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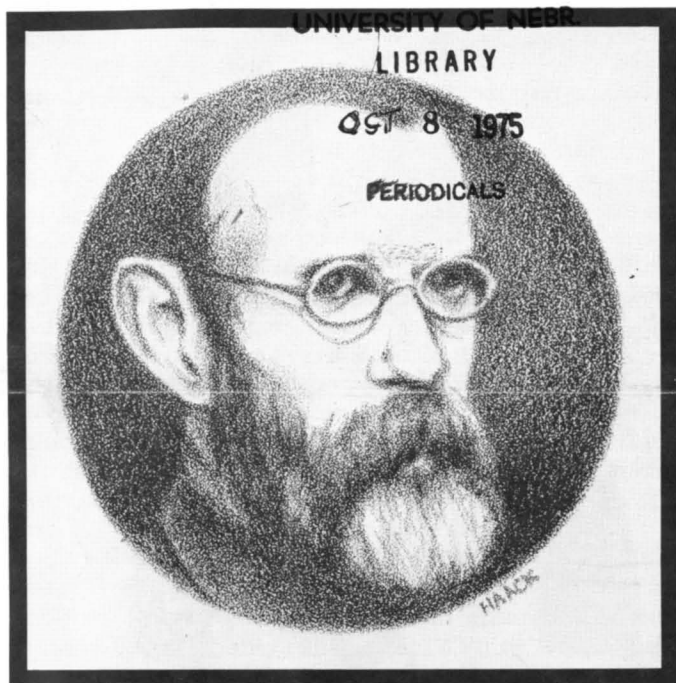


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Haack, Martha; Wolf, Arthur H.; and Gunderson, Harvey L., "Robert Fletcher Gilder: Archeologist for the Museum" (1975). *Programs Information: Nebraska State Museum*. 11.

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Robert Fletcher Gilder
1856-1940

Robert Fletcher Gilder: Archeologist For The Museum

With the 1974 donation by Omaha's Joslyn Art Museum of a large collection of artifacts to the University of Nebraska State Museum, a chapter in the history of early archeological work in Nebraska was made complete. The artifacts were collected by Robert F. Gilder in the course of his archeological explorations of 1907-1912. Considering Gilder's long association with the Museum and the fact that much of the pioneering work in Nebraska archeology is unknown to most Nebraskans, a brief discussion of Gilder's life and works is offered.

A Journalist By Trade

Robert Fletcher Gilder was born in 1856 as a minister's son in Flushing, New York. His family was eventually to become distinguished in literary circles so it was not unusual that Gilder studied both art and journalism in his youth. He also learned the printing trade and wandered over much of the country, working as a printer and occasionally writing articles as a roving correspondent for the *New York Sun* newspaper.

Gilder first arrived in Omaha in 1887 and worked for several printing companies before accepting posts with the *Omaha World-Herald* as a typesetter, proofreader, and finally as a member of the editorial staff. He held

the latter position for nearly 25 years until his retirement in 1919. It was his night work at the newspaper which freed him to pursue what were initially his two hobbies in the daytime. The first of these was painting, at which Gilder excelled. His works are hung today at Joslyn Art Museum and in many Omaha homes.

However, during his frequent trips to paint in wooded areas atop the bluffs along the Missouri River he became interested in the origins of the supposed "buffalo wallows" which lined them. Gilder's interest in these shallow depressions led to his second hobby, archeology. He became most interested around 1903, and excavated and published extensively on eastern Nebraska for ten years thereafter, and to a lesser extent into the 1920s.

