

Lost Village Site Redbird, Nebraska



Prehistoric Ponca Indian Archeology Expedition 1937 - 1938

# The Lost Village

Prehistoric Ponca Indian Site  
Redbird, Nebraska



Archeology Expedition 1938 = 1939  
LANCE MARTIN

# Archeology The Lost Village

Prehistoric Ponca Village  
1000AD - 1400 AD

Located on the south bank of the  
Niobrara River, Redbird, Nebraska

Lance Martin

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# Archeology

## The Lost Village

Prehistoric Ponca Indian s  
1000 AD – 1400 AD

Located at Redbird, Nebraska on the  
south banks of the Niobrara River



Lance Martin

# ARCHEOLOGY THE LOST VILLAGE

PREHISTORIC PONCA INDIANS  
(1000 A.D. - 1400 A.D.)



**LANCE MARTIN**

# Archeology - Pre-Historic Ponca

## THE LOST VILLAGE RED BIRD, NEBRASKA

It was in 1935, the time of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl devastation. Those that found employment with the W.P.A. (Work Progress Administration) were fortunate.

In 1935, digging in the center of what was thought to be a buffalo wallow, evidence of a fireplace was discovered by Professor Linton Strong of the University of Nebraska.

A test trench revealed that the area had been occupied in the past by an unknown plains culture. It was an opportunity to use unemployed archeologists, and W.P.A. labor.

The 'Lost Villlage', on the Red Bird Site extended for over two miles along the south side of the Niobrara River. It was the archeological remains of a Ponca, also known as Poncha, culture that existed some 600 to 900 years ago, prior to the introduction of horses to the western plains.

I was a student and protege of Dr. Franz Boas, Columbia University Anthropogy and Archeology Department Chairman. He was the leading authority on physical anthropology. When he died in 1935, the University directors skipped over Boaz's staff, and invited Linton Strong, to be chairman.

Some Columbia University staff members and students, myself included, left for other universities. Enrolled in N.Y.U., I was offered the opportunity to work as Assistant Supervisor on an Archeological Expedition under the auspices of the University of Nebraska and the Smithsonian Institute. It was 1937, and I worked as an archeologist in exhuming an unknown Plains Indian culture.

# Archeology

## Pre-Historic Ponca Indians

The excavation continued during the summers of 1937 and 1938. It was during the period of the 'dust bowl' dilemma, and sometimes temperatures reached 127 degrees. Farms were being sold or deserted. Those farmers remaining were fortunate to get W.P.A. work on the excavation. They were excellent workers and many became enthusiastic in seeking out artifacts.

At times Ponca Indians from the Niobrara Reservation would join us. We learned about their recent culture, but they had no knowledge about their early ancestral agricultural society. They were amazed at the size of the circular dwellings and the size of the village their ancestors had occupied.

At first I lived in Lynch, Nebraska, a few miles north of the Niobrara River and "Lost Village". I lived with the Reid's, a part Indian family. I paid four dollars a week for room, food and laundry. They packed lunch and a Thermos of coffee when I went to work.

A month later, I rented a furnished house in the ghost town of Redbird. The town had a population of fourteen. The small general store and post office was run by the Wrede family of three. The house has no electric but did have well water and an outside outhouse. The rent was \$1 a month.

On Sundays I worked digging water wells for \$1 a day from sunrise to sunset. I did have an hour lunch break.

During a ceremony, following the Sun Dance Ritual, I was adopted by the Ponca. My father a chief named White Shirt, and my grandfather was named Bird Head. I was given the name Turtle Foot. My two sisters worked in a corn cannery miles from the reservation. They changed their names to Mary and Margeret White, eventually married Whites and left the reservation life.

Some forty years later, while living on Long Island, N.Y., I was contacted by A.I.C.H. (American Indian Council House). They asked me to join as the only member of the Poncha tribe in the Eastern States. During a survey at the Poncha reservation, they found my name listed as a Poncha.

