Lewis H. Morgan's Western Field Trips*

By Leslie A. White

THERE has been a tradition among American anthropologists of the twentieth century that the defects and shortcomings of the earlier, and particularly the evolutionary, anthropologists were due to too much theorizing and too little field work or none at all. It has been customary to dub the classical evolutionists "closet," or arm-chair, philosophers.[1] The corrective for the "theoretical excesses" of the early ethnologists, according to this tradition, was, in the words of Edward Sapir, "the sobering influence of field work among the American aborigines."[2]

The life and work of Lewis H. Morgan (1818–1881) provide a salutary corrective to this tradition—not to mention the field researches of Ad. F. Bandelier, J. Owen Dorsey, Horatio Hale, F. H. Cushing, A. S. Gatschet, Alice Fletcher, and others. Morgan was unquestionably one of the most eminent and influential theoreticians of the nineteenth century.[3] But he was also an industrious, critical, versatile and productive field worker as well. According to Clark Wissler, Morgan was "a pioneer, if not the initiator of field study in cultural phenomena."[4] He began his ethnological researches among the Iroquois tribes, in whose territory he was born and reared, in 1842 or '43, and continued them assiduously until the publication of *The League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee or Iroquois* in 1851— "the first scientific account of an Indian tribe ever given to the world," as John Wesley Powell termed it.[5]

With the publication of *The League*, Morgan laid ethnological researches aside in order to devote himself to his legal profession and to his domestic

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Morgan's journal of his trip to Colorado and New Mexico in 1878 has already been published (White, ed., 1942). The journals for the expeditions of 1859–62 are now being edited, and it is hoped that they will be ready for publication in the near future.

[1] Sapir, 1920, p. 377; Murdock, 1932, p. 200, and 1949, pp. xiii–xiv; Redfield, 1937, p. x; Herskovits, 1937, p. 259; Steward, 1949, p. 1. See, also, White, 1947, pp. 406–408, for a summary statement of the attitude of the Boas school toward theorizing. [2] Sapir, *loc. cit.*

[3] "Morgan was undoubtedly the greatest sociologist of the past century," Haddon, 1910, p. 165. [4] Wissler, 1929, p. 340.

[5] Powell, 1880, p. 115. Seventy years after the publication of *The League*, Alexander Goldenweiser, who had himself done considerable field work among the Iroquois, asserted that "the best general treatise on the Iroquois still remains Lewis H. Morgan's 'The League of the Iroquois' " (Goldenweiser, 1922, p. 418).

Morgan's Western Field Trips
1859—1862

life—he was married in 1851.[6] In 1856, Morgan attended a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Albany. This meeting, as he tells us in one of his journals, so quickened his interest in ethnology that he resolved to resume the study as soon as possible.

The next year Morgan read a paper, "Laws of Descent among the Iroquois," before the Association in Montreal.[7] "At this time," he writes, "I did not know that the system extended beyond the Iroquois, although I surmised its probability." In the summer of 1858, Morgan obtained the kinship system of the Ojibwa tribe, at Marquette, Michigan. "To my surprise somewhat," he reports, "and not a little to my delight, I found their system was substantially the same as that of the Iroquois; thus, by including a second stock language, extending very greatly the area of its distribution. From this time I began to be sensible of the important uses which such a primary institution as this must have in its bearing upon the question of the genetic connection of the American Indian nations not only, but also upon the still more important question of their Asiatic origin."[8]

This significant discovery at Marquette inaugurated an arduous program of research which was to absorb a large part of Morgan's life for the next decade. He determined to obtain full and concise data on kinship nomenclatures from as many tribes and nations as possible all over the world. With the assistance of the Smithsonian Institution he distributed questionnaires to missionaries, diplomatic and consular agents, and others. And he undertook to obtain data himself from as many North American Indian tribes as he could reach. He took advantage of opportunities afforded by delegations of Indians from distant tribes on visits to Washington, D.C. He obtained relationship terms from Eskimos brought to New York City by an arctic explorer. But most important of his efforts were, of course, his four western field trips.

Morgan made four trips to the west and northwest in the consecutive years of 1859 to 1862. The first and second trips were to Kansas and Nebraska territories. The third was to Ft. Garry, near Lake Winnipeg, on the Red River of the North. The fourth trip, in the summer of 1862, took him over 2,000 miles up the Missouri River, past the Yellowstone, to Ft. Benton.

Conditions attending ethnological field work in those days were somewhat different from those of our own. In Morgan's day, the ethnologist did not leave home, after a series of inoculations and vaccinations, by pullman or airplane, and with perhaps a generous grant from a large foundation—and, possibly, with a supply of tinned foods. In 1859, the railroad ended abruptly at Jefferson City, Missouri; from there Morgan was obliged to travel by river boat, stagecoach, and on foot. A decade before Morgan saw St. Louis on his first field trip, an epidemic of cholera was taking a toll of 200 persons per day in

[6] Morgan, 1859a. See, also, Stern, 1931, and White, 1948.

