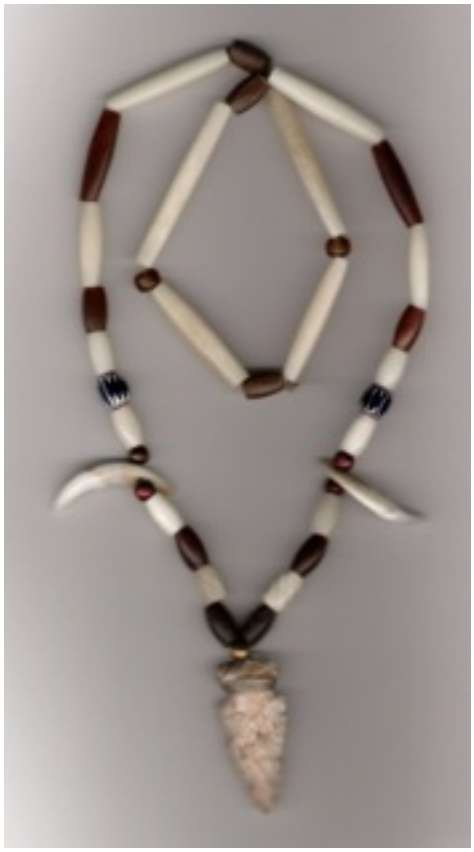
THE STORY OF A FLINT ARROWHEAD -
Historic Artifacts are Doorways Into The Stories Of The Past



THE STORY OF A FLINT ARROWHEAD

(First story: What is it? And how I found it.)

Several years ago I was working in my garden, weeding my asparagus patch, when I struck something hard with the hoe. I cleared away the dirt and a glimmer of sunlight reflected from a pearly white stone. I reached down and picked up the rock to toss it away. But when I picked it up I saw that it was a worked stone. I brushed away the dirt and saw the careful fluting of a craftsman. It was aerodynamic, a perfect razor sharp point. Shimmering in the sun it seemed illuminated from within. I could tell from the size, shape and design it was not a spear point, but an arrowhead, probably a Plains Indian point made in the historic period 3-500 years ago. It is about an inch and a half long with a beautifully worked point and fluted ends. There is even a shallow depression on each side where the shaft of the arrow would attach.

As I turned the stone in my hand my mind reeled on the possibilities. My imagination traveled back through the centuries, back through millions of years… as the garden disappeared in the mists of time…

THE ANCIENT SEA

(The second story: What is it made from or what is the raw material? The raw material is fossilized sea sponge, known as chert or flint.)

Three hundred fifty million years ago most of the Midwest was a shallow sea. During the Devonian and Ordovician periods, a hundred million years before dinosaurs, an ocean covered the land that is now Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska.

Imagine a warm tropical coral reef. There were sea lilies, snails, clams, and an amazing variety of coral. Lime green brain corals and bright purple fan corals provided hiding places for the trilobites that feasted on unsuspecting prey.

On the sandy bottom of this shallow sea there was a huge colony of sea sponges. They thrived here for thousands of years. But every year some of these sponges would die and decompose. Their skeleton, what we use to scrub with, would collapse and pile up on the bottom of the ocean. All of this coral and millions of sea shells, piled up over the millennia and slowly hardened into lime stone. But the sponges themselves formed a harder material, chert, flint.

Over the course of a hundred million years the land slowly rose above the sea to form the plains of North America. An Ice Age came and went, with mountains of ice adding pressure to the ground below, further compacting the bedrock. When the ice melted back, about 12,000 years ago, the melt water eroded the land carving deep ravines that exposed the ancient sea bed below.

THE ARROW SMITH

(The third Story: Who made it? Step by step, how was it made?)

A thousand years ago, an arrowsmith, a man who makes arrows, was traveling down the river, a river carved by the melting glaciers 12,000 years before he came paddling his canoe. He had traveled more than 100 miles to this bluff above the river for one reason only, for generations his people had gathered their flint for arrowheads from this cliff. It was a deep rich vein of chert, some of the best flint in the region. This flint was highly prized for its pure white color, with a hint of pink. It was also prized for its hardness. The way it flaked made it easy to shape into tools. The arrowheads, spear points, awls, and knife blades he made from this flint he could trade with other tribes. Some of these tools might travel thousands of miles on the rivers of America, traded from one village to another.

