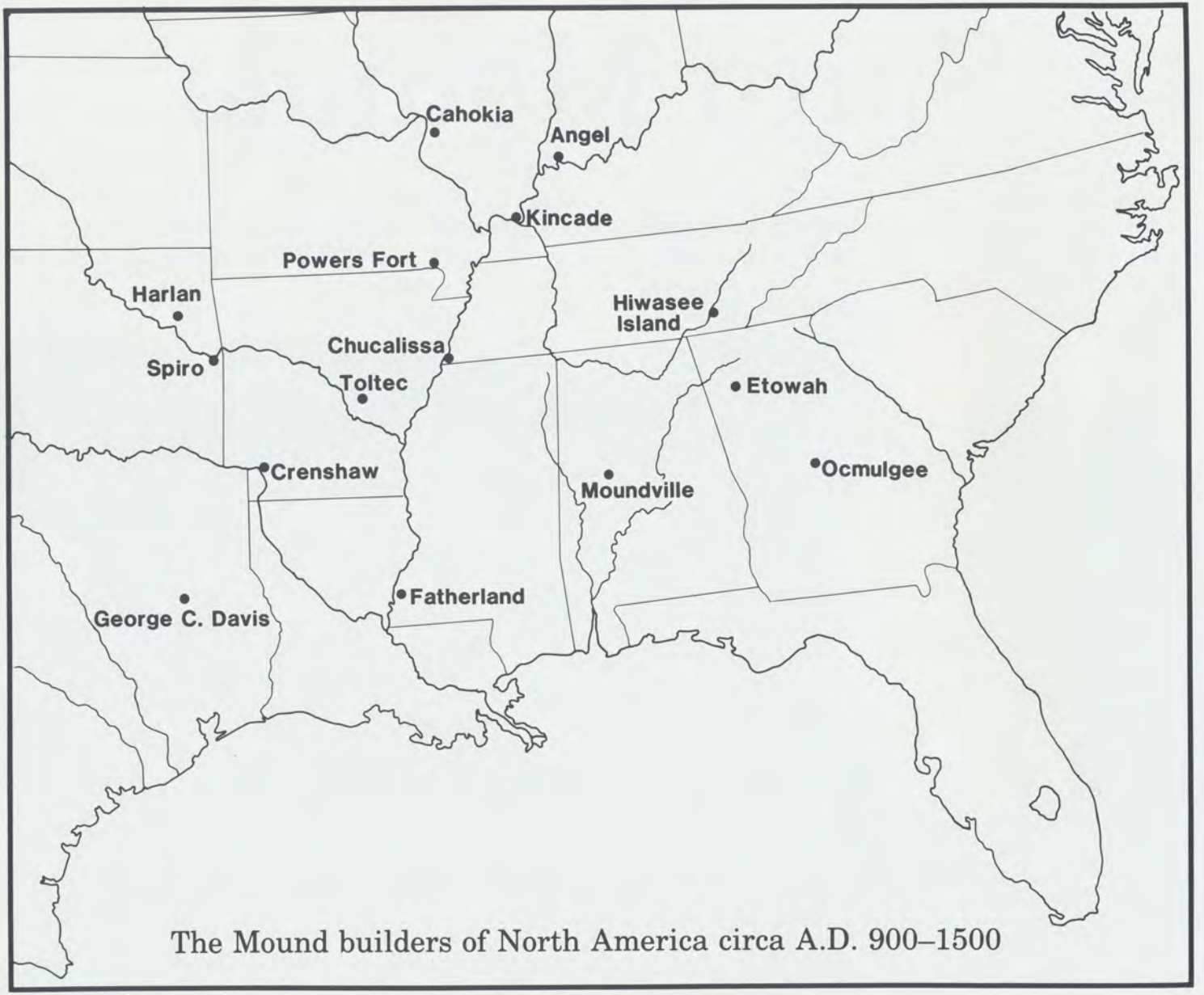
SPIRO MOUNDS

PREHISTORIC GATEWAY . . .
PRESENT-DAY ENIGMA

A traveling exhibition presented by the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History
(formerly Stovall Museum of Science and History) and the Oklahoma Archaeological Survey.



