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A place called Pahaku

BY PAUL A. JOHNSGARD

THERE is an area in eastern Nebraska where the Platte River, after flowing northeastwardly from the vicinity of Kearney for nearly 150 miles, enters the glacial drift bordering the Missouri Valley and turns directly east. Over its eastward course of about 50 miles, the river forms a shallow and wide sandy channel that is bounded to the south by forested bluffs and to the north by a wide wooded floodplain. One of these glacially shaped and loess-capped bluffs was known historically to the resident Pawnee tribe as Pahaku (usually but incorrectly spelled as Pahuk) Hill. This Pawnee word may be roughly translated as “mound on or over water,” or “headland.” The bluff is one of five natural sites (four of them along the Platte River) in the historic range of the Pawnees that were considered sacred to them, and it is the only remaining location that is still virtually biologically intact. About 50,000 years ago, during late post-glacial times, this bluff also marked the approximate point where the Platte River abruptly turned southeast.

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Dutchman's breeches in Pahaku forest. (Paul A. Johnsgard)



Pahaku *from page 1*

It then followed a glacial moraine valley, now known as the Todd Valley, toward present-day Ashland. Although this part of the lower Platte Valley is now recognized for its uncommonly rich bottomland soils, it is also rich in Pawnee history, since the Platte and Loup Valleys were among the most important parts of the Pawnee's original homeland.

Pahaku Hill is located almost directly north of Cedar Bluffs, in northern Saunders County. According to one Pawnee legend, a young boy once lay at the edge of the bluff, hoping to shoot a bird with his bow and arrows. Growing at the edge of the bluff was a tall cedar tree, marking the entrance to a huge cave that was the lodge of many animals. Several eagles and a hawk sat on the cedar tree, perhaps serving as guardians. A second underwater entrance to the cave also existed, which could only be reached by following a kingfisher as a guide. The chief of the animals living in the lodge was a giant beaver, but the lodge also was the home of other spiritually important animals, such as deer, elk, antelope, wolves, coyotes, foxes, cranes and geese.

These were known to be sacred animals (*Nahu'ac*) by the Pawnee, and in this cave they periodically held council. There they also endowed the young Pawnee boy with special healing powers, which he later passed on to others of his village. At times such medicine men

visited Pahaku to renew their healing abilities, and to give thanks. Of all the Pawnee animals having spiritual powers, birds were especially important. They served as direct messengers to the gods and played significant roles in important Pawnee ceremonies. Eagles were the most preeminent and powerful of these totemic birds, and hawks were also notable, as were their feathers. Owls were particularly significant in Pawnee healing ceremonies, while other species such as jays, magpies and woodpeckers were appreciated for their own valuable attributes. For example, the intelligent magpie helped the legendary Pawnee child find the entrance to the Pahuk cave. There probably once was an actual cave at this site, as several of the Pawnee's sacred sites along rivers consisted of bluffs with caves, but erosion no doubt destroyed it long ago.

In a different and perhaps more authentic version of the legend, after a young boy had been sacrificed by his father and placed in the Platte River, two turkey vultures delivered his body to the sacred animals in the cave. The sacred animals brought him back to life and taught him all of their medicine powers. He later went back to his people to serve as a great medicine man and transmit his knowledge.

The Pawnee's peaceful bison-hunting and agricultural culture was eventually destroyed by the impact of European immigration, partly as a

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result of the destruction of their bison-dependent economy. Their vast homeland, which once stretched from the Niobrara to the Arkansas and Cimarron Rivers and numbered about 20,000 people by 1820, was decimated by smallpox during devastating plagues in 1831 and 1832. Adding to this catastrophe, part of their land was sold at a pitifully small price to the U. S. in 1833. Later losses of ancestral Pawnee territory were associated with the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and the ceding of tribal lands for settlement by immigrants. The Pawnees were soon limited to a small reservation along the Loup River, now Nebraska's Nance County. Eventually even this tiny remnant of their homeland was lost to settlement pressures. In 1874 the last of the Pawnees (about 2,000) left Nebraska, when all the adults walked to a small reservation in Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. At this time they were under periodic danger from attack by the Lakotas and were being increasingly surrounded by white settlements. After their reservation school year was over, the Pawnee children were similarly

moved to Indian Territory. According to Pawnee oral history, they, too, walked the entire distance; after their shoes and moccasins had worn out, they had to walk barefoot, with some dying along the way. The Pawnee reservation

Pahaku was homesteaded in 1868, and it was not until the forested part of the bluff was purchased by Dr. Louis and Geraldine Gilbert in 1962 that any attention was given to preserving its natural habitats. After learning of the

of the bluff has been farmed by the Pat and Nancy Shanahan family for more than a century, and in September 2008 a delegation of Pawnees visited Pahaku to help celebrate the establishment of a conservation easement on the Shanahan's 257-acre farm that will protect that part of the bluff from further development.

