



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Late Precontact Village Farmers

Full Citation: John R Bozell, "Late Precontact Village Farmers," *Nebraska History* 75 (1994): 120-131

URL of article: http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1994Time5_Farmers.pdf

Date: 7/26/2013

Article Summary: Village Farmers, a group that archeologists refer to as "the Central Plains tradition," appeared in Nebraska about A.D 1000. Their culture typifies Nebraska prehistory.

Cataloging Information:

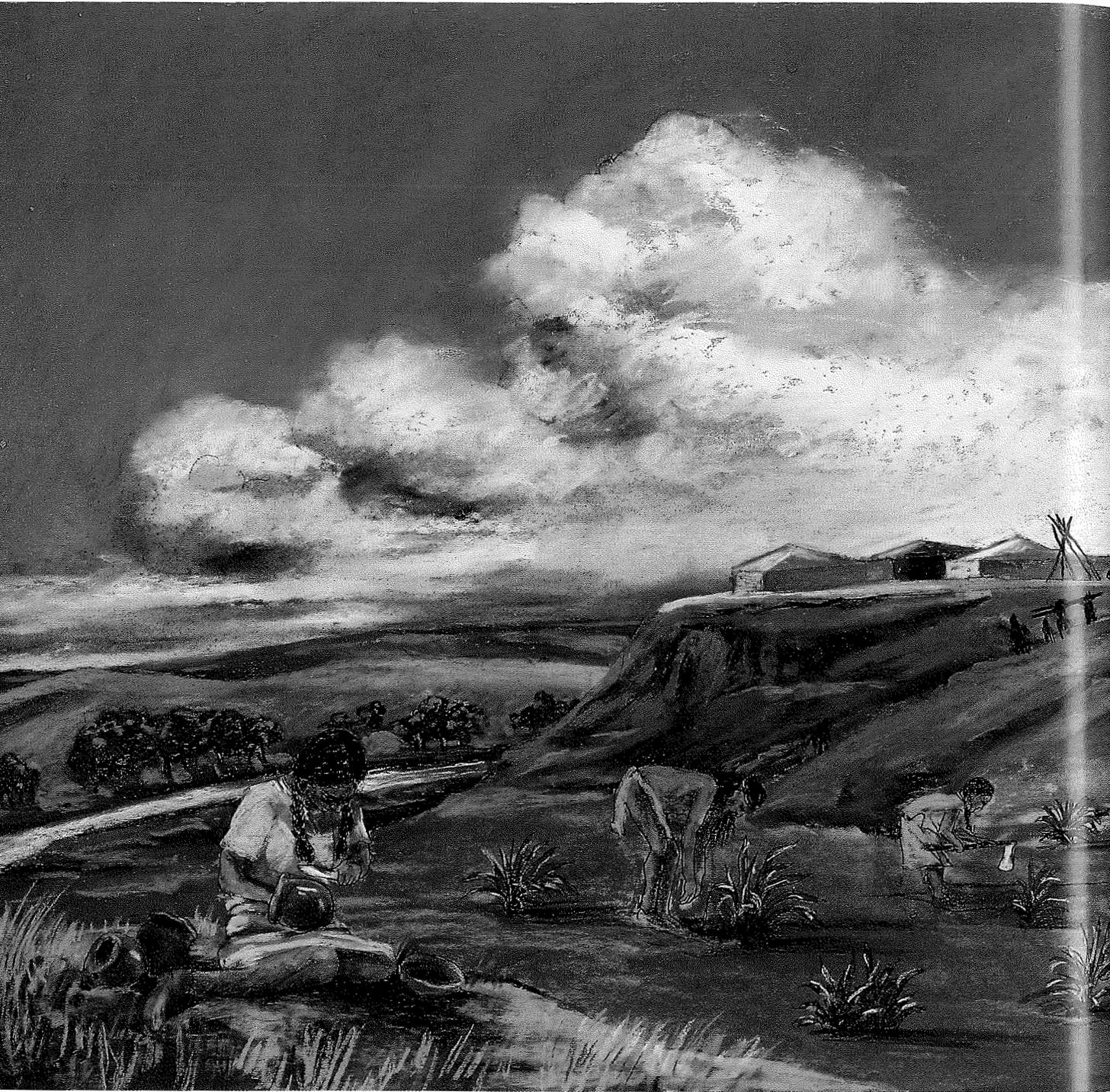
Geologic Time: Upper Republican phase, Smoky Hill phase, Nebraska phase, Itskari phase