When he had filled his canoe with all of the flint he felt he could safely carry, he began to paddle home, but before he left, he said a silent prayer of thanksgiving and he left a small bundle of blue corn meal as an offering to the river and to the land.

When he arrived home it was three days later, paddling upstream with a full load took longer than going down stream. First he greeted his family and then he unloaded the precious cargo. His children helped to carry the rough stones up to their lodge. For the next several days he heated the stones in the fire to harden them. He sat in the sun, carefully chipping away at the small flakes to shape them into the tools he needed for survival. He made awls, small points for his wife to poke holes in the buffalo hides so she could sew hides together to make moccasins and clothing. He made a knife blade and attached it to a piece of deer antler for his son to butcher the meat for dinner. He made dozens of arrowheads for himself, his family and to trade with his neighbors for other things that they made, like clay pots and porcupine quill jewelry.

He also gathered the straight sticks and the turkey feathers to fashion the arrows. He would slice a small crack into one end of the straightest stick and slide this crack over the bottom of the arrow head. He would wrap this with sinew from a buffalo to hold it together. He cut grooves in the back of the arrow and attached a piece of turkey feather, also tied with sinew, so the arrow would fly straight and true.

These arrows filled his quiver so he could hunt the food that fed his family.

THE HUNTER'S TALE

(The fourth story: Why was it made? How did they use it?)

Early one morning, before the sun rose, a hunter rose from his bed. He quietly slipped on his moccasins, leggings, and his buckskin shirt. He moved silently, so he did not wake his family. He took his bow off of a hook and picked up his quiver full of arrows. The hunter ducked out of the lodge, stood and stretched, then greeted the first rays of morning light. Next, he pulled each arrow out of the quiver. One by one he carefully checked to see that they were straight, the arrowhead was firmly attached and the fletching was true.

He flung the quiver over his shoulder and set off down the trail at a trot. After the sun was two fingers above the horizon and he had travel far from the village, he slowed, moving more quietly towards the river's edge. He entered a copse of willow. He followed a game trail until he saw the fresh tracks and scat of a deer. He bent to feel the mud. He poked a stick into the steaming scat. The deer was near.

The hunter pulled an arrow from his quiver and notched it into his bow. Instead of following the deer tracks he angled off towards the east so he would be downwind and the deer would be approaching him. On the bank of the river, he hid behind a fallen cottonwood tree. He waited. The deer often crossed the river here to spend the day sleeping in the cottonwood forest on the other shore.

The hunter heard a twig snap. He pulled back on the bow string. He slowly moved the bow and arrow so they were pointing in the direction of the sound. His heart thumped in his chest. He offered a silent prayer to the spirit of the deer, asking if it would offer its life so the people could live. A huge buck came down the trail, cautiously, as if it sensed he was there. The hunter had anticipated the movement of the deer so well he was already aiming in its direction when it stepped into the clearing. Before he shot, he looked the deer in the eye and asked forgiveness with another silent prayer. The deer stepped forward and turned, as if to give him a better shot. When it felt right, the hunter let the arrow sail. It pierced the shoulder of the deer, through the lungs and into the heart. The deer jumped once, snorted, staggered, and fell.

The hunter sprang and raced towards the deer almost as swiftly as his arrow. He pushed the arrow on through so it did not break. Then he took some blue corn and sprinkled it on the mouth of the deer. Though the deer was gone, he offered a gift to the spirit of the deer so it would return again next year. He sprinkled corn meal on the hooves of the deer to speed its journey to the other world and back again. He sprinkled corn meal on the mouth of the deer to nourish it before its journey and so it would speak kindly of him in the other world. He then took out a stone knife and removed the heart of the deer. While it was still dripping, he ate a bite of it, so the heart of the deer would nourish him, their hearts would beat together, and he could feel compassion for the deer.

When this ceremony was complete he field dressed the game, leaving some of the guts for the buzzards and coyotes. Nothing goes to waste. The hunter put the deer over his shoulder and returned to his village. As he butchered the deer, he offered one flank to his neighbor, another to his mother-in-law, and a third to his elderly father. Most of the deer he gave away. Of course his neighbor would invite him over for dinner and he would later eat with his father, but he wanted to be sure they were fed first. The deer was a gift to him, it was his duty to give it away.

