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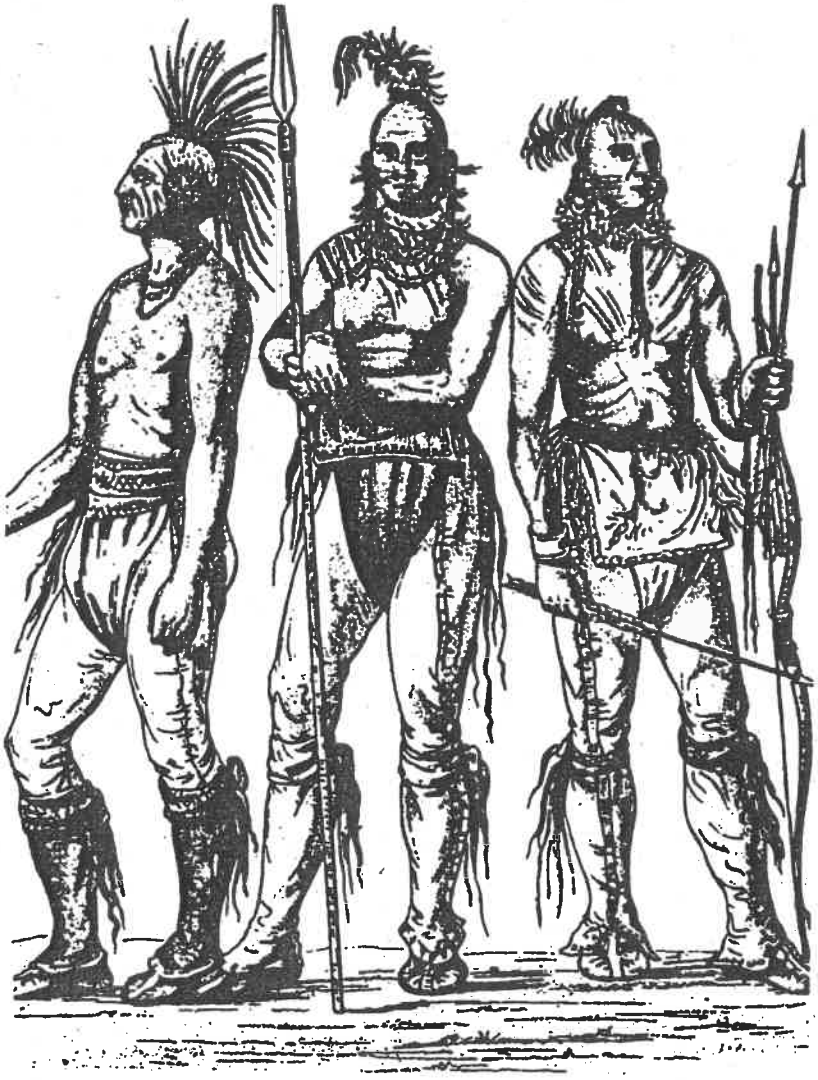
A look at some of the work of J. Mett Shippee

Digging for the Relics and History of Clay County's Early Indians



Story By
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Eldridge

The fascinating pasts of the people who inhabited Clay County long before the French, Spanish, or English set foot on our soil is told only through the relics of pottery shards, old bones, and crude weapons buried for hundreds of years.

Such discoveries and the piece-together history that go with them are generally found only through careful digging and exploration. Only then do we have an idea of the tribes and cultures that lived in Clay County even before the time of Christ.

How the Indians of a thousand years ago migrated from Asia into the North American continent is still being studied. Archaeologists say that evidence dug up literally through the ages of time can fairly accurately paint a picture of the lifestyles and types of tribes that lived here.

But these same archaeologists note that little evidence is left and each piece that is destroyed by careless digging is one more lost piece of a puzzle that will never be completed.

