

A. T. HILL

In the passing of A. T. Hill, on March 21, 1953, Plains archaeology lost one of its most enthusiastic, capable, and colorful personalities. Largely self-trained, energetic, with a highly practical mind, and possessing unusual insights into problems of human relationships, he turned from a successful business career to full time and equally successful archaeological endeavor. His achievements demonstrate once again that a humble start in life and the lack of academic preparation in themselves need be no deterrent to a productive and influential career.

Born at Cisne, Illinois, November 29, 1871, Hill moved with his parents to a homestead in Phillips County, Kansas, in 1878. Dry land farming in those days was not an easy life. Mr. Hill's formal education ended with the fourth grade. Crop failures and economic depression drove him to try his hand at salesmanship, and he ultimately cast his lot with the rapidly developing automobile business. He remained in the business of marketing cars in Hastings, Nebraska, until the early 1930's when he became an active officer in the Nebraska State Historical Society, and moved to Lincoln.

Significantly, Mr. Hill's interest in archaeology began not in mere antiquarianism — that is, in a desire to collect and hoard relics, but in a purposeful attempt to find the answer to a troublesome historical problem. A long time student of early western history, he was an interested spectator in 1906 when the Kansas State Historical Society unveiled in Republic County, Kansas, a monument commemorating Pike's visit a century earlier to the Pawnee village on the Republican River. Dissatisfied with the spot so marked, Mr. Hill re-examined the relevant documents and began a search for another that would better conform to the contemporary accounts. In this he was successful; in 1923 he identified, and later purchased, what is unquestionably the correct site in Webster County, Nebraska. His privately financed investigations here, besides amply documenting his claims, were the first serious inquiry into Pawnee archaeology. They also convinced him of the soundness of what has since been designated the direct-historical approach to archaeology.

Stimulated by his findings, Mr. Hill steadily widened his field of interest. In the course of frequent business trips out of Hastings — trips that took him to many parts of central and western Nebraska and northern Kansas — he was constantly on the lookout for archaeological sites and collections. His salesmen, if they showed even a casual interest in his avocation, were expected to function as scouts, lining up contacts and prospects which were passed on to him along with their routine reports. Weekend digging in the Hastings region and tests at numerous other sites while he was on the way to or from some business appointment, eventually resulted in a considerable collection, housed for years at Hastings. Despite the unavoidably piecemeal nature of this earlier work, Hill convinced himself of the former existence of not one, but several, native cultures in the Nebraska region. He recognized as distinct, though he did not name, the Woodland, Upper Republican, Lower Loup, and Pawnee complexes. He persisted in his convictions despite the discouraging reaction of certain eastern professionals to whom he described his findings in the early 1920's.

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With his appointment in 1933 as Director of the Museum and of Field Archaeology for the Historical Society, Mr. Hill brought to his new post the same drive and organizing ability that had characterized his business career. He set up an exhibits program and installed an accurate catalog system. More important, he was instrumental in getting increased appropriations to support the museum and field research programs. Finally, he launched a series of field investigations that took him and his parties to nearly all sections of Nebraska. Though the Pawnee and their antecedents were always his first and main interest, he also spent three seasons along the west bank of the Missouri from the Kansas line to Homer, Nebraska. Utilizing whatever resources were available—private means, state appropriations, and finally federal relief funds, he worked Woodland, Nebraska Culture, Oneota, Upper Republican, Dismal River, and other sites widely scattered throughout Nebraska, as well as preceramic horizons in the western part of the State. The wealth of specimens, notes, maps, photos, and other records so amassed has been the basis for numerous reports by his colleagues and others. Such is their bulk and variety that they will still furnish important basic source material on Plains archaeology for years to come. Combined with his own collections, now deposited in Lincoln, they give the Society one of the largest and most comprehensive archaeological collections in the Plains area.

In the field, Mr. Hill developed an uncanny knack for locating habitation sites, and an enviable skill in their thorough excavation with limited manpower and time. He had a rare ability to get along with property-owners and collectors, and for persuading these and other casually interested local persons to lend a hand with the heavy work during his often hurried investigations. He was considerate of the welfare of his men, but insisted on an honest day's work and on good behavior. Complaints about the inconveniences of camp and field life usually drew caustic comment from him, and sometimes led to early dismissal. In this day of large scale operations, supported in relatively generous fashion by State and Federal agencies, it is easy to forget the handicaps under which Mr. Hill, like pioneers everywhere, carried on much of the work that was so basic to Nebraska and Plains prehistory.

Though he insisted on careful and full recording on his digs and was deeply scornful of careless or inept observation, his interest in specimens as such was always secondary to his concern with the way those specimens were used, and with house types, community patterns, subsistence economies, and the problems of culture change and chronology. He was deeply interested in the relations of man to environment in the Plains, and from his own rich experience and reflection he contributed penetrating observations to the studies of others along these lines. His belief in the usefulness of the direct-historical approach, wherever it seemed applicable, gave direction to much of the productive research in the Plains.

Failing health forced Mr. Hill to relinquish his post as an active officer of the Historical Society in 1949. His oft-expressed hope for a separate modern building in which the collections he had amassed would be properly housed has just been realized—but too late for Mr. Hill to witness personally the fruition of his dream.

My acquaintance with Mr. Hill began some twenty years ago, during my first field trip in the Plains with the newly established University of Nebraska Archeological Survey. Then, as later, he gave freely of his knowledge and understanding to anyone who inquired seriously. Looking back over those years of association, and leafing through a thick file of correspondence that passed between us, I am particularly impressed by the imprint left by this rough and ready scholar on Plains archaeology. Always ready and willing to extend a helping hand to a deserving beginner, he touched—and often deeply influenced—the lives of most of the professional archaeologists active in the Plains during the past two decades. Lacking academic training, he generally shunned formal recognition of his accomplishments by educational institutions. Yet, he possessed a strong sense of problem, and of personal and professional integrity. The desire to know, which lies at the root of all science, burned no less strongly in him than in those whom he helped along their way to a professional career.

To those of us fortunate enough to have worked intimately with Mr. Hill in field and laboratory, his passing brings to a close relationships we shall always cherish. We remember him as A. T., the grand old man of Plains archaeology, and wish him "Happy diggings."

WALDO R. WEDEL.

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