Archeological Sites: Patterson site (Sarpy County), Olsen site (Custer County), McIntosh site (Brown County), Lynch site (Boyd County)

Nebraska Place Names: Republican River, Smoky Hill River, Solomon River, Loup River, Platte River, Sand Hills, High Plains (Panhandle)

Keywords: wattle-and-daub houses, storage and refuse pits, trash middens, pottery, bows and arrows, stone tools, bison, burial sites, trade network, fire

Photographs / Images: image of Village Farmers tending crops and making pots; shell pendants and bone bracelet; schematic map of Village Farmer hamlets; smoking pipes made from stone and clay; Pawnee knives made of jasper and chert; fish hooks; corn shelling tool and scoop; knives; axes; points; pots (Howard, Nance, and Washington counties); "Taking the Hump Rib," image of a buffalo hunt by Alfred Jacob Miller; excavation of a Village Farmer house floor (Cedar County)

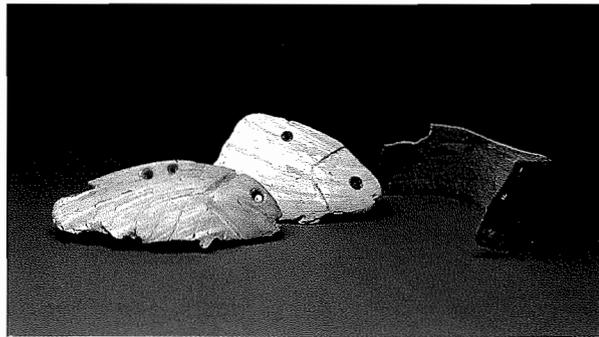


Village Farmers built sturdy houses overlooking Nebraska streams. They tended streamside plots of domestic crops and hunted a variety of game.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Late Precontact Village Farmers

An Agricultural Revolution



Shell pendants and bone bracelet

**By John R. Bozell
Nebraska State Historical Society**

THE USUAL IMAGE OF THE PLAINS INDIANS is of 19th century nomadic bison hunters like the Sioux and Cheyenne or of village dwellers like the Omaha and Pawnee. Yet, the population of those powerful tribes did not approach that of late prehistoric farmers. About 1,000 years ago, distinct changes occurred in Great Plains Indian life. The population of the region grew, and the lifestyle of the inhabitants changed dramatically. Archaeologists estimate that during the period from A.D. 1000 to A.D. 1400 the region supported a greater population than during any period before or after. If any culture typifies Nebraska prehistory, it is that of those farmers.

About 5,000 archaeological sites have been found in Nebraska, but fewer than one-quarter can be assigned to a specific time period and only about 50 are attributed to historic tribes. Most of the dated sites were inhabited between A.D. 1000 and A.D. 1400. Who those late precontact cultures were, what their lifestyle was and what became of them is the subject of intense interest among archaeologists.

Populations increased, societies grew more complex and the people became more dependent on agriculture, a pattern common in many regions at that time. Which phenomenon triggered the others is unclear, but they were related. Such changes occurred among southwestern Pueblo dwellers and Mississippian mound builders of the Southeast as well as on the Plains.

Village Farmers, referred to as the Central Plains tradition by archaeologists, appeared in the Republican, Smoky Hill and Solomon River valleys about A.D. 1000, possibly from the south. Yet their culture is so distinctive they cannot be directly associated with any earlier cultural group in other parts of North

America. The relationship of the Central Plains tradition people to preceding Woodland cultures of the central Plains also remains a mystery.

