

From Asia to the New World.

In 1923, Clark Wissler, renowned curator of the American Museum of Natural History, published this map to show the distribution of the common one-handed drawknife culture that spread from Siberia to a large part of North America. Additional evidence accumulated up to the twenty-first century reinforces this view. (See Wissler's classic article "The Story of the Crooked Knife," in *Natural History Magazine*, August 1923 and the Smithsonian's *Crossing Continents* in 1998.)

The Mocotaugan's Ancient Origins

THE HISTORY OF THE ONE-HANDED DRAWKNIFE OF THE NATIVES OF THE NORTH AMERICAN Woodlands originated long ago and far away.

Tens of thousands of years ago, sometime during the last long, long glacial era, some members of the early human species living in the temperate region of Eastern Asia began spreading to other parts of the continent. By 16,000 B.C. or so, the descendants of those first people had reached north and east into Siberia, and as more centuries passed, crossed the 1000-mile-wide Bering Bridge into North America.

These Stone Age people who arrived in the North Pacific were typical of the humankind that emerged in various parts of the world. Each group was small in number and traveled independently, but they shared a basic, single, primitive culture. They were nomads, moving from place to place in search of food, clothing and shelter; and subsisting on whatever they could kill or pick. Their only weapons were their bare hands, a club and a spear.

Their only tools, made of stone, were the maul, the wedge, the ax and the knife. The knives were used from a sitting or squatting position, in a natural toward-the-body movement.

But that shared, single, rawly primitive culture did not last. In *Crossroads of Continents*, one of the most recent studies of the movement from Siberia to the New World, William Fitzhugh and Aaron Crowell write that:

“[This] first migration was only the beginning of the story, for the populations that had settled into the North Pacific region then began a long and complex process of cultural change, adaptation and diversification which generated the brilliant spectrum of hunting, fishing and herding cultures in place at the time of the first contact with explorers.”

At some early stage in this process, Fitzhugh and Crowell report, “One particular man was born with a mutated Y chromosome, and when he passed it on to his son or sons, he began a process that eventually produced groups of people with distinct genetic differences.”

Most of these new groups — like all other prehistoric groups in different parts of the globe — somewhere in their process of development lost the trait of toward-the-body cut-

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ting. But two of the groups, Eskimos and Indians, held to the trait for thousands of years, even after the groups’ descendants gained access to iron and its technology.

The trait was most conspicuous in two general forms: the Eskimo and Northwest Coast woman’s ulu, and the man’s drawknife. Both of these were first made of easily found and ready-shaped stone, sharpened by chipping or rubbing with other stones, and held in the palm of the hand.

Then came handles. Inevitably form followed function, so handles were attached to the blade at an angle that made the draw stroke still more efficient.

As the aboriginal population continued to grow in numbers, it spread slowly but steadily east and south for several thousands of miles. About 1400 B.C., sub-groups of Paleo-Indians began to form a definable Eastern Woodlands culture. As the migration progressed, sub-groups of 50 to 100 or so stopped and settled into areas of forest and stream that could provide them with food, clothing and shelter year-round.

Eventually some of these sub-groups formed into some sixty Eastern Woodlands Indian tribes, and for untold thousands of years the men of these tribes continued to use the single-

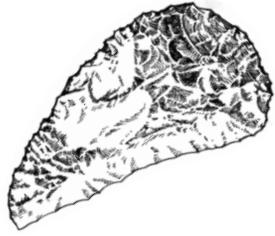
handed Stone Age drawknife as one of the tools most essential to their survival.

As centuries passed, prehistoric people found better stone for their blades — flint, obsidian and slate — that could be honed razor-sharp. The Woodlands people found still another material for their knives — beaver teeth. These beaver teeth knives, as Karna Borlund points out in *The Indians of Northeast America*, “were used as the beaver had originally used its tooth for cutting — by pulling it toward the user.”

It was these tools of stone and beaver teeth that served the First People of the Woodlands well for so long, up to only five hundred years or so ago.

