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Trade Beads Among the American Indians*

By

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The Mound Builders and Prehistoric Indians were familiar with beads as a medium of exchange; these North Americans fashioned beads from shells, stones, bones, claws, teeth and seeds. Even meteoric iron was used in some localities. Also pearls, which were carefully deposited in vases and mortars, have been found with the dead. One may deduce that these objects were among things of value which were exchanged or hoarded by the Aborigines. In addition to the above, copper beads or sections of small copper tubes have been dug up from mounds.

Columbus presented the natives of Watlings Island (San Salvador) with strings of glass beads, which they placed about their necks. This introduced the bead trade to the American Indians.

The American Indians had a medium which they circulated, consisting of beads of two kinds; one, white, made out of the end of a periwinkle shell, and the other, black, made of the black part of a clam shell. These beads, rubbed down and polished as ornaments, were arranged in strings or belts which were used as money. One black bead was regarded as being worth two white beads; three black or six white beads equalled one penny. This was called wampum, wamupumpeag, or peag, and was a product of labor which was subject to supply and demand. It was not easy to make, and the Indians, who went to the seashore to find periwinkle, clam, and conch shells, worked tediously with them until they were of the required size and shape to be used for barter.

A fathom or belt of wampum consisted of three hundred and sixty beads. One fathom of white beads would buy furs valued at five pounds sterling. In the form of belts, wampum was given as a pledge of friendship, used in the ratification of treaties and to convey messages, and served many other purposes.

A true wampum bead is an Indian-made shell bead, cylindrical in form, averaging about a quarter of an inch in length, by an eighth of an inch in diameter, perfectly straight on the sides, with a hole running through it the long way.

The term "wampum" should be applied to the Indian-made bead. Lyford stated that some of the beads prepared for commercial trade were half an inch in length but that none of that size has been found in the wampum belts.¹

Soon after 1607, a London company sailed from England. Included in its roster were four bankrupt London jewelers, goldsmiths, and refiners, and a little group of eight Dutch and Polish glass-blowers and workers to teach the art of making pitch tar, potashes, and glass. They were aware that a string of almost worthless glass beads would be good to use in barter and trade with the Indians.

DeSoto records that he saw many pearl beads among the Indians of the Savannah River and of the Valley of the Mississippi.²

Lewis and Clark found Indians making beads and record on Saturday, March 16, 1805: "... A Mr. Garrow, a Frenchman who has resided a long time among the Ricaras and Mandans, explained to us the mode in which they make their large beads, an art which they are said to have derived from some prisoners of the Snake Indian nation. These beads were in great demand among the Indians and were used as pendants for their ears and hair, and are sometimes worn about the neck."³

*This is part of a paper which was read at a monthly meeting. The full text will be published in the annual Brand Book.

¹Lyford, Carrie A., *Iroquois Crafts*, U. S. Indian Service, Haskell Institute, August, 1945, page 45.

²Bakeless, John, *The Eyes of Discovery*, New York, 1950, page 57.

³Hosmer, J. K., *History of the Expedition of Captains Lewis and Clark*, Chicago, 1902, Vol. I, page 182.

On the Columbia River, Friday, November 1, 1805: "... Referring to natives who carried on an intermittent trade with other natives near the mouth of the Columbia—their great object is to obtain beads, an article which holds the first place in their ideas of relative value and to procure which they will sacrifice their last article of clothing or the last mouthful of food. These beads are the medium of trade, by which they obtain from the Indians still higher up the river, robes, skins, chapped bread, bear grass, etc. Those Indians in turn employ them to procure from the Indians in the Rocky Mountains bear grass, pachio-roots, robes, etc."⁴

Saturday, November 23, 1805: "... Toward evening seven Clatsops came over in a canoe with two skins of the sea-otter—To ascertain however their ideas as to the value of different objects we offered for one of the skins (sea-otter) a watch, a handkerchief, an American dollar, and a bunch of red beads, but neither the curious mechanism of the watch, nor even the red beads could tempt him; he refused the offer. But he asked for tiacomoschack or Chief beads, the most common sort of coarse blue-colored beads, the article beyond all price in their estimation. Of these blue beads we have but few and therefore reserve them for more necessitous circumstances."⁵

Sunday, November 24, 1805: "In the evening a chief and several men of the Chinooks came to see us; we smoked with them, and bought a sea-otter skin for some blue beads."⁶

Tuesday, December 10, 1805: "Captain Clark attempted to purchase a sea-otter skin from the Clatsops with some red beads but they declined trading, as they valued none except blue or white beads."⁷

Thursday, December 12, 1805: "Blue beads are the articles most in request; the white occupy the next place in their estimation, but they [the Clatsops] do not value those of any other color."⁸

Arthur H. Woodward, an authority on beads, stated in a personal letter to Frederic Douglas in 1932 that "trade beads in the beginning were large and fairly crude." Even the plain beads were crude and were mostly globular. These large beads were among the first items dispensed by the traders and explorers. They were not used as trimmings for garments, but were worn as necklaces, as earrings, hair ornaments and nose bobs. Both the French and the English traders carried beads as part of their stock, selling them singly, by the bunch, and by the pound.

