Lost Alaskan Culture Found By Brown Anthropologist

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PROVIDENCE, Oct. 20—A Brown University anthropologist, who spent part of the past Summer digging on a lonely Alaskan beach, has unearthed traces of one of the oldest human habitations ever found in the American Arctic. This 'house" is unique in that it is of a type entirely different from any previously found.

The discovery fills in a gap in the chronology of the region. The flints, pottery and other artifacts found there place its former occupants as some of the earliest Eskimos or related people, yet later by centuries than still more ancient peoples of the Far North, who, however, left no recognizable habitations.

Sparsely Settled

The find lends added weight to a theory now held by some scientists that the North American continent was not settled by "mass migrations" from Siberia. They believe instead that the Far North from Siberia across the American continent to Northern Europe, once was sparsely settled by peoples sharing a similar culture.

Whether these peoples moved from east to west or from west to east, or in both directions, is not known. But it is believed that their movements were casual, at the urge of hunting, fishing and trading, rather than in mass migrations.

One day last Summer, Dr. J. Louis Giddings Jr., now director of the Haffenreffer Museum of the American Indian, Brown University, at Mt. Hope, Bristol, stood with two companions on a rocky cliff overlooking Eschscholtz Bay, an inlet off Kotzebue Sound, more than 100 miles roughly northeast of Bering Strait.

Looking across a long narrow beach between cliffs, they could see three oval depressions breaking the nearly level area. These were not on the beach of today, but back from the shore, where the beach had been centuries ago, actually on the ninth beach level discernable.

Clue Valid

Dr. Giddings had learned from previous Alaskan experience that traces of ancient habitation were to be looked for in such depressed areas, rather than only in mounds.

Dr. Giddings and his two companions, Melvin Reichler, a graduate assistant in sociology at Brown University, and Robert Ackerman, a trained archeologist from the University of Pennsylvania, started digging in one of the pressions at Eschscholtz Bay.

They unearthed an oval area about 42 by 24 feet, around which 10 posts had been imbedded, slanting toward the center. Within this space was a smaller area which had formed the oval floor of the structure, apparently lower than the "bench" at the sides and the surrounding earth. Lengthwise within this area were two curved rows of the impressions of posts, evidently for support of the roof.

While this "house" apparently shared with more modern Eskimo houses the features of a sod roof supported by poles resting on the upright posts, it was otherwise unique. Its oval shape is different from any human habitation ever found in the Arctic. All the ancient structures in Western Alaska were either square or rectangular. That pattern also is found in comparable houses on the Asian continent to the west.

From this site Dr. Giddings brought back at least 200 artifacts, not counting about 150 pieces of broken pottery. There are harpoon dart heads, arrow and spear heads, an adze head made of caribou antler with openings for the flint blade and a handle, burins (stone grooving tools), bone needles and other tools and knives in flnt and slate.

It is this material, largely, which has enabled Dr. Giddings to date the house as having been used between 3,000 and 4,000 years ago. That would place its occupants somewhere between the oldest Eskimos—termed paleo-Eskimos—and the people of the still earlier so-called "Denbigh complex," who left no recognizable dwellings at their coastal camps.

Artifacts of the "Denbigh complex," so named because too little is yet known about it to label it a culture, were unearthed by Dr. Giddings and others at Cape Denbigh on Norton Sound, a branch of the Bering Sea, in 1948 and subsequent years. The Cape Denbigh site furnished no traces of what could be called a house, only tools and artifacts. No organic material whatever was found there.

Convincing Evidence

The Eschscholtz Bay find, dating centuries later, does furnish convincing evidence of settled habitation, the oldest yet found in the Arctic. Two other oval spots there await exploration. Dr. Giddings feels that similar ones may also be found in Arctic areas yet to be explored.

As to the potsherds, he says they appear to be parts of round-bottomed, slightly constricted pots of a much finer workmanship than is found in pottery of a later period. Curiously, this Alaskan pottery has a strong resemblance to that found in far distant places, including the Eastern United States, and dating from early periods.

The facts unearthed by Dr. Giddings and others in various Arctic regions have led him to the theory that the people of the "early flint complexes" flourished on the forest edge, near the northern limit of spruce, venturing into the treeless north for hunting caribou, bison and other animals, retreating to the shelter of the forests in Winter.

Moved Back and Forth

He is inclined to think that a very sparse Arctic population spread slowly across this northern belt, moving back and forth in hunting and trading. He frowns on the theory of mass migrations, from Asia or elsewhere.

Even today, the most northern Eskimos hunt and fish across the limits of human habitation, always more or less in contact with neighboring tribes or families. As a result, a Greenland Eskimo can readily understand the language of one in northern Alaska. Farther south, this is not true. Where they are settled in more specific locations, they stay put and develop distinct dialects and customs.