Fortunately, there is a very large amount of historical artifacts that

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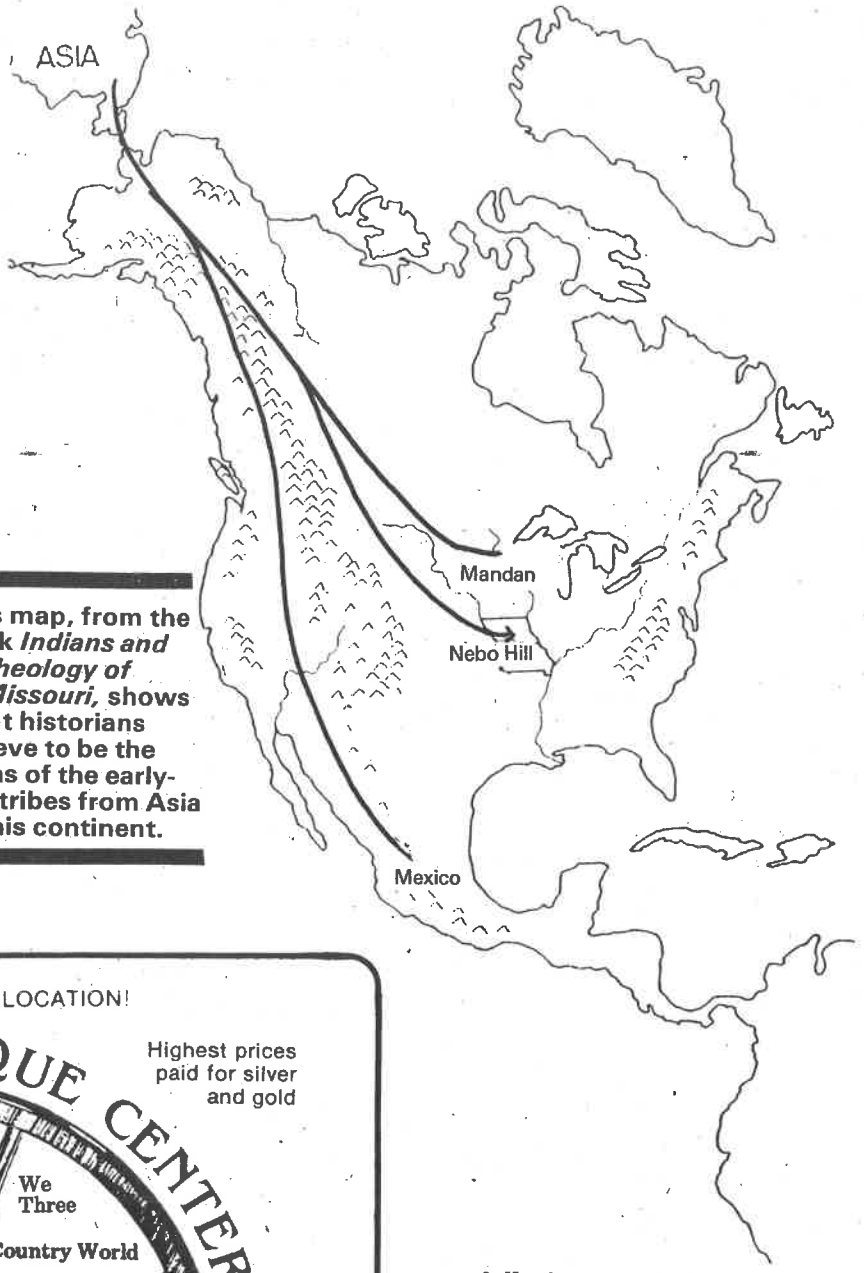
were taken to Clay County and shown artifacts as old or even older than those in the Chinese exhibit. The Chinese officials said they could not believe the sites were not government owned and protected, and the artifacts were not in special museums.

Some progress has been made in preserving the cultures of the past. For instance, Line Creek Park in Platte County is now the site of an Indian Museum as well as a preserved Indian village site, much to the credit of Shippee and Frank Vaydik, former superintendent of the Kansas City Parks and Recreation Department.

But a dilemma is shaping up in neighboring Riverside. Land owned by the late Mrs. Carolina Brenner Renner, who died last April, is now up for sale by the six relatives who inherited the estate.

There are about 15 acres in total, but three acres are especially important to archaeology. Shippee and others, in past years, with the permission of Mrs. Renner.



This map, from the book *Indians and Archeology of of Missouri,* shows what historians believe to be the paths of the early-day tribes from Asia to this continent.

carefully inspected the site, which they say has the area's most abundant collection of Hopewell artifacts. This site is so important that it has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

It is believed that on these few acres, several hundred Indians lived for 300 years. Shippee noted that although this site is vitally important, funds for such preservation is scarce.

Shippee has been digging at this site since the 1920s, and although he has worked in scores of archaelogical sites in the area, he calls this site "the cream of them all."

The Indian tribes in Missouri during more recent times included the Osage, Kansas, Iowas, Missouris, the Sac and Fox. At

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have been recovered in Clay County to be preserved for the generations ahead. Much of the work in this area can be attributed to one man--J.Mett Shippee.

Shippee, who has been actively doing Indian explorations for the past 50 years, is a research associate for the Department of Anthropology at the University of Missouri, and is a consultant for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. He is now supposedly retired, but the thrill of new finds and frustrations of trying to save them still keeps him active.

