

CHAPTER VIII

THE RIVER PEOPLE

In 1916 Professor C. B. Moore published an interesting report on the shell mounds which he had investigated on Green River in Kentucky.

In the summer of 1924 the authors accompanied by Mr. J. Curtis, made a trip to this region and visited not only the various mounds reported by Professor Moore but a large number of other sites in the vicinity which had been the dwelling places of a prehistoric race. Since all of these sites were along the rivers and since the shell-mounds, the artifacts and the village sites indicated a tribe of fishermen and boatmen, we have chosen to call the tribe or tribes, whoever they were, the "River People."

Here again we must repeat that these people may have represented no peculiar race or culture but, as in the case of the cliff-dwellers, we find certain distinctive features which warrant the consideration of their habitat and habits in a separate chapter. They are generally considered as an Algonquin or pre-Algonquin people.

River sites are as a rule small, not extensive and often almost entirely washed away by high water, but they may be found along most of the rivers within the state as well as along the banks of the Ohio and Mississippi. We are forced to conclude that the river-people were not numerous and that their villages were widely scattered. Wherever the sites are found, however, they show the same peculiar banner-stones, the hooked horn implements for net-making, the bobbins, the sizers, the mesh-spacers, the net-sinkers and the fish-hooks so characteristic of a river-inhabiting tribe.

The outstanding features of the work of the river people are the "shell-mounds"—enormous heaps of mussel-shells found near the river banks—some of them containing many tons of shells and often standing ten or fifteen feet high. The occasion for the piling up of these gigantic mounds of shells can of course only be conjectured. We assume that the mussels

must have been used for food in which case the heaps represent either the accumulation over a long period of years or the assemblage for a shorter time of a multitude of people. The shells are usually unbroken which would suggest that the mussels had been cooked or at least heated before the contents of the shells were removed since the edges of the valves show no indication of their having been forced apart while the animal was alive, a process which would certainly have fractured the margins. Often the two valves are still together, tightly closed with the hinge uninjured and sometimes the space between them is filled with dirt but more commonly the valves are empty. Even when the valves are separated or broken apart, they are not mutilated nor do they show signs of heating or charring. It is difficult to imagine a method of cooking and eating which would leave them in such perfect condition. The inhabitants of the regions where shell-mounds are common, use the shells for grits for poultry and occasionally grind them for lime fertilizer.

Sometimes the shell-mounds are so large as to resemble natural hills and indeed they are often located on natural elevations. Occasionally they are extensive enough to furnish the sites for houses and barns. Usually they are not suitable for cultivation since the water drains through the loose shells so quickly that the plants dry up for lack of moisture. In them may be found burials, artifacts, refuse, and in fact everything usually found in other types of mounds but whether the skeletons were the occasion for the mounds or represent intrusive burials we do not know, and whether the objects mixed with the shells were originally a part of the mound or represent accidental associations we can not tell. Always the objects found in the mounds, even the most easily perishable bones, beads and shell ornaments, are in an excellent state of preservation, probably because of the fact that the drainage is so good that no water can stand in the piles of loose shells and perhaps also because of the fact that the lime itself tends to preserve them.

It may be noted that the rivers in and around Kentucky are very rich in mussels, not only in the number of species represented which is very large, but in the abundance of individuals of many of the species. For this reason, these waters

have for years been the source of supply for shells for commercial uses, especially for the button-factories.

One of the largest of the shell-mounds on the Green River is the one designated as "Indian Knoll" by Professor Moore. This is located in Ohio County just across the river from Paradise, Kentucky, on the property of Mr. Jared Brown and tenanted at the time of our visit by Mr. Joe Winters. The mound covers several acres and has on it three frame buildings. The made dirt which is four or five feet deep is composed of rich black river-valley loam with a large amount of mussel-shell scattered through it.

It was on this spot that Professor Moore and his staff of eight men worked for over twenty days and discovered two hundred and ninety-eight burials, represented by skeletons of 183 adults, 23 adolescents and 92 infants and children. These skeletons were found in various positions, some closely flexed, some partly flexed, some extended and some which indicated that they had been disturbed. The skulls were described by Doctor Ales Hrdlicka of the United States National Museum as "typical, undeformed Algonquin skulls, evidently not Shawnee, although coming from the region ascribed in general to that tribe." We saw, at the residence of Mr. Jared Brown, at Paradise, four of these skulls which were in excellent condition.

The outstanding artifacts of this mound, according to Professor Moore's report, were the so-called "netting-needles" and the "sizers" indicative of the vocation of fishing. A number of skeletons of dogs were unearthed, which according to Doctor G. S. Miller were very similar in structure to those of modern European dogs and suggested a common evolutionary origin. In this mound was found, also, the human vertebra transfixed by a spear-point of antler which is figured in Professor Moore's report. The present authors made only a superficial examination of "Indian Knoll" since it had been so thoroughly explored by the Moore expedition, but the field had been plowed since the former excavations and was in corn and tobacco and on the surface were found a large number of artifacts and bones which had been brought to light by the more recent cultivation. Mr. R. W. Taylor stated that he had seen this mound entirely covered with water during the flood season.