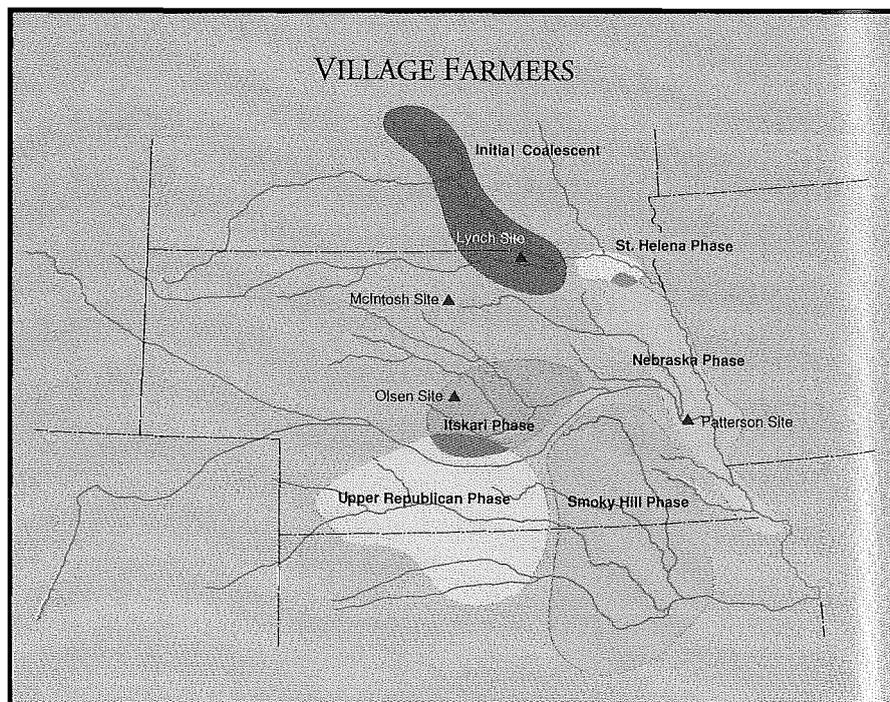
Village Farmers expanded northward and established hamlets along all major rivers and many lesser streams throughout the eastern two-thirds of Nebraska, northern Kansas and western Iowa. They even occupied the High Plains of Colorado and Wyoming. A typical site consisted of one or more sturdy square or rectangular wattle-and-daub houses — far more substantial than historic period tipis. Houses were constructed by digging the floor a foot or more below the surface, setting large, closely spaced posts about the perimeter and center of the floor and placing a cover of earth, thatch or mud plaster. Most houses featured a long entry passage, a central fire hearth, beds along the walls and several storage and refuse pits. Pits were dug to store crops or dried meat, but the food was often spoiled by seeping water or burrowing rodents. When this happened, the people dug new pits and converted the old ones to refuse disposal. Hundreds of house sites and trash-filled pits excavated by archaeologists have yielded details of past material culture and how those people adapted to the central Plains. Today the house ruins are often visible as large dish-shaped depressions in undisturbed grasslands.

Village Farmers left many diverse and often beautifully crafted artifacts. Ceramic technology blossomed during the period with potters making thousands of globular jars and bowls, many with intricately decorated rims and handles. Some vessels were miniatures no larger than golf balls. Pottery was used for cooking and storing food.

They made good bows, and their arrows were tipped with very sharp, thin, triangular side-notched flint points. Their stone tools included highly polished ground stone axes, chipped stone knives, scrapers, drills and grooved sandstone abraders used in arrow making. The assortment of implements made from animal bones is also impressive. The most common were digging and gardening tools made from buffalo shoulder blades and sharp hide-working awls split from lower leg bones of deer and antelope. Bone or shell beads were used as ornaments, and tobacco was smoked in stone and ceramic pipes.

The economy was diverse. For the first time central Plains Indians cultivated corn, beans, squash and sunflowers with regularity. They collected a variety of

Village Farmers built hamlets along major rivers and streams in the eastern two-thirds of Nebraska, northern Kansas and western Iowa. They occupied these sites from 1,000 to 600 years ago.





wild plants, hunted deer, pronghorn, small mammals and birds, and caught fish and freshwater mussels. Although they also hunted bison the importance of bison to these villagers is a point of contention among archaeologists. The period was subject to frequent cool droughts, and bison populations seem to have been sparser than in historic times, and large bison herds were not always available. Hunting small game and growing crops were successful.

