

THE MISSOURI INDIAN TRIBE IN ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY

by

ROBERT T. BRAY



Missouri Indian, Oto Indian, Chief of the Puncas

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BY ROBERT T. BRAY*

The University of Missouri Archaeological Research Center and Field School in Van Meter State Park, Saline County, was established in 1959 as a joint venture of the University and the Missouri State Park Board. Excavations, which progress each summer from June through August, and special exhibitions may be observed by visitors on weekends and holidays during the summer months. The research center is located twelve miles north of Marshall and may be reached from there via highways 41 and 122.

In northern Saline County, in the great bend of the Missouri River, stands a prominent range of low, broken hills known as the Pinnacles. Rising abruptly from the flat river valley, they may be



Photo by author

The Pinnacles

seen for a distance of several miles and are a dominant feature of the landscape. The slopes and hilltops, except where cultivated, are heavily timbered today, a fact which seems to be directly related to farming methods and other activities of men during the past 100 years. Most authorities agree that less than 150 years ago all except the lowest slopes were treeless and covered with tall grass.

The Pinnacles consist in large part of extensive deposits of a wind-deposited soil known as loess which ranges in depth from a few feet to more than 100. The soil has been eroded into a series of steep sided ravines, precipitous slopes, and rounded knobs. An early description of the area states:

The Pinnacles are a range of high river bluffs, rising abruptly from the Missouri River, just above the town of Miami, . . . Of the range of the Pinnacles there are several bluff hills, having different names, such as the "Devil's Back-bone," "Sugar Loaf," "Potato Hill," etc. The "Devil's Back-bone" is a high, bold bluff, one hundred and fifty feet high, running from north to

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south, and situated just at the turn or end of the river bottom, known as the Laynesville bottom. The top of this pinnacle is a ridge, something like a hay-rick in shape, its rugged appearance and its back-bone similitude giving it its name.¹

These bluffs diminish gradually in height and finally merge below the town of Malta Bend with the prairie known to the French as the Petite Osage or Little Osage Plain. The term has since been Anglicized to "tetesaw."

For many centuries prior to 1500 the Pinnacles and the nearby grassy, swampy prairies were traversed by Indian hunters. For long periods, though not continuously, these areas had been the scene of Indian encampments and of the universal drama of birth, life, and death. Over the centuries the hills became liberally sprinkled with remains of their small villages, their everyday tools and weapons, and earthen mounds which covered their dead. The land, swamps, and river were bountiful, and the Indians returned again and again as the years passed.

About 1500 a powerful group of Indians came into the Great Lakes area, probably from the southeast. They seem to have been restless and warlike, and more or less constantly in trouble with their neighbors. Possibly they were at this time organized into a unit which we would call a tribe but, if so, we have no idea of its name. These people built their villages at several locations in the present states of Illinois, Wisconsin, and possibly Michigan. Some liked the lake country and decided to remain. Here Jean Nicolet, the French explorer, encountered them in 1634 at Green Bay, Wisconsin, and they became known to history as the Winnebago. Restlessness forced some of the Indians westward to and beyond the Mississippi, and their numbers were further reduced when some took residence in the fertile river valleys in Northeast Iowa and Southeast Minnesota. These people were discovered in 1685 by Nicholas Perrot, a French trader, who was responsible for recording in history the name, Ioway.²

The remainder of the original groups proceeded southward and finally, at a time that we may guess to be during the second quarter of the seventeenth century, reached the mouth of what we believe to be the Grand River in North Central Missouri. Here another separation occurred, and a third division of the original unit

¹*History of Saline County, Missouri* (St. Louis, 1881), 113-14.

²Mildred Mott, "The Relation of Historic Indian Tribes to Archeological Manifestations in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XXXVI (July 1938), 236-37.

