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### The Attraction of Observatory Hill

My interest in Observatory Hill was sparked a year <sup>ago</sup> back while on an autumn stroll through campus. It was a beautiful afternoon so I grabbed a friend and headed off to explore a part of campus unknown to me: the lakeshore area. We made a full circle from Chadbourne down lakeshore path and then back on Observatory Drive. Little did we know what beauty awaited us at the top of the drive. As we came to the climax of the hill, my friend and I were overcome by the incredible view. It was all we could do to keep our jaws from hitting the ground. I felt as if we could see the whole world from this vista. In reality, we viewed the bright colors of autumn trees contrasted by the glassy waters of Lake Mendota. It was a view never to be forgotten.

We continued our exploration by climbing up the hill a bit to Washburn Observatory. We were hoping the view would be even grander a few feet up. On this short walk we came upon a huge boulder with a plaque upon it. It was this boulder that sparked my undying curiosity in Observatory Hill.

That's a strong stat! How about "over-whelming"?

This enormous boulder is dedicated to Thomas Chrowder Chamberlin, former State Geologist and former President of the University. The plaque boasts Chamberlin's accomplishments and states: "This boulder, brought by the continental glacier from ancient pre-cambrian bedrock in Canada, was deposited here in the Wisconsin or latest glacial drift, of which this hill is a part". This inscription allowed me to regard the landscape in a whole new light. I turned toward the water once again and tried to imagine what the land and water looked like at the time of the last glacial retreat, before man tampered with its beauty.

✓ When this last ice sheet retreated it left a legacy of rolling hills and crystal-clear lakes. The soil was rich and the water perfectly clean. Small species of colonizing plants would soon flourish in this fertile land and in time, would give rise to larger, more stable species such as shrubs and trees. Animals joined this fledgling ecosystem and the combined forces of flora and fauna took over the day of the glacier. The plants and animals worked hard to carve their niche into the landscape of Observatory Hill as they colonized its soil.

The view we see from the hill's peak today is not nearly what we would have seen those thousands of years back. The forces of plant and animal life have since given way to those of man. These human forces have affected the landscape in a much more profound manner than anything before their time.

The first group of men to affect the landscape were the Native Americans. The tribes of the Madison area were the Menominee, Potawatomi, Winnebago, and Chippewa. These tribes roamed the land of Observatory Hill and made the first detectable human impacts on the land. Although these impacts were on a much smaller scale than that of the white settler, the native american way of life played a crucial role in shaping the land of Observatory Hill and the shores of Lake Mendota.

Different aspects of Indian life affected the land to varying extents; the most notable being their agricultural practices. Indians planted their crops similarly to the settlers, first clearing the land and then replacing the native plant species with their own crop species. The natives chose to clear their land by way of fire, a very destructive course of action. Whole tracts of land were set aflame in order to make way for the planting of maize, beans, and other indian staples. The hill's steep gradient may have saved it from these agricultural practices due to its tendency to erode, but the area seen from the hill was undoubtedly greatly affected by this Indian practice. If we were to look upon the area during indian times we may have seen large patches of barrenness, places where the Indians burned away the existing plant species and planted their own. Perhaps patches of recouperating land may also have been viewed. Tribes often grew crops until the land lost its fertility. At this point the tribe would move on to another area to start fresh, leaving the drained land to bounce back on its own.

Although Observatory Hill itself may not have experienced such agricultural activity, we do have proof that the Indians found the hill as inspiring as I did. Upon the hill remains a bird effigy. This large native american monument suggests that Indians used the hill as a place of worship and spirituality. The land likely experienced tribe meetings, rituals, and more obviously, effigy construction.

Native Americans did not worship on the hill freely for long. Soon settlers found the land of Observatory Hill as appealing as they did. The whites wanted to possess the land and were not going to stop until they

obtained their goal. The whites took it upon themselves to push out those tribes that had inhabited the land for many years past. In time, the whites succeeded in completely forcing the natives out of the area and the settlers claimed the land as part of the state of Wisconsin.

Due to its insuitablity for agricultural use, the land of the hill was for the most part left untouched for a while. At most, the land may have been used for grazing grounds for the livestock and horses of settlers. If this was indeed the case, the land experienced quite a few changes. The heavy footsteps of these animals would churn up the soil and this churning would provide great opportunity for foreign plant species to colonize the soil. These possible foreign species would have been brought over from Europe on the bodies of the grazing animals or in the objects brought over by the settlers. These colonizing species would have started to coexist or take over the existing habitat of Observatory Hill.

The hill was most likely affected by the footsteps of men and women who, like me, found the view from this spot as breathtaking as I do. The seeds from the apples they perhaps enjoyed on a summer picnic may have found their way into the soil along with those of their watermelon and cherries. Haphazard occasions like these may have affected the hill's flora landscape in a much more subtle manner.

In 1848 Wisconsin became a state and plans for a university were underway. Although the land of Observatory Hill was not originally a part of these plans, its short distance from the proposed College Hill put it in danger of becoming annexed in the future. Its location also put it within walking distance from campus; increased traffic on its land was a definite.

As the years rolled on more and more students enrolled in the university and indeed their footsteps trod upon the hill's soil. The footsteps of men such as John Muir and Frederick Jackson Turner were undoubtedly among those of the hill's visitors. Many students must have found the beauty of the view a reprieve from their studies. I imagine picnics, sporting games, and romantic strolls as regular events of the hill. This increased traffic affected the area by decreasing plant and animal life in the area and caused increasing barrenness of certain patches of land.

Observatory Hill did not experience the pressure of construction until early in the twentieth century. The hill remained a picturesque overlook until Washburn Observatory was built. Astrology students and admirers

came to the hill more frequently than ever before. Trees and grass were undoubtedly planted in conjunction with the observatory in order to make the hill "prettier". These domestic species would replace whatever native ✓ species remained along with the european newcomers. The hill's qualities were now much different than earlier. The hill had been tamed. A second nature had taken over, a nature created by <sup>humans</sup> ~~man~~.

As the agricultural school and lakeshore dorms came into being the land became even more tamed by <sup>humans</sup> ~~man~~. Sidewalks and streets followed. Soon the passing of automobiles would become a common occurrence. More people would enjoy the view from the hill but less and less of the hill was ✓ being preserved.

Observatory Hill will forever remain a special place in my heart but I will never stop wondering what the land looked like before the university, before the settlers, even before the time of the Indians. I can look at pictures, but the exact scene will forever remain a mystery. The land is ever-changing. What we see today is different than what will see a month from now. Let the monuments of Observatory Hill forever give insight into its past for that is all we have left beyond our own powers of imagination and speculation. However, we must not forget this history of the land. Its applications for today are numerous. What happened in the past is often a good indication of what tomorrow will hold.