

University of California photography professor Miles Coolidge makes offset lithographs from old postcards of Indian mounds, including this one in Franklin, N.C.



Coolidge's lithographs, like this "Indian Mound, or remains of an old fort" in Florida, raise disturbing questions.

EDIFICE COMPLEX

Mound postcard posters provide window onto ancient ruins of North America

About Art



TOM COLLINS
For the Journal

If you go

WHAT: Miles Coolidge: Mound Postcard Posters, courtesy of the Lannan Foundation Collection

WHEN: Through March 21

WHERE: The Harwood Museum of Art, 238 Ledoux St., Taos, (505) 758-9826

The small exhibition of "Mound Postcard Posters" at the Harwood Foundation isn't much to look at, but it resonates in a number of different and interesting ways. Most may have to do with archaeology, natural and social history rather than art or aesthetics, but never mind. Museums and artists serve many purposes and constituencies and this is particularly true of a museum such as the Harwood, with its connection to the University of New Mexico, a photographer/artist/professor such as Miles Coolidge, who teaches photography at University of California at Irvine and who conceived of this pithy installation, and the Lannan Foundation Collec-

tion from whence the show and free brochure with Coolidge essay come.

As I said, there isn't much to look at here — seven enlarged reproductions of some old postcards. But who doesn't get a thrill looking at old postcards, transporting us instantly, as they do, to another time and place? Coolidge's blownup color and sepia-toned postcards are early 20th century settings of Native American "mound" earthworks somewhere in the Midwest or Southeastern U.S. Each is individually printed by offset lithograph on a 35-inch by 55-inch aluminum panel, and hung on the wall.

The postcards are curiosities, for sure, and the blowups on the walls are even curioser, less like

artifacts and more like evidence in some bizarre investigation. Most interesting by far, though, is the subject matter — those inscrutable mounds of earth as they looked in the early 20th century. These are the ancient "ruins" of North America in contexts which themselves, a century later, have now disappeared, covered over by the growing mound of history.

Human aspiration

People have been piling up dirt and rocks for a long time. You might say it's in our nature. Just watch kids at the beach. The Tower of Babel might have been just a pile of rubble when it was completed, but like the World Trade Center towers (and the

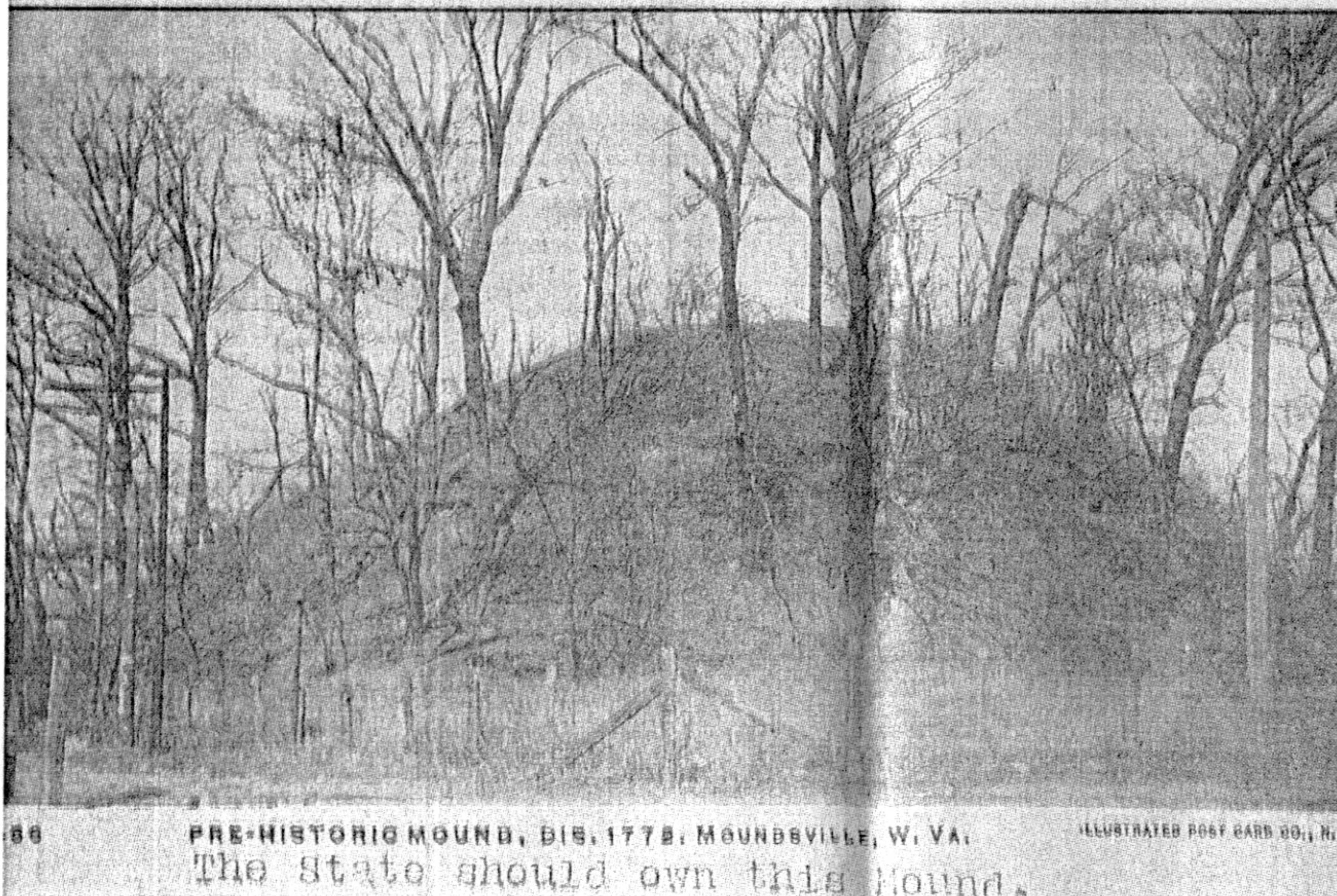
mostly awful structures that have been proposed to replace them), it was an expression of human aspiration. To build higher, to the point of hubris, to the point of collapse.

