

ECHOES FROM THE PAST

www.grandriverhistory.com

The first Citizens of Northeastern Oklahoma

Our region is a historical treasure chest of information regarding how and when the earliest inhabitants lived. Even by 1981, archaeologists had compiled a list of no less than 397 sites for excavation that were hundreds, even thousands of years old. Mayes County alone was credited with nearly 200 locations. The territory all along the Grand River apparently proved to be an early attraction for hunting and fishing, and salt deposits along Saline Creek that empties into today's Lake Hudson were an added bonus.

During pre-historic times, the region had been covered by a sea which eventually retreated to become the Gulf of Mexico. There were no glaciers that penetrated this far south. The river valley was created by the water shed from Kansas and Missouri that encompassed nearly 11,000 square miles and was drained by the Neosho and Spring Rivers. The two rivers then funneled into the Grand at today's Twin Bridges State Park, south of Miami. The valley that eventually was carved out also serves as somewhat of a dividing line between the Ozark Uplift, the hilly country to the east and the Osage Prairie grasslands to the west. The region contained everything necessary for man's quest for survival.

Possibly the oldest site to provide a link with history in our region was the discovery of the Afton Spring, located about two miles northeast of the current city of Afton and excavated in 1900 by employees of the Smithsonian institute located in Washington DC. Dr. D. H. Harper of Afton was credited with discovering the spring, and even before its excavation, he had obtained 150 specimens of artifacts as curiosities and had thrown away a bushel more. When the spring cavity was opened it was found to contain hundreds of Stone Age implements as well as mastodon bones and those of other pre-historic animals. Apparently, the spring had first been a watering hole for animals and later, a site of worship for various Indian tribes. More recently, during the 1800's, it had also served as a place to water cattle being driven north along the Texas trail. The spring continued to flow early in the 20th century until during World War I, underground pumps designed to empty the lead and zinc mines 20 miles to the northeast, drained the underground stream that fed the spring and it dried up.

Early mans' occupation of the valley coincided somewhat with the birth of Christ. While the Apostle Paul was preaching Christianity and writing letters that eventually would comprise over half of the New Testament, mound building tribes from the Sallisaw area began spending summers along the Grand River. Later, around 400 AD, they began staying year round. The discovery of whole villages and burial sites dating from that period confirms this.

A particularly interesting archaeological site in our region is located at Woodward Hollow, named for the Woodie family in the 1800's, and now inundated by Grand Lake.

Today, it's a favorite rafting destination for boaters, but far below in its depths are the remains of a small city, or more specifically, "cities" of prior inhabitants. Before the closing of the last gate to the Pensacola Dam in March of 1940, scientists had the luxury of excavating the area during the greatest drought and the lowest river flow since 1895. What they discovered were villages and burial sites that consisted of four different layers of humanity representing cultures extending back for hundreds of years. Skeletal remains of the most recent "layer" of inhabitants were found in caves that indicated, from the position of their remains, that they may have been victims of disease or a plague. Many of the victims were seated upright against the walls of their cave homes, and most did not have the burial artifacts archaeologists usually find. Today, the skeletal remains of many of these early citizens are stored at the Museum of Natural History in Norman.

The magnetism of the river valley has continued even after its first inhabitants departed: as a jealously guarded hunting region for the Osage; as a settlement destination for relocated Indian tribes; as a bountiful farming region for early settlers; and today, as a vacation paradise for modern day citizens.

More information can be obtained regarding the incredible history of Northeastern Oklahoma. Publications and artifacts of the Grand River Valley's past abound at our regional museums and libraries. Visit www.grandriverhistory.com for a list of their locations.