

## Veteran Nature Lover of Lake Koshkonong Revives Lost Art of Arrow Making

The following article by Joe Alexander, Madison writer, appeared in the September issue of Farm and Fireside, under the heading "The Arrow Maker of Lake Koshkonong." It is reprinted here through courtesy of Farm and Fireside.—Editor's note.

BY JOE ALEXANDER

I HAVE always wondered how the Indians made the arrowheads that we pick up in the plowed fields now and then. I had been told that it was a lost art; that no one, any more, knew how they were made.

Now I know. I have seen them made, and have seen stone axes made too. For I have met Halvor L. Skavlem, "The Arrow-Maker, of Lake Koshkonong." Grey of beard and keen of eye, 77 years young, he says, this "John Burroughs of Wisconsin" lives at his farm home in south central Wisconsin, by the shore of this historic lake.

Skavlem, a kindly old lover of birds and flowers and of Indian lore, told me how he learned the secret of the Indians—a secret that they have forgotten they ever knew.

"Right around here," said Mr. Skavlem, with a wide sweep of his hand, "once stood a Winnebago village, Carcajou, of between 5,000 and 7,000 people.

"I first came here as a boy to hunt and fish. I picked up Indian arrowheads, stone axes, celts, and bits of bone.

### Found Stone Hammers

"For many years I came up here whenever I could find a good excuse to 'play hookey from work. Finally I built my home here. My experiments really started then. I had been finding some odd-shaped stones hereabouts — triangular, with rounded

corners, a couple of inches thick and four or five inches across. When I found so many of similar shape and size I began to wonder. When I saw how nicely they fitted the hand, I saw they had been used for some purpose, for they were worn concave where my thumb and fingers gripped. Then it came to me that they were stone hammers.

"One day I found an unfinished Indian ax. With one of these hammer stones I sat down to the job of finishing the ax that had been begun perhaps a century ago. I didn't learn all of the tricks of the trade, then, but in time I did.

"First you take a big piece of crystal-line stone, like half a brick, but larger. With the hammer stone you strike sharp, short, glancing the edge to give it the shape of a thick, blunt ax."

And this he did, while I dodged the flying fragments of stone that whizzed past my ears and nose. Then, holding up the roughed-out stone, he remarked:

### Taps Lightly

"You can see that this has an ax shape, but it still needs smoothing off, and it must be grooved to take the cleft-stick ax handle. Everybody thinks that would be an endless job, but it isn't. Why, I have heard that it would take days of work to make the groove; that the Indians must have had lots of time to kill! Now you take out your watch and time me."

Holding loosely in his hand an angular piece of whitish, flinty stone about the size of a duck's egg, he commenced rat-a-tat-tatting sharp, short blows that sounded, as he remarked, like the drum of a woodpecker on a hollow tree. I noticed that he did not strike hard; rather, he swung the small hammer stone entirely from his wrist, letting it rebound between strokes. Rapidly a fine white

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powder collected in a wide band around and close to the thick end of the ax-to-be. This he blew off from time to time.

"This piece of flint crushes the crystals of the stone in the axhead. The flint wears away too, but not nearly so fast. You can see how fast a groove takes shape, and how deep this one is getting—"

"Time!" I called, for the three minutes he had allowed were up. Examining the axhead, I found that a groove about an inch wide and half as deep extended nearly halfway around it. Five minutes more would have completed the work.

**Relic of Stone Age**

"And to make the finished, smooth head," he told me, "would only mean more steady pecking away until its rough edges and depressions disappear."

Nothing but a couple of lumps of stone as tools, and in a very short time he made a relic of the Stone Age to order.

"And now for the arrowheads," Skavlem said, laying aside the stone ax. "Flint or rather chert, arrows are an entirely different matter. They are made of non-crystalline, unstratified stone. You can see from any of these heads," handing me a couple of genuine ones, "that they were not made by pecking off tiny fragments as we did with the ax, but that larger flakes have been broken off to leave a thin edge and a thicker center."

"Do you remember reading in your history books about Captain John Smith and Chief Powhatan, father of the Indian princess Pocahontas? Well, I came across a statement like this in an old book:

"John Smith tried to purchase from Chief Powhatan his medicine bag, containing charms and odds and ends of bone, etc. The chief refused to sell, saying that these old bones were big medicine in his arrowhead-making."

"There was an idea. Old bones; big medicine for making arrows! I had often found pieces of bone in mounds hereabouts; often had turned them up in the fields; but they meant nothing much to me until I read this.