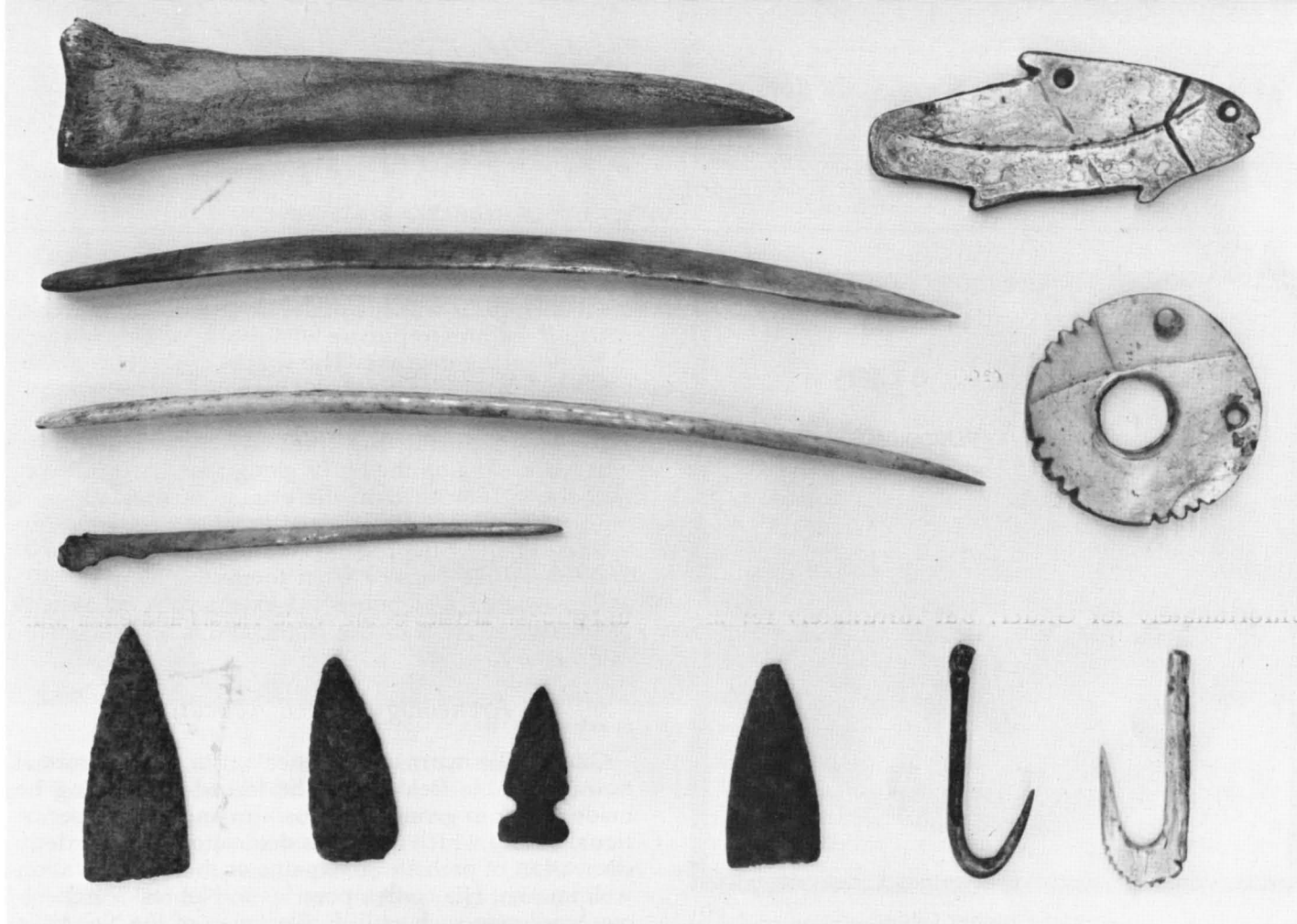
Archeology As An Avocation

Gilder, like many early archeologists, had no formal training in the field. What he lacked in training he made up for in genuine enthusiasm and keen observational ability which made his dedication to the orderly excavation of prehistoric remains or their preservation well known. His contemporaries in Nebraska archeology were men such as E. E. Blackman of the Nebraska State Historical Society and Frederick H. Sterns of Omaha and, later, Harvard's Peabody Museum. Aleš Hrdlička, of the United States National Museum, and W. H. Holmes and Gerard Fowke of the Bureau of American Ethnology were also colleagues with whom Gilder enjoyed friendly but often stormy and competitive relationships.

