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INDIAN MOUNDS: WISCONSIN'S PRICELESS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TREASURES



All over Wisconsin, gentle swells of earth punctuate our landscape. Our state's American-Indian mounds—shaped like bears, birds, deer, men, rabbits, water creatures or abstract geometric shapes—are priceless archaeological treasures. "Effigy" Indian mounds, in the form of animals, are not found anywhere outside Wisconsin in such numbers. Up to 20,000 Indian mounds once spread across our state. Perhaps 4,000 remain today, often unknown or underappreciated.

I fell in love with Indian mounds last year. Based in Spring Green for some months, I chanced upon some mounds in nearby Muscoda. Casual interest turned into obsession. I visited sites in Madison, Devil's Lake, Sauk City, Baraboo and Prairie du Chien. Smitten by their history and beauty, I anticipated visiting mounds in Milwaukee when I returned home. I was sorely disappointed. Milwaukee was once the site of more than 200 Indian mounds. Today metropolitan Milwaukee can claim only two: one in Lake Park, one in the Wisconsin State Fair grounds.

Some background. From 500 B.C. to A.D. 1200, Woodland Indians were Wisconsin's prevalent people. Their history is elusive, but archaeologists believe they were predominantly hunter-gatherers who also cultivated sunflowers and corn. They made pottery, stone tools and (some copper) arrowheads, settled near water and changed camps in winter. In spring and summer, they built ritual mounds in conical, linear and animal forms symbolically linked to the earth, water and sky. Sometimes mounds contained bodies and burial artifacts, sometimes not. No one knows why the Woodland tradition ended.

Wisconsin's first settlers noted these mounds. Sadly, farmers often plowed them under, city dwellers razed them or vandals looted. A curious few recognized their archaeological value. The self-taught naturalist Increase Lapham trekked across the state surveying and sketching mounds. In 1851, the Smithsonian published his extraordinary *The Antiquities of Wisconsin*, in which Lapham lamented that mounds were sometimes "destroyed immediately or within a few days after my survey."

In Milwaukee, demolition of Indian mounds was rampant. Clusters of them once dotted the cliffs above Lake Michigan, bordered its rivers and edged its wild rice marshes. Barely a trace remains.

Today where Locust Avenue abuts Lake Park, you will find a large, earthen swell. Like the navel of the park, this ancient conical mound—40 feet across and two feet high—evokes the world of those who came before us. A marker tells us similar mounds clustered nearby in a "Stone Age village." In the 1890s, the landscaping of Lake Park leveled all but one of the remaining mounds.

In an unlikely corner of State Fair Park, you can find the second enduring mound. Entering from Greenfield Avenue, you'll come to the DNR grounds at the park's southeast corner (near the site of the cream puff stand). A marker notes that there a village and four similar conical mounds once stood. This grassy spot, an island amid concrete, conjures up a vanished world.

Scholars speculate that Woodland Indians assembled at these mounds to mark the turning of the seasons. We might do well to honor these ancient, potent sites so redolent of history and spirit. Southeastern Wisconsin offers rich opportunities. We can witness, in roughly an hour's drive from Milwaukee, some extraordinary examples. I suggest four destinations that are more than worth the trip:

- Fort Atkinson: Indian Mounds and Trail Park (W7670 Koshkonong Mounds Road) contains 11 beautiful mounds (one 222 feet long), including "water spirits" aligned with Lake Koshkonong. At 1236 Riverside Drive lies the unique, concave "Panther Intaglio Mound." The Hoard Historical Museum (401 Whitewater Ave.) has charming informative exhibits.
- Lake Mills: Aztalan State Park (N6200 Highway Q), built by a post-Woodland tribe, has three massive platform mounds surrounded by stunning reconstructed stockades. The Aztalan Museum, just north of the site, has park artifacts, but Aztalan's prize "Princess Burial" (a female skeleton covered with thousands of shells) is in the Milwaukee Public Museum.
- Sheboygan: Sheboygan Indian Mound Park (5000 S. Ninth St.) contains 18 effigy mounds and a lovely nature trail.
- West Bend: Lizard Mound County Park contains more than 25 mounds of fascinating shapes and sizes.

For more information on Wisconsin Indian mounds, visit: www.wisconsinhistory.org, www.elli.org, or www.wisconsinmounds.com/index.html

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