Village Farmers, like Woodland groups, buried their dead in communal ossuaries on high hills overlooking stream valleys. Those burial sites may have served several hamlets. Archaeologists find few burial offerings, suggesting an egalitarian society in which rank or social stratification was absent.

Villagers of Eastern and Central Nebraska

Village Farmers began settling along the Solomon River in Kansas perhaps as early as A.D. 1000, although sites that old are rare. Population grew rapidly in the Republican and Smoky Hill valleys and along the Missouri River in southeastern Nebraska and northeastern Kansas. Those Village Farmer cultures, called the Upper Republican, Smoky Hill and Nebraska phases, flourished until A.D. 1300 or later.

Sites in those areas are closely spaced. For example, along Medicine Creek, a Republican River tributary, sites have been found on nearly every level ridge and terrace overlooking the valley. Each site may hold the remains of one or several houses, but taken together, every stream valley was home to hundreds of people. In addition to abundant timber, game and arable bottomland, the valleys offered plentiful sources of flints and jasper used to make stone arrowheads, knives and scrapers.

Another major region of occupation during that time was in the Loup and Platte basins of central Nebraska. That group, called the Itskari phase, did not

Village Farmers made smoking pipes from stone and clay. The red pipe, found in Washington County, represents a mythical horned serpent.

CHIPPED STONE TOOLS

By Steven R. Holen, Research Archaeologist, University of Nebraska State Museum



The Pawnees made knives of Smoky Hill jasper (brown) and Permian chert (gray) obtained in their bison hunting territories.

Chipped stone tools were a necessity for the Native American people of the Plains until the introduction of European metal tools beginning in the late 17th century. Not only were stone tools used in almost every aspect of food acquisition and processing, they also were necessary for making other tools of bone and wood.

Stone suitable for making tools is found only in certain outcrops in Nebraska and surrounding areas, and a large area in central Nebraska offers little good stone. Secondary sources include cobbles in gravel along the Platte River in central and western Nebraska and in the northwestern corner of the state. Those secondary cobble deposits were sometimes used, but not as extensively as the primary deposits, where it was easier to acquire large quantities of good stone.

The lack of good stone in certain areas allows archaeologists to study how people acquired stone from distant sources and what territories various groups used. For example, about A.D. 1700 the Pawnee lived in large villages along the Loup and Platte rivers in east-central Nebraska where there was almost no material for chipped stone tools. The nearest sources were the Pennsylvanian cherts in eastern Nebraska along the lower Platte River and Weeping Water Creek. However, the large majority of stone from two villages, the Gray site and Burkett site, came from more distant sources.

The Gray site Pawnee got most of their stone from the Flint Hills, Permian age chert outcrops in east-central Kansas. The Burkett site Pawnee acquired Smoky Hill jasper from along the Republican River and its tributaries

in south-central Nebraska and north-central Kansas. Historic records explain why they did not get stone from the nearest sources.

There were two distinct groups of Pawnee in the early 1700s, the Skidi Band and the Grand (South) Band. Each had its own villages and bison-hunting territories. Comparing their hunting territories to stone outcrop locations makes it obvious that the bands got their stone for tools from the sources within their bison-hunting territories. That was more efficient than making a special trip to the nearest source of stone because they could acquire two absolutely necessary resources, stone and meat, with one trip.

Flintknapping skills reached their peak during the Paleoindian period 8,000 to 11,000 years ago. About 11,000 years ago, the Clovis culture mammoth hunters transported stone over even greater distances. Those Paleoindians were skilled flintknappers who preferred high-quality stone for their tools. Archaeologists have learned that they were highly mobile, probably covering several hundred miles during their yearly hunting rounds.

A good example comes from the Eckles Clovis site just across the border in north-central Kansas. There, most stone tools are made from a high-quality, light purple chalcidony originating nearly 300 miles away at Flattop Butte in northeastern Colorado. Even though there are closer sources of stone, the Clovis people preferred the higher quality stone and carried it long distances.

The movements of prehistoric peoples and the territories they used are just some of the information that can be learned by studying their stone tools. Studying wear patterns on

the tool edges under high magnification can indicate what materials had been cut or scraped. Technological changes can be apparent in stone tools of different ages.