Another scientist with whom Gilder became involved was Dr. Erwin H. Barbour, then Curator of the State Museum and State Geologist. The two consulted on Gilder's earlier independently done work and many of the artifacts and skeletons were deposited at the Museum in Lincoln.

As mentioned previously, Gilder had no formal training. However, he was realistic in his intent and serious in his purpose: the investigation of the earth-lodges of eastern Nebraska and the description of their contents. To this end he began an independent survey and excavation program in 1903 in northern Douglas and southern Washington counties, north of Omaha. In his capacity as a newspaperman, Gilder made frequent use of the *World-Herald* to illustrate and describe his findings to the public. One long running series in 1909, entitled "Digging into the Homelife of Nebraska Ancients," was one of the more accurate of these. Many of the items then pictured are included in the recent accession.

In 1907, Gilder, along with E. E. Blackman, petitioned the Nebraska State Historical Society for funds to take archeological lectures to the people of Nebraska. It was such dedication, interest, and cooperation which established Gilder as an early Nebraska archeologist.



Bone tools, shell pendants, bone fishhooks, and stone projectile points from the Gilder collection.

In 1913 Barbour appointed Gilder "Archeologist in the Field" for the Museum. It is unclear whether Gilder received any support from the University for his explorations, although he made frequent reports to Barbour on his activities in eastern Nebraska. His work for the State Museum and his public service accomplishments led the University of Nebraska to bestow an honorary degree, Doctor of Science, on him in 1917. Thus he took his place with other great people of the day who had received similar honors: Theodore Roosevelt, Willa Cather, Gen. John J. Pershing, and Roscoe Pound.

Dr. Gilder did not publish as much after his retirement from newspaper work in 1919, although he remained active in both survey and excavation with younger workers well into the 1930s. His final publication, *The Nebraska Culture Man*, in 1926, was a summary of his previous work. The name "Nebraska Culture" has been retained in some form in all of the classifications of prehistoric remains found in eastern Nebraska since that time. Although he did spend some time in Wyoming and Arizona, Gilder's excavation, description, and recognition of this distinct cultural unit in eastern Nebraska was perhaps his greatest accomplishment and legacy to the work of those who followed.

Gilder, who was a life member of the Nebraska State Historical Society and a past chairman of the Ethnological & Folklore Section of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences, retired to a cabin he had built in the Fontenelle Forest area near Bellevue and painted until his death at age 84 in 1940.

Early Excavation And Controversy

During his early excavations Gilder made a discovery which brought both him and Nebraska archeology into the national spotlight. In 1906 he excavated a number of disarticulated skeletons from an artificial mound on Long's Hill, then about ten miles north of Omaha. The skeletons were found under about four feet of undisturbed loess soil, and exhibited what were considered at the time to be very "primitive" characteristics. Gilder, Barbour, and Dr. Henry B. Ward published articles in 1907 attributing great antiquity to the mound and the skeletons on the basis of geological deposition and the cranial characteristics of the skeletons. The skulls and skeletons of the "Nebraska Loess Man" were brought to the Museum in Lincoln where they were studied by the famous physical anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička of the United States National Museum. He visited the site at Long's Hill in the middle of winter and later published a report in the Bureau of American Ethnology *Bulletin* 33 in which he disputed both the claims of geological and skeletal antiquity, pointing out that the Pleistocene origins of the mound could not be proven, and that similar cranial characteristics (thick cranial bones, heavy brow ridges, and low receding foreheads) could be found among historic populations of Indians. Although Gilder published a rebuttal, history has not seen the acceptance of the Gilder-Barbour theory on the origins and antiquity of "Nebraska Loess Man."