[7] Morgan, 1858. [8] Morgan, 1859a. See, also, Morgan, 1871a, Ch. I.

that city.[9] Some Indian tribes were restricted to reservations but many were not, and bloodshed was not infrequent. On his first trip to Kansas, Morgan went to his informant's lodge one morning and saw there, drying in the sun, a fresh Indian scalp. The boat that took him to Ft. Benton in '62 picked up two Gros Ventre warriors who had escaped from a band of Sioux. And warfare between Indians and whites was continued for a generation after Morgan made these journeys. Great herds of bison still roamed the plains, and the crews and passengers of river boats on the upper Missouri used to kill them as well as elk and antelope for their mess. River travel was not without its hazards in those days. Four members of the crew of the *Spread Eagle*, the boat upon which Morgan went to Ft. Benton, were killed as they strove to negotiate a rapids just below the fort. With regard to expenses, Morgan once estimated, in a letter to Lorimer Fison, that *Systems of Consanguinity* cost him about $25,000, in money spent and in the sacrifice of professional income to free him for this work.

It might be mentioned also that one of these field trips was ever afterwards associated with deep tragedy by Morgan. His two little daughters, ages 7 and 2, died of scarlet fever while he was ascending the Missouri river in the summer of '62. He received the appalling news at Sioux City on his journey home, more than a month after their death.[10]

These field trips of Morgan's were relatively brief; the longest lasted only ten weeks, the shortest slightly less than four. There was thus no question of living among the Indians from day to day and of sharing in their lives as Morgan frequently had done among the Iroquois. His expeditions were for the specific purpose of collecting kinship nomenclatures, and when a suitable informant and interpreter could be found, this object could quickly be attained. On his long trip on the Missouri, Morgan had, as fellow passengers on the *Spread Eagle*, Indians from various tribes with whom he was able to work at his leisure, hour after hour, during the journey. Fifty-one kinship systems were obtained on these four trips; that is, his data on this number were complete enough for publication in *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity* (see pp. 283–90); fragmentary data were obtained on some others.

But Morgan did more than collect kinship terms. Whenever possible he secured data on clan organization and tribal government, some of which was subsequently used in *Ancient Society*. He also recorded information on ceremonies and dances of many tribes—including the Medicine Dance of the Winnebago and the Sun Dance of the Crow. He gathered data on such items as mythology, diet, dwellings, methods of bestowing names,[11] dress, weapons,

[9] Nebraska, 1922, p. 372.

[10] See Morgan's own account of this tragedy in White, ed., 1937, pp. 369–370.

[11] Morgan read a paper, "Indian Mode of Bestowing and Changing Names," before the American Association for the Advancement of Science at its meeting in Springfield, Mass., in August, 1859 (see Morgan, 1859b).

warfare, sign language, a Yankton war dance, and the Indian manner of drinking whiskey. He noted the sororate among the Kaws, Blackfoot, Crow, and other tribes.[12] Mortuary customs received considerable attention; once in Nebraska he carefully opened and minutely examined two Omaha burials. He describes "Payment Day" among the Delawares, "the annual gala day of the nation," at which time the officials of the United States government distributed $78,000 in gold and silver to less than 1,000 Indians. The schedule of the *Spread Eagle* made it possible for him to make a rather thorough examination of a village on the Missouri, abandoned by the Arikaras and occupied before them by the Mandans, and to collect a considerable number of artifacts and other specimens. He subsequently published a full account of this site.[13]

The journals which Morgan kept on these trips contain much data also on semi- and non-ethnological subjects. He made a study of the relationship between the Indian tribes sequestered on reservations and the United States government. He regarded the government's attempt to pacify, domesticate, and acculturate the Indians as a failure. "The evidence increases," he wrote, "that . . . [the agency system] does but little good, that it is not only a failure but disgraceful for the immorality and dishonesty with which the business is managed." In addition to the blindness or stupidity of government policy and the incompetence and corruption of agents, Morgan notes the influence of the trader, bootlegger, sharper, and colonist upon the Indian. Even the Christian missionaries could not always resist the temptation to enrich themselves at the expense of the Red man they had come to convert.