One of the foremost authorities on beadwork design is Mr. Frederic H. Douglas, who made a survey of the writings of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century explorers, traders and soldiers.⁹ He also reviewed the paintings and drawings of early artists, such as: the paintings of Catlin; portraits by Karl Bodmer in the Maximilian of Wied folio, 1833; McKenney and Hall portraits; and many others. The results of the survey were disappointing in the matter of detail, but he deduced that beadwork hardly existed until about 1835-40, except for the early Pony beadwork. This is particularly true for the Central and Northern plains area, which with the exception of the region around the Great Lakes and the upper Mississippi Valley was the principal area of beadwork development, and the one which concerns this study.

The use of the small white, red, black, yellow, blue and green beads as trimmings on leggins, moccasins, shirts, shifts, breech clouts, blankets, pouches, hair ties, belts, sashes, knife sheaths, medicine bags, and tobacco pouches invaded the East, the Great Lakes region, and the Southeast around 1750. By 1761 trade lists show white beads of different sizes, and by 1800, beads of various colors were being sold plentifully into the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys.

⁴*Ibid.*, Vol. II, pages 59-60.

⁵*Ibid.*, Vol. II, pages 88-89.

⁶*Ibid.*, Vol. II, page 89.

⁷*Ibid.*, Vol. II, page 100.

⁸*Ibid.*, Vol. II, page 101.

⁹Douglas, Frederic H., *Plains Beads and Beadwork Designs*. (Leaflet) December, 1937, pages 73-74.

Beads first used as decorations for garments were smaller than the original crude beads, but were quite large compared to the very fine seed beads in use among the Great Lakes tribes and middle Mississippi Indians between 1800 and 1830.

From about 1800 to 1840 large opaque, irregular and fairly crude China beads came into use on the plains. They were known as "pony beads" because they were brought in by pony pack-trains. These beads were made in Venice and were about one-eighth of an inch in diameter, about twice as large as the beads used at a later date. White and medium sky-blue were the colors commonly used. Black pony beads appear in the old pieces. A deep buff, light and dark red, and dark blue have also been noted. Pony beads which are translucent red with a white core have been described by Mr. Douglas.

The pony beads were first used by the plains Indians on bands to decorate skin robes, shirts, pipe bags, cradles, saddle bags, moccasins, and the head bands on war bonnets. The bands were usually less than six inches wide and were solidly beaded with designs consisting of bars, tall triangles and concentric squares and diamonds.

Between 1830 to 1850 smaller, round opaque Venetian beads known as "seed" beads came into use on the plains and have continued to be popular since that time; the transition was gradual, each bead period blending into the other. The seed beads made of glass or china were sold in a great variety of colors in "bunches" of five or six strings each; the strings varying in length from four to six inches, according to the size and kind of bead. There were four or five bunches to the pound. These beads came in three sizes varying from 1/16 to 3/32 of an inch in diameter.

Toward 1860, when settlers began to crowd into the Sioux country, traders began to bring in Bohemian (Czechoslovakian) beads. The white opaque Bohemian beads were a little darker than the Venetian and inclined to a slightly semi-translucent bluish tinge.

Douglas states that the irregularity of the bead indicates older beads; recent ones being uniform due to improved methods of manufacture. The older beads are opaque and have softer, richer colors. The facet seed bead—two to four sides—is smaller and was popular in the 1840-1870 period.

About 1870, there began to appear translucent beads; and toward 1885, glass or metal beads colored silver or gilt and faceted throughout. There was a huge variety of colors and sizes coming not only from Venice and Bohemia but from France and England. Douglas believes that the glass beads came from Venice and Bavaria, and that the porcelain beads came from Czechoslovakia and Austria through Venice. At a later period Bohemian, French, and English beads were used; then more recently Japanese and German beads. Tons of these beads and other trade materials were carried to the Indians by the fur traders.

