Luther Cressman (1897-1994)

By Virginia Butler

Known as the father of Oregon archaeology and anthropology, Luther Cressman conducted pioneering archaeological work in the 1930s through the 1960s and established the broad outlines of Oregon's ancient human history and occupation by Native peoples. He helped establish the anthropology department at the University of Oregon and supervised the first students in Oregon to earn doctorates in anthropology. He was the first director of what would become the Oregon State Museum of Anthropology, the first museum in the state to curate archaeological remains. It is hard to find an area in Oregon whose archaeological record has not been touched by Cressman or his students. His contribution is especially noteworthy as he had no formal training in archaeology or natural sciences.

Luther Sheeleigh Cressman was born in rural eastern Pennsylvania in 1897. He earned his B.A. in Classics with a minor in English poetry from Pennsylvania State College in 1918 and then joined the military near the end of World War I. In 1923, he became an ordained Episcopal priest in New York City, but he maintained broad ambitions and earned a Ph.D. in sociology from Columbia University in 1927. Cressman was heavily influenced by Modernism and the potential for science to address societal challenges. He formed strong intellectual bonds with prominent faculty, including Franz Boas and William Fielding Ogburn; students such as Ruth Benedict and Melville Herskovits; and New York intellectuals such as Lewis Mumford, Louise Rosenblatt, and Louise Bogan. In 1923, he married Margaret Mead, one of the students in his circle.

Cressman's life underwent dramatic changes in the late 1920s. He left the church and chose an academic career. He also divorced Mead and met and married Dorothy Cecelia Loch, his companion until her death in 1977, and moved from New York to Ellensburg in central Washington state to teach. He then moved to Eugene to join the sociology department at the University of Oregon. In 1930, less than a year after arriving in Oregon, he excavated an archaeological site in the Rogue River area of southwest Oregon, an experience that inspired him to focus on archaeology for the rest of his career.

Professional archaeology in Oregon was almost nonexistent in 1930, but there were many questions about Oregon's ancient past and Native peoples to address. These questions guided Cressman's many projects over his thirty-five-year career, which took him into the basin and range country of southeast Oregon, along the Columbia River, the Willamette Valley, and the Oregon Coast.

Cressman was a quick study, and early on he collaborated with science experts, students, and landowners to unearth discoveries about Oregon's past. Before radiocarbon dating, archaeologists relied on associations between artifacts (e.g., baskets and arrowheads) and unique geological deposits or extinct animal remains to establish a relative time period for past human activity. The eruption of Mount Mazama, which created Crater Lake, blanketed a large section of eastern Oregon with a thick layer of ash sometime between 5,000 and 10,000 years ago. Cressman reasoned that the location in which artifacts were found in relation to the ash layer would indicate when the human activity had occurred.

He made some spectacular discoveries. At Fort Rock Cave in 1938, his crew found seventy-five sagebrush sandals beneath Mazama ash, confirming their great age. With the advent of radiocarbon dating in the early 1950s, he had the sandals tested, proving that they were more than 9,000 years old, the oldest directly dated artifact in North America at the time of the study. While excavating areas to be flooded by the reservoir behind The Dalles Dam in the mid-1950s, Cressman's team found thousands of salmon remains in layers between 9,000 and 10,000 years old, demonstrating that Indian people had been fishing on the Columbia since ancient times.

Testing at Paisley Caves next to Summer Lake in 1939, Cressman found remains of extinct megafauna (horse and camel) and stone tools, which hinted at the possibility of people living at the same time as Ice Age animals in southeast Oregon; recent work by University of Oregon archaeologists has demonstrated that Paisley Caves was one of the oldest inhabited sites in the New World.

Luther Cressman wrote many books, including the autobiography *A Golden Journey* (1988)*, The Sandal and the Cave* (1962 & 1981)*,* and *Prehistory of the Far West* (1977), and received numerous honors for his work.He launched the field of archaeology in Oregon, establishing the great antiquity of Native peoples in Oregon and helping interpret the rich cultural history recorded in the artifacts left behind.

Sources

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