

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

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I find it very hard to be critical about so superlative an experience which I thoroughly enjoyed. There is much more to be gained than the theatrical benefits of making hand axes and arrowheads for audiences, as I have done seven times already to date for laymen, students and professional archaeologists. I would, therefore, like to make some observations regarding the flintknapping school.

In general, anthropologists have always used informants; archaeologists have used ethnographic analogy. The two combine when, as has happened so many times, a native worker identifies as typical in his cultural inventory, some artifact which the archaeologist has labeled "problematic" or "ceremonial". The "alien" professional can hope, at best, for a reasonable insight, an analytical sensitivity to the objective material he recovers. It is this analytical sensitivity, in the final analysis, that is the most important thing learned at your flintknapping school--more than all the field work and lab analysis I have done in the past. A review of my own ideas and the reports of others leave me with one conclusion--to begin to understand stone tools, you must start by learning to break stone, to experience first-hand the problems and methods for success and the reasons for failure.

In particular, I want to point out specific features of the school which I found especially helpful. The broad nature of the prior experience of the group had a tremendous positive effect in the exchange of ideas. The informality of the school and the broad opportunity for each of us to explore and experiment in our own interests and techniques as we discovered and developed them contributed immensely to the sum total of ideas which we shared. I recommend the broad approach if for no other reason than the fact that I could switch to some other technique when the muscles in my fingers stiffened up. The campsite was marvelous, the perfect atmosphere. In thinking back over the material we covered, I wish now that we had done more experiments with actual tool use. It is simple anthropological cultural relativism to recognize that in context so many stone tools are unsurpassed in efficiency and effectiveness. One of the most important problems I can see in lithic analysis is the recognition of residual preparation patterns as distinct from functional use marks. The few discussions we had about the books and reports we had with us were most helpful. I would suggest for future schools that a selected bibliography be sent to each prospective trainee having a field library at the camp for reading and discussion.

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Needless to say, there is very little that could improve upon the absolutely superb learning experience achieved at your flintknapping school. I will shortly begin analysis of one of the largest collections of Mayan lithics in Mexico. I look forward with great excitement and anticipation to the challenge it represents. If, indeed, there is anything new and significant to the study of this material, you and your school are immeasurably part of it. I can only reiterate my support for the suggestion made at the close of the school that the "graduates" periodically hold a seminar-type reunion to share again the exchange of ideas and experiences; this time with heightened awareness and sensitivity toward our work.

I wish you continued success in the future.

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