The Prehistory of Hunting and Fishing*

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The first inhabitants of Mississippi left behind a fascinating legacy which intrigues and delights us today. Stone tools lie forgotten for thousands of years, then turn up in our gardens as we work the soil. Earthen mounds dot the land, lasting monuments to peoples whose way of life has vanished forever. At least 12,000 years of prehistory lie beneath our feet, holding in close embrace the secrets of those whose world was abruptly changed by the guns, diseases, and the ruthlessness of the Europeans.

Through the science of archaeology, these secrets are slowly being revealed. In fact, a fair amount already is known about the hunting and fishing practices of these early peoples. Bones from prehistoric garbage and cooking pits, special types of tools, ornaments fashioned from animal remains - these and other clues tell us how the Indian provided food for survival. Here is a closer look at the means by which the prehistoric inhabitants of Mississippi took their living from the world around them.

Ca. 10,000 - 8,000 B.C. Big Game Hunters in Mississippi?

Many thousands of years ago, mammoth ranged the plains of North America, while mastodon browsed along the deciduous forest edges of the Southeast. On the trail of these and other game, hunters from the Old World made their way across the Bering Strait land bridge into Alaska. From there they followed a I interglacial corridors down into the New World, exploiting the rich environment so successfully that soon their presence was felt as far south as the tip of South America.

We know that these early Indians hunted mammoth because at places like the Blackwater Draw site in New Mexico, prehistoric spear points have been found among the bones of the mammoths they killed. These early spear points are of a type called Clovis and except for the West Coast they are found throughout the United States, including Mississippi.

Mississippi was somewhat different in those days. The climate was cooler and wetter, and boreal forest species such as spruce and fir were widespread, along with mixed hardwood/pine forests, open grasslands, and marshy environments. Waterways carried large amounts of sediments created from the runoff of the glaciers to the north. Most of the animal species we see here today were probably present then, with the addition of mastodon, bison, bear, wolf, and others. We do not know if these Clovis peoples were killing mastodon in Mississippi as mammoth were being killed elsewhere. No kill sites have been found, possibly because the preservation of bone in the acidic soils of Mississippi is very poor. We do know that by around 10,000 B.C., Mississippi was sparsely inhabited by these first early hunters. Nearly every county has yielded some evidence, and new finds are being made which promise to add to our knowledge of these people.
In time, the glaciers retreated and the mammoth and mastodon perished from the change in climate, overextensive hunting, or a combination of these and other factors. Adapting to the changing conditions of the environment, specialized hunting practices gave way to a more generalized hunting-gathering type of economy. Spear points became smaller, more efficient for hunting deer, bear, and other game with which hunters today are familiar. A specialized tool was developed for throwing spears - the atlatl. This was a short stick with a bone hook on one end that fit into the end of the spear. With the opposite end of the stick serving as a handle, the atlatl became, in effect, a longer arm and it greatly increased the range and power of a spear cast.

To improve the atlatl's effectiveness even further, stone weights (called "bannerstones" today) were secured to the business end of the spear thrower, adding even more power to the cast. These bannerstones are among the most beautiful of the stone work of the prehistoric Indians of the Southeast, being ground into elaborate shapes from exotic materials.

Another technique which may have been common to these hunters was binding the spearpoint to a small foreshaft which was then inserted into the spear. If an animal was wounded, the spear itself would fall to the ground while the dart remained in the animal. In this way a hunter could travel with one or two spear shafts and several darts, lightening his load considerably.

It is thought that these Archaic Indians traveled from place to place during the year, exploiting in different areas the resources that were seasonally available. For instance, their hunting camps are often found in the uplands where deer and turkey would be plentiful during the fall. Sites from this period occur in great abundance throughout the Southeast, along the major river valleys and tributary streams as well as in the intervening uplands.

They also took advantage of summer by fishing with hooks fashioned from deer or turkey bone, probably using a method identical to the "trot-line" that is so common in Mississippi today. Where mussel beds were available in the rivers and streams, great mounds of empty shells rose in testimony to the importance of this food resource. These shell middens occur often in the Tennessee River valley, Florida, and along the Gulf Coast.

From excavated remains it is also known that these Indians took advantage of migratory waterfowl each year. While they probably depended mostly on nets to capture these birds, they may also have used the bola, or weighted thongs which were whirled over the head and thrown to entangle the birds. Stone objects which look remarkably like plumb-bobs have been found in many places, and the idea that they are bola weights is one explanation of their use.
A woman prepares food near a small fire while another carries firewood. Meat slowly roasts over the fire and mussel shells from an earlier meal litter the hearth area. Stored food fills the rear of the temporary shelter. A few men barter for fine points with a visitor from a distant village.

2,000 B.C. - A.D. 1,000 Settled Life

With plenty of food and favorable environment, populations grew quickly, and the Indians began to change from a seasonal round to a settled lifestyle. Small villages began to grow around special sites where mounds of earth were raised to bury and honor the dead. The innovation of pottery spread rapidly, and no doubt made it easier to prepare and store foods.