This arrow was used for several more successful hunts.

Until one day his son, while hunting in the same cottonwood forest, missed the deer and the arrow broke off inside the trunk of a tree.

THE FARMER WHO FOUND IT

(Where was it found and How did it get here?)

Many years later, but not so long ago, not so far away, I was working in my garden, weeding my asparagus patch. I struck something hard with the hoe. I cleared away the dirt and a glimmer of sunlight reflected from a pearly white stone. I reached down and picked up the rock to toss it away. But when I picked it up I saw that it was a worked stone. I brushed away the dirt and saw the careful fluting of a craftsman. It was aerodynamic, a perfect razor sharp point. Shimmering in the sun it seemed illuminated from within. I could tell from the size, shape and design it was not a spear point, but an arrowhead, probably a Plains Indian point made in the historic period 3-500 years ago. It is about an inch and a half long with a beautifully worked point and fluted ends. There is even a shallow depression on each side where the shaft of the arrow would attach.

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THE ARCHEOLOGIST WHO STUDIED IT

(Another possible story: Who studied it? Who did the research and created the museum exhibit? What was their process for researching? How did they build the exhibit?)

THE ARROWHEAD (*A second example, a simpler story that answers several questions at once***.)**

My uncle Mickey is a flint knapper. He takes pieces of rock and flakes off little chips to make arrowheads and spear points, knives, and other stone tools.

Last fall he gave me an arrowhead made from a beautiful piece of Brazilian Agate. I carefully tied a piece of sinew to the notch where you are supposed to tie the stick. Then I strung some beads of buffalo horn and bone. I put on one white bone bead and then one black horn bead. In the middle I put a hematite bead. I wear it as a necklace.

People are always asking me about it. They say things like: “That is a beautiful arrowhead, what is it made out of?” Or they will say: “That is such a beautiful stone, what type of rock is that?” I always answer, it is Brazilian Agate, but I really did not know what that meant, so I went to the library to find out.

I already knew that if you learn the language of stones, geology, they will tell you their story. When I got to the library, the librarian helped me to find a book about rocks and minerals. I found a really cool picture of Brazilian Agate. It did not look exactly like mine, it was different colors and was not carved into an arrowhead.

My stone is smooth. It is shaped like a triangle with notches on the back. It is mostly purple with two yellow streaks. The tip is white. So are the notches. It is very hard, so hard I could not scratch it with my fingernail. I could not scratch it with a nail. But my rock will scratch a penny. Other than the colorful stripes it does not appear to have any layers, like a sedimentary stone. I am guessing that it is igneous, melted by fires deep in the earth.

I started to think about how my stone was made. I began to learn its language and it told me this story:

Two hundred million years ago, the continents of the earth, Africa and America, Asia and Antarctica all crashed into each other. When this happened, huge volcanoes erupted. The crust of the earth smashed together. The friction of stone rubbing on stone actually melted rocks. Mountains were pushed up. Old sedimentary stones were melted down. Metamorphosis took place, stone were transformed, changed. My stone was melted by fire, making it an igneous rock, an agate. Some of the molten magma cooled to form crystals. Some of it cooled too fast or too slow and became a firey agate. This rock lay buried under the surface of the earth for millions of years.

A few years ago a mining company began to dig up many of the rich minerals buried in the mountains of Brazil. They clear cut the rainforest, stripping the land so they could get at the minerals underneath. They drilled holes into the side of the mountain and put dynamite into those holes. They exploded the mountains layer by layer. A huge bulldozer began to scoop up the rubble and put it into a big dump truck. The dump truck loaded it into a train car which carried it down to the sea. A big boat sailed up the coast through the Gulf of Mexico and took the minerals to the United States. The agates were loaded into smaller trucks and sold to rock shops across the country.

My Uncle Mickey went to a Knap-in. This is big festival where lots of people who make arrowheads, flint-knappers, get together to share ideas, show off their craft and to buy rocks. One guy from Ohio sold my Uncle Mickey a beautiful piece of Brazilian Agate. My Uncle Mickey chipped off this piece. He worked the stone, carefully chip, chip, chipping until he made it into the shape that you see. And then he gave it to me. I put it on a string with beads made of bone and buffalo horn.

And now I have more than an arrowhead… I have a story to go with it!