Since the time of the earliest big game hunters about 12,000 years ago, projectile points were the type used on small spears thrown with an atlatl (spear-thrower). About 1,500 years ago, projectile points suddenly became smaller. That was because of the adoption of the bow and arrow, which required a smaller point — an arrowhead. That technological change is often misunderstood by artifact collectors who correlate the size of the point with the size of the game hunted. Thus we have the popular but incorrect designation, “bird point,” for small arrowpoints that actually were used for game such as deer and bison.

Often the function of a site can be identified by the type of tools found. For example, specialized sites such as hunting camps have higher percentages of projectile points than do village sites where a wider range of tasks were performed. One new method of studying stone tools is the analysis of blood residues remaining in small amounts on hunting tools. The residues allow us to identify the types of animals hunted.

Chipped stone tools are an important part of the archaeological record of Native American people, which goes back at least 11,000 years in Nebraska. Metal tools began replacing stone tools only about 300 years ago. Indeed for much of human history, stone has been the most important material for tools, and at many sites chipped stone tools are the only record that remains of the people who once lived there.

settle there until a century after the Republican and Missouri valleys were at the height of occupation. In fact, many Itskari artifacts, particularly pottery, resemble items made by Upper Republican, Smoky Hill and Nebraska phase people. Archaeologists suspect that Itskari may in part represent members of those slightly earlier cultures colonizing new areas.

The similarities are such that archaeologists have speculated that Village Farmers from the south and east colonized the Loup River area and made some adjustments to lifestyle and artifacts. The occupation of the Loup drainage, however, is contemporaneous with other areas — A.D. 1100 to A.D. 1300.

They experimented with new ceramic vessel decoration and architectural techniques. Why people began moving northward out of the Republican and other valleys is not clear. Drying climate, overhunting, depletion of timber, population pressure and conflicts are all possible causes.

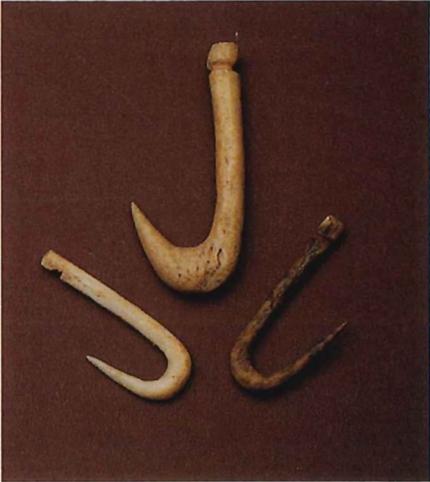
The Patterson Site

In 1977, 1984 and 1993, the Nebraska State Historical Society conducted excavations at the Patterson site, a Nebraska phase community perched on a high ridge overlooking a small Sarpy County tributary of the Platte River. Five house ruins have been identified, and three were excavated. Only one home has been completely analyzed, and that research showed that Village Farmers occupied Patterson at least twice.

The first use of the site came about A.D. 1050 when at least one large house was occupied. The house, more than 1,200 square feet, was home to about 25 or 30 people. Different construction styles used in building the east and west halves suggest two extended families may have joined in the construction. The home was inhabited for a long time, as shown by abundant refuse found on the floor and in 11 storage and trash pits. Many wall and roof support posts had auxiliary posts adjacent to them, presumably repairs to crumbling walls and sagging roofs.

A wide variety of artifacts and food remains were found in the house ruin. Shelled corn filled one pit, and several others contained more than 100 sandstone abraders, tools used to manufacture arrow shafts. The large number of abraders and arrowheads suggests that someone living in the house was a specialist in arrow making.

Specialization may have been a response to the need for trade with neighboring villages or even those in other areas of the Plains. Ceramic vessels made by Upper Republican phase potters and Mississippian people in Kansas or Missouri, and galena, a lead ore from Iowa and Illinois, were found in the



Fish hooks illustrate the Village Farmers' skill in fashioning implements from bone. They apparently made good use of the hooks, since fish bones are common in the refuse at many Village Farmer sites.



Village Farmers made this corn-shelling tool from a deer jaw and the spoon or scoop from a deer skull. Both items are from sites along the Missouri River.