The Mound builders of North America circa A.D. 900–1500

Spiro Mounds

Prehistoric gateway . . . Present-day enigma

The mounds at Spiro, Oklahoma, are among the most important archaeological remains in the United States. A remarkable assemblage of artifacts from the mounds shows that prehistoric Spiro people created a sophisticated culture which influenced the entire Southeast. There was an extensive trade network, a highly developed religious center, and a political system which controlled the region. Located on a bend of the Arkansas River, the site was a natural gateway between societies to the east and the west, a gateway at which Spiro people exerted their influence. Yet much of the Spiro culture is still a mystery, including the reasons for the decline and abandonment of the site. Their objects remain intriguing, and pique the creative thoughts of professional and layman alike. Today, the Spiro site and artifacts are among Oklahoma's richest cultural resources, and the site is Oklahoma's only National Historic Landmark and archaeological park.

This archaeological site includes the remains of a village and eleven earthen mounds. Although various groups of people had camped on or near the Spiro area since early prehistoric times, the location did not become a permanent settlement until approximately A.D. 600. Spiro Mounds was renowned in southeastern North America between A.D. 900 and circa 1400, when Spiro's inhabitants developed political, religious and economic institutions with far-reaching influence on societies from the Plains and the Mississippi Valley to much of what is now the southeastern United States. Because Spiroans maintained such practices as mound construction, a leadership of priest-chiefs, horticulture (of corn, beans and squash), and a religious tradition (the "Southern Cult") common to the Southeast, they were an example of what archaeologists have termed the Mississippian cultural development in America.

Spiro was known locally as a prehistoric Indian site as early as the late nineteenth century. However, it was not until 1933 that the Spiro Mounds attracted national and worldwide attention. In that year, a group of treasure hunters leased the site and began excavating the largest mound. They discovered rich troves of spectacular artifacts, including objects of wood, cloth, copper, shell, basketry and stone. Unfortunately, the diggers were only concerned with finding and selling the relics, not with preserving or recording their significance or their context. Consequently, not only were important prehistoric artifacts looted

Pot hunters digging Craig Mound, 1933

Robert E. Bell

Works Progress Administration controlled excavations, 1936–1941 Robert E. Bell

and sold out of Oklahoma, but, like pages ripped from a rare book, irreplaceable information about Oklahoma's past was lost forever.

In an effort to prevent repetition of the tragedy at Spiro Mounds, the Oklahoma legislature passed the state's first antiquities preservation law in 1936. At the same time, state leaders worked to initiate a joint research venture by the University of Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Historical Society, and the University of Tulsa to scientifically excavate the Spiro Mounds site. Between 1936 and 1941, Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers, under the supervision of University of Oklahoma archaeologists, conducted a systematic excavation of the remainder of the Spiro Mounds. The WPA crews and archaeologists excavated and recorded the stratigraphy (sequence of deposit), burials, crematory pits and other features which remained in the largest and most severely damaged mound. Called the Craig Mound, this earthwork was 33 feet high and 400 feet long. Study revealed that Craig Mound, which was actually four joined mounds, had been constructed between A.D. 800 and circa 1350 to cover the graves of the society's most important leaders. Besides the Craig Mound, WPA workers excavated the remains of other mounds, the locations of several prehistoric houses, and other features at many nearby village sites.

Since 1964, the Spiro Mounds and other related sites in eastern Oklahoma have become points of renewed interest to archaeologists. Spurred to salvage important information from areas threatened by construction and development, archaeologists recognized an unparalleled opportunity to document and explain the rise and decline of a remarkable prehistoric society. Thus, for the past 20 years, archaeologists have re-examined the WPA records, studied newly excavated sites and patiently

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pieced together artifacts to determine the lifeways of these prehistoric Oklahomans.

The new findings show the Spiro site as one of the premier trading and religious centers of prehistoric America. Situated in a narrow valley of the Arkansas River, the Spiroans were in a strategic position to control traffic, trade and communications along this waterway, especially between the small villages scattered among the Ouachita Mountains to the south and the Ozarks to the north. Both of these regions were rich in raw materials favored by the Spiro people. Not only did Spiro become an important center for Caddoan-speaking residents of eastern Oklahoma, but it also began to play a significant role in controlling trade and information between bison-hunting Plains farmers to the west and the numerous settled horticultural tribes in the Southeast. This development was enhanced by Spiro's "gateway" position between the rolling grassy Plains and the wooded Southeast, as well as by the initiative of Spiro leaders.

