

The Pony Bead Period: A Cultural Problem of Western North America
I.

The first half of the 19th Century, Indians of the Plains and Plateau areas exhibited a marked preference for large embroidery beads. These materials, larger than those they would use subsequently, are popularly called "pony Beads". The traditional Indian explanation of this preference, favored as well by most ethnologists, is availability. That is, we are told that only pony beads were available until some time in mid-Century when smaller beads appeared and gradually became the medium of all bead embroidery.

This paper proposes to test these assumptions against recent ethnographic and archaeological evidence and to suggest an alternative explanation for the pony bead period.

II.

To begin, the expressions "pony bead" and "pony bead period" should be identified precisely. In classifying glass trade beads, most persons have tended to divide them into the categories of necklace beads and embroidery beads. To a certain extent this functional division has validity. For purposes of this discussion, however, embroidery beads are perhaps best described by physical factors. They are "tube beads" (i.e. made from sections of glass tubing), they range in diameter from 1 to 5 mm., and they tend to have monochromatic surfaces. Within this size group, pony beads are those of 3 mm. diameter or greater; seed beads, those of 2 mm. or less. But since embroidery beads are made in a continuous series of graduated sizes, this leaves one or two intermediate sizes between 2 and 3 mm. diameter. This latter group has never

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acquired a common name, perhaps because they seem never to have been as popular as the others. However, we shall see that they do occur in some early historic material and so they must be considered. *Wichita used, found in mostly size class*

Embroidery beads of the pony bead size group have been widely used in North America, particularly the western portion, in several ways: for embroidery proper, as necklace components, fringe ornaments, basketry decorations, etc. However, the term "pony bead period" refers to the time and area in which they were used for most of the sewn beadwork produced, presumably since no smaller beads were available. Spatially, the period is thought to apply only to Plains and Plateau Indian groups. Temporally, it is thought to run from the introduction of embroidery beads until roughly the mid 19th Century. The period closes with the introduction and popularization of seed beads, and presumably the abandonment of pony beads.

The recognition and first discussions of the pony bead period were made by John Ewers, F.H. Douglas, Carrie Lyford, and others in the early 1940s. Their data were based on informants' testimony, supported by historical accounts and documented specimens. However, since that time a number of historical sites in the pertinent areas have been excavated and documented collections of early beadwork have become more widely known. These new data enable us to define the pony bead period and the factors that shaped it more carefully.

III.

Since World War II, there has been a marked increase in

Plains and Plateau archaeology. Apart from the purely prehistoric, a number of Indian village sites occupied partially in the Historic Period have been studied. These have yielded a variety of trade goods, including glass beads. Unfortunately, though, most of the village sites offer little help in precise trade goods research since it is difficult to date them as closely as would be desirable. Furthermore, the Historic Period occupation is usually so brief that distinguishable levels of trade goods deposition are not to be expected. On the other hand, excavations of trading posts are more illuminating. In particular, sites occupied only once and for a short, known period offer us reasonably accurate ideas of the traders' goods. As a sampling of this sort of new data, five sites have been chosen covering the presumed span of the pony bead period. They are:

1. Fort Riviere Tremblante, Sask.	NWC	1791-8
2. Fort Spokane, Wash.	PFC,NWC,HBC*	1810-26
3. Kipp's Post, N.Dak.	CFC	1826-30
4. Fort Lookout II, S.Dak.	FFC	1831-51
5. Fort Laramie, Wyo.	P.T.	1849-75

The embroidery beads recovered from each of these sites varied in size and each assemblage extended outside the pony bead range. Riviere Tremblante, the earliest site, yielded some very small beads -- less than 1 mm. in diameter -- as well as other ranging through the intermediate group and into actual pony beads. The Spokane excavations recovered no seed beads, but plenty of intermediate and pony beads. Kipp's Post and Fort Lookout II both

yielded beads ranging from at least 2 through 4 mm. in diameter, that is, all three size groups. Fort Laramie, like Riviere Tremblante, produced small seed beads -- these of about 1 mm. diameter -- and a continuous range of sizes through roughly 4 mm. To be sure, five sites are only a sample. Yet, there is reason to expect that a complete survey of pertinent sites would substantiate these results. By itself, this sample seems adequate to show that embroidery beads were in fact available in several sizes during the period in question and thereby sufficient to question its supposed raison d'etre.

