

# Signs of old city still clearly visible at site in Illinois

OHSWEKEN — Thanksgiving Day, which came in October here in Canada, was celebrated on Nov. 23 in the U.S. It seemed like a good time to visit a young family from the Six Nations Indian reserve who had moved to Dallas. On the way we stopped off in Nashville to see the Grand Ole Opry. I'll tell you more about this at a later time.

On the way home we visited the Cahokia Mounds at Collinsville, Ill., across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. It is the site of what was once a great city called The City of the Sun.

This city was larger than London, England, about 1,000 years ago. It covered nearly six square miles and it was inhabited for 800 years. It was abandoned in the 1500s for reasons not yet known. My guess is that European diseases, such as small pox, to which North and South American natives had no known remedies, could have caused this. The only defence against unknown diseases sometimes was to just move away.

According to a pamphlet I got at the interpretive centre (museum) on the grounds, there were originally more than 120 mounds but many were destroyed by modern farming and urban construction. About 68 are still preserved in the 2,200-acre park. The largest mound is about 100 feet high and the base covers more than 14 acres. I climbed to the top of this mound and found that there were four terraces and the top was flat. Archaeologists have found that a massive building 105 feet long, 48 feet wide and 50 feet high once stood on the summit.

The state of Illinois took its name from the Illini (Ee-lienie) Indians. The Cahokia Indians were a sub-group of the Illini who were occupying this territory when the French arrived in the 1600s. The diseases brought by Europeans went far in advance of the Europeans themselves.

Since 1813 there have been extensive excavations by archaeologists. The site has been compared to Stonehenge in England. In fact, excavations have uncovered four circular sun calendars. One of these has been reconstructed. It consists of 48 large cedar posts arranged in a circle, 410 feet in diameter around a central observation post. It has been named Woodhenge. It was probably used to determine the changing seasons and certain ceremonial periods.

The main food was various types of corn which was grown outside the city. They also grew many other vegetables. There were extensive trade routes up and down the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. They did not lack for a variety of food.

The people lived in wooden houses with thick, thatched roofs arranged in rows around open plazas. The mounds were built entirely of earth. Flat-topped mounds were used for ceremonies, ceremonial buildings or the residences of notable people. Mounds with round tops were used for the burial of important people or to mark important occasions.

As I mentioned in an earlier column, there are Indian mounds all over North America. There are an even greater number of mounds in Ohio and there is a group in St. Paul, Minn.

These earthen mounds represent a great deal of hard work by our native ancestors of long ago.

*Our Town is an Expositor feature which provides a forum for news and views from some of the smaller centres in the region. George Beaver is a Six Nations reserve resident and was a teacher and principal on the Six Nations and New Credit reserves for 33 years.*