Morgan came to the conclusion that the best service the white man could render the Indian would be to teach him the English language. This would serve not only as a gateway to the culture of the white man but would help the Indian to cope with him on more equal terms.[14]

Morgan noted and deplored the degradation to which many Indian women were brought at the hands of unscrupulous white men. He once described an adolescent Indian girl at a Missouri river port whose face bore the lesions of syphilis. But he also observed that a considerable number of the sober, industrious and respectable colonists married Indian women. Morgan thought this mixture to be a good thing—for the whites as well as for the Indians. "Our race," he wrote in his journal, "I think will be toughened physically by the intermixture and without any doubt will be benefited intellectually."

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[12] Concerning sororal polygyny, Morgan observed in his field journal: "If polygamy must prevail at all, why is not this the most respectable form in which it can exist? There would be less strife and jealousy, and the children would be near blood relatives."

[13] Morgan, 1871b.

[14] As in earlier years Morgan had come to the aid of the Iroquois in their struggle against the machinations and aggressions of the Ogden Land Company (see Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 49–60), so in later days—during the popularity of the slogan "The only good Indian is a dead Indian"—he championed the cause of western tribes (see Morgan, 1876a, 1876b and 1878).

And, in addition to his ethnological observations—which by the way included a rather detailed account of a Chinese burial ceremony in California, obtained from a white informant who had lived there—Morgan's journals contain copious notes on the topography, climate, flora and fauna[15] of regions which were not too well known in those days.

The material on kinship systems obtained on these four expeditions into the Indian country was of course incorporated in his monumental *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family.*[16] Other data, such as those on clan organization, tribal government, etc., were used in *Ancient Society,*[17] *Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigines,*[18] and in various articles in journals, as we have already footnoted.

In 1878, toward the close of his life, Morgan undertook another, and this time his last, field trip. Accompanied by two nephews and two fellow students of the latter, he set out for the southwest. By this time the railroad had reached Canyon City, Colorado. From there the party travelled by wagon. Their journey took them to southwestern Colorado, to McElmo Canyon and the Mancos river. It seems probable, judging from his journal, that Morgan entered the region of Mesa Verde but did not discover the spectacular archeological sites there. He spent considerable time examining, measuring and analyzing a "great stone pueblo" on the Animas river.[19] This was the now famous Aztec ruin, subsequently excavated by Earl H. Morris.[20]

The party then journeyed eastward through southern Colorado until they reached the Rio Grande which they followed into New Mexico. After a brief visit to Taos pueblo they returned to the east.

As a field worker Morgan was meticulous and precise. He was a keen observer and he recorded his observations as a rule in minute detail. He obtained specimens for analysis and identification and for museum collections; he made

[15] On the journey up the Missouri to Ft. Benton in 1862, Morgan made observations and obtained information from trappers on the beaver, an animal he studied exhaustively in northern Michigan for many years, eventually publishing his results in *The American Beaver and His Works* (Philadelphia, 1868).

[16] The Preface to this work was signed by Morgan in January, 1866; it was accepted for publication by the Smithsonian Institution exactly two years later, but it did not appear until 1870–71. It was published as Volume XVII of the Smithsonian Institution's *Contributions to Knowledge.*

[17] Published by Henry Holt and Co., New York, in 1877. Since the expiration of the copyright, it has had many reprintings by C. H. Kerr and Co. of Chicago, and is still being published by them. *Ancient Society* has been translated into many languages including German, Russian (Czarist and Soviet editions), Bulgarian, Chinese, and Japanese, and is still being translated; a Spanish translation has appeared within the last few years.

[18] Morgan, 1881. [19] Morgan, 1880.

[20] See Morris, 1919. Of Morgan's examination of the site Morris has written: ". . . Morgan visited the site, made a fairly thorough examination of the Aztec Ruin, and subsequently published a good description, and a reasonably accurate ground plan of the great pueblo" (*op. cit.*, p. 9).

accurate measurements and sketches. Above all, he carefully distinguished between what he was told and what he himself actually saw, or otherwise ascertained to be a fact. Readers of his European journal[21] will see these ethnographic virtues exhibited on every hand. We close with the following appraisal of Morgan as a field worker by Robert H. Lowie:[22]

"As an ethnographer, Morgan takes high rank . . . [his] honesty as a field worker is no less conspicuous than his acuity . . . . One naturally thinks first of his *League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee or Iroquois*, but the results of his very brief visits to more remote tribes are likewise most creditable. He discovered the matrilineal exogamous clan organization of the Crow, an observation once doubted but wholly confirmed by later research; and he registered sororal polygyny as a Crow usage. Exactly as I did some decades later, he noted that men and women chopped off a finger joint in mourning or as a religious sacrifice. What is more, his description of the Crow kinship system is vastly superior to my original attempt . . . for he recognized that cross-cousins were put into different generations from the speaker's. As I subsequently wrote: 'My error seems the less pardonable because the essential facts had already been grasped by Morgan.'"

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[21] White, ed., 1937. [22] Lowie, 1936, pp. 169–170.

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