

TENNESSEE PREHISTORY

By MACK PRICHARD ★

Yesterday, at Cape Sounion, Greece, I saw people from around the world exploring the ruins of the Temple of Poseidon. They gazed out over the blue waters of the Mediterranean and lingered to watch the sunset. Today, thousands more climbed the Acropolis above Athens to view the Parthenon and other temples built over 2500 years ago.

Atop this religious sanctuary one gains a unique perspective of time and place. Beneath our feet new archaeological discoveries unfold daily to explain this age of great minds. We stand where Socrates once did, and comprehend the debt we owe to a civilization on whose shoulders we built. The Greek children grow up amid this heritage, proud of their history, and curious to see what more archaeology reveals.

Across the Atlantic I remembered the broad rivers and green hilltops of beautiful Tennessee, here and there dotted with Indian mounds whose temples were raised to God long ago. These remnants of America's first civilizations have great value to us for they provide the only record of our unique past.

A few sites like Chucalissa Museum at Memphis, Pinson Mounds near Jackson, and Old Stone Fort at Manchester have attracted great public attention. Under the new Archaeology Division, funds have just been approved to preserve ten more of these archaeological parks before they are destroyed.

As in Greece these sites will be set aside to be excavated, reconstructed, and interpreted for the people in years to come. It is past time to set aside some sacred grounds of the Indians that we might appreciate their values. It is essential because new archaeological techniques are being developed, and unspoiled sites need to remain for more enlightened excavations. It is also necessary because "progress" is rapidly erasing our fragile prehistory with concrete, highways, and high dams.

One example is the Cordell Hull Dam near Carthage, which the U.S. Corps of Engineers will soon impound. Over thirty sites, including some of great antiquity, have been surveyed, but only minimal excavations have been made.

Another classic archaeological crisis centers around the Tellico Dam which the Tennessee Valley Authority plans to complete in a few years across the Little Tennessee River near Lenoir City. This valley was the homeland of the Overhill Cherokee and earlier cultures. Over sixty sites have been found including

Citico, Toqua, Tomotley Town and the capital, Echota, city of refuge.

Here are Tenase, namesake of our State; Tuskegee birthplace of the genius, Sequoyah, who invented the Cherokee alphabet; and old Fort Loudoun, built in 1759. As early as 1890 the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of Ethnology noted that the archaeology of the Little Tennessee River Valley was the most interesting in the Appalachians.

As they have done on other reservoirs, TVA included in the project cost, funds for archaeological salvage through the U. T. Department of Anthropology. To date most of the archaeological work done in the State has depended upon such salvage arrangements. However, TVA has spent less money on the archaeology of this river basin than the State Parks Division spent at the Chucalissa site over ten years ago.

One TVA official said it was good that the dam made some archaeological work possible since these sites were just cornfields getting plowed away or looted. This seems to me a bit like shooting yourself so that your body will get a nice funeral sooner. It would be better for TVA to support such excavations without the impending execution. Once the water comes up, it leaches out bone material, burys sites beneath silt, and the water action erodes shoreline features.

The real tragedy is that there has not been time to salvage more than a five to ten per cent sample. We could ask which ten per cent of the Parthenon is adequate to understand the building? Isn't this a bit like Lord Elgin, who in 1801 took one of the maiden pillars off the Erechtheion Temple back with him to the British Museum? Since our evidence is fragmentary, archaeologists must have time to find all they can. For example, a test trench or 10 foot square, however well excavated, could have missed by one inch a silver medallion which was plowed up by a farmer. This medal was given to Chief Attakullakulla by England's King George in 1730.

If rushed the results are often inadequate. Digging with patience and grapefruit knives, an archaeologist can spend a lifetime on certain sites. The head U. T. Archaeologist on the Tellico Project said it might take six lifetimes to excavate these sites. Speaking of salvage crisis one Arkansas antiquarian said, "this isn't archaeology, this is ridiculous."

In their final impact statement, required by the National Environmental Policy Act, TVA says that

the present State Archaeologist believes the Indian sites are more valuable than the Tellico Project. They regard this as an extreme point of view. But, TVA can't make more Indian mounds, although they can pour more concrete. This may not be so extreme when we consider that salvage may be defined as what is saved from a disaster.

Because of the inadequacy of the draft impact statement, the Environmental Defense Fund has obtained a partial injunction halting the dam construction. Due to objections over the loss of the outstanding trout stream, the historic sites, the fertile soil, and pastoral valley, etc., Governor Winfield Dunn has urged TVA to stop the dam. He suggested the river might better serve all Tennesseans by leaving it as a recreational gateway to the wilderness lands beyond.

If this were done the Indian sites would be an attractive nucleus for a national scenic river park. Certain features like council houses could be excavated and reconstructed in-situ where they are found. Displays of material already excavated could be shown in museums along the river. Cherokees could serve as guides to interpret their own culture and to conduct trips downstream through the islands. Their craftwork and philosophy would be of value to tourists from the adjacent Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Actually, these sites have great heritage value in addition to the articles they contain. This is the place where the Englishmen first settled to live beside the Cherokee in our state. The sites are recorded in historic journals, and their archaeology can be cross-checked with these notes.

Most of all, these sites are landmarks of the Cherokee Nation. Since the old tribal ways are dying out, these places could stimulate Indian culture. The Cherokee are a remarkable people who prospered in the Little Tennessee Valley. After their tragic eviction along the Trail of Tears in 1838, they adapted well again to their new home in Oklahoma. There is much we might learn from them.

Excavations show that the Cherokee lived gently on the land. They wasted little and left us a beautiful East Tennessee, rich in wildlife and great forests. Would they be surprised to see how we have polluted the rivers, fouled the air, and stripped the hills of their trees and topsoil? Or would they expect our greed to use up Mother Earth from our children? Will our affluence please future archaeologists if they dig through our dumps and then discover we dammed all of the rivers and stripped the mountains for our own power?

(Continued on page 58)



An Aerial View of Ft. Loudoun