LANCE MARTIN - Archeologist



PONCA ROUND HOUSES  
11<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY



## PREHISTORIC PONCA

EXPEDITION: 1937-1938 WAS SPONSORED BY THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTE AND THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA.

EXPEDITION SUPERVISOR - ALEXIS ALES PRAUS  
ASSISTANT EXPEDITION SUPERVISOR - LANCE MARTIN  
AIDES: UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA STUDENTS

WORKERS: 40-80 MEN FOR MANUAL LABOR AND EXCAVATING SUPPLIED BY W.P.A.

In the mid-thirties, *Dr. Linton Strong* of the University of Nebraska discovered the remains of ashes from man made fires while digging in 'buffalo wallers' and found evidence of an early agricultural Indian society. Without adequate funding, it became impossible to form an expedition to excavate the site. *Dr. Strong* was appointed chairman of Anthropology at Columbia University when world renowned *Dr. Franz Boas* died. *Dr. Strong* was instrumental in getting funds and approval for the expedition, evacuation and study of the prehistoric Ponca village.

**SITE LOCATION:** REDBIRD, NEBRASKA - 1 mile from the South shore of the NIORRARA RIVER (the fastest river in the U.S.) with its current racing along at 14 MPH. The Niobrara River runs along the base of hills denoting the southern and extreme range of the Last Ice Age (12 -18,000 years ago).

**EXCAVATION:** "LOST VILLAGE" was the community village of the Prehistoric Ponca. It ran along a strip of fertile land for a distance of two miles. The uppermost layers of the excavation was from the culture dating back 800 years, and preceded the arrival of the White man in America. Deeper layers indicated that the site area had been in use for thousands of years.

Prior to the 1600's, the early Ponca Indians were primarily agricultural and lived in round houses that were 40 to 60 feet in diameter. They stored their agricultural products in cache pits. They were artisans and created functional and decorative pottery. Between 1613 and 1620, horses that were abandoned or had escaped from the Spanish explorers appeared on the Western Plains. The Ponca culture underwent a transformation. The agricultural aspect of their culture was abandoned and supplanted by hunting. Horses were responsible for the change and gave the Plains Indians mobility and the opportunity to hunt buffalo and game that were previously difficult to hunt on foot. The stationary round houses were replaced by easily erected and transported wigwams, or tepees. The fragility of pottery became a detriment in a mobile society and the making of pottery soon became a lost art.

Currently the present few remaining Ponca Indians live on the Niobrara Reservation in Nebraska.

In 1938 *Lance Martin* was adopted into a Ponca family and tribe, and given the name *Turtle Foot*. His Indian father was *Bird Head* and his grandfather was named *White Shirt*. *Lance Martin* is a member of the AICH (American Indian Council House).

RELATED ARTICLES AUTHORED BY LANCE MARTIN

LOST VILLAGE, NOT ALL INDIANS RODE HORSES, PREHISTORIC PONCA



BONE  
FLINTCHER



BISON



MAIZE



TEEP  
WIGWAM  
18<sup>TH</sup> CENTUR  
EATER





LANCE MARTIN - ARCHEOLOGIST

Redbird Site No. 1 - Redbird, Nebraska



**Looking North from Redbird Site.**

Niobrara River in background is fastest river in the U.S. Current speed is 14 m.p.h. River flows along southern border of hills, the remains and evidence of the terminal moraine of the last glaciation. Some of the rocks and minerals present were carried from Canada and the far north by glacial action, 18,000 to 20,000 years ago.



#### DUST STORM APPROACHING

Men gather implements, cover exposed finds, and hurriedly pack artifacts as the dust laden winds increase in velocity. We hid in cars or near by shelters until the dust storm abated. Sometimes the storm would last for many hours. Dust would have sifted through the smallest openings around doors and windows, covering furniture and clothes.