Another large shell-mound which we were permitted to visit through the courtesy of Mr. W. E. Dortch is known locally as the "De Weese Mound" and is located near the bank of the Green River in Butler County about ten miles by road but a much shorter distance across country from the village of Prentiss. This mound is very similar in size and appearance to Indian Knoll but is situated on higher ground and on it is built a farm-house and a barn. The mound is thickly covered with shells and the neighbors for miles around regularly visit it to secure the shells for their chickens. We did not have an



FIG. 76. CAMPING ON GREEN RIVER.

A temporary camp established for the study of shell mounds.

opportunity to do any excavating in this mound but on its surface were picked up a number of artifacts and animal bones and between the mound and the river the ground is thickly strewn with flint spalls.

The largest shell-mound which we have examined carefully was located on the banks of the Green River in Ohio County only a short distance across the pike from the general store at Green River Postoffice. Through the courtesy of Mr. F. M. Knight, the storekeeper and postmaster of this village, we were allowed to camp on his premises and were given every opportunity for carrying out our work.

This mound, which so far as we could learn has no special name unless it be that of "the mound at Chiggerville" (the local appellation for the village), was about 100 yards long, 75 yards wide and when we visited it about ten feet high. It is some-

times (for example in 1913) entirely covered by high water and has been cultivated for many years and these two factors have probably made it lower and wider than it was originally. On the surface of the mound and on the surrounding field were found large numbers of flint artifacts, a number of pestles, several hammer-stones, a bottle-stopper, many human and animal bones and one quadrant of a banner-stone.

After making a series of exploratory holes in the various parts of the mound it was trenched completely through the center from north to south.



FIG. 77. TRENCHING A SHELL MOUND.
Characteristic shell heaps on the banks of Green River.

The mound was found to consist of an almost solid bed of mussel-shells for a depth of six feet. Mixed with the shells were human, elk, deer, wildcat, and wild-turkey bones but no complete skeletons were found in this trench. Flint and bone artifacts were also scattered through the mound but seemed to have no association with the bones. The shells were packed closely together and apparently had been undisturbed for a long period so that they had settled into compact masses of lime. This condition made excavations very difficult as it was impossible to force a spade or shovel through the mass of shells and it was necessary to first loosen them with a pick before they could be thrown out of the trench.

Below the mussel-shells was found a layer of made dirt mixed with charcoal to an average depth of two inches and below

this the natural river sand which has evidently not been disturbed.

East and west trenches at the ends of the mound showed the same formation. In one of these trenches was found the fragmentary skeleton of a child but there were no artifacts nor ornaments with this skeleton.

Other mounds in the vicinity showed the same structure. Some contained burials, many were rich in artifacts and all gave evidence of the one outstanding feature—the use and piling up, for some purpose or other—of such an enormous number of shells that the mind was overwhelmed in estimating their mass or in trying to account for their presence.

On the Green River, also, in addition to those we have mentioned, Professor Moore reports and describes similar mounds near Bluff City in Henderson County, on the Austin Place in McLean County near Smallhouse, in Ohio County, on the Annis Place in Butler County, on the Martin Place in Butler County, on the Cherry Place in Butler County, near Little Reedy Point in Butler County and a location called "Indian Hill" in Edmonson County. Some of these have never been explored and still await the investigator.

The Green River country, therefore, was no doubt a favorite part of the State for the river-people but their residence was not at all limited to this region. There are many such sites along the Kentucky side of the Ohio River including a series of mounds in Ballard County almost opposite Mound City, Illinois, in a region famous for evidences of prehistoric man and rich in Indian lore, an interesting burial and village site also in Ballard County on the edge of Colvin Lake, a dwelling-site near the mouth of Massac Creek in McCracken County from which Professor Moore secured twenty skeletons, an ancient cemetery in Livingston County on government land, a field from which a fine collection of artifacts has been secured on the river bank in Hancock County almost due north of Lewisport, a village site on Diamond Island in the Ohio River just south of Henderson, and a river mound on the Major farm just outside of that city.

On the Kentucky side of the Mississippi, too, in Carlisle, Hickman and Fulton counties, similar sites have been reported.

In one mound in this region, about six miles west of Hickman, Kentucky, were found what appeared to be evidences of a cremation and in the town of Wickliffe in Ballard County is a site which is very celebrated locally, for the number of skeletons and artifacts which it has produced. Mounds on the Chaney Place in Hickman County and on the Turk Place and the Edwards Place in Ballard County are recorded by Moore but have not been visited by the authors. Not all of those sites have the typical shell mounds but almost without exception all of them are rich in shells, which are sometimes mixed in the soil in great quantities and prove that the mussel played a large part either as a food or in some other way in the life of the river people.