Clay County is rich with Indian cultures from several hundred years ago. These sites, often discovered by Shippee, dot much of the county. Many are clustered around the Fishing River in Clay and Ray counties, as well as other area streams.

Nebo Hill is one of the more prominent sites for Indian discoveries in Clay County. Shippee wrote a book in 1946 about the projectile points and spear points, as well as other artifacts, found on Nebeo Hill during the 1930s.

These artifacts were from an early Indian culture called Clovis, who lived on the high bluffs south of Liberty overlooking the Missouri River west of Missouri City.

In fact, a museum in Mexico shows a large map of the paths scientists feel the early Indians used to cross the land bridge over the Bering Straits, through what is now Canada, and into the U.S.

One path led to the Dakotas where the Mandan Indian tribe lived, one path led down into Mexico and was the founding of the Indian tribes down there, and the third path stopped in what is now Missouri, and was marked "Nebo Hill."

The Mexicans place and enormous amount of importance on Indian discoveries in their country. They will bring to a halt all construction--be it a new building or subway--to a halt when they make an archaeological find. They then very carefully remove the artifacts, which are later put on public display in museums.

Historians say that from about the years 1,000 B.C. to 560 A.D., Indian populations in Missouri increased. This time period is called Woodland, which is also divided into three sub-periods. The latter period is called the Hopewell, named after the Hopewell Indian tribe.

Remains of the Hopewell villages and burial mounds reveal extensive information about this tribe. The artifacts and other materials that have been dug up show that the people lived in a prosperous community as well as a peaceful one. They used spears for hunting, as the bow and arrows which later tribes used were not yet developed.

They made pottery which was decorated and lived in homes constructed of poles set in the ground and thatched with grass roofs. They wore skins and wove cloth from plant fiber.

It is thought the Hopewell lived here in Clay and Platte counties at least until 1260 A.D., then drifted away in a westerly direction and integrated with other tribes. Tools left by the tribe, such as grinding tools, crude hammers and spears can be seen at the Clay County Museum in Liberty. Many of these artifacts were donated by the Archer family and marked by Shippee.

It is tragic that curiosity seekers, treasure hunters, and builders have destroyed scores of mounds, vaults and village sites with little thought that they were destroying priceless history of an unknown civilization.

When the Chinese exhibit was on display at the Nelson Art Gallery a few years ago, two of the Chinese officials accompanying the exhibit