Hunting, gathering, and fishing went on much the same as before for these Woodland Indians. The use of the bow and arrow became known sometime around A.D. 700, and this quickly became the favored weapon of hunters and warriors.

Archaeologists find out these things by using various techniques which have been devised for field and laboratory work. Prehistoric pits are often found during excavation and their contents are full of information concerning the people who dug them. Animal bones and burnt seeds are carefully removed from the dirt, then shipped to specialists who identify them by species. Analysis by soil scientists may tell whether the pit served some specific function, such as disposal of organic materials. Pits and other features are dated by careful analysis of the pottery found in them, which shows stylistic changes through time, or by carbon-14 dating, which gives a reliable date for the death of organic materials such as wood which has been burnt in a fire. Spear and arrow points have been associated with specific time periods. It is through methods such as these that we know that corn was introduced at the end of the Woodland period, and Indian culture began to reflect the growing importance of agriculture.
Having waited patiently and motionless behind a bush near a game trail, the hunter is rewarded by sending a dart shaft into a large buck. Hunting at such close range was dangerous and uncertain, and opportunities for a clear shot were rare. Spirits were high and stomachs were full for a few days when the hunt was successful. Here the Indian hunter used the atlatl or spear thrower, to help insure the kill.

A.D. 1,000 - 1542 Early Farmers

The most important crops grown by these Mississippian Indians were corn, squash, and beans. They provided a nutritional diet that was supplemented by hunting and gathering. Chiefdoms evolved from the smaller Woodland groups and flat-topped "temple" mounds were erected in the growing centers.

Since these Indians lived more recently, more artifacts have survived into the present to tell us of their way of life. We know that they were closely bound to the waterways of the South, for the game and transportation as well as the favorable farm land. Dugout canoes were crafted from cypress trees, fashioned by a combination of burning and gouging with stone axes and adzes. Canoes such as this have been found near Amory, Vicksburg, and Natchez. Nets were in use, presumably to catch fish and birds. These Indians also took their food from the rivers and creeks in another fashion: clever traps designed to capture and hold fish.

Prehistoric fishweirs made from stone have been found in different places across the United States and Canada. However, in Mississippi there was found one of the very few weirs made of wood which survived until modern times. The trap was discovered in the Homochitto River in 1975 by T. G. Sturdivant. Sharpened stakes of wood such as pine, hickory, and sweet gum were hammered into the soft river bottom to form a funnel with the broad end facing the current. Fish would follow the current into the funnel and into traps waiting at the other end. (Unfortunately, this end of the fishweir had been
destroyed by the current.) Mats formed from split cane were woven throughout the stakes to prevent the fish from escaping. From some of the nearly 300 stakes which remained, carbon-14 dates were obtained that placed the fish weir from A.D. 1480-1595, indicating that the trap had been rebuilt over the period of its use, perhaps many times. This is a rare and extraordinarily clear glimpse at the life of the Indian in Mississippi.

During the time of the first European contact with Indians in Mississippi, houses were probably round, domeshaped structures covered with grass or straw mats. Daily activities were carried on outside the dwelling. Polelike structures kept stored food and articles out of harm's way. One woman is preparing food taken from a nearby storage pit while another is making cloth. A wooden mortar with its two-headed pestle is near the weaver, and a stone mortar is on a skin near the food storage pit. Food is also stored in large pottery vessels sealed with tightly stretched skins. Three men discuss the events of the day while two boys race about in a game near the larger hut.

The contact between the American Indian and the Europeans was a devastating one for the Indian. Populations were decimated by diseases to which they had no resistance. These Indians were the historic tribes that we are so familiar with today. Namely, the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Natchez, Tunica, and others. It is ironic that we know a great deal about these Indians due to the historic reports of the very people who caused their destruction.

Accounts exist of great deer drives held by the Indians. They would form a "U" shape with people and slowly begin to close it into a circle, trapping the deer and other animals in a small area where they could easily be shot. Fire was also used to drive game, usually toward a river where the animals would be easy marks while in the water.
Another method used by hunters was to wear the head and hide of a deer, draped over the head and body, and thus approach game close enough to shoot with the bow and arrow. This was particularly effective during the rutting season, when the bucks would be just as inclined to fight with a newcomer as to be suspicious.

These Indians were adept at net fishing, although fish were generally not a very important food item. Fish were also speared with multiplepronged gigs. In smaller creeks, the Indians sometimes poisoned the water. Buckeye, pounded up and placed in the water, caused the fish to float belly-up. The plant known as "Devil's Shoestring" was also used. Neither poison harmed the fish's flesh for consumption.

These are only a few of the things we know today about the Indians of Mississippi and their way of life. Archaeology goes on in Mississippi today in an effort to learn more, but it is a losing race against site destruction. Subdivisions are built upon prehistoric villages. Sub-soilers churn up sites. Vandalized and pot hunters tunnel heedlessly through mounds and other sites in search of trophies for the mantel. However, the people of Mississippi are beginning to realize the need for site preservation, and with their understanding and cooperation much more will undoubtedly be revealed to us in the future about the lifestyles and beliefs of our first Mississippian.

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