The region which most nearly approximates the Green River country in producing the typical evidences of the river folk is the so-called "Coalins" between the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers and along the stretches of these rivers farther from their mouths. Here are to be found again the heaps of shells, the sizers, the banner-stones and the flint hoes which we associate with the river dweller.

In an earlier report (1915) resulting from an expedition which took him through part of Kentucky, Professor Moore describes habitations of the river-people on the property of Mr. W. A. Henson on the Tennessee River in Marshall County. We were fortunate in being able to visit this site in September, 1924, and through the courtesy of Mr. Jesse Henson, Mr. Albert Henson, Mr. Homer Sirls and Mr. Sut Ferguson were enabled to examine these sites as well as many others in the vicinity. A most delightful camp was established near the river and due to the kindness of Mr. Harry Cotrell the County Agent and Mr. Clyde Philbeck, principal of the Benton High School, assistance was given us in doing intensive work.

The most typical evidences of the river people in this region were found at the mouth of Jonathan Creek and on the property of Mr. Tom McNealy on the bank of the river. Here were located shell-mounds, most of which had been leveled by cultivation, the mussel-shells scattered over many acres, the flint hoes and the lap-stones, presumably some sort of mortar, all of which seem to be characteristic of this culture. Also the surface of

this region yielded a large number of excellent flint arrowheads and flint knives.

Summing up our knowledge concerning the river-people we may say that the outstanding features are the sites along the streams, the shell mounds and the use of the mussel in great quantities for some purpose not entirely explained.

Of the artifacts, the most characteristic are the banner-stones and the implements used in fishing. Of the former, we know but little as to their actual significance. We assume that they were some sort of emblem, either tribal or individual, of



FIG. 78. IN THE LAND OF THE RIVER PEOPLE.

A camp on the Tennessee River in Marshall County. "Indian-digging" always attracts many visitors from the neighboring farms.

rank or office. These banner-stones show perhaps as elaborate workmanship as any ancient artifact known. They are often highly polished, carefully bored, and doubtless represent long tedious labor in their fashioning and great care in their preservation. Such a beautiful object may have been highly treasured and handed down in a tribe for many generations. The fact that quadrants of these stones have been found very exactly and apparently carefully broken, has suggested that perhaps on the death of an individual his particular emblem or totem should be destroyed by ceremony in such a way that it could not be used by another individual. These interesting objects are figured and described in a later chapter.

Of the implements presumably used in the fishing industry, the most abundant and the most easily recognized are the "netting-hooks" of various kinds, usually made of bone or horn, and the interesting objects commonly referred to as "mesh-spacers." These spacers represent also great labor and care in their manufacture and are often very beautiful in their design and polish. Attention has been called by archaeologists to the fact that modern Papuans make fish-nets by the use of a hook and sizer very similar to those used so long ago by our own river-people. Netting-needles very similar to these in the shell-mounds have also been found among certain Alaskan Indians.

Another implement which seems to be restricted to the regions occupied by the river-people is the flint hoe. Limestone hoes are very common and are found in practically every part of the state but we have never seen them made from flint except from the river country. Some of these hoes, both notched and plain, as described later in this report, are exquisitely wrought and highly polished.

The lap-stone or flat mortar is also rather indicative of the river people. The stones sometimes have the concavity on both sides and occasionally have smaller depressions in the corners which suggest that they may have been used for cracking nuts. The largest collection of these objects we have ever secured was obtained along the Tennessee River in Marshall County. Another peculiarity of the river-people is the fact that apparently they never used pipes. We have never found a pipe in the shell mounds and so far as we can find from the records, this is the usual experience of collectors.

The skeletons of the river-people seem to show no particularly distinctive characters. We have already quoted Doctor Hrdlicka to the effect that they were typical Algonquin and we have yet to see one which was deformed. The skulls are rather modern in appearance with high frontals and excellent teeth.

Altogether we believe that we are dealing here with a rather modern group, not numerous and much scattered, whose chief industry was fishing and who had developed to a remarkable degree the art of fashioning the implements needed in their craft. The time during which they were in Kentucky is purely conjectural as is their possible relationship to other groups, Cer-

tain indications, as for example the fish-tail banner stones and the bone netting-needles, might suggest a connection with northwestern tribes, possibly Alaskans, and it is not impossible that they may have migrated inland from the western coast, bringing with them the practices of ocean fishermen and retaining the customs of such a people. Or they may have been descendants of such a folk and while still keeping the love of the water had retained only half-forgotten traditions of the ceremonies of their ancestors so that their banner-stones and artifacts while still used had become almost meaningless to them. Whatever their history, they are deserving of definite notice, and we can at least record the little that we know of them under the descriptive term of "river-people."

