

ARCHAEOLOGY IN MONTANA

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OSCAR O. MUELLER
(1877-1964)

Montana has lost one of their top ten amateur archaeologists. Oscar O. Mueller, professionally, was a lawyer, but he found time to make many fine contributions in a number of other fields. He was particularly interested in the history of central Montana, in paleontology, and in archaeology of the Northwestern Plains Region. As archaeologists, of course, we want to pay particular tribute to his additions to our knowledge of the prehistoric and early historic human inhabitants of Montana.

Oscar O. Mueller was born on March 19, 1877, in Iowa. His early life and his formal education was in that State. He graduated from the Iowa State Normal School in 1903, and was a school principal for a while. Then he went to Law School at The University of Iowa. Soon after he received his law degree he settled in Lewistown, Montana, and here he resided the remainder of a long, useful life. He first came to Montana in September of 1908.

His contributions to Central Montana history are significant. Nearly a dozen of his writings have appeared in The Great Falls Tribune, and in The Lewistown Daily News. Other articles appeared in The Montana Magazine of Western History. A major work of his was published on the Cook-Folsom Expedition, one of the first deliberate explorations of what is now Yellowstone National Park.

For paleontologists in the U.S. Geological Survey he collected fossils. Two new finds were named after him: Metoicoeras muelleri, and Cadoeras muelleri.

In the field of archaeology he published very little in his own name, but he was the main inspiration and implement of works which have been accomplished by others. During the 1880's a Mr. A. J. Stough, who later lived at Stanford, Montana, was on a trading trip to a post known as Claggett, or Judith Landing. Near the mouth of this river Mr. Stough picked up some beads from underneath a cottonwood tree, or from the tree itself (Mr. Mueller was not able to determine which from Mr. Slough). More of these beads were found in the vicinity during the 1880's by a woman who worked on a ranch at the mouth of the Judith River, and these later came into the possession of Mrs. Frank E. Wright.* Mrs. Wright later gave a few of these to Oscar Mueller for the purpose of determining their origin and history. Some, however, had been sent to an Art Museum in Chicago, and these created considerable interest to the editors of the Chicago Tribune, and on June 9, 1895, an article was published about them. In the 1920's, apparently, Mr. Mueller became interested in the beads, and he also made an original search for more of them. With characteristic thoroughness he sought for information on them from every source available. Samples were sent to the The. U.S. National Museum, and they determined that they were Chinese in origin.

Oscar Mueller's collection of beads came from a cave within three miles of the mouth of the Judith River. In this cave were two skeletons and the mummy of a child.

*Mrs. Wright died in 1949 at the age of 87.

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Mr. Mueller wrote of these beads:*

"The beads...collected by me personally are on the original sinew as strung by the Indians. The valuable beads and the cheap ones are alternately strung, showing that the Indians did not know the difference in value."

The cave was located in the general vicinity of the trees where other beads, of an identical make, had been found as early as the 1880's. Mueller concluded that the beads near the trees had fallen from tree burials (which were common to the tribes in the region during the last century), but the other remains had disappeared. The group in the cave, Mueller thought:

"Were probably a chief and family, or at least a family of much importance, since most of them were buried in the cottonwood trees some three or four miles away."

The beads which particularly impressed Mr. Mueller were some which were of porcelain, and not the usual, cheaper European makes. Both types were found with the burial remains, but the porcelain beads were of particular interest. These had been made in China, and Mueller had determined that they were imported as trading goods beginning about 1790. Mr. A. Wetmore, of the U.S. National Museum, remarked that they are still made in China (letter 1927). Regarding their history in make he wrote:

"I am informed that a study of ceramics will show the Chinese were the oldest in point of history to do this work.. Naturally, their designs are varied as the Chinese are individualists. In the groups I have there are practically no duplicates."

Such beads were taken to Alaska by the Chinese and Russians as trade items, and some found their way into Oregon, and even into Central Montana where the Crow, Atsina, and Blackfoot were particularly delighted with them. Many of them seem to have come into the possession of the Indians during the 1830's and 1840's. Some of these beads may be observed on a bracelet of the child's mummy, The University Museum, Montana State University, Missoula.

Incidentally, the very history of this mummy since its discovery shows us the depth of Mr. Mueller's scientific appreciation. When it was first found it fell prey to local looters who removed an earring, a bracelet, and other items. Clearly it was not possible for local exhibitors to properly care for the specimen, and certainly it had little scientific value away from laboratories and professionals, and from research centers where much more could be learned from such a specimen. It was Mr. Mueller who effected its transfer to Montana State University.

Petroglyphs long interested Mr. Mueller. Through his encouragement, and financial contributions, Montana State University was able to publish sketches of prehistoric drawings in Central Montana. The University dedicated this issue of their "Anthropology and Sociology Papers," (Nos. 20,21,22.) to Oscar O. Mueller.

In retrospect, we can see Mr. Mueller as "a doer," and not a mere talker, or collector. His training as a teacher gave him academic acumen, his years as a lawyer gave him the ability to make contributions where they were most effective. Montana archaeology cannot forget Oscar O. Mueller.

* Correspondence with Malouf, 1954.

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