

Conservation Corner

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After an exciting side trip to far-away Pluto last week, it's time to come back to Earth and pick up the story of rocks and the first Iowans. Today we depend on rocks to shelter us, nurture us, and fuel our lives. And while the first Iowans didn't build skyscrapers and interstate highways or create electricity from rocks, they also depended on this common and ordinary natural resource for survival.

Their story begins 30,000 years ago during the Wisconsin period when glaciers covered much of the Northern Hemisphere and sea levels were 600 feet lower than today. It is believed early nomadic hunters stalking large game animals followed mammoths, oxen, and bison across the exposed Bering Strait Land Bridge and into the New World, perhaps without even realizing they had left the Asian plains and tundra.

These early Iowans, known as Paleo-Indians, are often divided into three complexes. The earliest is the Llano Culture, and only their large, fluted lance points called Clovis points remain to tell their story. The second is known as the Folsom Culture, and again only a few scattered finds of small, fluted projectile points survive. The last is the Plano Culture, whose people hunted bison as the mammoths became extinct and also gathered wild plants. The best known site for this period is the nearby Cherokee Sewer Site, an 8,400 year-old-old bison butchering site that was uncovered in 1973.

Remember, these early people were familiar with the Ice Age long before they migrated into our area approximately 12,000 years ago. As the glaciers retreated and the climate warmed, these early Iowans adapted to the new environment. They hunted with atlatls or spear throwers with notched spear points. Early hunter-gatherers also used other chipped-stone tools such as blades, scrapers, choppers, notched flakes, and drills. One of their more important innovations was developing ground-stone tools to process seeds and nuts into flour. The techniques of pecking and grinding stone led to a new class of tools including grooved axes, hammerstones, and bannerstones. These tools would continue to be important in the Archaic and Woodland Cultures that would follow.

Perhaps you have some stone points or tools from these early cultures that were found right here in Pocahontas County. Collecting artifacts is a fun hobby, but please follow these guidelines from the Office of the State Archaeologist at the University of Iowa. Always get landowner permission. A permit is required to collect on any public lands. Only surface collect, do not excavate a site. Identify, catalog, and label your finds and record site locations with the OSA. Remember, all pre-historic and modern cemeteries and burial sites in Iowa are protected by state and federal law. Avoid buying and selling artifacts, an activity that encourages looting and the loss of our cultural heritage. Finally, keep your collection intact and share it with others.

Stone artifacts are often all that remain from the lives of the first Iowans. What will remain from our lives to be found by collectors 10,000 years from now?



Artifacts at Wilson Brewer Park Museum in Webster City.