

Fish Farm Mounds



A Quiet Roadside Site with Many Stories

Story and photos by Chris Wellman Hall

Traveling along the Mississippi River between Lansing and New Albin, Iowa, you may not notice Fish Farm Mounds. A wooden sign marks an unassuming picnic spot with a couple small shelters and tables. Nothing special here, unless you climb the overgrown stone steps to the wooded terrace above and the huge ancient mounds.

Created by generations of Native Americans who lived here at the confluence of the Upper Iowa and Mississippi rivers, there are 30 round burial mounds packed onto three acres — including some of the largest conical mounds in Iowa, ranging from 20 to 40 feet in diameter and some as tall as 12 feet.

Woodland Indians started building them sometime around 100 BC, and succeeding generations added burials to the mounds until about 1000 AD.

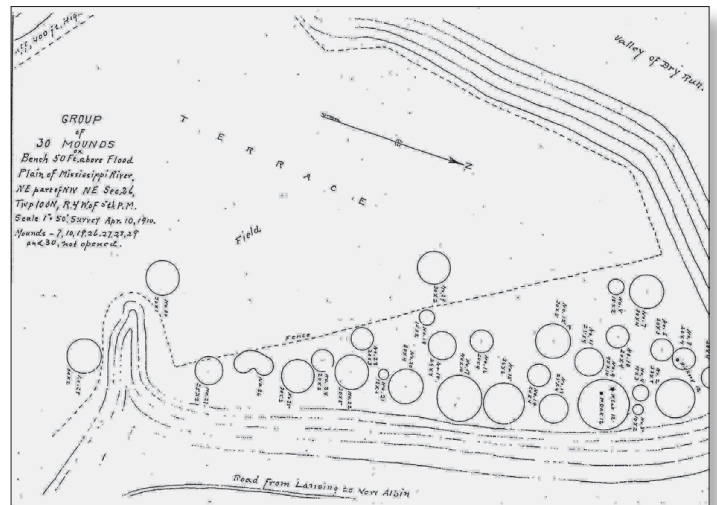
The first known documentation of these mounds was in 1887, when the Bureau of American Ethnology released a report on excavations in the Upper Mississippi River Valley. It reported that a number of mounds owned by brothers Ed and Frank Fish were excavated by the bureau, both on the terrace (the mounds you see today) and on an area east of the railroad tracks below the terrace. Nothing remains of the mounds in this lower group.

The bureau took the artifacts they discovered back to Washington, D.C., where they now reside in the warehouses of the Smithsonian Institution. The objects included human skeletons, copper artifacts, stone arrowheads, drills, beads and pots.

The area came to light again when surveyor T.H. Lewis passed through while mapping mounds in 1889. He documented a site below the mounds and across the railroad tracks he dubbed the Fish Farm Caves, two big crevices in a low ledge of St. Croix sandstone. Lewis noted numerous

petroglyphs (stone carvings) within. In what he called the South Crevice, Lewis copied nine petroglyphs, including a human head with “horns,” ear appendages and a possible feathered headdress, a human-like figure, a small bird, two feet, a hand and three simple enclosed figures.

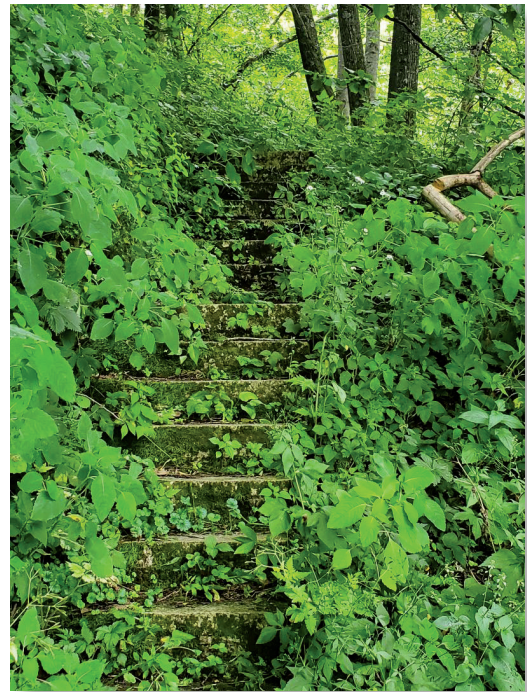
The most complete documentation of the cave was done by a local amateur archaeologist, Ellison Orr, in 1931. By this time, the South Crevice had been blocked off by the railroad, so he couldn't get to it. But he did a complete survey of the North Crevice and the mounds. Orr reported that the North Crevice was shaped like an inverted “V” and ran directly back into the sandstone under the railroad for about 30 feet. He said the floor was composed of sediment deposited by high water, being only six feet above the water in nearby Botsfords Slough.



T.H. Lewis mapped 30 mounds on the terrace above the river in 1889.



This sign and park is right off the highway. Steps lead to the terrace and mounds.



All of the petroglyphs in this crevice, except for one bison, were “grid” patterns. Lewis probably did not record them, possibly thinking, as Orr did at first, “that they were the work of white men or boys, but that they along with some turkey track petroglyphs appear to form a group and after all may be Indian.”

