

# Did Earliest Americans Hunt Sloth?

By FRANK THONE

Did the earliest American hunt the ground sloth and the cave bear? Did they have a part in the extermination of the wild camels that once roamed the Southwest? Were there human beings on this continent twenty thousand, forty thousand, a hundred thousand years ago, instead of the mere eight or ten thousand now allowed by many anthropologists?

These and a score of like questions will be agitating American students of ancient man during the coming months, as the result of excavations now going on in the bottom of a cave in southwestern New Mexico. Fragments of the bones of two skulls and other human bones have come out of the sandy earth, together with a great quantity of fossil remains of animal species like the cave bear, the extinct American camel, the huge ground sloth, and the wild horse that flourished on the plains and plateaus of the West and had gone over the road of the mastodon and the saber-tooth tiger long before the Spanish conquistadores restocked the ranges with the ancestors of the modern broncho. The human bones were so intimately interburied with those of the animals that the possibility of their having been buried here at a later date seems to be ruled out of court; yet these animals have always been checked off by geologists as extinct since the end of the Great Ice Age—and that was a hundred thousand years ago.

Did the owners of these skulls wander into this cave to die a thousand centuries in the past, or were there still survivors of the strange Pleistocene fauna left on earth until late-coming man put in his leisurely appearance, perhaps only ten thousand years ago? That is the dilemma now confronting the scientists, and that is the reason why the busy spades of workers from the Los Angeles Museum are digging into the bottom of Conkling's Cavern like so many living question-marks. The answers to these questioning thrusts come up day by day—more pieces of bone, a few of them human, most of them of mammals and birds, some living and some extinct. The cases and study tables of the museum in Los Angeles are filling with fossils, faster than paleontologists, the specialists who delight in ancient bones, can read their



*DID THE FIRST AMERICANS hunt this beast? Ground sloth, Nothrotherium, tentatively restored by Prof. R. S. Lull of Yale from skeleton found near El Paso. Bones of similar animals were found in Conkling Cavern*

riddles. When these long runes are read at last, which may be months hence, or even years, the full significance of the two broken skulls will be made known. In the meantime, the story can be told so far as it is known to date, while it is still news.

Conkling's Cavern, this newest of the mines of science, where bones are more to be valued than gold, and odd teeth are priced above rubies, has achieved the dignity of a name of its own only recently. Before that it was merely one of the innumerable nameless holes in the ground in the limestone base of Bishop's Cap Peak, in southwestern New Mexico. Now, in recognition of the inspired amateur scientist, Roscoe P. Conkling of El Paso, whose initiative and enterprise resulted in opening up this new fossil Golconda, the place has been given his name.

The romantic story of the opening up of Conkling's Cavern is well told by Wm. Alanson Bryan, director of the Los Angeles Museum. Dr. Bryan writes: "Mr. Conkling, who for many years has been connected with the American Smelting and Refining Company, has had as a form of relaxation and recreation a very lively interest in the field study of archaeology, coupled with a general interest in natural history which in the course of his travels in connection with mining operations in remote fields has led him to examine and to study scores of burial and bone caves in America and in various foreign lands.

"In following this interesting avocation, he some time ago arranged with Nicanor Mestes, Richard Chapman and José M. and Lorenzo Benavidas to locate promising caves within reach of El Paso for him to explore and study at leisure. Their acquaintance from youth with the mountains in the country surrounding El Paso and the first-hand knowledge of a local tradition to the effect that Spanish gold had long ago been buried in the small dark cave on Bishop's Cap Peak prompted them, under Mr. Conkling's encouragement, to go there and dig—not for bones or Indian relics, but for buried treasure—with the happy result that in this indirect manner what appears to be an exceedingly important and convincing discovery in the prehistory of America has been made.

"The cave, which is located in carboniferous limestone, opened on the easterly flank of the mountain through a jagged orifice about three by four feet (since enlarged) which led into a dark stone cavern formed by water erosion. The floor was about eight feet below the mouth and was of wind-blown sand some twenty feet or more in irregular diameter. Aside from a few unsuccessful attempts to use the cave as a storm shelter by an occasional herder, the place had never been a human habitation. A previous unsuccessful attempt to locate treasure in this cavern was made about forty years ago by men still living, who since the discovery have been induced to revisit it. (Turn to next page)

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"The work of treasure hunting proceeded without much show of success until at a depth of approximately ten feet below the floor bones were unexpectedly discovered. These were thought by the excavators to be perhaps the bones of a mule that might have belonged to the owners of the supposed buried treasure. As a result the work of excavation went feverishly on, until a fragment of a human skull was exhumed! These bones were brought to the attention of Mr. Conkling, who at once recognized the possible importance of such a find under such circumstances. He then supervised the further exploration of the cavern.