Village Farmer knives include a large, hand-size blade (black) and a smaller thumb-size version. A clever example from Franklin County (left) is fitted with a slotted handle made of bison rib bone.

house ruin. Those items may be evidence of an extensive trade network.

Fire destroyed that house, as it did so many other Village Farmer dwellings. The cause of the blaze is unknown, but its effects were swift and final. The structure could have been ignited by lightning, prairie fire or flames and sparks from the central hearth, setting rafters ablaze. Eleven ceramic vessels were crushed when the roof collapsed, and an assortment of “in use” and unfinished stone tools and stored food remained in place on the house floor. The house might have been occupied at the time of the fire or the inhabitants might have been away on a hunting expedition.

The occupants probably moved on to settle elsewhere, but the Patterson site’s story does not end with them. When archaeologists excavated the burned ruin, they first discovered Nebraska phase artifacts above the house ruin, from just below the sod to a depth of about two feet where the roof of the house lay buried. Charcoal mixed with the shallow sod artifacts was radiocarbon dated to A.D. 1280 — more than 200 years after the abandonment of the burned ruin by earlier Nebraska phase people. The more recent artifact sample from the upper level is large and diverse but not directly associated with a house or any other substantial structure.

Evidently the centuries-old, collapsed and burned house site left a depression that was used as a dump or work area by late 13th century Nebraska phase people attempting to reoccupy the little valley, previously colonized in the 11th century. Other sites associated with the re-colonization have been found within several miles of Patterson.

The Patterson site and others in the immediate area are important to our understanding of late prehistoric eastern Nebraska. It includes one of the first, as well as one of the last, Village Farmer occupations in eastern Nebraska. As a result, it is key to understanding how a particular culture colonized, adapted to and ultimately abandoned a locality.

The Olsen Site

In 1981 the Nebraska Highway Archaeology program investigated a site exposed by construction on Nebraska Highway 2 between Berwyn and Ansley along Muddy Creek in Custer County. The archaeologists excavated several sites, including the Olsen site, an important Itskari phase hamlet. At that site they uncovered the remains of three small houses ranging in floor area from 170 to 390 square feet, along with several trash heaps and exterior refuse and storage pits.

With some notable differences in architecture, economy and artifacts, Itskari culture was similar in many respects to neighboring Upper Republican, Nebraska and Smoky Hill cultures. Itskari houses were smaller, still essentially square but with rounded corners and bulging sides. Although Itskari people were still farmers who supplemented their economy with diverse hunting and gathering, they seem to have had more focus on bison hunting than their relatives to the south and east. Pottery decoration displays a wide range of motifs. Olsen potters were influenced by Smoky Hill phase artisans.

The Olsen site may be the remains of a village established by former Smoky Hill phase people exploring land to the north in search of bison and stone raw materials for tools and weapons. Much of the stone from Olsen was quarried in northwestern Nebraska and southwestern South Dakota in the White River vicinity.

Food remains at the Olsen site include bones of 18 species of mammals, five species of fish, two species of turtles and 10 species of birds. Although the occupants of Olsen and other Itskari villages were not considered intensive bison hunters, bones of that species occur with increasing frequency compared to other Village Farmer sites in Nebraska.

The Sandhills and High Plains

Prehistoric farmers lived not only in the major river valleys of eastern and central Nebraska, but in the Sandhills, the High Plains of the Panhandle and even in the shadows of the Colorado and Wyoming Rockies. The distribution of sites stretching from the wooded valleys of western Iowa to butte tops and caves on the High Plains is testimony to Central Plains tradition diversity.

Village Farmer axes usually were not grooved. How the handles were attached remains a mystery.



The Village Farmers made thin, sharp, well-crafted points. The two points without notches may be unfinished.





Ceramic technology blossomed during the Village Farmer period. These pots (from left) were found in Howard, Nance and Washington counties.



Some sites are the remains of transitory camps established by villagers seeking bison and other natural resources great distances from home. Many eastern village sites contain tools made of stone available only from the western Plains. Similarly, excavated sites have produced many bison bone tools but no direct evidence of food bone refuse. Those finds are evidence of hunting, butchering and gathering activities far from home. Other western sites may reflect permanent migration of people onto the western Plains.