Early in the eighteenth century fur traders of the Hudson's Bay Company and their competitors, the French from Montreal, offered beads in trade to the Indians east of the Blackfeet. By the 1780's, white traders were in direct contact with the Blackfeet and traded them beads. These early trade beads vary in size and color and shape. Most of them were over one-fourth of an inch in diameter. Many were considerably larger than that. Some were monochrome, while the surfaces of others were covered with patterns of various colors. Indians learned to introduce a few of these new trade beads at intervals on their necklaces of claws, teeth, or other native materials.

By 1833 these necklace beads were still expensive. Maximilian said Blackfeet Indians bought them from the American Fur Company in that year for the equivalent of three or four dollars a pound and that they were highly valued by Indian women.¹⁰

Bodmer, the artist who accompanied Maximilian, painted a portrait of Big Soldier, and Maximilian wrote: "In his ears he wore long strings of blue glass beads and on his breast suspended from his neck, the great silver medal of the United States."

¹⁰Thwaites, Reuben Gold, *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, Arthur H. Clark Co., Cleveland, 1906, Vol. XXIII, page 100 (Maximilian, "Travels in North America.")

In writing of the Sioux at Fort Pierre, Maximilian said: "Some had strings of Wampum in their ears, but the greater part of them strings of white or blue glass beads and round their necks an elegant, and frequently broad necklace, embroidered with white beads."¹¹

Large blue beads with a raised pattern of meandering lines and flower buds in white and red were considered a very old type of necklace bead. These "Skunk beads," as the Blackfeet called them, were then rare. A necklace of them was worth a good horse and a robe.

"Crow beads," a more common type of necklace bead, were irregular, monochrome, china beads, over one-fourth inch in diameter. Light blue "Crow beads" were most popular although they were available in medium blue, pale green, light red, and black.

Large brass beads which the Indians termed "Iron beads" were also popular. Smaller beads, three-sixteenths of an inch in diameter, transparent red on the outside with a lining of opaque, white, were used primarily for children's necklaces. Older Indians called these "under white beads."

The second period opened with the first use of embroidering beads among the Blackfeet. It may be termed the "Real bead" period for the Blackfeet called the bead type characteristic of this period the "Real bead." Real beads were smaller than the majority of necklace beads, but larger than the seed beads used in Blackfoot embroidery in more recent times. The beads are irregularly shaped, about one-eighth inch in diameter, made of China. They are monochrome, and the color range includes light blue, dark blue, dark red, deep yellow, white and black. The blue and white beads were most favored by the Blackfeet. These beads were sold by the "bunch" or "hank." Each "hank" consisted of ten strings, all about eight inches long. About the year 1870, eight hanks of different colored "Real beads" were worth a good robe.

Maximilian, in 1833, was the first writer to observe that the Blackfeet were employing bead embroidery on the men's shirts and women's dresses. "The men's shirts have a flap at the neck hanging down both before and behind, which we saw usually lined with red cloth, ornamented with fringe, or with stripes of yellow and colored porcupine quills, or of sky-blue glass beads."¹² "The women ornament their best dresses both on the hem and sleeves, with dyed porcupine quills and thin leather strips, with broad diversified stripes of sky-blue and white glass beads. The Indians do not like beads of other colours, for instance, red, next to the skin."¹³

Alexander Henry, in his detailed description of Blackfeet clothing twenty years earlier, made no mention of the use of decorative beads.¹⁴ "Real beads" were most commonly applied in narrow bands to articles of costume, women's dresses, men's shirts, leggings, and moccasins. Both quillwork and beads were used during this period.

About 1870 or 1875, the seed beads, a smaller-sized bead became popular and were in fairly common use among Blackfeet beadworkers. These were made of glass or china. They were supplied by traders in a number of sizes all of them quite small, the largest being about one-sixteenth of an inch in diameter. This bead change was gradual.

The older seed beads are generally irregular in size and outline, and opaque. More recent ones are even, and some of them are translucent.

For a period of a little more than a decade, following the opening of trader's stores in Browning, Montana, in 1896, a larger transparent bead three-sixteenths of an inch in diameter and either three-sixteenths or one-half of an inch in length, known as a *basket bead* was very popular with the Montana Blackfeet. It was commonly used in the decoration of women's dresses made during that period. This popularity disappeared and the little seed bead regained and has held its favoritism.

¹¹*Ibid.*, Vol. XXII, page 325.

¹²*Ibid.*, Vol. XXIII, page 201.

¹³*Ibid.*, Vol. XXIII, page 103.

¹⁴Coues, Elliott, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, New York, 1897.