# ARCHEOLOGY – THE LOST VILLAGE



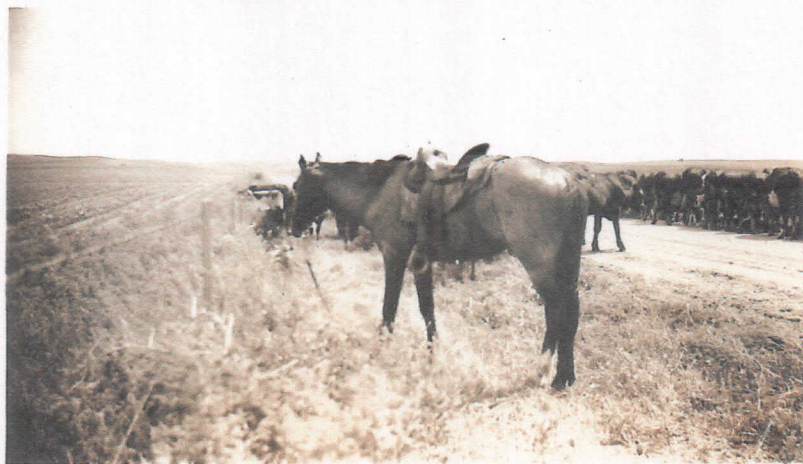
Professor Earl H. Bell  
University of Nebraska



ALEXIS ALES PRAUS, SUPERVISER & LANCE MARTIN, ASST. SUPERVISER



Learning to ride (Indian Style) bareback.  
Niobrara Reservation



Currently, saddles are preferred by most.



Lance Martin and W.P.A. foreman, Bob Walker



Gene Graham, physical anthropologist, Univ. Nebr.



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WHITE SHIRT — PONCHA CHIEF and MEDICINE MAN



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RED WING = PONCHA INDIAN ASSISTING ON THE EXPEDITION



Stone shelter built into the side of a hill  
by early settlers proved to be a death trap.  
Raiders burnt and massacred them.



ABANDONED STOCKYARDS - DUNDEE, NEBRASKA  
No water, crops, or grass to raise and sell cattle.  
Arid, Dust Bowl conditions contributed to failing farms  
and unemployment in the entire Western Plains area.





Reconstruction of a typical prehistoric Plains Indian dwelling.

This was erected at nearby St. Helena site.

The actual diameter was established by the underlying ruins.

Two concentric circles of spaced poles had been erected on a sixty foot diameter walled and covered structure.

A double row of posts were filled in with earth to make walls. Ridge poles and beams spanned overhead to make the conical roof.

In the center of the roof was a vent hole for smoke.

Typical pottery of the prehistoric period was repaired and constructed from fragments found in the excavations.

The development and continued use of pottery declined as the formerly stable agricultural society with permanent structures was supplanted by mobility and temporary quickly erected homes.



PONCHA FORT EXCAVATION  
VERDEL, NEBRASKA

This fort was erected in historic times, circa 1700 - 1780 A.D.  
The Poncha were in a transitional state of change from a  
agricultural to a semi-agricultural and hunting society.

They had a more sedentary culture than the nomadic hunting tribes  
that surrounded them. The fort was erected as an attempt to try  
to protect the Poncha from attack by the Souix and other tribes.