Man's "edifice complex" has taken other forms and functions, death being chief among them. The burial pyramids of Egypt date from 2700 B.C.; the stone chambers, called barrows, in England were used as early as 2000 B.C.; between 1700 and 1400 B.C., keirgans were used in central Siberia; and the burial mounds of the Choo Dynasty in northern China date to 1000 B.C.

In North America, over a span of at least 1,800 years,

See MOUND on PAGE 5

A postcard of a mound in West Virginia includes a typewritten editorial.



PRE-HISTORIC MOUND, DIS. 1778. MOUNDSVILLE, W. VA.
The state should own this mound.

ILLUSTRATED POST CARD NO. 11

The twin park benches at the top of the steps on the "Prehistoric Mound, Marietta, Ohio," seem to suggest that mounds were made for the simple reason that they offered a better view.



PRE-HISTORIC MOUND AT MARIETTA, OHIO.

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See **MOULD** on **PAGE 5**

Mound Postcard Posters Revealing

from PAGE 6

from around 400 B.C. until almost 1700 A.D., various Native Americans of the Mississippi Valley and its tributaries made thousands of earthen mounds. From Minnesota to Florida, Louisiana to West Virginia, the mounds were constructed in various ways, shapes and sizes — early, rounded, dome-shaped structures that ranged from about three to 18 feet in height, with diameters from 50 to 100 feet, to the later, rectangular, flat-topped "platform mounds" constructed of wooden posts covered with mud plaster and thatched roofs ranging from eight to almost 60 feet in height and from 60 to as much as 770 feet in width at the base. Standing alone or in groups of as many as 20 or more, and arranged around broad plazas or connected by earthen ridges, their uses, too, were various and, in many cases, still mysterious. Some societies buried their dead in mounds with great ceremony; others built temples atop the mounds, which worshipers approached by climbing steep stairs or ramps; some earthworks were symbolic pinnacles upon which temples or residences of chiefs were erected.

Symbolic meaning

Looking at the lone fellow atop the "Indian Mounds, Franklin, North Carolina," say, or the gazebo on top of the mound in Vicksburg's National Cemetery, or the almost Diane Arbus-like twin park benches at the top of the "Prehistoric Mound, Marietta, Ohio," it's tempting to believe that mounds were made for the simple reason that they offered a better view.

In any event, it seems that, regardless of when or how or why mounds were made, they had deep symbolic meaning

for the people who built them. With such powerful associations, mounds were significant territorial markers and monuments of social unity, reinforcing and perpetuating community identity and tribal pride.

Since we have no idea how many mounds may have dotted the American landscape, we have no idea how many were eradicated by the engine of American "progress," the new culture. When you look at these postcards in the context of a museum, you immediately feel history clutching at your throat. The non-descript, tree-covered rise that is "Pre-Historic Mound, Dis. 1772, Moundsville, W. Va." bears the touching typewritten editorial comment from a citizen and one-time owner of the postcard, "The State should own this Mound." You wonder if the state does own this mound today? The scene of "Indian Mounds, St. Paul, Minnesota" is charming, in an unintentionally surreal way. In a rather severe American park, a perambulator sits empty on a gravel path. In the shade of foreground trees, two white-shirted women in bonnets get water from a fountain. Deeper in shade to their right, a little girl in a white dress confronts the picture-taker, and the viewer, rather startlingly. Almost invisible looming behind her but facing away is a male figure in straw boater. In the distance, two figures stand on top of the mound. Now, in 2004, the scene is somewhat appalling, of course. You can't help knowing (unless you're Robert McNamara, say) that those charming bourgeois people are cavorting over the remains of an authentic culture only lately subjugated once and for all and in the most brutal manner. This is all suggested in the most minimal way, of course, but there is an annoying kind of didactic,

almost cutesy Ken Burns-like use of the documents though they do make for some chilly viewing.

Off the beaten track

Coolidge's essay in the free mini-catalogue, "Some Thoughts on the Exhibition," is scattered and tortuous, if I may say so. Among other claims Coolidge makes is that modern earthwork sculptures, such as those by the late Robert Smithson (whose famous "Spiral Jetty" is itself now submerged beneath the Great Salt Lake) and Michael Heizer (but not James Turrell's work at Roden Crater in Arizona, for some reason), have served to remind us of these older works of Indian earthen mounds. Possibly. But those "modern" works have been associated with just about anything and everything since they appeared. Coolidge claims further that "History ... is now facing its most profound challenge — how to come to grips with the pasts of non-literate societies." Hardly history's "most profound challenge," I think but certainly historians have had to learn to be particularly sensitive in examining cultures and societies that left little written record. Professor Coolidge asserts "the quality of earthworks that attracted artists to the form in the sixties and seventies is the same quality that has kept ancient American earthworks obscure." By this Coolidge is evidently referring to the out-of-the-way quality of the ancient works. They may have been all over but they were off the beaten track. As Coolidge points out, the mound sites may have been more visited as tourist destinations in the Automobile Age than they have been since the triumph of air travel. Hence, the importance of the postcard artifact-document, the only way most people will see any of these earthworks.