

# The Revolution of the Iron Age

**T**HE AGE OF IRON CAME LATE TO THE NEW WORLD. WHEN IT DID COME, IT ARRIVED ABRUPTLY and spread through the vast Woodlands with extraordinary speed.

Unlike the ancient peoples of most cultures, the peoples of North America stepped directly from the Stone Age to the Iron Age. Most other prehistoric cultures experienced many centuries of a Bronze Age as a transition from Stone Age to the Iron Age. The Woodlands Indians made some occasional use of indigenous copper for ceremonial and ornamental items, and perhaps some axes, but for some reason they never found the way to combine the soft copper with tin to create bronze, a metal that could be put to many practical uses.

The discovery, mining, smelting and shaping of iron began in the Middle East approximately 5000 years ago; in Asia and Africa, 4000 years; and in Europe, 3000. In contrast, the revolutionary metal was completely unknown to the Woodlands Indians up to only about 500 years ago.

About 1500 A.D., Frenchmen fishing far from home waters in the newly discovered Grand Banks began occasionally to set up small temporary camps on the mainland to dry and salt their catches, repair sails and take on fresh water. The permanent exhibit on North American Indians at Harvard University's Peabody Museum describes what happened next:

“During these brief occupations, groups of Indians visited the camps to exchange animal pelts for knives, axes, kettles, trinkets and anything else the French were willing to part with. About the same time, further south, English fishermen were making the same kind of infrequent, brief contact with the Micmacs and Abanakis. Europeans from both countries quickly realized that the profits made from furs in such exchanges were far more lucrative than fishing.”

This trade that brought iron and iron technology to the great majority of the Natives of North America was fueled by the Europeans' insatiable demand for furs, especially beaver. The explosive expansion of the trade in the Woodlands was aided by the ancient, many-tentacled, far-reaching network of travel routes that the Indians themselves had knitted together from the innumerable lakes, rivers and streams of their native land.

First came New France's rough and ready red-sashed voyageurs, using the native Indians' remarkable 30- to 40-foot freighter bark canoes. To the south, Dutch trappers operated out of what is now Albany, and English trappers were seeking furs throughout their new colonies.

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Soon large trading companies were organized, coming from England, France, Russia and the then-new United States of America. Competition was intense. The politically powerful Hudson's Bay Company led the race. Eventually, HBC was trading European goods for furs at some 4500 trading posts spread over an area that covered 1.48 million square miles of what is now all of Canada and the United States' northern border states from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

The Indians for the most part greeted the traders with enormous enthusiasm, both as suppliers of the furs and as consumers of the Europeans' irresistibly appealing new objects. Of all the Iron Age objects, as Daniel Richter points out in *Facing East in Indian Country*, "the fundamental innovation was not firearms, but the introduction of metal cutting edges." The greatest demand was for axes, mauls, and knives.

Yet, in this historic process, the Woodlands Indians never abandoned their ancestral one-handed drawknife technique. The natives to a substantial degree accepted ready-made European knives and used them in European fashion for certain tasks, but for cutting and shaping the essential wood, they adapted the new-found material to make better knives for use in their ancient ways. Although the trading companies at some rather early point began to import machine-made blades in basic mocotaugan form, most Indian men could only afford to make their own. As "master recyclers" they made their own out of discarded

metal. They found that the fire pits they had used for copper could generate enough heat to serve as a forge, but they did trade furs for the dense iron hammers strong enough to reshape the scrap iron into a useful blade.

With this new and radically different knife, the Woodlands man could do things impossible — or at least enormously difficult — to do with the best of the stone blades. He could, for example, cut babiche much finer, divide lengths of reeds more evenly, shape and smooth wood more readily, and hollow bowls and masks more precisely. The steel blade not only made his work much easier, it gave him freedom to create far more imaginative art. As C. Keith Wilbur wrote, “Good English steel, salvaged from an old file or even a tired musket barrel, gave new life to the crafting of woodenware.”

Thus, the steel-bladed mocotaugan serves as a telling symbol of the first move of the Woodlands Indians from the eons-old Stone Age into the Iron Age.

## The Question of European Influence



A number of people argue that the *couteau croche* of the Native American was derived directly from one or another of a steel bladed draw knife introduced to the Woodlands by Europeans. Most often cited as the inspiration for the mocotaugan is the farrier's knife. Also cited, in varying degrees, are the cooper's knife, the pruning knife, the bill hook, the soldier's tranchet, the shoemaker's knife and the lumberman's scribing knife.

To other people, such claims are speculation with negligible foundation. The evolution of the mocotaugan shown here offers sound physical evidence to prove that the mocotaugan was aboriginal to the Woodlands peoples. (*See pages 44 and 45.*) And there is other evidence. Early explorers like Gyles and Franklin commented on the unusual character and omnipresence of the Native's drawknife. Later, the most respected anthropologists confirmed the indigenous origin of the knife. Franklin Speck, for example, devoted several pages of his classic *Penobscot Man* to the knife and its place in Native life, but never raised the possibility that Europe was the source of that knife. An item-by-item search of Hudson's Bay Company's early trade records found listings of several kinds of "push" knives, but no mention of any kind of the one-handed drawknife other than the mocotaugan. Also, among the well-researched books consulted for this essay (see the bibliography) there is not one truly authoritative support for the claim of European origin.

A third group of people, including the authors of this essay, have still another view contrary to the claims of the mocotaugan's European origin. In this view, the mocotaugan was indeed indigenous. But beyond that, *the very nature of the mocotaugan influenced a considerable segment of settlers to adopt the Native implement.*

By the 1600s, the cultures that settlers brought from Europe had been molded by the Iron Age for more than two thousand years. Only remnants remained of the once-universal use of the pull knife for cutting; and those remnants were found in tools made only for a few special purposes, such as shoeing horses, shaping barrel staves and pruning vines. These special knives are one-handed drawknives but otherwise do not meet the accepted definition of the mocotaugan. In the farrier's knife, for example, the entire flat side of the blade curves in a single arc from end to end, but there is no angle, or "crook" between blade and handle as in the defining character of the Native knife.

It was these specialized knives that some early settlers brought to the New World. Upon moving into primeval forests, however, many settlers quickly seized on the unique, new-to-them, multi-purpose tool that Woodlands Natives had developed long before for survival in those dense forests.