"Early in the work he sent photographs and drawings of his finds to the Los Angeles Museum for verification, with the result that Dr. Chester Stock, curator of the department of vertebrate paleontology, identified certain of the bones uncovered under ten feet of sandy loess deposits as the well-preserved phalanges of a ground sloth; and, as these were found adjacent to and at the same depth as the human skull cap referred to, all excavations since have been made with a view to preserving all available data growing out of the association of the material uncovered, as well as the material itself.

"The cavern during the past four months has been carefully excavated to a depth of more than thirty feet without encountering rock bottom, the inference being that it extends much deeper. Except for a slight amount of surface material, and material doubtless falling down from the roof, the entire space is uniformly filled with very fine reddish wind-blown sand which exhibits an ill-defined horizontal laminated bedding, indicating the nature of its slow accumulation.

"Eight feet below the occurrence of the skull, i. e., twenty feet below the surface, a hard, compact lens from two to four inches in thickness was encountered. This, while composed of the same material as that which filled the cavern, differed in that it was evidently water laid. Apparently it had settled out of water accumulated in the cavern, as a result perhaps of a cloudburst. The value of this circumstance, however, lies in the fact that it formed a definite undisturbed horizontal diaphragm completely flooring up the cave. The



*ROSCOE P. CONKLING, who opened up America's latest and most sensational find of ancient man*

significance of this will be appreciated when it is understood that at about eighteen inches below this floor and more than twenty-one feet below the surface floor of the cavern additional human skull fragments were found!

"From the twelve-foot level where the first skull was found to the bottom of the excavation, i. e., for a depth of eighteen feet, bones of extinct horse, cave-bear, camel and sloth have been excavated in such numbers as to fill five large table type museum exhibition cases, while a bushel or more of small animal and bird bones have been recovered. Practically the complete skeleton of a ground sloth was found in place midway down between the occurrence of the two skull finds, which were almost ten feet apart. The last bones recovered from the bottom of the excavations were the limb bones of a very large camel!

"From the foregoing it would seem obvious that we have here the undisturbed occurrence of human remains in direct association with a number of animals regarded as extinct since the Pleistocene period, and all deposited in such a manner as to preclude even the suggestion of their later intrusive burial. It is, therefore, believed that Conkling's Cavern has been a den and trap for wild animals through countless centuries and is a find which fortunately settles conclusively the moot question as to

whether man and the sloth, the camel and the cave-bear, for example, were coexistent in America.

"At the invitation of Mr. Conkling, I visited the cavern during the latter part of April. After very careful study of the occurrence and having had the exhilarating satisfaction of assisting in the removal of the pelvic and lumbar portion of the sloth specimen referred to and seeing its relation to the human remains, I do not hesitate to pronounce the find as probably the most important prehistoric discovery ever made in America."

The find at Conkling Cavern promises to be a classic in the study of prehistoric man on this continent, because up until the present most human relics of apparently high antiquity in America have been unearthed under circumstances that left room for argument by the skeptical. As a matter of fact, America has not yielded a tenth or even a twentieth as many prehistoric human remains as have been found in Europe. We have nothing as yet to compare with the wonderful pictured caves of southern France and northern Spain, where the Cro-Magnon race once dwelt, nor anything to match the many burials of the beetle-browed, heavy-jawed Neanderthals. We may be said to stand now about where Europe stood in 1856, when the skull of the first Neanderthal man was found in the valley of the Düssel.

Not quite, however. There have been other finds of prehistoric man in America within recent years, which have proved disturbing to the earlier concept of a western hemisphere with no human inhabitants until within the last few scores of centuries.

The Southwest has yielded a large share of such discoveries as have been made. The most telling of these have not been of the bones of the prehistoric Americans themselves, but of flint arrow points, undoubtedly the handiwork of man, found associated with the bones of ancient animals, sometimes deeply buried under deposits of gravel.

A little over two years ago three such discoveries were made near the towns of Frederick, Okla., Folsom, N. M., and Colorado, Texas. These discoveries were investigated by J. D. Figgins and Harold Cook, of the Colorado Museum of Natural History in Denver. Along Wolf Creek, near the town of (*Turn to next page*)

# New Institute for Eye Problems

A great step forward in the study and treatment in America of diseases of the eye is marked by the dedication of the Wilmer Institute of the Johns Hopkins University and Hospital. Before the establishment of this institute, such opportunities in our country were far behind those of European countries. Individual men specializing in the subject were doing splendid work at various places, but no one center existed.

The new institute was founded and built by contributions from former patients and friends of Dr. William Holland Wilmer, one of the country's leading eye specialists, who is the head of the institute which bears his name. The location of the institute

is of especial advantage because the means for caring for patients and the general medical facilities of a great university hospital are available.