A distinctive type of bead of Venetian origin, known to the trade as "Cornaline d'Aleppo" is found widely distributed throughout the American continent. The records of the Hudson's Bay Company show that these beads were well received by the Indians at the Company's trading posts and were known as "Hudson's Bay beads." It was one of the earliest kind of beads used in the Canadian trade. Independent traders created a demand for this variety of bead and introduced them southward.

The Hudson's Bay beads of recent years comprised seed beads from Venice, metal and seed-beads from France, and agate beads from Bavaria.

In shape, the early glass beads found with burials and at village sites are short tubular and oblate spheroidal and vary in length from about an eighth to a quarter of an inch. They are made in two distinct colors of glass—one inside the other. The outer is always opaque red, closely resembling that commonly known as Indian Red. The inner section, which is exposed at the ends, is transparent and has the appearance of being black, but by transmitted light is usually greenish.

A more recent variety of the same general kind has yellow and white centers of opaque glass, and outside coverings of red transparent glass. These beads are tubular, ovate, and spherical, and have a wide range of sizes. Some of the tubular and ovate beads are an inch or more in length, and some of the spherical ones exceed half an inch in diameter. These later beads seem to be confined to the Northwestern trade.

The "Star" or "Chevron" bead is classed among the finest of the trade beads, in fact, I would call it the "aristocrat" of the trade beads, and consider it the most important of all the Venetian beads. It was widely distributed to some of the remotest spots of the earth and was made for use in the Congo. They have been found in upper Egypt, and Nubia, Zanzibar and India, Central Africa, the South Sea Islands, Peru, Canada, and to get back to our subject, even in the graves of and among the American Indians, but still are now quite scarce.

At Hawikuh, New Mexico, two *star* beads were found by an expedition. The early Spaniards took beads and trinkets to the Indians and it is presumed that Coronado in 1540, or Fray Marcos de Niza in 1539, introduced manufactured beads among the Pueblo Indians. Of course, the prehistoric Indians of the Southwest made many beads.

This star bead is made in three main layers, externally a deep blue, then an opaque brick red, and in the center a tube of pale green transparent glass; these three layers are divided by thinner ones of opaque white glass and the dividing surfaces are in a series of chevrons or zigzag, so as to present a star-like pattern on cross section. The extremities are often faceted. They vary in size from one-third to two and one-half inches. These beads are very beautiful. They have been made at Murano, Italy so long that the time of their introduction is unknown.

The greatest number of Polychrome Glass Beads were used by the Crow Indians of Montana who used these beads as offerings to the spirits of their sacred bundles as hunting charms and similar objects.

Neighboring tribes of Blackfeet, the Oregon tribes, namely, Umatilla, Cayuse, and Wallawalla, and also the Sioux possessed these beads which they may have obtained by barter, which was very commonly practiced between tribes. These beads are of Venetian make and cost more than seed beads. They are found sparingly east of Montana. These beads were made in homes of Vienna, which accounts for the great range in decorative patterns.

There are more varieties of commercial beads that were traded, one of which is the *Delft* bead, which was made in Delft, Holland. Delft is soft, paste ware which was painted while the white enamel coating (glaze plus oxide of tin) was still wet, ultimately mixing color with enamel.

Dentalium is the scientific name for slender, little white shells, a fine specimen of which is about three inches in length, but usually they are much shorter. The Indians

called them "Money beads," and coastal whites say tusk shells. They were hard to get and the supply was somewhat limited. They were found only in the deep sounds off Vancouver Island, where they, or the little creatures inside them clung upright to the rocks. The Nootka went out in canoes and laboriously fished them up. Then they peddled them up and down the coast. Even the Indians of Northern California imported their shell money all the way from Vancouver Island.

A string of twenty-five of these three-inch shells, when strung on dried sinew, and placed end to end, reached one fathom or six feet. The Indians called them a "Hiaqua" and this was the standard of value for which they might buy a canoe or a comely squaw. Thus, an industrious beach-comber might become a man of means.

The short or broken shells were strung in like manner and these inferior strings were called kopkops or small change of which forty were equal in value to one Hiaqua.

"Forty to the fathom" was the standard or one Hiaqua, which would purchase as a rule one male and two female slaves; this was approximately fifty pounds sterling. A fathom of the best shells was equal to ten good beaver skins.

In Arizona and New Mexico, beads of turquoise were in use in trade and evidently much prized. They are round, small, and flat like the other stone beads but somewhat larger and thicker. They have an average diameter of one-eighth of an inch and are one-sixteenth of an inch thick.