**Fashioned Bone Chisels**

"I dug up the cannon bone of a mule that had died some 15 years before, cracked that into long splinters, and made chisels. As last I hit on what is called by the scientists the conchoidal fracture of stone—these flakes taken out of the edges, you see. Once I mastered that, the rest was practice.

"Now let's make an arrowhead. We could choose any one of several kinds

of stone, also obsidian (volcanic glass) or even plain glass. This arrowhead," showing me a very pretty brown one with saw-teeth along its edge, "was made out of the bottom of a beer bottle. No other use for beer bottles nowadays."

Drawing up to his side a box filled with several fragments of bone, he went to work. This is the way he did it, to the accompanying "crunch-scrunch" of his bone chisel on the hard flake of stone:

On the porch he placed a block of hard wood in which has been channeled grooves and depressions of varying widths and depths. Upon the block he placed an irregular, flattened flake of flint, about three-eighths of an inch in thickness and somewhat larger than a silver dollar. With the fingers and thumb of his left hand he held it so that its edge projected slightly over one of the shallow grooves.

"I begin with this big bone chisel, which has no cutting edge," he explained. The chisel was perhaps eight inches long and half an inch thick at its roughly rounded point.

"Now I press this point down against the lower edge of the flake, at the same time exerting a slanting, downward, and rotary pressure. You see that the bone is not used like a real chisel at all; rather, it serves as a sort of rasp." With the roughened cross-section of the end of bone deftly held and operated by the strong and practiced right hand, the left hand rotating the bit of stone upon the wooden block, fragments crunched and fell rapidly from its outer, lower edge. Quickly he converted the stone flake into a somewhat triangular arrowhead. Holding it up he said:

"In the fields you find lots of heads like this one, finished except for the notches and barbs. Now let's finish it."

This time he used a smaller chisel with a thinner and narrower point. Deftly he clipped out the two notches and left the head ready to be lashed to a wooden shaft. As an extra fancy touch, however, he sharpened the edge by removing small chips and producing an almost knife-like cutting edge. Then, with a muskrat's tooth set in a wooden handle, he chipped a series of saw-teeth notches along the entire edge from tip to notch.

**Would Pass for Genuine**

The head was finished. Perfect in proportion and shape, it would have passed readily for a genuine Indian arrowhead.

"The Indian didn't have a well-developed mechanical eye or sense."

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said Skavlem. "He made an arrow-head that would serve his purpose of hunting or defense. Often one side was not true; sometimes the head had a spiral twist, but that was not intentional, nor was it so made to rotate the arrow. The feathered shaft was planned to prevent rotation."

I asked if certain Indians did the arrow-making for the tribe, as we have blacksmiths and carpenters.

"No, the Indians didn't do much specializing. Every little Indian child had as its playthings the tools of war and the chase. No scooters nor marbles in those days. Papoose had his little bow. Naturally, he imitated the grownups by trying his hand at making arrows. Gradually each child learned the art."

"Do the Indians now living know how to make arrows?" I asked.

"I have been waiting for that question," he replied. "Indians always say, 'We shoot with guns!' They believe that they always used guns. Once I made some arrows for a bunch of Indians gathered for a big powwow on the upper Chippewa river. I asked one old squaw, 'Gran'-ma, where do these heads come from?' She answered, 'Thunder stones; come down in rain.'"

From

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## *Halvor Skavlem Will Be Awarded Lapham Medal for Indian Research Work*

Janesville's well known archaeologist and naturalist, Halvor L. Skavlem, 605 Prospect avenue, has been designated by the Wisconsin Archaeological society as one of 10 men to receive the Increase Lapham medal in recognition of many years of research work which has given to the state exhaustive information concerning the Indians and other contributions to archaeology.

The presentation of medals, the first to be awarded by the state society, will be made at the silver anniversary meeting in Milwaukee, Monday night, according to an Associated Press dispatch.

Mr. Skavlem, who makes his home at Lake Koshkonong during the summer, is credited with being the first white man to fashion arrowheads and implements with the crude weapons used by the Indians themselves. He is considered an authority on botany, ornithology and geology.

Dr. George L. Collie, Beloit, is another man designated to receive the medal. He is director of the Logan museum of Beloit college and occupies the Logan chair of anthropology of the college. He has played a prominent part in the state society since its organization.

Others who will receive medals are as follows: George A. West, Milwaukee; Charles F. Brown, Madison; Dr.