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A Toast to the Fur Trade

A Picture Essay on Its Material Culture

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BLANKETS AND BEADS

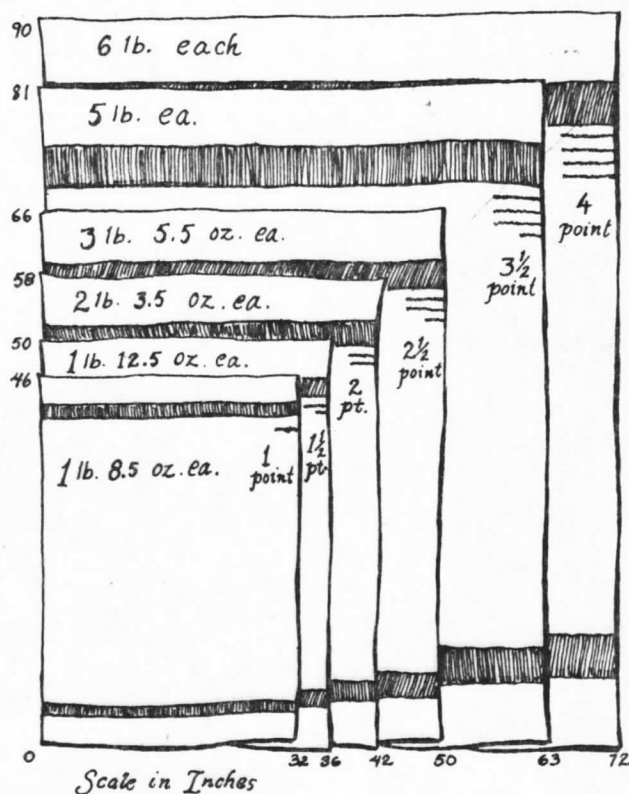
Before the arrival of the European, the northern Indian relied heavily on animal furs and hides for clothing. The women were expert in tanning skins and could make them thick or thin, hard or soft as they wished. However, when European goods became available, woolen blankets soon replaced the fur and leather clothing. The Indian quickly saw the advantage of the lighter woolen cloth, for, even when wet, it provided more protection from the elements. "But we now plainly, as well as the Indians, see in this climate, the great advantage of woollen over leather clothing, the latter when wet sticks to the skin, and is very uncomfortable, requires time to dry, with caution to keep it to its shape of clothing. On the contrary the woollen, even when wet, is not uncomfortable . . ." [David Thompson's *Narrative of his Explorations in Western America, 1784-1812*, pages 421-422.]

Blankets were valued not only by the natives but by the traders and their employees as well. The woolen blankets were used for making capotes, coats, pants, gloves, bed covers, and as covering for the natives who often preferred blankets to coats.

When the Hudson's Bay Company introduced the point system in 1779, the Standard of Trade was a 1-point blanket for 1 prime beaver skin, a 2-point blanket for 2 beavers, and so on. With later inflation the blankets cost more in beaver skins. At some time after 1868, the Hudson's Bay Company standardized its blanket sizes with each point indicating a different weight and precise dimensions. Note the blanket illustration.

Although the Hudson's Bay and North West companies bought their blankets from several localities in England, it is safe to say that a large percentage of them came from the blanket makers of Witney. "The first mention of 'pointed' blankets in Hudson's Bay Company records is in the Minute Book of a meeting of the Committee on 16 December 1779. At that time a letter was written to Messrs. Empson of Witney (Oxfordshire) requesting samples of pointed blankets for inspection by the Committee. It appears that these blankets were already an article of trade, possibly in New England, Virginia, and New France . . . five hundred pair of 'pointed' blankets were immediately purchased." [Letter, March 30, 1783, to the author from Hudson's Bay Company Library, Winnipeg.]

The white or "common" blankets were popular with the Indians as they provided the best white camouflage. "Perhaps the most interesting items of trade goods were the blankets sent to York Fort. It had been reported that the Indians had preferred white cloth to red and blue



Blanket illustration adapted from Douglas Mackay, "Blanket Coverage," *The Beaver*, June, 1935, page 45.

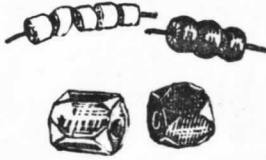
which had hitherto been shipped, so a trial shipment of three white blankets was now sent; they were cheaper, and when worn they were not so likely to frighten the game in the snow-covered landscape." [E. E. Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870*, Vol. I, page 254.]

BEADS

" . . . the bulk of the glass beads traded on the North American continent from the 16th until the first half of the 19th centuries were manufactured in the glass factories of Murano, Venice—since the 13th century the center of European glass production. . . the glass trade bead—produced in one locality, has become the eyes of historians and students of the American Indian, the denominator of the fur trade." [Arthur Woodward, *Denominators of the Fur Trade: An Anthology of Writings on the Material Culture of the Fur Trade*, page 15.]



Two types of beads recovered from the Basswood River in 1961, by divers of the Quetico-Superior Research team. [Minnesota Historical Society collection.]



Beads, ca. 1732-1740, found on the surface at Fort St. Charles by Douglas Birk, Minnesota Historical Society archaeologist.



A glass bead from the early historic period, ca. 1610-1670. [Courtesy, Kenneth Kidd, Peterborough, Ontario.]



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American Fur Company beads, ca. 1820-40. [Minnesota Historical Society collection.]

HARPOONS AND FILES

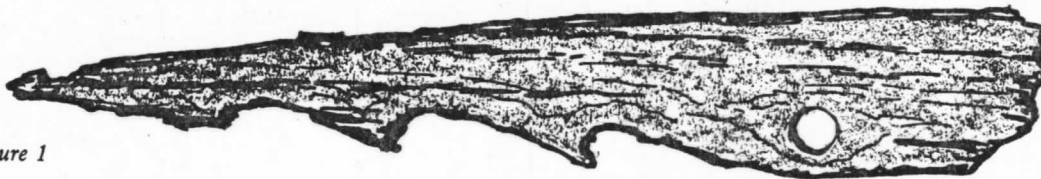


Figure 1

Of the two items of trade illustrated on this page, the file was by far the more important to the Indian. Iron axes, chisels, knives, and other edged tools had to be sharpened, and the file provided the only means. That the file was a significant item of trade is evidenced by its frequent appearance in quantity on the inventories of merchandise. In 1784, as in 1748, on the

Hudson's Bay Company Standard of Trade, a large flat file traded for one beaver skin.

Figure 1 This harpoon of iron was found at Fort St. Charles on Lake of the Woods. Note how much this resembles the prehistoric bone harpoon. Established in 1732 by the French explorer-fur trader, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de La Vérendrye, the post served as