

Some Factors that Controlled the Location of the Villages of the Pre-historic People of Central Oklahoma¹

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Archeological studies of recent years indicate that from around 2,000 years ago until sometime before the discovery of America, Oklahoma and the surrounding states had a considerable population. These people may have been the direct ancestors of some of the tribes that occupied the area when it first became known to the whites or they may have been destroyed and replaced by more savage and warlike Indians. As would be expected in a region of scanty moisture and long droughts, the sites of these villages are found mostly along the larger streams and their tributaries.

Since the location of the towns and cities of either modern or primitive people is mostly determined by their culture and environment, a study of the conditions that surrounded these ancient villages should yield some valuable information as to the habits and way of life of the people who occupied them.

It may be somewhat difficult for the modern mind to picture the laborious and difficult life of the people who lived before the discovery of the use of iron. Such tools and utensils as they possessed were of stone, bone, skin, shell, clay or wood. The shaping of a piece of wood with their crude stone axes and knives was an extremely slow and wearisome process. It is said that it took an Indian, working with stone tools, about three months to make a bow and that for some time after the traders first crossed the Mississippi, a good osage bow was valued at \$100 in trade goods. Again, at some sites, there are numerous cache pits. Some of these are as much as 10 feet in diameter and 8 feet deep. The digging of these with no tools except sharp sticks, clam shells, and the shoulder bones of deer or buffalo, must have been extremely slow and tedious.

There was very little leisure, as we moderns understand the term. Nearly all the time of each individual was required to obtain the food and shelter necessary for survival. There was probably little or no specialization in labor. Each individual or, at most, each family or kin group, had to procure the materials and prepare the food, clothing and shelter necessary to maintain life.

Food was obtained by hunting, fishing, gardening and by the gathering of wild roots, fruits and seeds. Probably, clothing was mostly of skins. The process of weaving hair and vegetable fibers was known but the cloth produced was crude. Some of the excavations give evidence of permanent houses having frames of posts and cross-pieces and walls of wattle covered with clay. No doubt, like most primitive people, they also made many temporary shelters of brush, reeds, or grass. It is not probable that the people of that time built tipis like those of the later plains Indians. The tipi is a portable shelter and, before horses were available, the transportation of the lodge skins and poles would have been very difficult.

The permanent shelters, along with a great abundance of flint chips, pottery sherds, grinding stones, projectile points and other artifacts that are found in many of the sites, indicate long occupation. Since most of the food supplies had to be drawn from the immediate surrounding area, it was necessary for such villages to be well located with respect to the needs of the community. Most of the sites were probably picked by the trial and error method. A hunting party may have found a spot where the game

¹Much of the field work for this study was made possible by a grant from the Faculty Research Fund of the University of Oklahoma.

was plentiful, the water good, and fruits and nuts abundant. There would be a tendency for the group to return to such an area again and again and if, in addition to its other advantages, the soil happened to be suitable for gardening, the site might become permanently occupied. And the migration would be hastened if the home site was becoming over-crowded, or if one of those factional disagreements, so common among both modern and primitive people, happened to be raging at the time.

The three prime necessities for living a comfortable primitive life are nearness to good water and abundant supplies of food and fuel. In the early Oklahoma sites, water always stands out as the first and most important consideration. They are always near a permanent stream or spring and, on the larger rivers, nearly always near where a smaller stream joins it. As water is almost as much a necessity for animals as for people, a well-watered area was usually a good game area, especially if covered with abundant vegetation. This is well illustrated by the sites near Rosedale, Oklahoma. This area appears to have been densely populated. There are a number of village sites on both sides of the river. It appears that several hundred people may have lived here in a distance of three or four miles. This was made possible by an abundance of good gardening soil and the fact that the broad river bottoms as well as the nearby uplands were covered with trees and grass.