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went westward up the Missouri and became known as the Oto. The remaining group of Indians seems to have lived for a time near the mouth of the Grand; but they were still dissatisfied and, for reasons that we cannot tell, they also turned westward up the Missouri River, probably following the same route that the Oto had taken. But this time the trip was short. This group approached the prominent row of grassy hills now called the Pinnacles, ascended the bluffs, and built their village on the summits. These were the Missouri.³

We may imagine that the Missouri were happy here, and for many years they lived amid the bounties of nature, hunting buffalo and deer, fishing in the river and swamps, tending their crops, and carrying on the other activities prescribed by habit and custom. They became numerous, powerful, and perhaps rich by Indian standards of the day. But the last quarter of the seventeenth century was approaching, and portentous events were taking place hundreds of miles to the north of which the Missouri knew nothing but which would change their lives and finally contribute to their destruction.

In 1673 two Frenchmen, a Jesuit missionary, Father Jacques Marquette, and an explorer, Louis Jolliet, traveled down the



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Adult Training Session in Archaeology, July, 1960

³The migration legend of the Winnebago, Ioway, Missouri, and Oto tribes, collectively called the Chiwere Sioux, is here stated in very general terms. The findings of archaeology, history, ethnology, and linguistics all tend to agree that something on this order took place.

Mississippi River to near the mouth of the Arkansas. This voyage carried them past the mouth of the Missouri River, and somewhere along the route they learned of a tribe living up the river Pekitanoui (Missouri) which their Indian informers called, or which became in Marquette's phonetic translation, Messourit. This is the first historical reference to the tribe of Indians known as the Missouri.⁴ Although the map on which the name Messourit appears is crudely drawn, it locates them approximately in the area where extensive remains of the tribe are found today.

It is uncertain when these people first saw a European. That the first was a Frenchman can hardly be doubted. They seem to have been on friendly terms with the French before 1612, as Missouri warriors helped the French break the siege by Fox and Iroquois Indians at Fort Detroit in that year. On their return to Missouri they were accompanied by a young French officer, Etienne Veniard de Bourgmond, who is said to have lived among them for some five years.⁵ Later, in 1723, de Bourgmond, after a brief period in France, returned to the Missouri country to build and command a military post, Fort Orleans, on the Missouri River near the village of the Missouri.

Fort Orleans (1723-1728), the first European post on the Missouri, was beset with administrative difficulties from time to time and was never very successful from the commercial standpoint. Militarily it may have contributed indirectly in minimizing Spanish incursions from the Southwest into the central and upper Great Plains. Nevertheless, the order to abandon Fort Orleans came in late 1727, and presumably this was effected in the early spring of 1728.⁶

It is not now known whether Fort Orleans, a sizeable establishment, disintegrated with time or whether it was burned by Indians unfriendly to the Missouri and the French. Today the exact site of the fort is unknown, although enough documentary evidence exists to make the discovery of its ruins entirely possible. That Fort Orleans played a portentous role in the lives of the Missouri is a certainty. While their way of life was perhaps not significantly

⁴See "The Marquette Map of 1673-1674," in Sara Julia Tucker, *Indian Villages of the Illinois Country*, Atlas (Springfield, 1942), 1, 2, 5.

⁵Henri Folmer, "Etienne Veniard de Bourgmond in the Missouri Country," *Missouri Historical Review*, XXXVI (April 1942), 279-98.

⁶Gilbert J. Garraghan, "Fort Orleans of the Missouri," *Missouri Historical Review*, XXXV (April 1941), 373-84.

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altered at the time, their traffic with the French was the first major event in the chain which led to eventual dissolution of the tribal life.

Archaeological findings at the great Pinnacles village, commonly called the Utz site after the name of the landowner, William Utz, lend credence to the idea that as early as 1724 the Missouri were trading at the nearby French outpost. The nature of the items found at the old Indian village shed some surprising light on trade relationships in the early historical period. It might be reasonably expected that several years of friendly relationship between the French and Missouri would have resulted in a considerable exchange of goods. It might also be expected that such an exchange would be manifest in the material objects recovered from the living sites of both participants, particularly the less advanced. Although French trade items have been found scattered over a wide area at the Missouri village site, they are of the kind carried most frequently by the earlier French *voyageurs* and, very probably, those which were traded or given the Indians for as long a period as they would accept them. If our contention that the Utz site was occupied by the Missouri from before 1673 to 1728 is true, there is suggested a considerably reserved French attitude toward trading anything of much intrinsic value. This was particularly true with respect to those items, such as guns, which could be turned against them in war. The trade objects found at the Utz site are practically confined to ornaments: glass beads, brass ear ornaments, copper and brass for rings and beads, and a brass finger ring with the Latin inscription "IHS" and a cross on the front of an oval signet. Such rings, often called "Jesuit rings," were undoubtedly carried by members of other religious orders and presumably by some explorers and traders. Even so, it is likely that this ring, together with some of the baubles of glass and copper, were distributed to the Indians by the French at Fort Orleans.