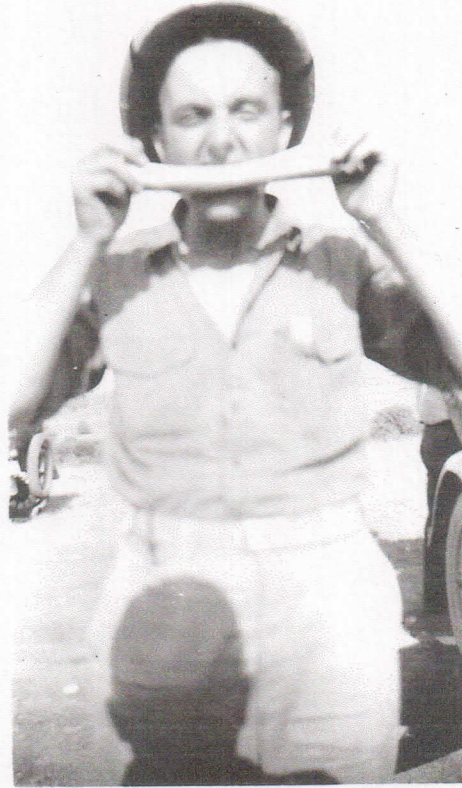


FIREPLACE and BONE HEAP  
MINARIC 1 SITE  
Mi - Ti - Sec 3 - F 715  
VERDEL, NEBRASKA AUG 21, 1938

We looked for opportunities to take our minds off the excessive heat and dust, aridity, and the desperation of an area in the grips of the Great Depression.

None of us on the 'dig' had freedom from financial worry. I was fortunate to get a job on Sundays digging water wells. It paid a dollar a day, from sunrise to sunset.

We eagerly sought mental relief and humor was where we found it.



Alexis is given a female femur to nibble on. He preferred a real thigh instead of the semi-fossilized femur.



Bob , the foreman, and I suffered many trials and tribulations. We shared everything - except our women.



**NO WAITING FOR TOILETS**

In the ghost town (Red Bird) we had a choice of toilets. One, two and even a four holer was available. We did have to supply our own toilet paper. Our paper came from newspapers and catalogs.



**A DUET WITH THE PAST**



**HUNTING FOR THE GAME THAT ENDS FRUSTRATION**



The earth is carefully removed,  
a spade wide, 1 inch thick, and 9 inches deep.  
Each shovelful is sifted and examined.  
The white object in the foreground is  
a scapula. The cigar box holds minute  
artifacts and bones.



Bob Olsen (Foreman) - Lance Martin - McQuiddey (visiting student)

When critical areas are unearthed,  
the work is taken over by the staff.  
This example is typical.



CHILD SKELETON IN SITU.

Note (Fontenella) opening in skull.

Childs about 2 years old and complete ossification has not taken place, hence normal fontenella opening is seen.

For centuries, the Sioux wagged war upon the Poncha. A few centuries ago the Sioux made a concerted effort to annihilate the Poncha Indians.

Over a century ago the Poncha erected an earthen fort near Verdel, Nebraska. ( Circa 1780 - 1820 A.D. )

A battle took place that lasted for days. The Sioux won. The flimsy earthern fort was breached and destroyed. Only a few Pocha Indians managed to escape and survive.



<sup>A</sup>  
BURIAL at MINARIC II, HOUSE III, VERDEL NEBRASKA  
Adult Male - Skeletal Remains Complete.

## THE PONCA POTTERY PUZZLE

### POTTERY MAY SOLVE LEGENDS OF THE PAST

Different areas develop their own pottery designs. Migrations or trade often result in the adaptation of pottery techniques and designs.

The pottery unearthed at the prehistoric Ponca sites, encompassed designs that were similar to that used by adjacent and remote cultures. A zigzag design, was typical of the Pawnee. Some Ponca pottery had bits of ground and broken shells in the pottery which was characteristic of the ancient Great Lakes cultures. Some were of typical Woodland design which did not have flat bases. Woodland pottery of the northeast had oval or pointed bottoms - designed to hang in fiber or leather cradles. Some pottery had motifs used in the pottery of Canada and the north.

The '*Lost Village*' pottery unearthed seemed to prove the legend of the origin and migrations of the Ponca.

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The Ponca have their own unique language. The old Indians living on the Niobrara Reservation related an ancient legend. The original Poncas came from the far north, a land of snow. They migrated south to the Great Fresh Waters. After a time they continued their migration into a forested mountainous area in the east.

