

Are We Losing Our Past?*

Evan Peacock

The unwritten history of Mississippi stretches back some 12,000 years, to when Paleo-Indians hunted mammoth and mastodon with spears. As the centuries went by, these hunting-gathering folk acquired new knowledge of the world around them, and exploited that knowledge in fabulous examples of technological achievement. They created beautifully worked stone tools, some of which took hundreds of hours to complete. They gradually domesticated plant life, becoming more independent of the land around them. They raised great mounds of earth to honor their dead, and huge earthen platforms where they practiced their ceremonies. They built houses, grew corn, and wove textiles. Their cultures enriched the centuries of time, until the diseases and guns of the white man brought them to an abrupt end. All that remains of these early Indians people are the material artifacts they left behind, over 10,000 years of labor and achievement buried in the earth beneath our feet. Sadly, every day that goes by sees a little more of this irreplaceable knowledge destroyed.

Construction is one main problem. Many sites are bulldozed over without ever being seen. Others are noticed, but go unreported and are destroyed. Poor logging and farming practices lead to erosion, which not only destroy sites but also the environment. Reservoirs, highways canals all can wipe out the remains of thousands of years in a matter of days.

So what's to be done? Of course construction will go on, as it must in any developing area. Yet care must be taken to insure that all information from the sites is not lost. Areas to be cleared should be checked for sites, and archaeologists notified if any are found. Farmers and loggers who take care to see that the land they work isn't destroyed are also preserving sites for future study.

Another problem is the "pot hunter." This is not referring to people who pick up an occasional arrowhead in a corn field, or collectors who take care to keep their materials separated by site. This refers to the person who robs us of our past even as some poachers and out-of-season hunters rob us of the kind of hunting we deserve. These pot hunters dig through mounds, dig in state parks, and dig on private property, destroying far more than they recover in their greed. Unfortunately, they often find a market for what they gouge out of the earth.

There are things which can be done to combat these people, and at least slow down their damage. Landowners should be aware of sites on their property, and safeguard them against looting. People digging on any state or federal lands, or in Indian mounds or cemeteries, should be reported to the nearest ranger or police immediately. If someone is selling artifacts, especially such things as beads or pottery vessels, it is almost certain that these artifacts came from graves, and local landowners and authorities should be warned. Also, buying artifacts from pot hunters only encourages their destruction of sites, and is as harmful as pot hunting.

There are enough people who care about Mississippi to make a difference. Site preservation is something that must take place now. Otherwise, our children will be denied the story of man before us in Mississippi, a story just now beginning to be written. We have some of the most interesting and important sites in America in this state, and to stand by and let them vanish would be a crime beyond all understanding. Won't you please help?

At the time the original article was published Evan Peacock was an anthropology student at Mississippi State University where he worked as a laboratory assistant at the Cobb Institute of Archaeology. Dr. Peacock is now Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Mississippi State University.

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