

HISTORIC SAUK INDIAN ART AND TECHNOLOGY

By Marshall McKusick and Charles Slack

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JOURNAL OF THE IOWA ARCHEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

VOLUME TWELVE, NUMBER ONE

IOWA CITY

July 1962

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ABSTRACT

This non-technical report illustrates archeological specimens from the Crawford Farm site, an old Sauk village near Rock Island, Illinois, and dating about 1790-1810 A.D. The Indians bought guns, bottles, brass pots and ornaments as well as a variety of other items from trading posts. Native crafts include bone carving, stone chipping and grinding, as well as reworking lead, brass and iron. The fur trade did not immediately destroy native crafts. Instead it seems to have encouraged artistic expression in new mediums. Illustrations are based on specimens in the Davenport Public Museum from the Slack Collection. A complete study of the site based on recent excavations is in preparation by Elaine Bluhm, University of Illinois. (M.B.M.)

TRADING POSTS AND INDIAN WARS

The fur trade in North America is both a fascinating and complex subject. Some of its effects on Indian life will be explained briefly as a background for understanding the significance of the archeological specimens. Viewed broadly, during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries an advanced European technology penetrated into the Stone Age tribal societies over much of eastern North America. The economic motivation for trade was strong on both sides. Beaver pelts were in great economic demand on the European market where the fur was processed into "beaver hats." The individual traders, the companies, and the various European governments made substantial profits. The Indians fought among themselves for rich beaver territories in order to obtain guns, axes, whiskey, beads, cloth, blankets and other items which represented an entirely new economic orientation for them.

The role of the fur trade in changing the Indian's way of life had far-reaching effects. It changed the technology of the Indians by making a number of crafts such as pottery-making obsolete. Trade broke down the local self sufficiency of the individual tribes by making them dependent upon European goods. Finally the fur trade intensified tribal warfare as the major tribes shifted their geographical boundaries in order to occupy lands richer in fur. European introduced diseases also played a crucial role in the steady disintegration of one tribe after another. Thus, the breakup of many tribes reached an advanced stage long before the actual settlement of the midwest by American pioneers.

The excellent study by G. T. Hunt (1940, Wars of the Iroquois) illustrates how the fur trade caused the Iroquois wars which upset the balance of power among many of the eastern and midwestern tribes. By 1640 the Iroquois exhausted the beaver within their tribal lands in central New York. Without the fur trade, and the guns it provided, the Iroquois were in danger of being submerged by the more numerous tribes around them who would dominate the trade. This economic situation forced the Iroquois into

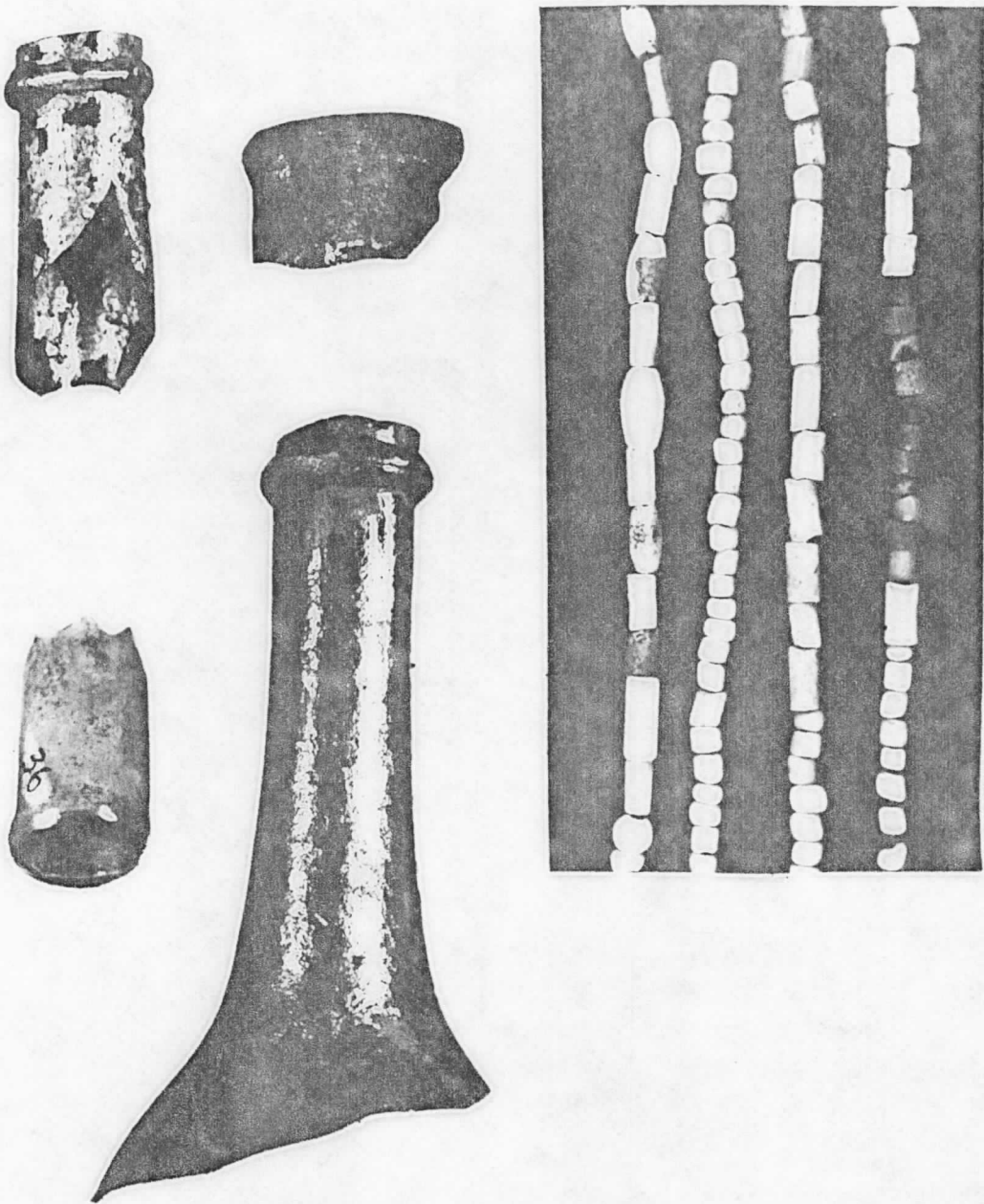


Plate 2. Trade Glass.

Bottles of whiskey were a trade item. The small glass vial fragment probably was the container for a patent medicine. The glass fragment shows deliberate flaking along the lower margin and seems to have been used as a scraper tool. Blue and white glass beads of many sizes and shapes were another important item of trade.