As certain Spiro inhabitants became political and religious leaders, they also became commercial entrepreneurs. To help identify their growing status in the community, these leaders accumulated exotic goods which they wore as status markers or used in special ceremonies. Among the most favored exotic goods were conch shells from western coastal Florida, copper from the Southeast and other regions, lead from Iowa and Missouri, pottery from northeast Arkansas and

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Tennessee, quartz from central Arkansas and flint from Kansas, Texas, Tennessee and southern Illinois. Spiro artisans fashioned many of these materials into elaborately decorated ornaments, ceremonial cups, batons and other symbols of status and authority. Among the prehistoric societies, such objects were a sign of wealth, and Spiro's

priestly leaders were among the most affluent of the time. Elaborate artifacts of conch and copper were more numerous at Spiro than at any other prehistoric site in North America.

The Spiro site reached its peak as an inhabited ceremonial center between A.D. 900 and 1200 when the village and public buildings covered nearly 100 acres, with a sizeable village occupying an upland ridge and portions of the adjacent bottomlands. During this time, two sets of earthworks were constructed: one on the upland ridge which contained a ring of eight mounds erected over the remains of burned or dismantled special buildings, and one on the bottomlands where three mounds were built.

In contrast to other mound centers along the Mississippi, Ohio and Tennessee Rivers, the Spiro site was never fortified by either moat or palisade. Despite their wealth and influence, the Spiroans apparently had little fear of outsiders. Archaeologists assume that they felt secure with their military control of a most strategic site. The Spiro inhabitants depicted themselves as fierce warriors in engraved images on shell cups and gorgets (pendants worn at the throat). It is clear that Spiro was the most powerful of a group of at least 15 political-religious centers in northeast Oklahoma. All of these centers were located at strategic frontier points along navigable waterways in the area, thus allowing Spiroans or their allies to monitor all traders, travelers, or potential enemies coming into their sphere of influence. These northeast Oklahoma natives could easily launch forays into neighboring regions from these sites. Utilizing canoes, parties were sent out to hunt, trade, raid or complete diplomatic missions.

Between A.D. 900 and 1350 Spiro was clearly an important political/religious center. It was also the home of artisans who influenced the ideas and works of many southeastern peoples. Conch shell and copper were favored materials for Spiro artisans. They used a variety of techniques including engraving and embossing, depicting elaborate scenes of dance, gaming, warriors, and mythological creatures. Among the latter were winged serpents, antlered serpents, spiders, and catlike monsters that later became important in the mythologies of historic southeastern tribes. At Spiro, however, the animal figures favored by early artisans were later replaced by humanlike figures.

For two or three centuries, Spiro and its satellite centers flourished. Around A.D. 1250, they began to change their way of life. Frontier settlements were abandoned, some people completely left northeast Oklahoma, and others began congregating along the Grand and Arkansas Rivers. From A.D. 1200 to 1400, a large community developed on the uplands and terraces around the Spiro site; however few, if any, people were actually living at the site itself. Apparently, they only visited the mounds periodically for certain rituals and ceremonies. Mound construction continued, and many people were buried in Craig Mound. Their diverse

graves and burial associations attest to the presence of a highly developed hierarchy of political-religious leaders. Of the more than 700 burials discovered at Craig Mound, most are believed to have been deposited during this time. Many of these burials may represent the remains of leaders from other communities who were brought to Spiro for burial. Because so few "status goods" are known from other northeast Oklahoma centers, either the distribution of wealth among leaders was very unequal or it was being deposited at Spiro along with its deceased owners who had been the leaders of other centers. By A.D. 1450, the dominant priestly chiefs were no longer evident in Spiro society; trade and influence among Southeastern chiefdoms were no more; and ritual mound construction at the Spiro site had apparently ceased.