In central Oklahoma, a sandy area was usually favored for both the camp site and gardening. Anyone who has lived in a camp under all conditions knows how disagreeable clay or gumbo can be in wet weather, and a primitive camp would be even worse. With tools limited to sharp sticks, and bone and stone hoes, the cultivation of heavy clay soils is next to impossible. But the more friable sandy soils could be worked and, for a primitive agriculture, they were sufficiently productive. Early settlers tell us that for a few years after the opening of Oklahoma, the sandy soils were productive even under the soil exhausting methods of the white man and there are some sandy soils, such as that of the upper Canadian terrace near Rosedale, that are still considered very productive. Indian agriculture, because of their primitive tools, was much less intensive. Also, there was nearly always a fresh area available when the old garden plot began to show signs of being worked out. A striking example of this preference for sandy soils is shown in one of the old sites near Rosedale. Here, on the south side of the river, the sites are on one of the few remnants of the old upper terrace of the Canadian river. It is very sandy and stands 25 to 30 feet above the broad black bottoms of the modern Canadian. At the Brewer site, not far from Rosedale, the contact of the sandy terrace material with the heavy clay-like soil of the upland is very sharp. On the sand, chips, pottery sherds, and cache pits are very numerous but on the heavy soil, a short distance away, they are entirely lacking.

Another important consideration in a permanent camp site was protection from winter winds. In intermediate and high latitudes, the cold of winter is one of the greatest inconveniences the human race experiences. It is only within the last 150 years that our own people have had really comfortable winter habitations. For the early people of Oklahoma with their thin houses and open fires, winter was a time of frequent suffering. For this reason, the winter camps were sometimes shifted temporarily to more sheltered locations. The Salyer's Lake site, not far from Cogar, Oklahoma may have been of this kind. It is in a deep, south-facing canyon, well protected from the winter winds and high enough above the stream to be free from floods. Probably the ideal location for a permanent village site in Central Oklahoma was a sandy southern slope near a stream and protected on the north by timber. There is such a site a few miles east of Norman, Oklahoma on Little River. It shows long occupation and of having been in use even up to modern times.

Insects were, no doubt, a great annoyance to the early people although, through having been fully exposed to gnats, fleas, mosquitoes, etc. from early childhood, they were somewhat more tolerant of them than is modern man. A high, open area is usually more free of such annoyances than is a low, swampy one. Also, in Oklahoma, such an area is more comfortable during the hot days of summer. Anyone who has done field work in Oklahoma in the heat of summer knows that the coolest place to eat lunch is on the top of a high hill, even though exposed to the full glare of the sun, rather than down in the shade of a tree filled canyon; and if the hill happens to have a few scattering trees, the situation is ideal. However, it is difficult to judge of the effect of this factor in the fixing of the permanent sites. It is probably mostly outweighed by the winter shelter needs and the still more urgent need to be near water. However, at one long-occupied site near Lindsey, the permanent shelters were on the top of a high hill above the river. The flat between the hill and the river has many cache pits and artifacts. The soil here is black in color but is friable enough to be worked with primitive tools and is productive even by modern standards. This and the river with its supplies of fish may have been the chief factors that made the site desirable. The flat may have been covered with water occasionally, as a tributary joins the river nearby. This may have made it unsuitable for the building of permanent shelters so they were placed on the hill despite the inconvenience of being a little far from water.

The question of protection from human enemies is an interesting one. Were these a peaceable or a warlike people? So far, no evidence of palisades or other fortifications have been found and the location of the sites seem to have been without regard to possible attack. Many permanent villages of the modern Indians were surrounded with palisades and otherwise fortified. Possibly these early people of Oklahoma lived at a time when there was little or no competition for land and when there was an abundance of food for all so far as it lay in their power to take it. Thus they may have been free from that economic pressure and greed which seems to be the underlying cause of nearly all wars.

Also, their mode of life was probably very well stabilized. There was little change from generation to generation. They had advanced about as far as was possible without a knowledge of metals or a system of making permanent records. Whether they were the forefathers of the present day Indians, were driven out by a severe climatic change, or were destroyed by a sudden influx of a more aggressive and warlike people may never be known.
