

CCHS Heritage Notes for 2-11-14

The Legend of Spirit Mound

Spirit Mound, or Paha Wakan, was known by tribes for miles around before the Lewis & Clark expedition ever came to Clay County. Lewis & Clark reported that the people of the Omaha, Oto, and Yankton tribes believed that the mound was occupied by little people who shot any human who came near.

By the 1790's when European traders came up the Missouri River, reports of this mound must have been well known, although no written record earlier than the journals of Lewis & Clark has been found. On August 24, 1804, the day before they reached the mouth of the Vermillion River (they called it the White Stone), Clark wrote:

“Capt. Lewis and myself concluded to visit a high hill situated in an emence plain three leagues N. & 20 degrees W. from the mouth of the White Stone River. This hill appears to be of a Conic form and by all the different Nations in this quarter is supposed to be a place of Deavels that are in human form with remarkable large heads and about 18 inches high. They are very watchful and are armed with sharp arrows with which they can kill at a great distance. They are said to kill all persons who are so hardy as to attempt to approach the hill. Tradition is that many Indians have suffered by these little people and among others that three Maha men fell a sacrifice to their murceyleless fury. The Mahas, Souix, Ottoes and other neighboring nations believe this fable and no consideration is sufficient to induce them to approach this hill.”

Spirit Mound is located 6 miles north of Vermillion along SD Highway 19 and is open year around for visitors. Detailed information at www.spiritmound.org