

Clark Wissler, Artifact Collector

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Clark Wissler, a birthright Hoosier, was born in 1870 near Hagerstown. He attended Indiana University from 1893 to 1897 but obtained his anthropological training on the East Coast. He was one of the half dozen most prominent anthropologists of the American Historical School and viewed as the anthropological authority of the American Indian during the 1920's and '30's. He was introduced to archaeology during his Indiana upbringing.

Citing Barton, the Freeds note (1, p. 803) that Wissler let it be publically known that he was a childhood collector of Indian artifacts:

His [Wissler's] birthplace was a rural village of six houses surrounded by farmland. And it was the owner of one of these farms, an industrious collector of Indian artifacts, who inspired him to take up the study of aboriginal life. . . . After school the boy [Wissler] would tramp about the fields unearthing arrow heads and other more complicated specimens. . . . His farm-tutor had evidently read up on these artifacts in the anthropological literature of the day, and was so conversant with their history and uses that his pupil *had little to unlearn in later life* (italics and brackets - BKS) (2, p. 48).

This raises the question of what Wissler's view of non-professional archaeological surface collecting was after he became an established professional anthropologist. This is no secret. Wissler states:

Every boy can explore the country near his home. Inquiry among the farmers will often aid him in locating probable village sites, since those men may know where relics are most abundant. The best time to go over the ground is in the spring, after the winter rains have cleared the surface and before the grass is high. Take *any* field, and walk along one side, sweeping the surface continually with your eyes; examining every suspicious-looking object. . . . Another good place to seek relics is along the banks of streams. The spring rains usually bring freshets that cut into banks and expose new surfaces. . . . They appear as streaks on the face of the fresh-cut bank; they usually show ashes and charcoal. . . . you may note. . . . cave-like places under ledges of rock. . . . The best thing you can do is *scrape away* the leaves and other refuse. . . . and look carefully over the ground (italics - BKS) (3), unsigned; but authorship credited by Murdock (4, p. 297).

Indeed the Departmental Editor of *The Youth's Companion* was apparently unaware of this facet of Wissler's background, or considered it as useful qualification for the article he was soliciting Wissler to write, but chose not to mention it (5). In 1941 Wissler submitted a manuscript, co-authored with Junius Bird, entitled "How to be an Archaeologist" to McBride & Co. for publication (6). Wissler's nostalgia of his boyhood interests is apparent in a brief sketch incorporated in an insightful methods article (7) from the *New York Times*, about a 13 year old boy reporting the existence of an undisturbed cave he discovered to the archaeologist at the Trailside Museum, Bear Mountain Ridge, New York.

Apparently Wissler supported and even encouraged surface collecting by non-professionals. This is quite curious since Wissler's view of archaeology was far from

antiquarian in precept. His knowledge of archaeological method was quite sophisticated (8) and he viewed the role of archaeology in anthropology as important and significant:

The great triumph in culture research will come when a worldwide chronology is attained, a time-sequence scheme that is workable and verifiable. True, there have been attempts, rough outlines of the evolution of culture have been sketched, but these are for the most part guesses; they can never serve as foundation for genetic interpretations. Yet the problems involved are, for the most part, just as objective as those of geology, and equally immune to all onslaughts except by the most refined technique. If, as has been said many times, science is the experimental and inductive determination of the hidden relations between things, then the true archaeologist deserves to sit among the great; for by infinite patience, amid a bewildering maze of details, he proceeds step by step to the discovery of time-relations in the debris. . . . since eventually one such increment after the other will fit into one unifying sequence" (9).

Wissler viewed archaeology as, perhaps, THE method of reconstructing culture history, though the process is slow and almost painful. It is interesting that despite his high regard for archaeological method and his unchanged interest and research in American Indian material culture Wissler never conducted any organized professional archaeological field work. He was versed in archaeological method, theory and goals, and often wrote general accounts of other archaeologists' research, especially his colleague Nels C. Nelson, to whom he apparently had high regard. In fact it was Nelson's work that Wissler used to try to demonstrate his concept of "natural diffusion," diffusion that spread at a uniform rate (10, Fig. 9-3, p. 338). Wissler published 26 works dealing with data primarily of an archaeological nature. He was also active in the administration of archaeology, for example Committee on State Archaeological Surveys (NRC), Committee on Basic Needs in American Archaeology (NRC) and the American Archaeological Survey of Asia Minor.

It is clear Wissler's archaeological method and theory were sound, but, one fears, his views on who should be the practitioners may be suspect.

Literature Cited

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