The McIntosh Site

Archaeologists usually have interpreted sites from the Village Farmer period in the Sandhills as temporary hunting or traveling camps, but road construction at the McIntosh site along a natural Sandhills lake in Brown County has led to reevaluation of that belief. Construction exposed extraordinary amounts of bison bone, fish bone and stone and ceramic artifacts, far more than are normally associated with hunting camps. The significance of the find prompted the Nebraska State Historical Society to organize excavations with the assistance of amateur archaeologists from across the state.

Excavations revealed the ruins of at least one structure, trash middens and many storage or refuse pits dating to A.D. 1400. The structure, although oval, had the basic elements of permanent Village Farmer lodge architecture. Sand from all the pits was screened through 1/16-inch mesh. The remaining residue included a typical array of Village Farmer artifacts, but more important large and diverse amounts of animal and vegetal food remains. Major species represented are bison, bullheads, ducks, pronghorn, corn, sunflowers and beans. Bison bones are more common at McIntosh than at almost any other Village Farmer site in Nebraska or Kansas.

The McIntosh site provides strong evidence that Village Farmers were using the western portions of the state for mobile hunting and also were attempting to establish permanent settlements there. Frequent droughts and unreliable bison herds elsewhere may have been one reason for expansion to the Sandhills. That region historically has been more drought resistant than other areas of the state because of its subirrigated meadows, many lakes and shallow water table. Range cattle are more likely to survive droughts there than in other areas, and the same may have been true for bison.

The Twilight of Prehistoric Village Farmers

The late 14th century may have been a time of significant crisis for the Village Farmers as the number of communities, and perhaps human population, dwindled. Nearly a century before Columbus's landing, Village Farmers, whose territory once encompassed most of present-day Kansas and Nebraska and portions of Iowa, Colorado and Wyoming, were confined to the Missouri River and its tributaries in extreme northeastern Nebraska and a handful of large villages along the Missouri in South Dakota. Soon afterward, archaeologists lose the trail of that culture. The central Plains of Nebraska were virtually unoccupied until the Pawnees, Omahas and Otos — tribes European explorers came to know in historic times — settled the region in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Late Village Farmer sites in Nebraska do not appear to have been fortified, but several related communities in South Dakota were surrounded by ditches and bastions for defense. At least one village in South Dakota, the Crow Creek site, was the scene of an early 14th century massacre of nearly 500 Village Farmer people attempting to colonize land to the north. They were probably attacked by warriors of the Middle Missouri tradition, Indians indigenous to South Dakota.

THE SEASONAL ROUND

By Robert Blasing, Archaeologist, Bureau of Reclamation, Grand Island



"Taking the Hump Rib" by Alfred Jacob Miller depicts a successful buffalo hunt.

Because the Indians of eastern Nebraska built earthlodge settlements and planted crops of corn, beans and squash, they are often pictured as living in small towns, much like the Euroamericans. Actually those groups had developed a system of seasonal travel carefully planned to put them at the right place to make best use of a resource when it was available and most useful. Their seasonal round was planned around two primary sources of food — bison hunting and the care and harvest of gardens. Other resources, such as flint for making stone tools, root crops and salt, also were gathered during the seasonal round.

In 1813, Robert Stuart described the seasonal round of the Pawnee. He said they came to their towns in early April, planted crops and left again on the hunt in May or June. They returned in August and, after harvest, again went on the hunt until the following April. Thus, the Pawnee spent as much as two-thirds of the year on the two annual hunts and only about one-third in their earthlodges.

While in the towns the Indians usually lived in large, circular earthlodges, but they used other types of houses at other times of the year. Gene Weltfish tells of Pawnee men building dome-shaped grass houses while tending their horses at Grand Island. James Murie said the Pawnee lived in tipis while on the winter hunt, but on the summer hunt they lived in "side dwellings," half bowl-shaped frameworks of saplings covered with skins. Those simpler shelters are no doubt explained by warm temperatures and the shorter duration of the summer hunt.

