

Conservation Corner

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Last week, county naturalists from around the state met at the Annett Nature Center south of Indianola. Hosted by Warren County Conservation, Fall IAN was the perfect time and place to connect with friends and peers, to gain new knowledge and understanding of our natural world, and simply to enjoy nature. Today I'd like to share my experience on the Woodland Mounds Hike, which delivered all three.

Our fearless leader for the afternoon was Gary Valen, explorer of creek beds, hill tops, and plowed fields as well as collector of artifacts. He taught history and served as Dean of Students at Simpson College from 1962-84, while his wife Betsy Lyman served as Director of the Warren Count Conservation Board. Together they helped raise funds to save the property from becoming a housing project. Today the Woodland Mounds Preserve is part of the largest continuous timber stand in Warren County.

Before heading outside, Gary shared several artifacts he has surface collected over the years from this mound group and village site he first came upon in 1963. The sites date from 300 BC to 200 AD, placing them in the Middle Woodland Culture.

And while these early Iowans did not leave a written record, they did leave cultural objects such as stone tools, pottery, and earthen mounds. Together we recreated bits and pieces of their story as written on the pages of awls, scrapers, hand axes, pipe pieces, abraders, bone beads, and hammerstones that lie strewn along the waterways across our state.

But the best part of the workshop was still to come – the time spent hiking over the hills and through the woods as Gary led us to a sacred spot where five large earthen mounds still stand guard among the oak trees. These mounds served as both burial and ceremonial sites for the Woodland people, who believed that the power of a leader or healer remains where they are buried. These people did not view the natural world as so many inanimate objects, like we do, but rather as their mother or grandmother. They would carry baskets of life-giving soil collected from their village site and fields to build the mound, thereby returning the body and soul to its mother's embrace.

As we stood in silence high above the South River, Gary withdrew a gorget of green banded slate from beneath his sweatshirt. Once part of a healing ceremony at this very mound, today he wears the sacred stone as a pendant of healing and warmth, a special keepsake from a special time and place.

Slipping and sliding, we skidded along a deer trail on the bluff face to a secondary terrace where the village was originally set above the floodplain. There we uncovered several paint stones, even one hammerstone, lying among the corn stubble. All too soon the sun was setting and we reluctantly returned to the parking lot and civilization, our bodies tired but our minds and spirits uplifted by an afternoon in the woods.