The migration legend continued until they reached the Great Salt Waters before turning southwest until they came to Nebraska. At the Niobrara River their chief died. A dispute arose between his two sons. One son decided to remain. The other son, and his followers migrated north, and was not heard from again.

In 1937 the reservation postmaster traveling in Canada, heard some Indians speaking the Ponca tongue. He knew all the Indians on the Ponca Reservation, but did not know the strangers. He questioned them and was told that they were a branch that interbred with the Cree. Some members spoke the old tongue. They also had a legend of a migration with some members remaining in the Great Plains while the others returned to Canada. Those that remained in the Great Plains perished.

In 1938 there was a token reunion of the Ponca Indians from Nebraska with those in Canada.





ONEOTA POTTERY FROM INDIAN CREEK  
Village Site #6 Stanto, Nebraska  
St 1. - C16 - 1069

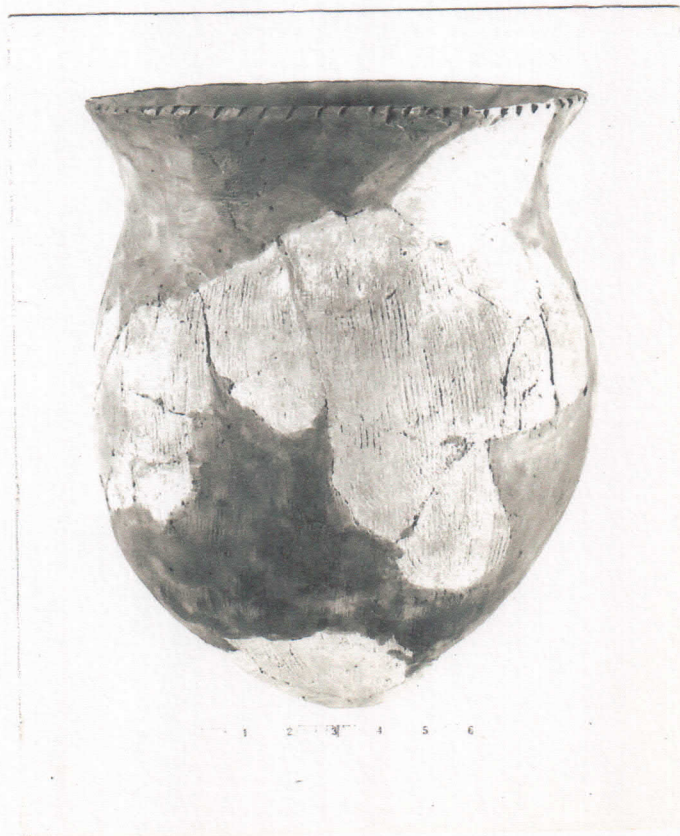


TYPICAL ONEOTA POTTERY

The development and continued use of pottery declined as the formerly stable agricultural society with permanent structures was supplanted by mobility and temporary quickly erected homes.



TYPICAL ONEOTA POTTERY



TYPICAL WOODLAND POTTERY  
RESTORED - SANTEE, NEBRASKA



POTTERY - EAGLE CREEK MOUNDS  
O'NEIL, NEBRASKA  
CONCENTRIC GROOVES BELOW RIM  
TYPICAL OF MOST MOUND POTTERY.



ARTICULATED BONE FLETCHERS  
NOTE NOTCHED ENDS

ANTELOPE, DEER AND BUFFALO BONES WERE USED IN  
TANNING, SCRAPING, HAIR REMOVAL AND PREPARING HIDES.



## START OF SHOSHONE SUN DANCE

BUCKS GATHER ABOUT CENTRAL LODGE POLE.

The clothes may be modern, store bought, but the feelings and intensity of the ritual is deep and old. Each year, fewer and fewer Indians gather to celebrate this once forbidden ritual.

These photos are of one of the last, real Sun Dance rituals. It was not publicized and was intended for tribe members only.

As an adopted Poncha member, I was invited to participate.