A similar situation was suggested for the Kansa by an observer who, in June 1839, described two camps of wigwams constructed of brush inserted into the ground and covered

with the buffalo hides they had been gathering for use on conical tents, their winter lodges. He describes meat drying throughout one camp, and fires in front of the lodges at the other. He describes a seasonal round for the Kansa very similar to that of the Pawnee.

The trader Chouteau reported that the Kansa started on their buffalo hunt about the first week in September, returning about Christmas and remaining in their villages the rest of the winter. Sometimes they would not return to the villages until spring, when they planted corn, then went hunting again in June. They returned about the first week of August.

In 1819, Stephen Long described a nearly identical round for the Omaha. The Brule Sioux in northwestern Kansas and southwestern Nebraska also were said to travel in a "great circle" by John Young Nelson.

The two mainstays of the seasonal round were the raising of crops and the bison hunt. Crops were more commonly planted in the eastern portion of the state, where moisture was more plentiful and predictable. Pawnee fields were generally confined to river valleys and creek bottoms, and no effort was made to cultivate the uplands. Major A.L. Green, describing the Pawnee town near Blue Springs, said "The corn and pumpkin patches ... were scattered throughout the neighborhood wherever a creek bend assured alluvial soil and partial protection from the ponies." Isaac McCoy reported two outlying houses more than seven miles from the Kansa Town on the Blue River, which apparently were associated with distant garden plots.

Most important were the twice a year bison hunts. A bull in good condition might weigh more than 2,000 pounds and provide about 800 pounds of useable meat. Cows weighed

from 700 to 1,200 pounds and provided an average of 400 pounds of meat.

Bison hunting methods have been described for several areas on the Plains. Paleoindian sites such as Jones-Miller show that some of these techniques persisted for a long time. In the central Plains, surrounds were common, but drives, and sometimes fire, were also used. The bow and arrow was still preferred for hunting long after guns were introduced.

In the 1820s, Ashley described a Pawnee surround where at least 1,000 Indians encircled a herd, then closed in a concerted rush. He said it took at least four days to set up this surround and 1,400 bison were killed. In November 1835, John Dunbar witnessed a Pawnee surround on the Platte River. A description of a very similar surround by Henry Kelsey on the Northern Plains in 1691, shows that horses were not necessary for that tactic. Similar hunts were described for the Omaha and Kansa tribes.

When many bison were killed, there was a lot of meat to process. Butchering and drying the meat into jerky at the site of the kill greatly reduced its weight. Processing tasks were the women's responsibility, but the exact nature of the work may varied depending on whether the purpose of the hunt was to obtain meat for the tribe or hides for trade. John Young Nelson said: "In the summer, the Indians as a rule do not trouble to secure buffalo robes: the fur on the skin of the animal is then very short, and does not become long and wooly until about the second week in October. All skins taken after the latter date, and until the first of May the ensuing year, are religiously set aside as robes. On the first the tepee or moccasin season commences."



The Lynch Site

The last major bastion of prehistoric Village Farmer culture in Nebraska was at the Lynch site in Boyd County, where the University of Nebraska completed excavations in 1936 and 1959.

The Lynch site was a large village scattered over about 300 acres on a high bluff overlooking the Ponca Creek valley about 12 miles from the confluence with the Missouri. University teams worked at four hut sites as well as deep trash middens and storage or refuse pits. The sheer size of the village and the amount of debris indicate that, unlike the dispersed hamlets elsewhere in the state, Lynch was a major community and home to hundreds of people.

The material remains are essentially of the Central Plains tradition but with some notable variations. The most important include poorly constructed oval houses rather than the more common well-built square structures, more focus on specialized bison hunting and new pottery surface treatment and decoration. Some changes almost certainly arose from increased contact with Middle Missouri tradition people of South Dakota and the Oneota people from Iowa and Minnesota.

Archaeologists search for clues to the mystery of what happened to the prehistoric Village Farmers. Nebraska was not the only region to experience major cultural change in the century or two prior to European contact. Complex societies, such as the Anasazi of the Southwest and the Mississippians of the Midwest and Southeast, all began to crumble after A.D. 1300. Causes of such continentwide change at that time might include climate change, overpopulation, warfare and disease.

In 1934, a University of Nebraska archaeology team excavated a Village Farmer house floor overlooking the Missouri River in Cedar County.