The unusual equipment and construction of the institute is the result of much thought and study on the part of Dr. Wilmer who spent two years in Europe visiting various ophthalmological centers before the institute was built.

A special camera has been devised in the research department to record pictorially operations on the eye. This is of immense educational value. Only a very few persons can observe closely the details of a surgical operation with safety to the patient. This is particularly true of delicate operations

on the eye. The new camera will give future surgeons an opportunity for observation of every detail, which is a vital part of their training.

Over 50,000 persons in the United States today have defects of vision so great that they cannot engage in pursuits requiring vision. Many thousands more are seriously hampered in health, happiness and earning power by poor eyesight. For these people as individuals and for the communities in which they live, the Wilmer Institute has tremendous significance. Research now being carried on at it is concerned with glaucoma, cataract, the effects on the eye of aviation, and many other problems of vital importance to humanity.

*Science News-Letter, October 19, 1929*

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Colorado, Texas, flood waters exposed the bones of an extinct species of bison, and while large blocks of earth in which they were embedded were being removed for transportation to the museum, three arrowheads, quite unlike those in any known collections, were found beneath a nearly complete skeleton.

At Folsom, N. M., fossil bones were discovered at the extraordinary altitude of 7,000 feet, and among the fossil bones were found two arrowheads similar to the Colorado specimens. The bones were identified as those of three hitherto unknown species of bison and an ancient deer-like animal.

In a gravel pit at Frederick, Okla., there were three distinct layers of deposits, which yielded, besides bones of animals, two arrow-heads and seven stones believed to be metates, or primitive grinding implements. Eight feet above the point at which the uppermost of the stones occurred, there were found remains of the mammoth, including numerous teeth.

Dr. O. P. Hay, of the U. S. National Museum, visited the Frederick gravel pits and came back convinced that they offered real evidence for the contemporaneous existence on the American continent of some race of man and of animal species now extinct.

But the Southwest is not alone as a possible dwelling-place of prehistoric man in America. Florida of the

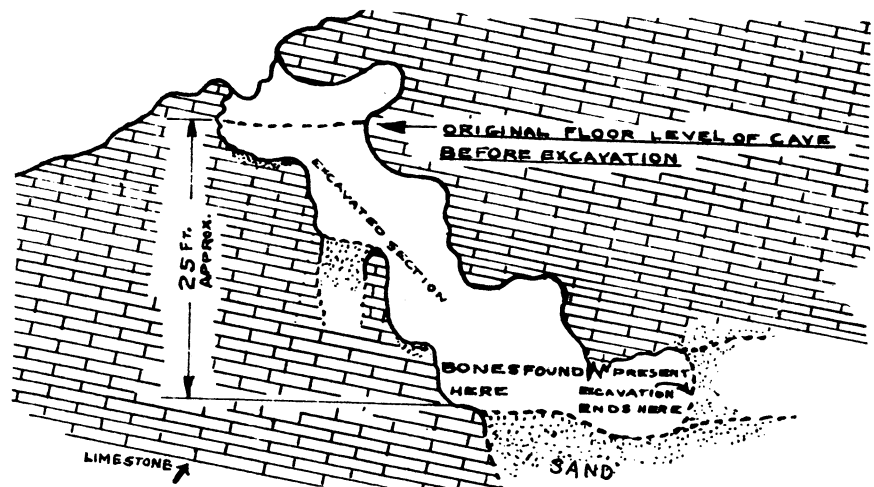


DIAGRAM OF CONKLING'S CAVERN, where human bones were found associated with remains of ground sloth and an extinct species of camel

Stone Age must have had its adherents as an ideal home, for since 1925 human relics have been coming to light from beneath its sandy soil. The most notable discovery was made in that year at Melbourne, where a joint expedition of the U. S. National Museum and Amherst College unearthed a crushed human skull from the same earth stratum that contained bones of mammoth, mastodon, and a huge scaled animal like a giant armadillo. Stone arrowheads, like corroborating documents, were found at the same level. Last spring C. P. Singleton, a Harvard zoologist, visited Melbourne and found a stone arrow or spear point directly underneath the bones of a mastodon, and at the same

time Dr. J. W. Gidley of the U. S. National Museum found a large stone implement of the type known as a turtle-back flaker.

To these and other evidences of the antiquity of man in America, the Conkling Cavern finds lend new weight and added authority. Though the cavern is closed to the general public during the activities of excavation, it is open to qualified scientists. And the really interesting part of it, the bones themselves, are on public display in the Los Angeles Museum, where both scientists and the laity can see for themselves the newest pages that have been opened in the book of the antiquity of man in America.

*Science News-Letter, October 19, 1929*