### THE CENTRAL POLE IS LIFTED

In unison, the pole is lifted horizontally up and down four times. Chanting and swaying to an ancient tune and beat, they concentrate and gather strength for the final lift and thrust into the ground.



**THE RAMMING INTO THE CENTER HOLE**  
The final and fourth lifting of the centerpole ends with the participants forcefully ramming the end into a prepared hole.



### THE ERECTION

With much tugging, pulling, and grunting, the main center pole is being slowly pulled into position.



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ALMOST ERECT





**ALMOST ERECT**

The pole is balanced as it is pulled into upright position.  
The ritual is carried out with serious determination.



### FULLY ERECT

The pole is balanced and held perpendicular to the ground as earth is tamped into the hole and around the pole.



**CLOSEUP OF CEREMONIAL POLE**  
A FRESHLY KILLED BUFFALO HEAD AND PRAIRIE GRASS  
ARE IMPORTANT COMPONENTS IN THE SUN DANCE RITUAL.



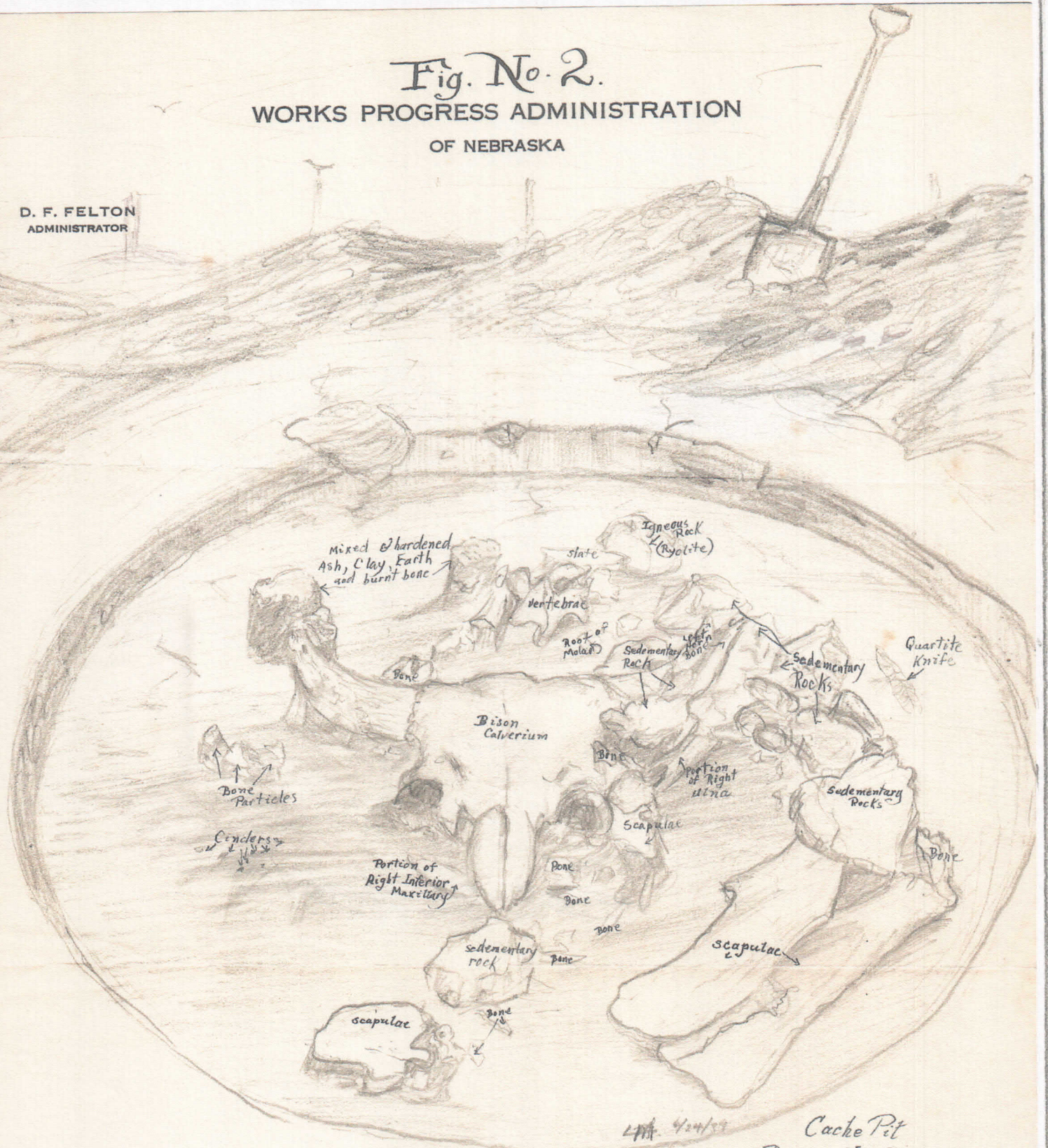
OUTSIDE VIEW OF COMPLETED  
SUN DANCE LODGE