Knowing the Indian demand for the white man's goods, we would naturally expect the remains at an Indian town to reflect the status of trade and offer important clues as to when the site was occupied. The absence at the Utz site of metal knives and axes, gun parts, and copper and iron kettle fragments indicates that the Missouri did not remain at their village much after the abandonment of Fort Orleans in 1728, because after that time utilitarian trade items became increasingly available. As a matter of fact, the

abandonment of Fort Orleans may have been the impetus which induced the Missouri to leave their home on the Pinnacles and move upstream to a new site located near a village of Osage Indians. This was nearly 50 years before the tenure of the Missouri in the State came to an end, but already there were hints of tragedy in the wind.

Among the many disasters which transpired during the 375-year push of the white man toward the west, few were more pathetic than those which befell the Missouri. From a vigorous and proud tribe conservatively estimated at 1,000 or more families in 1703, it was reduced to a pitiful remnant of 30 families in 1804.⁷ Two major reasons have been given for the decline and fall of the Missouri: disease and war. We may well believe, however, that there was a third reason, the general though slow breakdown of tribal customs which resulted from relations with the white man.

The business of hit-and-run warfare seems to have been an established social pattern of longstanding among the Missouri. One authority has stated that their enemies were apparently almost synonymous with their neighbors.⁸ Some ancient grievances appear to have followed them from their ancestral homeland, for as they emerged into history they were at war with the Sauk and Fox tribes of the Upper Mississippi region. In the old days the Missouri could hold their own against the Sauk and Fox and other enemies, but now when the war had been carried to Missouri the Missouri found themselves at a disadvantage. Both Sauk and Fox had known the French for years and had probably managed to acquire some superior weapons, including guns. The general disadvantage of the Missouri apparently increased each time a clash occurred. We cannot say how frequently battles took place, but we can be reasonably certain that they gradually increased in severity so far as the Missouri were concerned. This was particularly true after 1770 when the Spanish at St. Louis enlisted the aid of the Sauk and Fox against the Missouri and French.⁹ Presumably the Spanish supplied their allies with guns to supplement those which they already had. It is reasonable to suppose that the Missouri were anxious to equip themselves with guns, too. Yet gun parts, except for flints, are not found on their village at Gumbo Point, a few miles upstream near

⁷J. Brewton Berry, "The Missouri Indians," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, XVII (September 1936), 1.

⁸*Ibid.*, 11.

⁹Carl H. Chapman, "The Little Osage and Missouri Indian Village Sites, Ca. 1727-1777 A. D.," *The Missouri Archaeologist*, XXI (December 1959), 2-4.

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Fort Orleans, even though they occur in abundance at the nearby Osage village. It is difficult to believe that any Spanish plot to keep guns out of Missouri hands could have been this effective. Why the Missouri moved from their Pinnacles village to the one at Gumbo Point, then, is something of a mystery, and why their fortunes continued to decline amid the relative affluence of their erstwhile friends, the Little Osage, is stranger still. These factors, however, seem to have hastened the end of Missouri influence. Some time before the turn of the nineteenth century the Missouri suffered their greatest defeat by the Sauk and Fox, a decisive blow which evidently



U. of Mo. Anthropology Collection

Two-handled Pottery Vessel With Incised Decorations

first incidence of this disease among them, but it could have come while they still lived in their village on the Pinnacles. We do know that it struck terror in the Indian heart wherever it appeared, whether among the Missouri or some other tribe. Epidemics among those who had no natural immunity were swift and deadly. The Indians knew how to deal with human enemies, but they could not understand the raging fever and ugly pocks. George Catlin, the famous painter of Indian life, has left an eloquent description of the Mandan Indian reaction to smallpox:

Terror and dismay are carried with it; and awful despair, in the midst of which they plunge into the river when in the highest state of fever, and die in a moment; or dash themselves from precipices; or plunge their knives to their hearts, to rid themselves from the pangs of slow and disgusting death.¹¹

¹⁰John R. Swanton, *The Indian Tribes of North America*. Bulletin No. 145 of the Bureau of American Ethnology (Washington, 1952), 270.