Barleycorn beads existed in white, red, yellow and blue. Barleycorn is defined in the dictionary as a corn or grain of barley; an old measure of length; one-third of an inch. Obviously this does not relate to color, since those involved almost cover the spectrum. A yellow glass bead, which is formed like a corn kernel, has been recovered from sites in New Jersey but does not comply here because of the variety of colors. I believe that barleycorn beads were small oblate beads, and the invoice price of these beads on early trade lists would support this contention.

"Pigeon egg" beads are about the size of a pigeon's egg, and are made of opaque white glass. Nine strands weighed four pounds so they must have been heavy beads.

The Italians really had a "field day" in making beads. They manufactured all the different kinds they could with the equipment that was available to them. In excavations on the site of the old trading post that flourished at Grand Portage from 1780 to 1800 thousands of glass and porcelain beads of various colors, sizes, and shapes have been found. Among them are large seed beads chiefly in white and light blue. A few are deep red in color.

Cut-glass beads in blue, green, milk-white and clear were traded from the plains area to Alaska. Italian spotted beads were a type which were also widely used.

Runties, if Indian made, were either large like an oval bead, drilled the length of the oval or else they were circular and flat and drilled edgewise. There were also round tablets of about four inches in diameter, smoothly polished, and etched or graved with circles, stars, halfmoons, or other figures. The historic Indians adorned these shells with beaded rosettes and attached them to neckbands and other pieces. The term "Wampum Moon Shells" referred to the discs or especially the half-moons from one to four inches in diameter which served as money, and were valued by Indians from twenty-five cents to five dollars each. These were cut from Conch Shells, and worn by Indians as ornaments on the hair and clothing.

The Campbell Wampum, or manufactured Wampum, was very pretty because it was made from the thick and blue part of sea clamshells. The strings were about twelve inches long and the beads varied from about one-half of an inch to seven-eighths of an inch in length and were of uniform diameter of three-sixteenths of an inch. These are much larger in every respect than those made commercially before the Campbell factory commenced operations. I would estimate that there were about fourteen beads per string and six or seven strings to the bunch.

"Bugle" beads are described in literature as "The Melancholy Bugle Bead," so well known as a jangling accompaniment to modified mourning. They have been used for centuries and centuries for breast plates and collars. These bugle beads are usually white, but vary in color and size, and all are of opaque glass. They appear to have been cut or broken, suggesting that they came from a longer bead.

Coral beads from the Mediterranean and Mexico were traded to the Southwest Indians who commonly added silver and turquoise to the strings.

There are no references to the use of Russian beads in the Pacific Northwest; however, the Forty-Sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology refers to the finding of various beads of Russian make, especially those of the large blue variety, in the graves of Indians in the Yukon Valley in Alaska.¹⁵

The little bead which played so predominant a role in trade and barter is almost a thing of the past. As the Hudson's Bay Company's "Beaver" office recently expressed it, "We deal in beads so little these days that old words have lost their meanings."

¹⁵See also Smithsonian Report of 1877, Washington 1878, page 302.

"THE HEART HAS NO TONGUE"

Chief Washakie helped to extricate General Crook from a trap set by Crazy Horse and his warriors. For this act, President Grant sent Washakie an ornamented saddle, decorated in gay colors, which was accepted in grim silence. The gift was presented through an agent, who was somewhat puzzled by the Chief's behavior.

"What shall I say to the President?" he asked.

Washakie grunted, "Nothing."

The agent, puzzled and chagrined at the answer, was on the verge of admonishing the Indian for his seemingly unappreciative attitude. Washakie, with head erect, looked at him and said, "When a favor is shown a Frenchman, he feels it in his head, and his tongue speaks. When a kindness is shown an Indian he feels it in his heart, and the heart has no tongue."

Bib.: Lavender, David, *The Big Divide*, Doubleday and Company, New York, 1949.

THE NARRATIVE OF ZENAS LEONARD

Zenas Leonard, who spent five and one-half years in the mountains during the fur trade era, kept an accurate record of events which he gave to a newspaper, the *Clearfield Republican*. The material was printed serially and also was published in an eighty-seven page book by the editor, D. W. Moore, of Clearfield, Pennsylvania. The newspaper plant was burned down and all books and papers destroyed except a few copies of the Zenas Leonard book. This was reprinted in 1904 in a limited edition of 520 copies.

Leonard's copy is now owned by Zenas Leonard III, a great-grandson who lives in Burbank, California.

Bib.: Leonard's Narrative, ed. by W. F. Wagner, The Burrows Bros., Cleveland, 1904.
The Plains and the Rockies, Wagner and Camp, Grabhorn Press, 1937.
The Kansas City Star, March 9, 1948.