

MOUND BUILDERS

The time was some 5,000 years ago. The scene – probably Central America. A Mayan Indian woman had just discovered a wild grass with seeds which could be used for food. She had discovered the plant which centuries of cultivation and cross-breeding would change into corn – the corn that would make the Mayan civilization possible – the corn that would set the stage for a civilization in the Ohio River Valley. The remains of that civilization posed a mysterious puzzle to the pioneers of Clark, Floyd and Harrison Counties, and to settlers all up and down the river . . .

When the first settlers moved into the Northwest territory 150 years ago and more, they discovered mysterious mounds of earth dotting Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. Some of these mounds were as high as 70 feet . . . others were so low they were hardly noticed. Inside the mounds were found human remains along with beautiful pottery, jewelry and carvings, and other objects of a long-vanished civilization.

Most of the mounds were found along the Ohio River, and there were few settlers in the part of Southern Indiana who did not find one of these low-made hills on their newly-claimed property. At the mouth of Fourteen Mile Creek was discovered the ruins of a huge stone fort overlooking the river. Through Clark County, and in the knobs and bottom lands of Floyd and Harrison Counties mounds were discovered.

The Indians told hazy stories of an ancient people who had lived here and built these mounds. They told how their ancestors had made war on these

people, and they told of a great battle at the stone fort in which the last of the Mound Builders in this area had been wiped out.

Who were the Mound Builders? Where had they come from? And why had they vanished so completely not only from Southern Indiana, but from the whole vast area they had occupied? No one knew the answers then. No one knows all the answers now, but research and study have told us a great deal about these people and we are finding out more and more.

We know they were not a mysterious race – they were Indians. We know that they were a peaceful, agricultural people who grew corn and settled in permanent villages because they did not have to depend on hunting for most of their food. And we know that the corn they grew, the mounds they built and their customs came from the great Mayan civilization in Central and South America.

They were pioneers – much like the first white settlers who moved into Clark County – but they were pioneers who moved in from the south. These Mayan pioneers, looking for better homes, moved up along the Gulf of Mexico and up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers where they found lands ideally suited for the growing of corn.

They spread their ideas among the Indians who were already here – Indians who did not farm but who depended on hunting and fishing for food. The newcomers settled down in permanent villages and built homes and temples. They did not bring writing and arithmetic with them, because in the Mayan lands those were reserved for the priests and nobles. These settlers were simple folk looking for a better life. They knew how to make jewelry and pottery and weave cloth, and they mixed with the Indians who were here before them.

But they were constantly at war with many of the tribes of Indian hunters who envied the fine things the Mound Builders had created and who wanted

them for their own. This warfare was a constant drain on the Mound Builders' strength. Perhaps the enemy raiders actually killed off all the craftsmen among them. Whatever the cause, mound building stopped just about the time Europeans discovered the American continent 50 year ago.

The Mound Builders who remained were gradually absorbed into the other Indian tribes, but the corn they had brought with them became one of the white man's most important crops. Every green field of growing corn in southern Indiana is a tribute to those pioneers who arrived here before the white man – the no-longer mysterious Mound Builders.

[Vol. III, Historical Series No. 1]