¹¹Berry, "The Missouri Indians," *S. S. Q.*, XVII, 7.

Weakened from disease in both body and spirit, the Missouri never recovered from their greatest defeat at the hands of the Sauk and Fox. Even though a certain degree of tribal reorganization was achieved by those who moved northwest to the territory of the Oto, their number continued to decline, and by 1910 only 13 remained.¹² By 1930 their identity was gone, and no Missouri of pure ancestry is alive today.

As the Missouri have been known to history since 1673 it would seem that we should be generally aware of them as a people rather than as shadowy figures flitting across the pages of history. Surely someone among the Frenchmen at Fort Orleans observed this important Indian tribe and left a careful account of it. But if this did not happen, what of the many contacts which occurred between the Missouri and literate people in later years before their ancient ways were appreciably changed? The present day historian and archaeologist thus far has searched the records in vain for such accounts. Most of the information we have was recorded after 1800, when the ancient ways were falling into disuse and when some social usages had merged with those of other Indians and the white man. There are, however, ways to gain an insight into the lives of the Missouri, and one important way remains a challenge for the present and future—that of archaeology.

Let us examine our knowledge of the Missouri and how it will be possible to make significant contributions to the story in future work.

There are few illustrations of the Missouri drawn from life which are yet extant. A good likeness of a Missouri brave by Karl Bodmer, a nineteenth century recorder of Plains Indian life, depicts a powerfully built individual with sharply defined, rather noble-looking features, although with a slightly downcast appearance. The hair is arranged with a scalplock, a sort of modified roach in which most of the hair was cut or plucked over all the scalp except that in a narrow band beginning near the top of the head and extending to near the nape of the neck. The lobes of the ears are distended and festooned with strings of numerous beads, some shaped like the cones or spangles of copper which are frequently found on the Pinnacles village. Several strands of beads encircle the neck, and a trader's blanket is over the left shoulder and held to the chest by the left arm.¹³

¹²Swanton, *Indian Tribes of North America*, 270.

¹³See illustration on front cover.

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Of their general appearance we know little else, but we can say that there is opportunity to learn more of this through archaeological work. The Missouri were close relatives of the Winnebago, Ioway, and Oto tribes, spoke the same language, and their archaeological remains are remarkably similar.

Archaeology can speak surely and precisely regarding the food-gathering activities of the Missouri. Excavations on the Pinnacles have shown that they dug numerous, large, and deep pits in the rock-free soil and in them stored corn, beans, squash, and pumpkin, as well as wild products such as walnuts, pecans, hickory and hazel nuts, pawpaws, plums, grapes, and hackberry seeds. Most of the pits were used secondarily for the deposit of refuse; after a storage pit had become damaged, wet, or infested with vermin, the people dumped trash, and lost tools and ornaments, in them. The contents of these many pits, well preserved today, prove that these people were also hunters and fishermen. The bones of animals, often split open or charred and with knife marks still upon them, are found in large quantities. The Indians singled out in particular the bison (buffalo) and deer and also took smaller mammals, gar, and sturgeon.

