

THE
ROCK CREEK STONE PILES
AN
ARCHAEOLOGIC MYSTERY

In geologic history, knowledge of when human existence began is definitely indeterminate. Savants tell us of the Archean Period, when at its ending only the lowliest forms of life existed. Paleozoic Time, next in succession, the age of invertebrates, fishes and acrogens. Then came Mesozoic Time, the age of reptiles, topped by the Cretaceous Era, which merged into Cenozoic Time, the age of mammals. This has been divided into the Tertiary and Quaternary or Post Tertiary ages; the latter separated into three periods; Glacial, Champlain (flood) and Recent. The beginning of the so called Recent period goes back thousands of years and its time march brot us to the era of human existence and the present, which scientists of the future may designate as the beginning of the Atomic Period.

During the Recent Period, there was in Oregon a measure of time where unbelievable quantities of basaltic lava recurrently poured from volcanic fissures and vents spreading widely over its surface in successive layers. Evidence of these outpourings are visible in many places, their great depth particularly noticeable in the Columbia Gorge where the alternate layers have been exposed from top to bottom in several places. Adjacent to the town of Mosier, southward to the rising cliffs, westward to and beyond Rock Creek, is an extensive deposit of basalt that is broken and loose. From Rock Creek eastward much of the deposit is fractured to small pieces. During the construction of the railroad in the early 1880's, a spur track was laid along the east bank of the creek and thousands of yards were taken for grade construction and track ballast.

In this instance, the area of particular interest is some fifty or sixty acres lying west of Rock Creek, described as being in Section 2, Township 2 North of Range 11 East, W.M., Wasco County, Oregon. It is cut by the Columbia River Highway between mile posts 72.50 and 73.00. At Mile Post 72.90 there is an acute, reverse turn from which an old wagon road leaves the highway to climb the steep, rough road over the high hills to Hood River.

The described tract is a mass of loose, coarsely broken lava rock sloping toward the Columbia River, its surface uneven, with here and there oak, pine and fir trees, singly or in small groups; an area of waste, its surface of no economic value. Back of it is a rim rock, approximately one hundred feet high, rising to an extent of open bench land.

On this privately owned field of broken lava is where the "archaeological mysteries" are found. Heretofore, they have been called "Mosier Mounds". However, it would be more appropriate to call them Rock Creek Mounds, if the term "mounds" is at all applicable. For the most part these crude structures are winrows of area stone in varying lengths, built up one and a half to four feet above the undulating surface, sometimes roughly paralleling one another ten to thirty feet apart. Others, of irregular pattern, are isolated on the eminences or in the depressions. In other places there are circular pits with walls one to three feet high, and here and there mounds of rock five to eight feet in diameter and up to four or five feet in height, all loosely laid, hand placed rock forms representing many hours of labor; their crude simplicity baffling any logical conclusion as to their purpose in such surroundings. Near the west side of the area a trail about three feet wide had been partially smoothed by removing some of the stones and placing them along the low sides of the pathway, which leads across the area in a general southwest direction to a small spring flowing from a cleft in the cliff rising above it. This ancient trail, now cut by the highway, had apparently reached from the bottom land of the Columbia to and beyond the spring.

Some have that the stone piles were defense works. This is an untenable theory as the site is utterly devoid of any strategic value for this purpose. Neither do they have any explainable cultural use, and could not be classed as ornamental from any modern viewpoint. They are to be seen on both sides of the highway, more of them on the upper than the lower, and their weathering gives them a definite appearance of antiquity.

In the not distant past, some one had made feeble attempts to excavate in

the bottom of the walled pits. However, there is nothing to indicate that anything of informative value or interest was found.

Mr. George Chamberlain, a Mosier Creek orchardist, and a former Wasco County Commissioner, took a keen interest in the piled stones and endeavored to learn their history. He once questioned a very old Indian whose home was on the opposite side of the Columbia where similar rock piles are found. The Indian was thoroughly familiar with the sites on both sides of the river and exceptionally well versed in the native traditions of the locality; but who piled the stones and when, was beyond any of his tribal lore.

Years ago, rock piles were observed along the old road up the east side of Hood River, a mile or so from the town. Some of these were in size and form like small haystacks, others were smaller. Tomlike ("Old George"), the son of Chinideah, the last ruling chief of the Hood River Indians, and himself a venerable patriarch, was questioned concerning them. His ready explanation was, that before his time the older teen age boys were taken to the site of the stone piles on moonlight nights and required to move them from place to place, as part of a physical training to fit them to be raiding warriors. He also told of the Rock Creek site and its being beyond any traditions of which he knew.

Martha Aleck, who at the time of her death a few years ago lived between Hood River and the Mosier Tunnel, was the last of the old Hood River Indians. Martha was an intelligent oracle of native lore, but too often reticent about discussing it. When questioned regarding the Rock Creek site, she said the existence of the stone piles there and on the Washington side of the Columbia had been known to the natives for generations, and was emphatic in stating there was nothing in their oldest traditions to indicate their purpose, who built them, nor when they were erected. Apparently they have been as much of a riddle to past generations of Indians as they are to the people of today.

