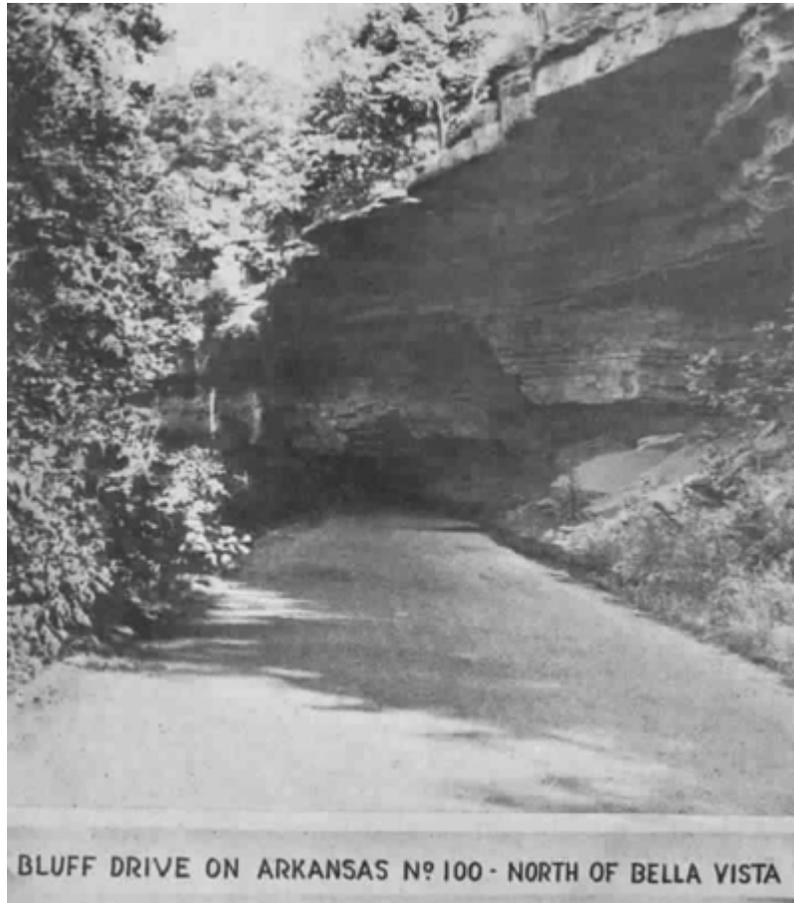


Photo of the Month

The Ozark Bluff Dwellers



We're Just Bluffing

The deep layers of limestone sediments that make up the Arkansas Ozarks have allowed for the creation of numerous unique geological features. Deep river valleys surrounded by high cliffs. Magnificent caverns filled with wondrous formations. And deep clefts or overhangs caused when the more fragile layers collapsed, leaving a natural space sheltered from the elements.

This last type of feature provided ideal settings to be used as habitations for Native Americans over thousands of years. These naturally forming bluff shelters not only protected Native Americans from the elements, but if facing south provided a form of natural passive solar heating. Barriers made of animal hides or woven plant fibers provided additional protection from the wind, rain and snow.

The dry interiors of these shelters also proved to be the perfect environment for the preservation of organic materials, providing modern archaeologists with a treasure trove of prehistoric materials not found on any other sites. But these sites have also attracted the attention of collectors and hobbyists who loot them for personal gain.

Sites can also be destroyed by other types of human activity. For example, dozens of bluff shelters were destroyed during the construction and filling of Beaver Lake. Divers have visited some of these sites and

found that water action has scoured the shelter bottoms to bare rock, dislodging any cultural material that may have been buried there.

In this photograph, a large bluff shelter near Bella Vista has a road running right through it. The road is old Arkansas Highway 100 [modern-day Highway 71]. Judging from the size and depth of this shelter, it is probable that significant archaeological remains were destroyed during construction of this road.

To learn more about the archaeology of bluff shelters in northwest Arkansas, visit the museum's new exhibit "Discovering the Bluff Dwellers". This exhibit runs through October of 2008.

A wide variety of artifacts recovered from the bluffs are on loan for this exhibit from the University Museum Collections, University of Arkansas. Panels feature photographs from the collections of the University Museum and the Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution.

The panels explore the first discoveries, the excavations of archeologists Mark Harrington and Sam Dellinger, and recent reinterpretations of "bluff dweller" artifacts. A re-creation of a section of a bluff shelter illustrates the ways Indians used the bluffs and provides a space for hands-on activities. Visitors can handle materials such as split cane, antler and deer hide that the Indians used. Activities include making a feather string to take home; such strings were woven together by the Indians to make warm robes and blankets.

Pioneer settler John W. Bland of Larue is credited with being the first to identify the basketry and other objects found in the bluff shelters as being of Indian origin. In 1872 he found a basket made of split cane, a needle or awl of bone, and, according to some reports, a moccasin made of woven grass. The bluff shelter where Bland found these items became known as Indian Bluff.

Fifty years after Bland's discovery the first trained archeologist explored the bluff shelters along the White River. Mark Harrington was working for George Gustav Heye, who used his huge private collection to found the Museum of the American Indian in New York City. Today that museum is part of the Smithsonian Institution, with exhibits in a new building on the Mall in Washington D.C.

Harrington excavated at the bluff shelters in Northwest Arkansas in 1922 and 1923. He hired local residents to help in the work. Harrington's team found a wealth of artifacts which he took back to the Museum of the American Indian for study and display.

Harrington concluded that two separate cultures had lived in the bluff shelters, an earlier "Bluff-dweller" culture and a later, unrelated culture. He published an article on his findings in 1924, but it was not until 1960 that his book-length study *The Ozark Bluff-Dwellers* was published.

A decade after Harrington's excavations, Sam Dellinger's field crews excavated in over 80 shelters and caves in the Arkansas Ozarks. Dellinger was a professor of zoology at the University of Arkansas and was the curator of the University Museum.

Although trained in biology, Dellinger was attracted to the field of archeology. Disturbed that much of Arkansas' archeological heritage had been removed by out-of-state museums, he was determined to collect Arkansas artifacts and keep them in Arkansas. As a result of his efforts, the University Museum built an outstanding archeological collection.

Through studying the artifacts collected by Harrington and Dellinger, more recent archeologists have reached some new conclusions. The "bluff dweller" concept Harrington developed implied that Ozark Indians led a primitive, isolated lifestyle – that they were prehistoric "hillbillies" of sorts. This concept and the very term "bluff dweller" has fallen out of favor among scholars as new research has challenged these ideas.

CREDITS

Souvenir of Benton County Arkansas: Land of a Million Smiles. Rogers Historical Museum, 2005.12.10