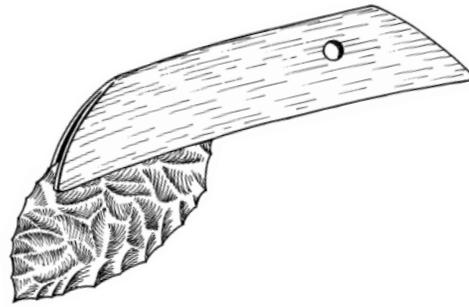
Evolution of the Mocotaugan

Illustrations A-F are redrawn from *Anthropological Papers*, American Museum of Natural History, *Reports of the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology*, and the *Handbook of the American Indians North of Mexico*.



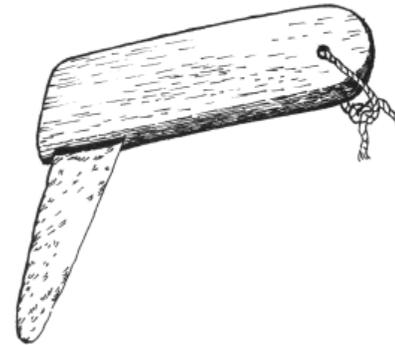
A) The Earliest Stone Age Blade

This was the essential cutting tool of the earliest man in all prehistoric cultures. He made the knife of “found” stone, shaping it to about a four-inch length and sharpening it with another stone to a single bevel edge, like a chisel. He used the knife by gripping it with all four fingers pressing the bulk of the tool into the palm of the hand, then cutting with a toward-the-body motion. This early man would most commonly squat while cutting, using his upper leg to brace the hand holding the object being tooled.



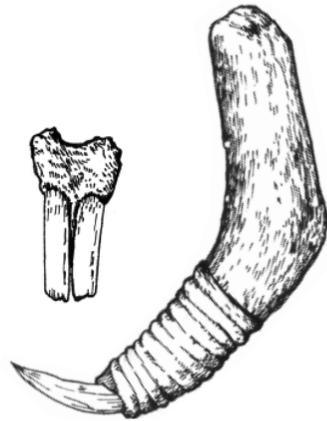
B) The First Major Advance in the Cutting Tool

Somewhere along the continuum of time, some prehistoric man discovered a better way to use the knife made of “found” stone. He fitted that stone into a handle, making a “crook” between handle and blade. Still holding to the toward-the-body technique, he now had a much-improved knife, one with greater pulling power, a wider range of movements, and a surface where he could now place his thumb to help control those movements.



C) The Second Major Advance in the Cutting Tool

Eventually, the Woodlands man learned to “manufacture” a better blade. He had developed ways to find, mine and process flint and similar minerals into blades that were much easier to make, could yield a sharper edge, could keep that edge longer and could be resharpened readily. This rare specimen was unexpectedly unearthed from a cliff-house or burial cave in the Southwest, far from the Woodlands where the crook-handled knife culture flourished. This advanced knife was most likely introduced into this locale by a small offshoot group of Algonquins who are known to have migrated to far south of the Woodlands a thousand years ago or more. Too, the knife might have found its way down through one of the many ancient trade routes that laced North America.



D & E) Two Unique Versions of Early Knives

Some Woodlands men, as late as the 19th century, used beaver teeth as cutting/gouging tools. The large upper incisors were designed by nature exactly as man's earliest knives were used, for a toward-the-body motion. And beavers, often as big as bears, had incisors big enough for men to use as blades. Some Natives simply used two such incisors still attached to their jawbone. Other Natives set one large incisor into a curved handle. Knives like this, excavated along the Ottawa River, have been estimated to be some 5,000 years old.



F) The First Mocotaugans

The Woodlands Native, ever adaptive, quickly took advantage of the revolutionary new blade material introduced with the coming of the Iron Age. The knife shown here is typical in many ways of a very large percentage of the knives made with the new metal. The blade is forged from one of the more easily transformed pieces of discarded steel, a straight razor; the handle, of any hardwood handy, is about as simple as possible; and the lashing together of blade and handle is done crudely with coarse native materials. Most of all, despite all the European forms of knives the Iron Age offered to the Woodlands Natives, this knife retains the millennia-old technique of palm-up, toward-the-body motion, even providing a working surface for the thumb. The one element of this knife that is *not* typical is the relatively shallow angle between knife and blade.

G) The Mocotaugan as Art

The highest form of the Woodlands Native's aboriginal essential tool. Such embellished knives were put together with great care, from making sure that form followed function as purely as possible to detailing every decorative element. Such knives borrowed generously from both European materials and European design motifs. Such knives were, and still are, the kind passed down from one generation to another.