Because of Pahaku's history and transitional location, linking the eastern deciduous forest plants and the prairie riverine forests, "Ty" Harrison, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln botanist, did an ecological analysis of the site's plants in 1984. He found that several eastern deciduous forest trees (bitternut hickory, black walnut and American linden) approach or reach the western edge of their Platte Valley distribution at Pahaku. There are also several eastern woodland vines (carrion flower, bristly greenbrier, eastern virgin's bower and Virginia-creeper) and many woodland wildflowers (jack-in-the-pulpit, columbine, pale touch-me-not, white snakeweed and American bellflower) that have similar eastern forest affiliations and range limits. Farther to the west, the drier climate and absence of a shaded forest understory increasingly prevents these plants from thriving and reproducing. In these ways, Pahaku represents a kind of botanical eastern outpost, which also supports a comparable array of eastern forest-adapted animals such as eastern fox squirrels and white-tailed deer.

On a cold morning in mid-April 2010, I drove to Pahaku with a friend, to meet

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A view of the Platte Valley from base of Pahaku bluff. (Paul A. Johnsgard)

now consists of about 20,000 acres, and the population near the end of the 20th century consisted of about 2,400 Native Americans, or about one-tenth of the estimated presettlement number.

location's great spiritual significance, the Gilberts applied to have the site placed on the National Registry of Historic Places, which was approved in 1973. During the 1980s, their land was preserved for posterity through a conservation easement. More recently the Gilbert's land was sold to Kirby and Mary Zickafoose, who are equally determined to keep it in a natural and protected state. The remainder

Pahaku *from page 20*

with its long-time caretaker and fierce protector, Cherrie Beam-Clarke. Cherrie also has served for three decades as an interpreter of the land's natural and Pawnee history and is an educational speaker for the Nebraska Humanities Council. The wild plums were then in full bloom along woodland edges, while the leaves of most of the forest trees were just unfolding. Newly arrived migrants from the tropics, such as brown thrashers and eastern phoebes, were establishing territories, while permanent residents, such as red-bellied and downy woodpeckers, were making their presence known with territorial drumming. We walked a trail to one of the higher points on Pahaku Bluff, an open area of prairie where the carcass of a white-tailed deer had provided food for wintering bald eagles. From the hill one can visualize the course of the old Pawnee Trail that paralleled the southern bank of the Platte River, leading to distant Morse Bluff on the western horizon.

Walking along the bluff's steep slope, we flushed a pair of wood ducks from the trees where they had no doubt been looking for a suitable nesting cavity. Wood ducks are another eastern species that, like red-bellied woodpeckers, has progressively moved west along the Platte Valley woodlands. In addition to the widespread and early-blooming blue violet, we found a few examples of Dutchman's-breeches. This delicate eastern woodland flower is very near the western edge of its

Nebraska range, and at Pahaku it is limited to the bluff's steep and shady north-facing slopes, where it often grows among mosses and ferns. Its pinkish flowers resemble baggy upside-down pants hanging from a clothesline, through the narrow "waist" of which bumblebees must pass so they can reach the pollen tucked away in its spurs. The other early spring wildflowers we most wanted to see, the columbine and jack-in-the-pulpit, had not made their brief but beautiful curtain calls. Like many other deciduous forest plants, they have evolved adaptations allowing them to bloom and be pollinated before most sunlight is cut off by the leafy summer canopy.

We did find another botanical goal: the oldest bur oak in the area, which no doubt was already an impressive tree when the Pawnees were still living peacefully along the Platte. The great oak is still producing a few acorns but is slowly dying; one of its largest lower branches had recently broken off and lay desolate on the ground. The tree's twisted shape reminded me of an ancient Pawnee holy man, lifting his arms in anguish toward the sky and lamenting the fate of his dispossessed people, who now live in a reservation over 500 miles away from their homeland.

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