

Central Illinois' Ogden-Fettie mounds mark the location of a 2,000-year-old community.

Who Were These Mound-Builders?

Story by Alan Harn and Michael Wiant

In Illinois, cemetery mounds are the most visible reminder of pre-historic Native American culture. About 4,000 years ago, Native Americans began the practice of heaping earth over the grave of an individual, a practice that became more complex over time. Two thousand years ago, during the Middle Woodland period, Native Americans built tombs with log walls and earth graded up to the edge of the tomb. The remains of the deceased, eventually perhaps several individuals, were placed on the floor, a roof added and earth piled over the tomb. This process may have been repeated many times, creating an increasingly larger mound.

On a terrace in the flood plain of the Spoon River just below Dickson Mounds Museum is the Ogden-Fettie site. Here, the remains of some 30 Middle Woodland burial mounds and an extensive village mark the location of a 2,000-year-old community and its cemetery. Aerial photographs indicate a pentagonal-shaped ditch or linear depression—possibly a moat, but it has yet to be investigated—enclosing 10 acres and five of the central mounds of this group.




(Photo by Kelvin Sampson, Dickson Mounds Museum.)

The Ogden-Fettie site contains nearly 30 burial mounds constructed during the Middle Woodland period.

The Dickson family excavated several of the Ogden-Fettie mounds, including the great Ogden Mounds, in the early 20th century. Tunneling into the interior of the great mound in 1928, Marion and Ernest Dickson discovered the remains of an ancient passageway, shored with light logs and matting, which led to the central tomb.

Inside, the Dicksons found crematory basins filled with burned ashes of many individuals. Nearby, on a red-painted fiber mat, were the skeletal remains of a man of considerable social importance. Entombed with him were necklaces of

pearl, bone and shell beads; copper implements; hundreds of grizzly bear canine teeth; an unusual stone gorget; a 25-pound nugget of lead; and, a stone platform pipe.

Today, the great Ogden Mound stands in silent testimony to this extraordinary Native American culture. 

At Dickson Mounds Museum, Alan Harn serves as the curator of anthropology and Michael Wiant as the director.

Dickson Mounds Museum is located between Lewistown and Havana, Illinois, just off Illinois route 78/97. For further information, visit www.museum.state.il.us/ismsites/dickson/homepage.htm or call (309) 547-3721.