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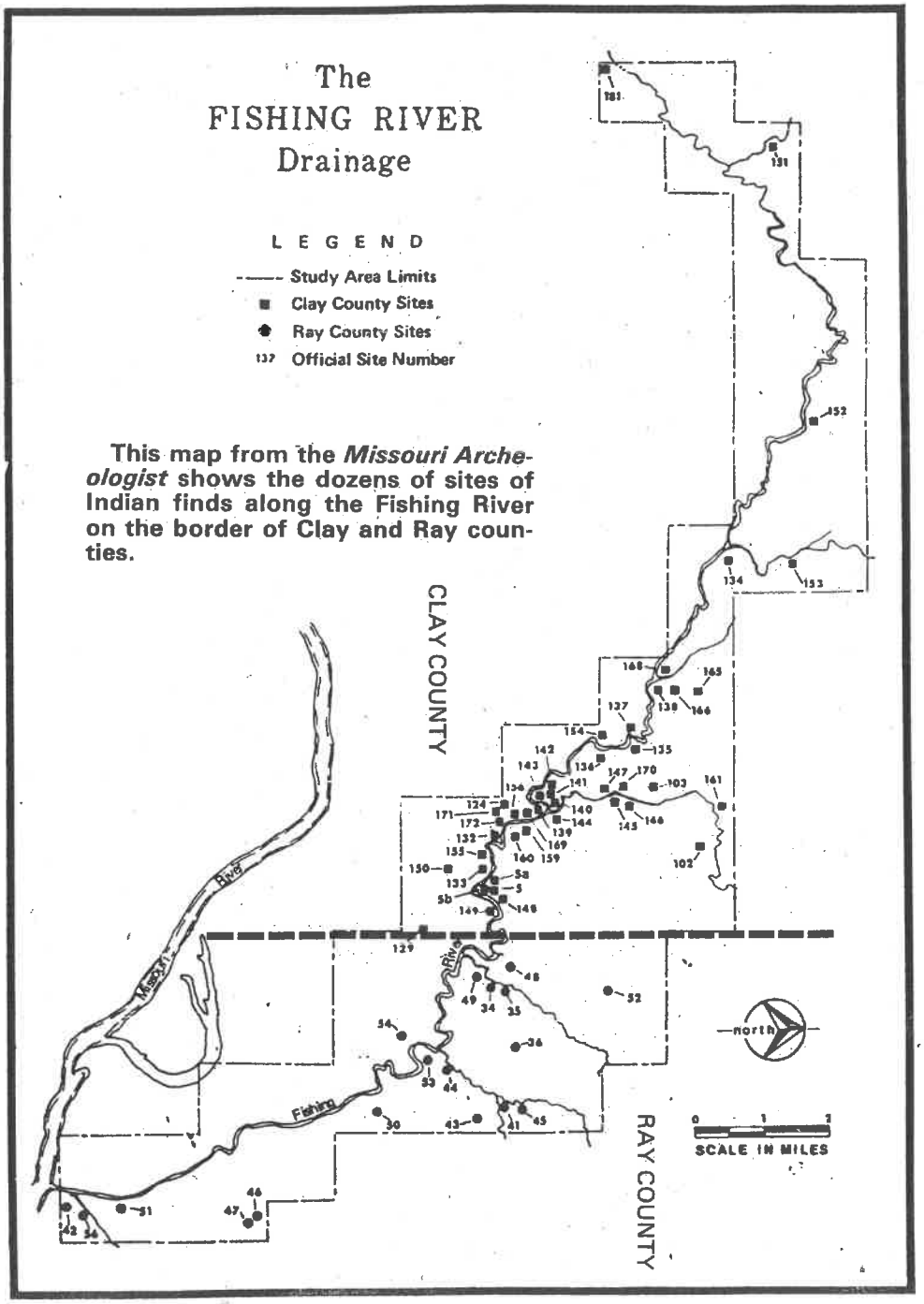
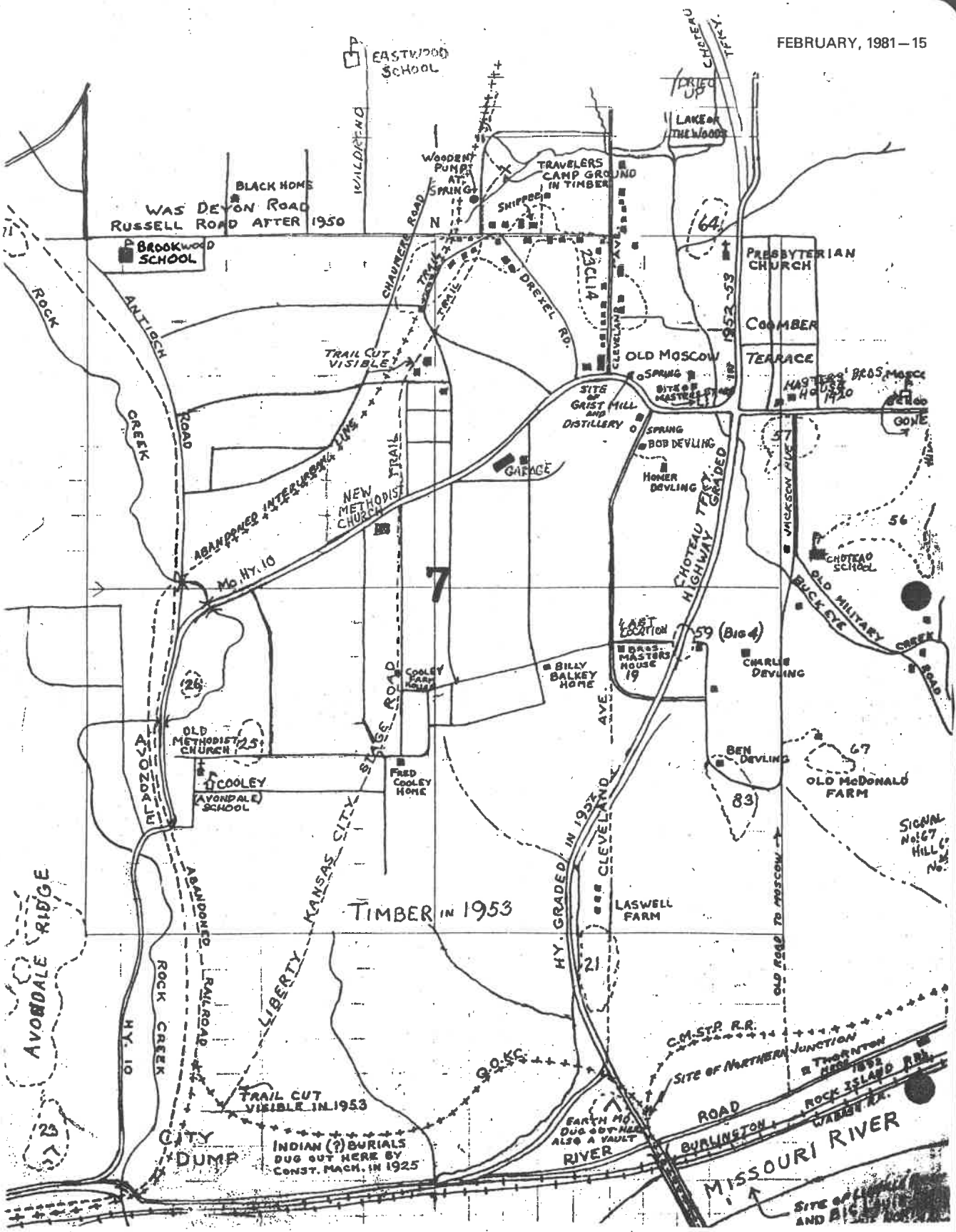
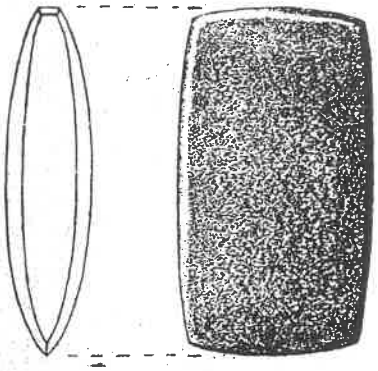