By the mid-sixteenth century, Spiro's descendants were living in hamlets scattered along the Arkansas River between Muskogee and Spiro. Their settlements consisted of small, less substantial houses with many nearby storage and trash pits. For the first time in their history, these people were hunting bison extensively. The use of buffalo and increased use of storage pits indicates that Spiro's descendants were becoming part-time hunters and farmers. After storing fall harvests, they left their homes to hunt bison in the upper reaches of the Grand and Verdigris Rivers. Travel was by canoe, with meat, hides and bones being carried back to villages in early winter. Another noteworthy feature of these later people's cultural change was their adoption of ideas and tools which had long been common with the Plains Indians. As trade with the Southeastern chiefdoms decreased, that with the Plains people increased.

The principal stimulus for this marked change is believed to have been the onset of a drier climate around A.D. 1200. This change adversely affected the ability of northeast Oklahoma villagers to produce crops, eventually causing them to move downstream toward the Arkansas River Valley where summer rainfall remained dependable for growing corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers. However, this increase in population placed more demand on the available soils and resources, creating ecological and social stresses that Spiro leaders could not resolve. It is thought that this eventually brought about the decline of these leaders' political and religious power, thus undermining the Spiro society's high level of organization and cultural development. By A.D. 1450, the Spiro site was abandoned. And, by 1719, when eastern Oklahoma was first visited by Europeans, the natives were bison hunting, part-time farmers of a tribe now part of the Wichitas.

Today, barges laden with Oklahoma grain, coal and oil travel down the Arkansas River to eastern manufacturing cities and ports. From distant places come equipment parts, fertilizer, asphalt, pulp products and steel needed by Oklahoma's farms and businesses. Ten miles west of Fort Smith, Arkansas, all river traffic passes through one of the locks and dams on the Arkansas River

Navigational Canal, just a short distance from the Spiro Mounds site. Even today, the Spiro area is important in trade, commerce, and travel, and the mounds stand as silent monuments to a people who, for their day, attained levels of technical, artistic, commercial, political and religious achievement that rival our own.

Although still an enigma in many ways, the

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Spiro Mounds have yielded much information. The thousand year record of the mounds provides us with valuable insights about this land, its resources and climate. They are lessons which can be applied today as Oklahoma's towns grow rapidly and industry increases in size and scope. As we already know, a two-year summer drought can seriously drain water reserves and create political problems among northeast Oklahoma communities. What will happen if, instead of two years, this region undergoes a 20-year drought? The record of the past shows us that this is possible. Perhaps the long-term consideration of present practices can make use of the legacy of knowledge gained about the Spiro people. Present-day Oklahomans may feel as secure as prehistoric Oklahomans at Spiro, but current demands on the Arkansas River Basin are greater. We must find a better solution than our predecessors, whose intriguing artifacts and mounds are all that remain.

Text by Don G. Wyckoff
and Dennis Peterson

Spiro Mounds Park and current activities

Spiro Mounds Archaeological Park is located in Spiro, Oklahoma, on the bank of the Arkansas River. It is Oklahoma's only Archaeological Park and is a National Historic Landmark. The Park land is leased from the United States Army Corps of Engineers to the Oklahoma Historical Society. The Historical Society manages the Park facilities and interpretive activities including an interpretive center and trail system. The Oklahoma Archaeological Survey is working with the Oklahoma Historical Society on future Park development. The Park is open Wednesday through Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 12:00 to 5:00 p.m. Admission to the public is free.

The Oklahoma Museum of Natural History (formerly Stovall Museum of Science and History) has produced interpretive programs and exhibits about the Spiro Mounds, with the assistance of the Oklahoma Archaeological Survey. The Museum also has a large and important collection of archaeological materials from Spiro, and serves as the state repository for newly excavated artifacts. The Oklahoma Foundation for the Humanities (formerly Oklahoma Humanities Committee) has funded several Spiro-related projects which have presented information and objects to the public through a series of exhibits, lectures and educational programs.

The exhibition, Spiro Mounds: Prehistoric Gateway . . . Present-Day Enigma, accompanying interpretive materials, and public program activities have been funded by the Oklahoma Foundation for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the University of Oklahoma Foundation, Inc., and the University of Oklahoma. The project has been sponsored and produced by the Oklahoma Archaeological Survey and the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History.

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Cover design from an engraved shell cup (160, Craig A) unearthed at Spiro Mounds, drawn by LaDonna Harris from Phillips and Brown, 1978. *Graphic design: Roger A. Vandiver*