A REPORT ON THE 1970 NSF FLINTWORKING SCHOOL DIERKEES LAKE, IDAHO

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The 1970 Flintworking School, sponsored by the National Science Foundation and Idaho State University, has certainly been the most significant portion of my graduate training in archaeology. This is particularly true because my primary interests lie in the earlier periods of prehistory in which artifacts consist almost entirely of lithic materials. For my subsequent work in the analysis of lithic materials from highland Ecuador (and I am certain the same would be true for any such collection) this experience has been critically important. In fact I now consider this experience, or an equivalent one, an absolute necessity for those who would understand and interpret properly the lithic remains of aboriginal man.

Insights gained from such personal involvement allow the analyst to select from an infinite range of possible attributes, modes, or characteristics of the implements those which are technologically most significant. This process of selection of important or diagnostic attributes is absolutely essential in describing, organizing, and comparing lithic assemblages. Too often this selection is made on grossly inadequate bases or on completely subjective feelings. Sometimes it is made only after much wasted effort in measuring and tabulating what may turn out to be - or should turn out to be - insignificant characteristics. An understanding of lithic technology proves most helpful in eliminating from primary consideration a great many "apparent attributes" which should properly be subsumed in larger technological processes, which normally serve chiefly as confusion factors in lithic analyses, and which may lead to inadequate interpretive hypotheses. While technological understandings are not the only way to discover cultural regularities in aboriginal societies, they are certainly one of the best ways; and assuming some degree of parallelism in the mental processes of modern and aboriginal man, these understandings seem important in revealing the "intentions" of the makers of stone artifacts.

Ethnographers have long profited by a personal involvement with the objects of their study, feeling that the gain in understanding made possible by a certain degree of actual participation is worth some loss in complete objectivity. Prehistorians have felt that since their subjects are no longer alive, such participation is impossible. This flintworking school is, however, a definite first step in the involvement of prehistorians in the lives of their subjects, and as such makes a significant contribution to the study of early man. One - and only one - who has sweat and bled over the production of a projectile point has a new understanding, a new feeling, a new perspective. He is better able to sense the significant elements in its production

which are perhaps only subtly evident in its final form. He may also be able to treat as properly insignificant some aspect which appears obvious. As a suggestion for a further step in this process of involvement in prehistory I would suggest for a selected group of students an extensive period of study not only in the production of aboriginal tool kits by various techniques, but their use in a complete pattern of subsistence.

Strong Points Of The Flintworking School

1. A personal involvement in one aspect of prehistoric life -- technology.

2. The skill and attitude of the school's teacher, Mr. Don Crabtree. He was a real inspiration to all of us and a constant stimulation in both technological proficiency and interpretive genius. His wealth of understanding and skill are utterly amazing.

3. The presence and assistance of Mr. Guy Muto. He was most generous with his time and skill, and particularly instructive in helping us learn from our many mistakes.

4. The intensity of involvement with a few interested and stimulating people from a wide range of backgrounds.

5. A loosely structured program with sufficient flexibility for each participant to proceed at his own pace, to emphasize areas of his own interest, and to receive much individual help.

6. A most admirable physical setting, especially for those who feel that a log and two people is still the optimal learning situation rather than a formal classroom.

7. The "accidental" presence of Dr. Francois Bordes for a few days, who generously contributed a slightly different set of skills and perspectives.

8. A healthy attitude of questioning and testing even established propositions and hypotheses in prehistory, and the application of experimental evidence to them.

Suggestions For Improvement (Even the best might be better)

1. A period of at least six weeks or even longer would allow for increased returns of understanding. Just when best experimentation becomes possible, it's all over.

2. An opportunity for really interested students to follow up this program with a more advanced one would increase the returns even more, especially on a long-term basis.

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3. The procurement of different kinds of lithic materials for further experimentation would increase the degree of parallelism between the experimental work and many aboriginal stone assemblages.

4. A slightly stronger emphasis on the use of lithic implements would help further in understanding only certain technological features which might have been significant to early man.

Both the National Science Foundation and Idaho State University should be congratulated for developing such a fine program, and given every assistance in continuing and improving it.