Turning to a survey of documented specimens, one finds that although seed and intermediate embroidery beads have been found in a number of historical sites, they are infrequent as components of early 19th Century Plains and Plateau beadwork. Almost all the materials from this era and area have their main decorative fields realized in quillwork or pony bead embroidery. And where the smaller beads have been used, they are likely to be part of the artifact's secondary decoration. In the interest of time, I will cite five representative examples. The first is a dress collected by Lewis & Clark, presumably at the Mandan Villages, and now in the Peabody Museum at Harvard. This skin garment is decorated mainly with geometric painting. It also has some lazy stitch embroidery in intermediate beads. This includes a narrow band at the neck, a wider band around the bottom, two small breast medallions, and some edging. The next two examples were collected by Paul Kane and are now in the Manitoba Museum. They are a Northern Plains crupper and headstall, both fully decorated with

quillwork. On each piece, seed beads have been used only as spacers between individual quilled fringe strands. The fourth example is a Plains Cree Medicine Pipe from the same collection. The principal decorations are the usual wrappings and pendants of feathers, ermine, and red cloth. A few intermediate beads have been used to edge some of the cloth ornaments. The final example is an Interior Salish horned headdress dating from the mid 1840s and now in the Eastern Washington State Museum in Spokane. This headdress has a browband of red and blue strouding on which a few seed beads have been sewn in a simple pattern. These examples illustrate the general tendencies cited above -- to use small embroidery beads sparingly and as supplementary to more extensive decoration in some other material.

From these examples and from the preceding archaeological data, it will be seen that the original concept of the pony bead period is still partly valid, but that it must be qualified to stand. A revised statement might read -- Plains and Plateau bead embroidery of the early 19th Century is characterized by a preponderant use of pony beads, although smaller sizes were available and in use to a limited extent. The original assumption is changed by recognizing that pony beads were not the only sort available and thus eliminating this as the period's explanatory factor. The term "pony bead period" would still seem useful, however, if understood in this revised context.

In the light of new data, the nature and extent of the Period may also be seen more accurately. Formerly it had been considered uniform -- that is, beginning and ending at roughly the same

date throughout its assumed range. However additional information - mainly a review of dated museum specimens - suggest geographical and temporal irregularity. The hardest contour to trace is the period's beginning. If one considers this as the era of predominant use of pony beads in sewn beadwork, then it begins for the Northern Plains in the very early 19th Century as illustrated by several pieces in the Lewis & Clark Collection. As far as I can determine, there is no 18th Century Plains beadwork in existence. So for the present, knowledge of Plains beadwork history begins with this collection. There is no direct evidence for dating the rise of bead embroidery in the Plateau and Central Plains, but by the 1830s the craft was established in these regions. The 1830s and 40s -- roughly the second quarter of the 19th Century -- were the real years of pony bead predominance in the North and Central Plains and Plateau. This has been well documented by the accounts of visitors such as Maximillian, by the art of Bodmer and Kane, and by the number of specimens collected at the time.

South of the Arkansas River, pony bead embroidery appears to have been far less common. I say "appears" since this impression is based on very limited data. Apart from one questionable Comanche specimen in the AMNH, I can find no extant Southern Plains pony beaded material. Furthermore, I have been unable to locate reports of S.P. historical trading post excavation similar to the examples cited above. Hopefully there are those here today who could offer the information needed. Their comments are requested during the discussion period to follow.

There is, however, a local development of pony bead embroidery south and west of the Plains proper among the Ute and Jicarilla Apache. Unfortunately, it is not possible to say when these people began practising this craft, for although there are examples from both groups in several museum collections, not one seems to be precisely dated. The positive dating is later and comes via photographs. In the 1870s and early 1880s, J. W. Powell and some of his colleagues at the B.A.E. photographed Utes and Jicarillas wearing pony beaded clothing, well after the neighboring Plains tribes had abandoned them in favor of seed beads. How long custom prevailed is also uncertain.