The bison petroglyph was on the north wall of the North Crevice, about 18 inches from the entrance. It was four feet, six inches long from nose to tail. It had a pronounced hump on its back, with a grid in it.

Orr also mapped the mound group and tried to initiate an effort to preserve the mounds and the cave. He voiced his concern over the Army Corps of Engineers’ plans to build a dam downstream, which would flood the cave. He campaigned to raise money to purchase Fish Farm Mounds, so that they could be turned over to the state or federal government.

Orr called this mound group “the most compact assemblage of earthworks, as well as the largest individual circular mound in Allamakee County.” Some of the mounds were

deemed Hopewell mounds. Hopewell is a tradition of the Middle Woodland period (100 BC to 500 AD) when this Native American culture was part of a vast trade network. Artifacts included copper from the Lake Superior region, mica from the Southeast, seashells from the Gulf of Mexico, obsidian from out west.

Orr’s efforts got the attention of Sen. Louis Murphy, who contacted the Corps of Engineers. Major Dwight F. Johns, with the Corps, wrote back to the senator in March 1934 regarding the “old Indian Cave on the Lansing-New Albin road; I am pleased to inform you that the elevation of the floor of the cave is about five and a half feet above the proposed elevation of 620 mean sea level datum and should in no way be affected by the rising of the pool.”

On April 25, 1948, Orr visited the Fish Farm Cave’s

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North Crevice, noting that it had been 10 years since he was last there. He wrote that the Upper Iowa River had cut a new channel to the Mississippi and the former channel in Botsford Slough had filled in, raising the flood plain banks four feet. The crevice interior was covered with silt, sealing it for all time.

By August 1934, \$100 was raised by selling \$1 subscriptions for the purchase of the three acres containing 28 of the 30 mounds of the Fish Farm Mound Group. A deed was executed by Frank and Ed Fish to I. E. Beeman and

Orr. The state of Iowa accepted the mound group on July 29, 1935, but it was not added to the state preserve system until 1968.

When Orr returned in 1940, he noted that all but eight of the mounds had been dug and looted. Little attention was paid to the mounds until 1968, when the University of Iowa excavated Mound #10. Unfortunately, all records and

artifacts of this excavation were lost.

In 1969, Ed Wild, an avid artifact collector from the area, opened the Indian Mound Museum in the former Fish brothers house, on the south edge of the Fish Farm Mounds State Preserve. Born and reared in Allamakee County, Wild told the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* in 1972 that he collected everything in his museum himself: arrowheads, mortars, pipes, copper jewelry, pots, beads, skulls and more. His museum included not only Indian artifacts but other curios as well, like a gun said to have been dropped by Jesse James during a bank robbery in Northfield, Minn., and rocks with gold streaks in them.

When Wild died, in the late 1970s, his collection was passed down to family members in the New Albin area and the collection was broken up, sold and lost. One bird-bone



The large mounds were built very close together.



Ed Colsch, Jr., donated much of his collection to the New Albin Public Library.

whistle that Wild found in the field across the railroad tracks from the mounds is still with one of the families, a last vestige of the collection.

Wild was not the only collector in the area. Ed Colsch, Jr., grew up near the Upper Iowa River (then called the Oneota River) in the 1930s and started collecting when he was a boy. Much of his collection was lost in a house fire when he was young, but that did not deter him from amassing another large assemblage of artifacts. Most of his collection

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was found behind the bluff at the rear of Fish Farm Mounds, near the Upper Iowa River and a place known locally as Sand Cove. These and other artifacts from this site indicate that it was a large village, primarily occupied by the Oneota, the last culture in the area before Euro-American settlers arrived. Artifacts show that the Woodland Indians occupied this site previously, but not to the extent that the Oneota people did.

Colsch donated much of his collection to the New Albin Public Library, where it can be viewed when the library is open. The collection includes many stone and ceramic pieces, including spear points, arrowheads, end scrapers, knives, drills, axes, decorated pottery, and pottery rims and handles. The more notable artifacts include a catlinite “bison” pendant, a marine shell bead, some brass beads, a white limestone pipe segment and a chunky stone. The black, ground, chunky stone disk is about eight inches in diameter with a hole in the center. Chunky was a game played between two opponents in which one would roll the stone across the



Ellison Orr photographed the Fish Farm's North Crevice in 1934. By 1948 it was filled with silt.

ground and the other would throw a spear in an attempt to mark as closely as possible where the stone would stop. Today players on the Shookey Fink ballfield in New Albin play baseball on ground where games of chunky stone were played hundreds of years ago.

Today the Fish Farm Mounds look undisturbed, as if they have been slumbering for millennia. They were reconstructed sometime in the 1970s. There are no records of who did this, but speculation ranges from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources to Ed Wild himself.

When you visit, bring bug spray, as the mosquitoes and chiggers guard the mounds ferociously, don't wander off paths into the poison ivy, and bring your imagination. I'm quite sure you can smell the wood smoke of campfires past, hear the echo of drums and see the impressions of a people who called this place home for centuries. 🍷

Chris Wellman Hall, who grew up in Lansing, Iowa, and Genoa, Wis., lives in Kendall, Wis. Her last story for Big River was "Coming Back to Where You Came From," September-October 2019.