Mr. Chamberlain brot to attention a pit grave at the edge of the rock mass adjacent to the Mosier School. The body had apparently been cremated where

found and among the remaining charred bones a few trade beads and native shell beads were uncovered. He also revealed the site of a second pit grave, situated about thirty feet from where the old Hood River road leaves the highway, and equally near the edge of the steep descent to Rock Creek.

This excavation was scarcely three feet deep and not more than three feet in diameter at the bottom and the body must have been doubled up, with the knees beneath the chin, to have found placement. The grave was in dry, loose rock, the harshness of this mortal's last resting place softened only by the presence of broken scraps of Douglas fir bark, some of which may also have been a covering. The skeletal remains were gone, presumably removed by the excavator. A few much worn teeth and a small bone or two were seen. Later on, a second visit was made to this grave. The stones and bark were removed and the finer material carefully sifted. This revealed a few digit bones and a single blue bead. Finding trade beads in these graves dissipated the idea of these particular ones being prehistoric, altho they appeared to be very old.

There are indications of other grave sites along this west rim of Rock Creek and some of them may be prehistoric. This intriguing possibility invites their investigation. However, if any should antedate the old traditions of the natives, only stone artifacts would remain in evidence as under the circumstances of their burial, time would long since have dissolved human skeletons to impalpable dust, and their age could only be conjectured by any artifacts that may have been placed in the graves.

A layman's speculations as to the age of the stone piles may be considered without point and futile. There are, however, some deductions to be made which will at least point to their antiquity, as they are believably beyond the oldest traditions of the neighborhood tribes.

The statement has been seen in print that the youngest of the Oregon lava flows are assumed to be approximately 8000 years old. Judged by their depth and spread, some in the Columbia Gorge maybe other thousands of years older.

In the University of Oregon publication, "Early Man in Oregon", prepared by Doctors L. S. Cressman, Howel Williams and Alex D. Krieger, we read that in some of the prehistoric caves examined by them in Eastern Oregon such inflammable artifacts as sage brush mats and sandals found beneath the deposition of pumice were scorched or entirely charred. On Page 70, is the comment . . . "our evidence is unmistakable that the Indians of the eastern Oregon country were witnesses to some of the last large scale eruptions of the Cascade volcanoes in Oregon."

In the excavations at the Wikiup dam on the upper Deschutes River, three obsidian knives were unearthed. The last one found was imbedded eighteen inches deep in a stratum of boulders and clay, beneath a surface overlay of thirty inches of pumice. On Page 76, they say . . . "Probably we shall not err in estimating that this event (the destruction of Mount Mazama) took place between 4000 and 10,000 years ago; and the presumption is in favor of a figure nearer the smaller. This, therefore, is a minimum age for the artifacts found at Wikiup and Paisley".


If the last great lava flows actually occurred 8000 years ago and the flint knives of Wikiup were made, lost and buried before Mount Mazama disappeared, 4000 years ago; it is reasonable to assume that people lived along the great Columbia waterway and enjoyed its many bounties just as early as they dwelt in caves and made flint knives on the high, arid, sage brush plateau of central Oregon.

Based on studied information, scientists reason that Mount Mazama actually existed and disappeared at the time of the general eruption of the Cascade volcanoes, some four thousand years ago. In the legend of the "Bridge of Gods" the Indians tell us of its destruction when the earth shook and the volcanic peaks threw their fiery stones at one another. As there is no geologic evidence of a succeeding like disturbance, it is a fair conclusion any natural bridge spanning the Columbia at the time of the great volcanic outburst would also have been destroyed, and the occasion a memorable event in the history of the natives, to be perpetuated in the only way they knew, which was by passing it on from generation to generation in their accustomed legend form. If this could be conceded, it would be a triumph for Indian tradition.

We have in the Rock Creek site crude stone works, known to natives of the locality for centuries, without the least idea of their purpose, nor any information as to when or by whom they were created. If the storied Indian tradition of the bridge is tenable, and the time of its destruction considered coincident with the cited last general eruption of the Cascade volcanoes; there is an implied inference that the unstoried Rock Creek stone piles may even antedate the legend of the fallen river arch. There is nothing known of measurable antiquity for comparison, nor is there anything in the lore of the natives upon which to conjecture the time of their creation, or the reason for their existence.

However, there is a possibility of finding some clew regarding them in a search of the immediate vicinity for old graves and their minute examination for imperishable artifacts which, if found, qualified archaeologists might relate to the period of the stone works and obtain some idea of their antiquity.

For years untold they have reposed in the stern immutability of their being, a mystery to generations of descendant aborigines; an intriguing challenge to their interested successors of today, as they will probably be to our followers in the morrows to come.


W. A. Langille

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