

Echoes From the Past

THE AFTON SPRING, A LINK TO OUR PAST

Northeastern Oklahoma abounds with pre-historic evidence. Archaeologists have identified nearly 350 sites in Craig, Delaware, Ottawa and Mayes Counties that provide clues of man's early existence in this region. Because glacial activity during the ice age stopped in the Kansas City area to the north the terrain in this region was never disturbed therefore providing concrete evidence of earlier life.

In recent years one of the most productive and well known archaeological sites, Woodard Hollow now inundated by Grand Lake, produced complete human skeletons and various artifacts now housed at the Museum of Natural History in Norman. However a lesser known site, the Afton Spring located two miles northwest of Afton in Ottawa County, revealed evidence of life far earlier. Dr. D. H. Harper, a resident of Afton, is credited with discovery of the spring and contacting officials at the Smithsonian institute in Washington DC. regarding its existence. The spring spewed sulfur water and is thought to be part of the Ozark Uplift a mineralized area 30 miles wide and 100 miles long. In more recent times this belt became an extensive mining region extending from Missouri into Kansas and Oklahoma.

Upon their arrival, the team of Smithsonian archaeologists excavated the spring and constructed wooden retaining walls around the site to prevent cave-ins while water was continuously pumped out of the shaft. They marveled at the collection on the gravel bottom of the spring. Man made artifacts were discovered dating back to 3000 BC and before. To provide prospective, elsewhere in the world history was about to be recorded for the first time by the Egyptians who had discovered papyrus and ink for writing and were in the process of building their first libraries. It was also about 1000 years before Native Americans began their migration from northern Asia across the Bering Strait to the Americas and when Stonehenge, that mysterious rock formation in England, had become a center of worship. The artifacts discovered by scientists that related to man included arrowheads, spear points, and flint instruments some believed to have dated back to the Stone Age.

But even more intriguing was evidence of ancient living creatures. Evidently a favorite watering hole, the spring yielded bushels of bones and teeth of pre-historic mammals, three toed horses and mastodons. Mastodon teeth as long as 18 inches were discovered. Interestingly, over the centuries the teeth had become coated with a metallic deposit that looked like gold under water. Apparently, this "fools gold" had attracted more recent settlers because during their excavation, scientists discovered remainders of a crude wooden shaft built in an attempt to recover the riches.

The appeal of the spring to thirsty animals was self evident, but the presence of artifacts led to speculation that centuries ago early man may have cast valued items into the spring to appease some ancestral god. In this regard and of particular interest to scientists were arrowheads among the artifacts that became known in archaeological circles as the "Afton Points" because they were unlike anything found elsewhere in the world. The points have a distinct leaf like shape and are made of a different kind of flint. In more recent times,

during the era when the Osage Indians claimed the region for tribal hunting grounds, verbal history recounts that the tribe had known of the spring for centuries and frequently made pilgrimages to worship there. Their medicine men gathered at the spring chanting prayers and tossing spear points and arrowheads into the water as offerings. Much later after the region became part of Indian Territory in 1830 the spring became a “modern day” watering hole when cowpokes herding cattle on the Texas Trail stopped their herds at the spring on the way to Chetopa or Baxter Springs. However approaching the spring could be treacherous, after losing a few head of cattle the cowhands had learned to build boardwalks from trees to reach the spring so the animals wouldn’t get mired down.

After the Smithsonian scientists left, the Afton Spring remained an attraction for several years until World War I. At that time lead and zinc mine employees around Pitcher and Cardin were working feverishly to supply lead for the war effort and the spring began to go dry. Underground pumps 20 miles away apparently tapped the ageless underground stream that fed it. Man once again had interfered with nature and today there is only occasional dampness at the depression, a faint reminder of a historically significant site.