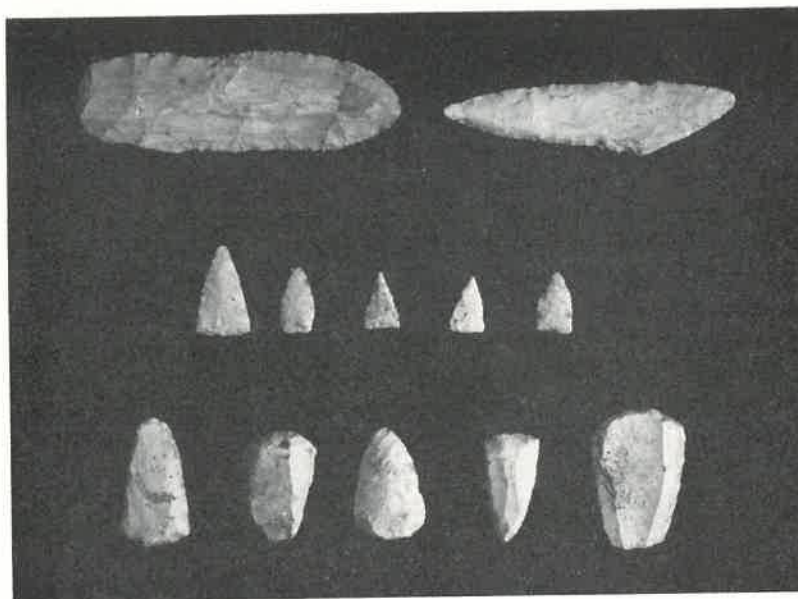
It is likely that the Missouri after the fashion of the Osage and some other tribes secured most of their big game on annual winter hunts of several month's duration. During such hunts their village was probably almost devoid of able-bodied men. The hunters returned home in early spring in time for preparation of the ground for summer crops and to participate in certain ceremonies.

The great bulk of material objects made and used by the Missouri were concerned directly or indirectly with their ways of earning a living. The principal weapons of the hunt were the bow and arrow and the stone-headed club. Arrow points were, with a few exceptions, small, triangular in shape, and chipped from flint. The heads of mauls or hammers were of stone, round or slightly elongated in shape, with a groove around the middle for attaching a wooden handle. The chipped flint axe with two opposite notches in the edges for attaching a handle was commonly used, as was the smoothed and ungrooved axe or celt. Stone knives of oval or diamond shape were used both in the hunt and in the household. Small flint scrapers were very common and served principally in the dressing of hides.

The Missouri were accomplished potters, and fragments of their many vessels are among the most common finds at the Utz site. Other tools and weapons collected include the stone mortar and

pestle for grinding corn and seeds and for crushing mineral paints; the bone awl, punch, and needle; the sandstone arrow shaft smoother; shell spoons; hoes made from buffalo shoulder blades; and various other items.

The houses of the Missouri are relatively unknown. No remains of dwellings have yet been discovered at the town on the Pinnacles. At the town site at Gumbo Point, part of a pattern of post molds was excavated which makes it appear that at least one type of house used by the Missouri was rectangular and rather long, similar to the "long houses" used by some Eastern tribes.¹⁴ The Gumbo Point find, however, is only one incomplete instance, and it is entirely possible that this was a town house or other public building. It seems more likely, in view of the lack of finds to the contrary, that the houses were fragile structures such as the oval-shaped, bark-covered wigwam which left little impression on the ground. Perhaps this problem can be solved with research at the Pinnacles village where a sizable portion has remained relatively undamaged by farming activities.



Research Center Collections

Chipped Stone Knives, Arrow Points, and Hide Scrapers

¹⁴Chapman, "The Little Osage and Missouri Indian Village Sites," *M. A.*, XXI, 1, 9.

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As with many primitive people clothing did not seem to be a prime consideration. There are no early historical references to the Missouri mode of dress, but a note in the Lewis and Clark journals of 1804 indicates that the men wore only breech clouts and blankets or buffalo robes.¹⁵ It has been said that primitive man may be unclothed, but he is never unadorned. This is, perhaps, a close approximation of the truth. Popular belief in the Indians' love for beads and other baubles is well substantiated by both historical and archaeological research. Finds made at the Pinnacles village show that the Missouri wore wristlets of bone and of strung copper tubes; ankle bracelets of rolled sheet copper; necklaces of shell, copper, brass, and glass beads; and ear ornaments of coiled copper or brass wire resembling screen door springs. The Ioway, hence possibly the Missouri, also occasionally made wide belts or "girdles" of strung copper tubes, employed other copper tubes several inches long as hair ornaments, and sometimes wore oddly shaped copper ornaments resembling birds and crosses.¹⁶

