

Idaho archaeologist carves out national reputation

When Idaho's world-famous archaeologist receives an honorary Doctor of Science degree at the University of Idaho next Saturday, sometime during the weekend he will probably unbutton his shirt to show somebody where the almost scar-free chest surgery was done with his own incredibly sharp obsidian blade.

This is something new in the field of modern medicine, although it evidently was an ancient art long before the pyramids were born. This is one of the things that makes Don Crabtree of Kimberly a true Renaissance man.

Crabtree stands unique, a self-taught expert whose study of stone-age tools has immeasurably aided archaeologists in interpreting the history of early man in America as well as in Europe.

As one of his international colleagues, Dr. Francois Bordes of France, is quoted as saying:

"In American archaeology there is a pre-Crabtree period and a post-Crabtree period."

The boy in Salmon, who was fascinated with the Indian arrowheads that abound in that area, became the man who unlocked one of the great secrets of the past: How pre-historic man made his incredibly efficient weapons and tools out of stone or glassy volcanic rock.

"If we try to examine the history of man beyond 10,000 years," he says, "we must turn to stone because that's the only unperishable thing left. It outlasts pottery or legends."

There were evidences of many different techniques found around the world, he says, but nobody had done anything with research in that direction. Crabtree had no guidebooks. He had only the examples of the distant past for models. By trial and error, and his own ingenuity and elbow grease, he learned to duplicate the work and thus to understand a great deal about how stone age man lived.

"It is true," he says, "that one is able to identify a certain people in different areas of the world, and different times of the past, just by these tools."

His listener learns that the artifacts found in Idaho hills, and around the world, are far more than Indian arrowheads and spear points. They are the history of primitive peoples and are often a great deal more sophisticated than the average person's Flint-stones image.

The ancient art of using an obsidian or cervit blade in surgery is now being seriously studied, he said, since his experience in 1976. A Twin Falls surgeon, Dr. Bruce Buck, used one of Crabtree's cervit blades for the first incision to remove a rib and lung section.

Crabtree unbuttoned his shirt and showed us it left no scar.

"With an edge that fragile, you can handle it very delicately," he explained. "It has lots of advantages. Quick healing. Speed. Some doctors are interested in using these blades for cosmetic surgery because few cells would be destroyed. The ordinary scalpel is pretty rough by comparison."

He showed a photo, magnified 10,000 times, in which the scalpel's "platinum plus" blade looks like a craggy rockpile beside the keenly sharp cervit blade.

The cervit blades can be thrown away after each use. They are not expensive.

"You can drag your finger across one and it will cut to the bone," he said. "I have cut myself often like this, but I don't have any scars. It took me 20 years to perfect these. I had aborigine models. All I had to do was copy."

He said primitive people made blades from stone by using a hammer



As She Says

By Betty Penson

and pressure to flake off the size and shape they need. Crabtree is able to read them like fingerprints.

"All are different and can be traced back to the different place and time they originated," he said. "We don't have many of their blades. We only have what they threw away, the basic piece from which the blades were flaked."

He showed a piece of black vitreous glass about the size of a zucchini squash but faceted lengthwise. "This is called the core."

In Meso-America (Central America) cores have been found to indicate primitive man was flaking blades 20 inches long. "They must have had some sort of lever or mechanization," Crabtree mused. "A man couldn't use that much pressure to break that much material."

How far back this goes is hard to judge, he said. One place in Mexico indicates a history of 20,000 years. Similar blades were being made in Russia, France and Spain.

"Now science of lithic technology has followed man back 3 million years by researching his rough stone instruments," Crabtree said. "So our evidence of using metals is only about one quarter of one per cent of our history."

Crabtree has just returned from Belize (formerly British Honduras) where he was invited as a consultant on an architectural excavation. The five university teams there had found what amounted to literally a pre-historic factory. Cut stone artifacts in piles dozens of feet high and covering acres of grounds.

He considers this a major find, and estimated it will take crews hundreds of years just to catalogue it.

"We can only conclude that these people had a great factory going here with thousands of people employed," he said. "They were doing things with this rock or volcanic glass that nobody knows how to do today. They must have been carrying on an international trade for one country couldn't have consumed all that is left here."

He said he is fascinated by the variety of techniques used and how each worker seemed to have had a specific craft.

Crabtree's forte, his great strength, is his comprehensive study of the ancients through their work with rocks. For that he is known worldwide. He has a massive understanding of what is going on in the world of archaeology today and is constantly being consulted.

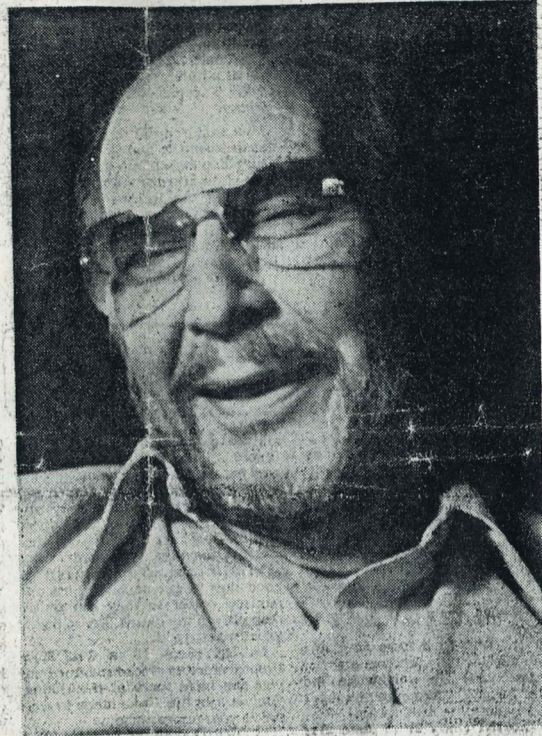
But for all this, he is a singularly humble man.

In the Denver Museum of Natural History, one of the largest in the world, a whole room is devoted to him and his work. When one mentions to him the Denver pictures showing him at work and the many credits given him, he says shyly, "I've never seen it."

Michener sent Crabtree a copy of the manuscript for his book Centennial asking him to correct the chapters on early man and gave him credit in the book for helping write it. He calls Crabtree the foremost authority in the world on early man.

Crabtree says, "It was only an autographed copy. And he didn't take my advice anyway."

(Betty Penson's column on Don Crabtree continues next Sunday)



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