CEREMONIAL DANCING  
FERVID DANCING GOES ON ALL DAY AND INTO THE NIGHT.

Fig. No. 2.  
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION  
OF NEBRASKA

D. F. FELTON  
ADMINISTRATOR



4/11 4/24/39

Cache Pit

Diam. N. to S 50 inches  
E to W 55 inches  
Section 20-25

Skull situated 27 inches  
from East side of pit  
and 27 inches from North  
side of pit.

N.N.E



Cache Pit #73  
Redbird Site #1

June 23-24, 1939

By Ass't Supervisor, Martin Friedman 6/23-24/39



In some fortunate, irrigated areas in central Nebraska, cattle are driven to the freight train stations to be taken to the slaughter houses. Despite some water, the grazing was not the best. The cattle are not as heavy or saleable as they were in the pre Dust Bowl years.



TYPICAL WATER WELL DIGGING RIG  
THE POWER COMES FROM A MODEL 'T' MOTOR.

The drill shaft is raised and lowered about 15 times a minute. With a Stilson wrench the shaft is rotated a half turn (180 degree). This gives the chisel drill tip a new position on each down stroke. Some wells may go down hundreds of feet before water is reached.



*ONE HUNDRED AND FOUR YEAR OLD PONCHA*

When asked by Margeret Mead,  
"When does the sex life of an Indian end.?"

The ancient Poncha answered,  
"You will have to ask someone older than me."



#### THE COMING FROST ENDS THE SEASON'S EXCAVATIONS

The transition to frost and the autumn comes fast in the plains. It is a sad time for many. There is so much more to be excavated. The farmers working on the project, and paid by the W.P.A., will soon be unemployed. Sadness throws its cloak over all of us.



# Archeologist's Reflections

I thought of America and my part of a later immigrant wave that came to these shores. I visualized America as a living entity and in my mind lectured to it. You are a nation that has not set aside your armaments and with a piston rod of power in your hand are confused by the dazzling light of unemployment and uncertainty. Even here in the dust bowl of Nebraska where the dust fell week long as a vengeful curse from the sky, I think of New York, the East Side, where I bought fresh fruit and old clothes from pushcarts in the street markets of immigrant hope. America, you minted out your soul in alloy nickels, faced with an Indian, backed by a buffalo, and spent it in the dime store of mad dreams. I recalled studying Florida Seminoles where the white egrets fly over the wild Everglades, bull alligators bellow up to the moon, and in nearby towns strutting swell-headed youth and head-hunting Amazonian women, envious and unemployed, eyeing the elegant mansions of the wealthy, emphatically illustrating the avenging fate of financial stratification while I pity those living in a tumbleweed land of heat cracked plains, where the dust of abraded visions disperse futile hopes to a tribe of Indian survivors.