

NELS CHRISTIAN NELSON, 1875–1964

J. ALDEN MASON

ON MARCH 5, 1964, death brought rather welcome relief to Nels C. Nelson in his eighty-ninth year; he died peacefully in his sleep at the Lynwood Nursing Home in New York City. Here he had been living for less than a year, following two weeks' hospitalization which had caused him to abandon the apartment where he had lived alone for several years after the death of Mrs. Nelson, the former Ethelyn G. Hobbs, who was once secretary to A. L. Kroeber.

To most American archaeologists today, Nelson is a name from the more or less distant past. He did his major work and published his most important articles before 1930; he published very little after 1940. After his retirement as Curator of Prehistoric Archaeology at the American Museum of Natural History in 1943 at the age of 68, he continued to visit his office regularly, to read, to consult, or do research. Then, as failing eyesight made travel hazardous and reading difficult, he stayed more and more in his apartment near the Museum, enjoying his independence, corresponding with old friends, his mind as alert and wide-ranging as ever. He refused sympathy for his physical handicaps and found a measure of happiness when others would have despaired. Naturally, for some years he had attended no scientific meetings.

Nelson's life was a classic Algeresque epic of triumph over handicaps. He was born April 9, 1875, the eldest of many children of an indigent Danish farm family near Fredericia and was bound out to a farmer. He went to school only briefly and, as he put it, "just enough to read the catechism." In 1892, an uncle who needed more assistance on his farm in Minnesota sent him a steerage steamship ticket, and in May of that year, having survived the hardships of the voyage and having thrown his mattress and old clothes into the New York harbor, he passed through Ellis Island immigration and finally reached Minnesota. Here he found only slight improvement over Denmark because he could attend school only part time. Speaking no English, he entered the first grade at the age of 17, but he graduated from high school in 1901 at the age of 26, at which age most of us had our doctorates.

As he had already acquired a local reputation as a scholar, it was presumed that he was destined for the ministry, but much of theological dogma left his inquiring mind unsatisfied. He was offered the opportunity to accompany some returning Californians to their earthly paradise, at no expense beyond nine days in a freight car tending to their livestock. Once there, he worked at several unskilled jobs while saving money to attend Stanford University. Even after entering the university, the problem of sustenance was ever present, and for much of this time Nelson solved it by working as janitor for a local bank.

At Stanford he pursued philosophy in particular and even followed his preceptor in transferring to Berkeley, but he was not satisfied in that field either. However, one day in 1906 a graduate-student friend, doubtless S. A. Barrett, invited him to help in the excavation of a shell-heap, and thenceforth Nels's interests centered in archaeology and anthropology. He received the B.L. degree at the University of California in 1907 and the M.L. in 1908. His thesis was a report on the shellmounds of the entire San Francisco Bay region, of which he located about 400 as a result of tramping some 3000 miles of littoral. His first post, in 1908, was as Field Assistant in the U.S. Geological Survey. He was given the position of Assistant Curator in the Anthropological Museum of the University of California (then in San Francisco) in 1909 and that of Instructor in Anthropology in 1910.

One of the major events in Nelson's career was his transfer in 1912 to the American Museum of Natural History in New York as Assistant Curator of Anthropology. He remained here most of the rest of his life, as Associate Curator of North American Archaeology, 1921–23; Associate Curator of Archaeology, 1923–28; and as Curator of Prehistoric Archaeology, 1928–43. Here he found larger scope for his interests and enthusiasm. For the first few years his field work was mainly in the American Southwest, with minor excursions to Kentucky, Missouri, and Florida. Later, in accord with the great interest of Henry Fairfield Osborn (then the President of the Museum) in European prehistory, he studied that field intensively, made excavations in Europe, and compiled and



Nels C. Nelson, 1930.

organized the data for Osborn's "Men of the Old Stone Age." His most publicized discoveries, however, beginning in 1925, were made while he was a member of the Roy Chapman Andrews expeditions to Mongolia and the Gobi Desert, where he found a Neolithic or Mesolithic archaeological culture which he termed the "Shabarahk culture" or the "Dune Dwellers." Of course, the hours devoted to curatorial duties and the care of collections far exceeded those spent in field work.

Nelson is generally believed to be the first man in America to demonstrate the value of careful excavation by artificial levels in determining chronological cultural changes. Possibly Gamio was actually the first, but his work had attracted little attention at that time. At the 24th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in 1959, a symposium on "Developments in Dating Techniques" was dedicated to Nelson as one of the founders of the technique. (See "Nels C. Nelson and Chronological Archaeology" by Richard B. Woodbury, *American Antiquity*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 400-01, 1960; "Nelson's Stratigraphy," Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 98-9).

Nelson had of course practiced rough stratigraphy in his excavations in California shellheaps and had been greatly influenced by the work of Uhle, Obermeier, Breuil, and Merriam. In his excavations at Galisteo, New Mexico, in 1914, he located a thick accumulation of refuse and took advantage of it. He dug the 10-ft.-deep midden in levels of 1 ft., gathering the sherds from each level himself so that there would be no confusion. He then classified his sherds in seven types and calculated their frequencies by levels. The plotted results resembled normal distribution curves and proved that statistical analysis of data by arbitrary levels could indicate chronological change just as well as data from natural strata. Nelson's reports on the results of his work (1914, 1916a) attracted the greatest attention, and his method has been used ever since.

Nelson received merited recognition from his colleagues and fellow scientists. He was president of the American Anthropological Association in 1937, having served as vice-president in 1936, and he was president of the Society for American Archaeology in 1942. He was president of the American Ethnological Society in 1929, and in 1935 was vice-president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and chairman of Section H (Anthropology). In 1929, he was elected a trustee of the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe. He was secretary of the International Congress of Americanists in New York in 1928 and a delegate to the International Congress of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences in London in 1932. He was one of the 20 anthropologists who was awarded a star in the old volumes of *American Men of Science*.

A fuller and most appreciative account of Nelson's life and accomplishments can be found in D. R. Barton's "Mud, Stones, and History, the Rise of N. C. Nelson from Danish Farm Boy to One of America's Outstanding Chroniclers of the Life and Times of Prehistoric Man" (*Natural History*, Vol. 47, No. 5, 1941, pp. 293-6, 303). In it, Barton quotes Walter Granger, one of Nels's closest companions on the Gobi expedition, as saying: "If I were going out on a desert island where I would have to be satisfied with the company of only one man, I'd choose him." Surely no greater commendation could be accorded to any man. Quiet and reserved, but with a dry sense of humor, he was universally liked and respected. His curious,

inquiring mind was ever eager for new information on almost any subject, which, however, had to satisfy a logical testing. He left no close relatives to mourn him, but those who knew him well remember him with great affection.

PUBLICATIONS OF NELS C. NELSON

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UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA
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