

Introduction

Volume 7, Number 1 (1999) 170 pages

Waconda Lake: Prehistoric Swidden-Foragers in the Central Plains

by Donald J. Blakeslee

Almost one thousand years ago, a new way of life developed on the Great Plains. Previous to it, people had subsisted primarily by hunting and gathering, with only a few crops, casually sown and harvested, merely a supplement to their diets. Previously, they were fairly nomadic, shifting their camps with the seasons. Then something happened, and it happened fairly swiftly. The people settled down in sites that were occupied for at least most of the year, and they began to grow crops in earnest. They did not give up hunting and gathering, but domesticated plants became an important part of their diet. The new way of life lasted for several centuries before another transformation occurred, generating a new lifestyle.

The several centuries following A. D. 1000 produced an archeological record that has been investigated since the late nineteenth century. In spite of extensive excavations and intensive analyses, the record of this period on the Plains has remained quite problematic. Rather than rebuilding repeatedly on the same spot and leaving a neatly stratified record, people moved every few years, so that it has been impossible to say which house was built first and which second. Rather than living in neatly bounded villages, the people lived in scattered homesteads, so that no one has been able to determine the size, let alone the structure of their communities.

This volume presents a new analysis of that way of life, one that offers new solutions to old problems, new approaches to well-known puzzles. Rather than using the ceramics to determine the sequence of occupation of sites in a locality, it analyzes them for apparently contemporaneous differences. It reinterprets data collected thirty years ago, and using ideas generated in the intervening decades, offers a very different interpretation of a way of life.

It deals with the archeology of Waconda Lake, a reservoir on the Solomon River in north-central Kansas, and is the public report of work done by Wichita State University for the Bureau of Reclamation. Normally such work is called Cultural Resource Management (CRM), and the reports generated by it see only limited circulation, even among archeologists.

This report is different because it is the result of a process different from that normally used by federal agencies. The Bureau of Reclamation Nebraska-Kansas Projects Office has entered into long-term agreements with several universities in the region for the performance of the archeological work that normally would go to the lowest bidder. In return, the universities have contributed a great deal of volunteer labor and equipment use so that the cost to the government is lower than what it would normally be for the same services. While this might sound like just another cost-saving maneuver, the implications for understanding the archeological record run deep.

The important differences for the archeologist have to do with the time frames for planning and performing research. Under the normal contracting procedures, an archeologist has only a very

brief interval in which to respond to a request for a proposal. What are euphemistically called "research designs" are barely more than listings of how many pits are to be dug and by what means, and what kinds of materials will be identified and counted. Time simply does not exist for reflection and discussion with students and colleagues regarding what approaches might be most productive. Since cost is a major consideration in the evaluation of most proposals, the archeologist is not likely to consider approaches that might be costly in terms of time because they usually translate into higher dollar figures and hence into unsuccessful proposals.

The time parameters enter even more heavily into the fieldwork and analysis portions of any project. The time allocated for fieldwork is usually the bare minimum needed to follow the framework of the original proposal. New ideas generated from the results of the fieldwork seldom can be followed up. Worse, the time allotted for analysis in the laboratory is always too short to accommodate new thoughts derived from the analysis itself.

The new procedure initiated by the Bureau of Reclamation involves five-year agreements with various universities. The long time span allows for careful planning in cooperation with Bureau archeologists. It also allows for repeated revisions of the initial research design as they become necessary. It allows too for the collection of pertinent data from outside the area involved in a specific project when this is necessary.

A primary result of the new time frame, and one that has enormous importance for this volume, is the opportunity for extended re-analysis of archeological collections from Waconda Lake. In the 1960s, Waconda Lake was the scene of one of the most concentrated studies ever performed of Central Plains sites. The resulting publications (Carlson 1971; Krause 1969, 1970; Lippincott 1976, 1978; Marshall 1967) were signal contributions to Plains archeology, but they left many unanswered questions. Part of the long-term agreement between the Bureau of Reclamation and Wichita State University involved the acceptance by WSU of responsibility for curating artifacts and records previously stored at the University of Nebraska. Re-analysis of them, in conjunction with continuing fieldwork, has allowed us to achieve exciting new insights into the life of the people who occupied the land around Waconda Lake in the 11th to 13th centuries.

In order that the new information generated by the work at Waconda Lake find its proper audience, this volume was not written for the "gray literature" of CRM reports. It addresses issues of vastly larger scope than found in normal reservoir survey reports, and should be of interest to a far wider audience than is normally the case. For the same reasons, it does not follow the usual report format that tells in absolutely linear order what was known before and after the project. Instead, it is organized around a wide variety of research questions, emphasizing what can be learned rather than what has been found.

A report of this magnitude is never the work of a single set of hands. Contributors to this volume include professional scientists Bob Blasing, Nancy Pearson, Myra Giesen and Jim Winfrey of the Bureau of Reclamation, David May of the University of Northern Iowa, John Weymouth of the University of Nebraska, Peer Moore-Jansen of Wichita State University, Larry Tieszen of Augustana College, Martin Stein of the Kansas State Historical Society, and Gayle Carlson of the Nebraska State Historical Society. Administrative assistants who kept the paperwork up to date and the principal investigator's nose to the grindstone are: Carole Robarchek, Melvin

Johnson, and Doreen Grattopp. Graduate students from Wichita State University who participated in the project include crew chiefs Loy Neff, Danny Wescott, and Carolyn Johnson; laboratory supervisors Rick Plouch and Frank Gagné; and illustrator Kent Wilkinson. Others who contributed were the participants in seminars in archeology at Wichita State University. They are: Bob Ficenec, Susan Hascall, Roberta Hayworth, Susan Houghton, Rick Plouch, Linda Edgeworth Terry, Marie Huhnke, Alex Kurota, Ron Dorsey, Cindy Ball, and James Watson. Other students performed various laboratory analyses. The ones who contributed significantly include David Walters, Elaine Banman, Sonny Ng, and Ron Dorsey. All photographs are by Frank Gagné; rim profiles are by Alex Kurota.

Both the field crews and the laboratory crews were composed primarily of students. Other volunteers who participated in the fieldwork include Sam and John Blakeslee, Mel Johnson, Joy Lewis, Donna Martinson, and Cleta Mulder. Rob Carlson provided his services as a pilot for aerial photography, and Letha Johnson provided free consultation and use of a computer for the development of a database. Many local residents provided valuable information, and foremost among them was Gerald Dubbert, who had been the primary informant for the University of Nebraska in the 1960s. Mike Nyhoff and all of the personnel at Glen Elder State Park provided assistance at every turn. Finally, I owe a great deal of thanks to the circle of scholars who have provided both constructive criticism and moral support over a period of many years of investigation.

In spite of all of this help, there are bound to be errors in this volume: sins of omission and commission. I acknowledge them as my own.