Excavating The "Nebraska Culture"

Undaunted by the controversy surrounding the Loess Man, Gilder continued his exploration of sites in the Douglas and Washington county area. He published reports of his work in 1907 in the *American Anthropologist* journal. This was the first exposure for Nebraska archeology in a major anthropological journal. His report dealt with a number of earth-lodges excavated along Ponca Creek in the northern part of Douglas County just north of Florence, a town since annexed by Omaha. The well-illustrated article contained descriptions of the lodges (which he assumed to be circular), their locations with relation to the terrain, the artifacts found, and the possible time frame for them. This was as good a report as could be found at the time, and many of his observations concerning the settlement patterns and the status of the bluffs as treeless at the time of occupation are regarded as valid even today. Unfortunately for Gilder, but fortunately for archeologists, the lodges were later proven to be rectangular, not circular, by Sterns. Gilder soon admitted his mistake and attributed it to the fact that he was never afforded the luxury of doing a complete excavation of a lodge.

After the publication of the Ponca Creek work Gilder was approached by Omaha State Senator William Patrick who knew of similar lodges in an area near Bellevue in Sarpy County called Child's Point. This area is now a protected part of the Fontenelle Forest. At first Gilder thought the lodges there were an Oto village but he later concluded that they were indeed similar to those on Ponca Creek. He spent the next five years excavating the lodges and published reports in various

journals about the remains of the distinct culture he was finding. A large range of artifacts were recovered from the lodges, including stone implements and projectile points, bone tools and fishhooks, as well as pottery vessels, effigies, and pipes.

In 1911 Gilder published an article describing "Discoveries Indicating an Unexploited Culture in Eastern Nebraska." Although he had yet to use the term "Nebraska Culture" he did define the remains in terms of their geographical extent, formal characteristics, and possible time frame. In 1912 a catalog of the collections made at Child's Point and Ponca Creek was published by the Omaha Public Library, which was to be the repository for them.

In 1913 and 1914 Gilder did extensive work at Child's Point for Barbour and the Museum. Results of this work were never widely distributed or published, although all of the artifacts and several of the field reports are on file in the Museum's Division of Anthropology. Gilder did publish articles in the *World-Herald* and other journals in later years. As mentioned previously, his naming of the "Nebraska Culture" in 1926 was the real culmination of his publishing career though his activity in the field continued for years thereafter.

Gilder's Collections

The collections which Gilder made are widely scattered. He dug with F. H. Sterns of the Peabody Museum. Gilder is said to have initially interested Sterns in the archeology of eastern Nebraska. Sterns eventually excavated in a wider area and to a more conclusive end than did Gilder, and the results of their joint explorations are deposited in the Peabody

"Nebraska Culture" pottery and clay pipes from the Robert F. Gilder collection. Note the effigy, and the turkey which has been incised on the shoulder of the larger piece.





Small pottery vessel from the Gilder collection.

Museum at Harvard. A smaller collection remains at the Washington County Historical Society in Fort Calhoun, Nebraska.

The Omaha Public Library transferred their well-cataloged collection to Joslyn Art Museum in 1949, and as mentioned, this collection was "reunited" in 1974 at the Museum with Gilder's other work from Child's Point. Accompanying this accession was a collection of artifacts donated by Charles Everard Childs of Manchester, Vermont, who had dug with Gilder as a high school student on his father's land.

As time has passed many of Gilder's achievements in the area of eastern Nebraska archeology have been superseded by the work of others. Some of his collections still have the potential to be reworked for inclusion in more general syntheses of Nebraska and Plains area archeology. Much is owed to him for building a base for the continued study of the prehistoric peoples of Nebraska.

Illustration by
MARTHA HAACK

ARTHUR H. WOLF
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Gilder's Bibliography

The following list does not include Gilder's numerous newspaper articles or his unpublished manuscripts, which are on file at the State Museum and the Nebraska State Historical Society.

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UNL News

Published 5 times in Oct., 4 in Mar., 3 in Feb., Apr., Aug., and Sept., once in June and July, and twice in other months by The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Dept. of Publications Services and Control, 209 Nebraska Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588. Second-class postage paid Lincoln, Nebraska.

This Issue:

Museum Notes

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA STATE MUSEUM, WITH PLANETARIUM



No. 54

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