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George F. Beck
Central Washington University

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ARROWHEAD MAKING IN THE GINKGO PETRIFIED FOREST

GEORGE F. BECK



HE mountaineer is lured outdoors, primarily I suppose, by the challenge of lofty snow-capped peaks that defy human ingenuity and endurance to scale. But at the same time there must be existent a strong love of the outdoors for its own sake and a bent to get away from the conveniences and encumbrances of modern life and to live the routine of primitive man. We must all of us heartily agree in the movement to set aside the Olympics, or at least a sizable part of them, as a wilderness area wherein one might utterly escape from civilization. For my own part, since boyhood, I have always felt the keenest regret and loss at not having been born into the life of an Indian. Most of us have been conscious at some time or other of such a regret and it is the Indian in us I suppose that prompts us to take up outdoor trails.

I am sure it was this element in my own make-up which led to the discovery of the Ginkgo Petrified Forest a few years ago. It was not the interest in fossil woods as such, so much as the love of the outdoors that led me to begin the collection of the log fragments that are strewn all over Central Washington. In fact it was interest in the Indian and early history of the great sage plateau that first drew me out into it, and I have found it difficult at times to prevent the search into old campsites, burial grounds and Indian trails from becoming my commanding interest. Many times in our extensive field trips out into the sage and bluffs we have beheld a landscape, as far as eye could reach, essentially as handed down to us from prehistoric times. Only the Indian himself was lacking and but a small flight of the imagination made Indians of ourselves. It was with real regret that the work of collecting and mapping became finally so exacting as to shut out all thought of the present or the immediate past. One cannot think in terms of the present few centuries and tens of millions of elapsed time, in the same span. If we were to recreate the setting of those ancient forests, we become obligated to close our eyes to the blue skies (or biting winds) of today. Eventually we come to see luxuriant towering trees in place of dwarf scrubby sagebrush. And strangely enough many of the finest logs peer out from beneath a large sagebrush where they have escaped the eyes of our Indian predecessors. As if seeking the protecting covering of the sage, fossil trees invited the brush to root well and deep in the several inch mantle of disintegrated rock which usually envelops the log.

In a sense we must give the Indians credit for being the original discoverers of these fossil forests of Central Washington. Not that I have been able to run down any legends or traditions regarding fossil logs or any certainty that the Indians recognized them as trees in stone. My opinion is that they could not have failed to recognize them as trees. Be that as it may, they long ago took recognition of the fact that certain logs were to be prized as the source of flint for their arrow-heads.

In our earliest mapping we came upon excavations that convincingly were the sites once occupied by logs. Wood fragments were strewn

around the spot. For a long time we passed it off as a loss to be charged to the avarice of the white man—that the logs had gone into material for a rock garden or fireplace. At the end of a year we had encountered several dozen such “empty graves,” as we called them, and at last we penetrated into an area where cars, trucks and even wagons could not have reached. In our search for some other explanation we hit upon the idea of arrow point making. However, at that time I could recall having seen but one arrowhead which had been fashioned apparently from petrified wood.

The test was to search on these sites for chipping fragments and broken or lost points. A few minutes of work satisfied us. Since, we have found a spot in which a large area was extensively worked and a relatively huge mound thrown up by the excavation. Most of the flinty material mined at this site did not derive from fossil trees, however, but seems to be an encrustation upon the bottom of an ancient lake which held the scattering logs. Therefore, the flint shows in the main no wood grain.

Much if not most of the logs encountered by ourselves, and the Indians before us, show a decided tendency to split like wood and were of no use in the arrow making industry. A minority of the logs, however, break with the shell-like fracture essential to the art. Other sources of arrow point material are made up of what we have called stump-root complexes—great blocks of stone as large as a room that once represented stump crowns, roots, root hairs and soil—all altered to solid stone. These make an arrow point speckled in appearance and devoid of grain. In the Whiskey Dick country we found exposed graves in the sand, each with its score or more of beautiful wood chips derived from the fossil forests high on the bluffs above. Undoubtedly, excellently grained fragments were prized as trinkets. An occasional beautifully grained arrowhead put in its appearance.

May I close with a legend that relates to the beautiful white stump that once stood in the Yakima Canyon near the tunnel of the Ellensburg-Yakima Highway. Until blown up several years ago—it, a beautiful redwood, presenting a diameter of five and a height of eight feet, had long been a landmark. It stood out as a white shrouded ghost against the sombre black of the basalt cliffs opposite the river. Mr. Reuben Crimp handed down to me this legend:

An Indian maiden could not choose between her two lovers and at length they agreed to a wrestling match to the death upon the bluffs that tower a thousand feet above the river at this point. At first the advantage went to one and then the other of the suitors. Summoning to his cause a superhuman outburst of energy the one threw his adversary over his shoulder and clear of the rim of the bluff. But in so doing he too lost his balance and both were crushed on the rocks below.

Every year at the anniversary of the tragic match, the Indian maiden retired to the spot and would not be moved by considerations of food or drink or solitude to rejoin her people. At length the Great Spirit said it were better that she be allowed to remain upon the site and turned her to stone at the exact place where the bodies came to rest. Immobile there as a white shrouded figure she was known among the Indians as “The Squaw.”