Pony bead embroidery seems to have declined first in the Central Plains. Specimens collected in the late 1850s show both sizes in use. Photographs of Sioux and Cheyennes taken at the Laramie Council in 1868 reveal well-developed seed bead embroidery and no pony beads whatever. From this time on -- the 1870s through World War I -- the Central Plains people had their great heyday of seed bead embroidery and hardly a pony bead was to be seen again.

On the Northern Plains and in the Plateau, one has the impression of a more gradual replacement. The situation in these regions is also complicated by the existence of intrusive floral seed bead embroidery brought into the region by Woodland Indians working for the fur trading companies. So, looking narrowly at geometric seed bead embroidery as it appears in dated photos and specimens, the 1870s may be taken as the transition years. How-

ever, pony bead embroidery didn't disappear completely in these years. Among certain groups, especially the Blackfeet and the Sahaptian-speaking Plateau peoples, pony beads continued in favor for decorating specific objects -- in particular women's dresses and horse trappings. The Blackfeet were still using the larger beads thus in the early 20th Century and some Plateau women use them to a limited extent today.

The pony bead period is seen then to have begun early in the 19th Century and to have extended over the Northern Plains, Central Plains, Plateau, as well as to the Ute and Jicarilla Apache. Its significance in the Southern Plains is presently uncertain. After a period of extensive use between 1830 and about 1850, pony beads declined in favor over most of their former range. They continued to enjoy limited use in the south by the Ute and Jicarilla until some time in the late 19th Century and in the north by the Blackfeet and some Plateau groups until very recent times.

IV. Conclusion

The application of the archaeological and ethnographical data cited above to the pony bead problem allows the original assumptions to be revised and some new conclusions to be drawn. First it is apparent that the basic statement of the pony bead period is correct to the extent that there truly was a time when these materials predominated in Plains and Plateau sewn beadwork and that this time was most marked in the second quarter of the 19th Century. However, it has also been seen that the Period had different spatial and temporal contours than previously thought.

Finally, it is now obvious that the pony bead phenomenon cannot be explained in terms of availability, since it has been shown that smaller embroidery beads were to some extent accessible and in use throughout the era. One must look elsewhere for an explanation.

I would like to suggest that part of the answer may relate to the technique of beadwork itself and to the auxilliary materials and sewing tools required. As you all know, Plains and Plateau beadwork is sewn in two principal techniques: lazy stitch and overlay. Lazy stitch requires one working thread which serves both to carry beads and fasten them down. Overlay requires two: one for carrying the beads and a second that couches the first to the foundation at close intervals. All the pony bead embroidery I have been able to examine is sewn either in lazy stitch or very loose overlay, generally with sinew. Central Plains seed bead embroidery is usually sewn in lazy stitch with sinew. However, Northern Plains and Plateau seed bead embroidery is mostly sewn in overlay with linen or cotton thread. Drawing upon my own experience as a beadworker, the following observations are offered. Lazy stitch with pony beads can be done rather easily using only an awl and sinew. With seed beads, it is still possible although slower and cumbersome. However, lazy stitch in seed beads using sinew and a steel needle is easy and rapid. Overlay presents more difficulties. With pony beads, sinew, and an awl, it is difficult to couch the carrying thread at the close intervals required. Overlay in seed beads is virtually impossible without needles. And, judging from existing specimens, may have been easier with

thread than with sinew.

In view of the above, I suggest that the initial popularity of pony beads may have been partly due to their greater adaptability to native sewing techniques. One could produce good lazy stitch and passable overlay with only the indigenous sinew and awl. Seed beads, on the other hand, would seem to have required needles and perhaps thread for satisfactory results, and their acceptance may have been delayed until the beadworkers had access to the new sewing materials as well as familiarity in working with them. Perhaps it may also be that seed beads became popular in the Central Plains earlier than elsewhere since it was easier to adapt them to the lazy stitch technique predominant in this area.

These suggestions are offered for your consideration and, hopefully, for discussion.

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