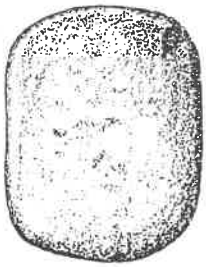
This map from the *Missouri Archeologist* shows the dozens of sites of Indian finds along the Fishing River on the border of Clay and Ray counties.



This is a portion of a very unique hand-drawn map by J. Mett Shippee showing the sites of his Indian archeology discoveries of the past several decades. Besides showing the sites of some of his finds (circled dotted areas with number indicators), the map also reveals fascinating bits of history for this section of Clay County. Among these are the right-of-ways of the Interurban, the Quincy, Omaha and Kansas City, the Chouteau Bridge when it was a railroad bridge for the Milwaukee Road, the trail of the Liberty-Kansas City stagecoach route, and the fact that Russell Road was once called Deyon Road.

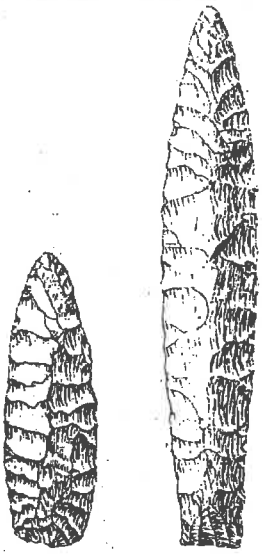


Nebo Hill Celt



Nebo Hill Mano

THESE ARE ILLUSTRATIONS of some of the relics that have been found on Nebo Hill in Clay County. The celt was a tool shaped like a chisel or ax head. The mano was used for grinding corn and other foods.



Nebo Hill Points

Indians

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about the time St. Louis was founded, these Indians lived mostly along the rivers and streams.

The Sac and Fox had been forced out of Wisconsin, and they in turn drove out the Missouris.

The only large battle between tribes known in Clay County was about 1809 near the present town of Smithville. The Sac and Fox had a prolonged "skirmish" with the Osage tribe, pushing them into southeastern Clay County, where Liberty Landing later was located.

The Osage Indians were later forced across the Missouri River into what is now Jackson County. Early settlers found remains of the battles in Clay County for several years following.

Later the Sac and Fox tribe members were exposed to smallpox by the white men and only about 400 survived.

In 1825, Missouri Governor Frederick Bates pushed the Sac and Fox tribes into Kansas and Oklahoma. In the 1830s, under President Andrew Jackson, the government moved the Indians across Missouri in what is now known as the "Trail of Tears." Many became ill and about 30 or 40 died and were buried near Beverly.

Before the Platte Purchase in 1837, Clay County was the eastern edge of the state line, and Platte County was an Indian reservation. But it was illegal to sell liquor to the Indians in Missouri, so a tavern, called the Chevis-Samuel tavern, was built in the town of Barry, with one room extending into Indian Territory. If traders wanted to sell liquor to the Indians, all they had to do was step across the "state line", and be out of reach of the law.

Today, this tavern has been reconstructed at Lake Jacomo in Jackson County as part of Missouri Town 1855.