We know distressingly little of Missouri social organization. It has been established historically that the tribe was divided into a number of clans, each named for an animal or bird and each presumably under a clan chief who was theoretically, if not actually, subservient to one or more chiefs of the tribe.¹⁷ The clans among the Winnebago and possibly among the Missouri were grouped into two divisions, the chief purpose of which was to reckon descent, which was through the father, and to regulate marriage, which had to take place outside one's own clan and clan grouping. The immediate or conjugal family was an integral feature, as it is with practically all peoples.

History fails to resolve other aspects of the Missouri's social organization, religion, folklore, prehistoric trade relationships, transportation, village plan, or mortuary customs. Archaeology, particularly that which will be carried out at the Pinnacles village, seems to hold out great promise in helping to solve several of these problems. For example, the occurrence of catlinite, the red semi-magical stone so highly prized for tobacco pipes, at the Utz site proves trade relationships with the Southwest Minnesota area where the peculiar stone occurs. Shells of the conch or marine whelk, used

¹⁵Berry, "The Missouri Indians," *S. S. Q.*, XVII, 10.

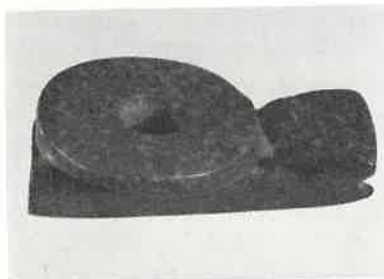
¹⁶Robert T. Bray, "The Flynn Cemetery, An Orr Focus Oneota Burial Site in Allamakee County, Iowa" (1961), unpublished typescript in possession of author.

¹⁷Berry, "The Missouri Indians," *S. S. Q.*, XVII, 10.

for ornaments and in religious or magical ceremonies by the Missouri, show that they were acquainted with peoples who frequented the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. Stones which do not appear to be native to the home region were also used.

In general the Missouri must have covered considerable distances on foot. They may have had boats, as they were said to have been

traveling in canoes on the Missouri River when they suffered their greatest defeat. They did not know the horse, at least not until near the end of the eighteenth century. The remains of dogs are found at the Pinnacles village, and the Missouri may have employed them, as some Plains tribes did, to pull light loads on the travois. This, of course, was in addition to the



Sam C. Irvine Coll.

Ceremonial Pipe of Catlinite

dog's regular role as scavenger and pet.

It will be possible to learn through archaeology a great deal about the Missouri's funeral customs and, by inference, of their religious and magical beliefs, the possible existence of social classes, their physical appearance, and some of the diseases with which they were afflicted. Human burials seem to be among the most common findings at the Utz site. Many have been found, and many others will be located in the future. From the great body of information that will be gathered over the years from this source, it will be possible for physical anthropologists to study the skeletal material and come up with quite positive statements concerning the overall appearance of the people in life. We shall be able to tell their average height; the relative numbers of men, women, and children; and the age of individuals at death. Pathologists can recognize evidences of several different diseases, as well as accidents or intentional violence, from a study of the bones. Archaeologists can sometimes recognize the social status of the individual by the amount and kinds of offerings included with the remains. The entire or overall burial pattern when finally established will undoubtedly aid in reconstructing the village plan as a part of the complete story.

The University of Missouri's archaeological research center and field school now located permanently at the Missouri village Utz

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site on the Pinnacles will have the task of solving some of these problems in the years to come. In addition to archaeological research and student training, there is an expanding program of interpretation designed to acquaint the public with some of the fundamentals of archaeology and to help keep it abreast of new discoveries. College students will learn field and research techniques here each summer, and each winter the data gathered during the summer will be analyzed and made meaningful in terms of everyday experience.

The story of the Missouri, then, is not yet finished. There lies ahead the opportunity, in archaeological research, for enriching the story, for adding entirely new facets to it, and for clearing up many lesser but important points which are now unclear. The future of the Missouri belongs to archaeology.