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THE ESCALON INDIAN SKELETON AND POUCH

By Baxter Sperry

In 1939 the Federal Government was clearing land in California so that it would be useful for farming. In southeastern San Joaquin County near Escalon was a piece of perfectly level land, about 40 acres in extent, which was covered with hundreds of old oak trees. The WPA men doing the clearing had, as part of their work, to count the rings on the trees they felled and fill in a report for their Chief. The trees ranged in diameter from two to three feet.

Roy Foote of Galt, later Municipal Judge for the District, was a leaderman on the clearing project and tells of this incident. One large tree, about thirty inches in diameter, was close to an old Indian trail that could be seen crossing the piece of land where the men were working. About four men dug a large circle about two feet deep around the tree with picks and shovels, using a mattock to cut the roots. When the tree fell, under where its crown had rested was the skeleton of an Indian, a full grown man lying stretched out on his back with his arms at his sides. On the skeleton's chest was a pouch of leather, with a round bottom about four inches across sewed to a tube about eight inches tall. From the description it sounds much like a present day quiver. There was no closing at the top end of the pouch, and the stitches were of a very thin leather thong.

Each of the men took some of the contents of the pouch for souvenirs, and Judge Foote still has most of the contents that were his share. There would seem to be no way in which the dead Indian could have been placed under the tree after it was growing. There were 260 rings in the oak trunk, which would make it 260 years old, or, counting back from the time it was felled, it had been growing there since about 1680 AD.

Fortunately Judge Foote has had a lifelong interest in Indian life and artifacts, so that, from the things which he found a fair amount of knowledge can be obtained. There was a great quantity of red and white beads, nearly enough to fill a quart jar. These beads were either reddish orange in color, or white. Some had orange outside and white inside, and similar beads are found in museums in the West. They are made of clay flattened and rolled into a tube, then cut and baked. There are none without glaze. They vary in size from tiny ones about one-eighth of an inch across to some about three-eighths of an inch in diameter. Some are flattened, like little doughnuts, some are nearly round. Judge Foote sent some of these beads to the University of California at Los Angeles around 1940, and was told that the material did not come from the United States, and the university staff could not identify it. It is known that beads have been manufactured in the Philippine Islands since the fourth century AD, and trade beads were made in Venice in the 16th century and later. There are beads, similar in color, of magnesite, which the Indians value highly, but these are usually longer and rougher on the surface. The Russians also traded beads to the West Coast Indians for furs, "Moss faces" as the traders were called from their beards are still referred to by old Indians. The question of dating still remains. Spain ceded Old and New California to Russia in 1817, and before that forbade foreigners to trade on these shores. There was, however, illicit trade, and these may be Russian trade beads of a very early period.

The largest charm was a piece of haliotis shell, or abalone, iridescent on both sides, worked into a long rectangle with a hole bored through the upper end. These charms were highly valued for use as fishing charms, and were suspended over a stream or bay or other body of water to attract the fish. They were also worn by the shamans, or medicine men in their ritual dances.

In the pouch was also a fossil of animal bone. It looks as though it had been in water and had crystallized. There are indentations outlining where tiny clam or mussel shells had been imbedded in the bone joint. This was a charm of some sort. The coyote figured largely in the Indian mythology, and this may have been a fragment of coyote bone valued for its magical properties.

Among the relics was a green stone which is highly prized by Western Indians as a charm stone. It was about an inch long and half an inch in diameter, of a shade slightly darker than oriental jade, and was very smooth as though it had lain in a stream bed or had been polished. Stones are sometimes used by Indian net makers, to measure each mesh when working the net, but the color green suggests that this, too, was a charm.

There was a pendant about two inches long and half an inch wide, thicker than shell, which looked like polished bone with a hole in one end, and many pieces of either stone or seashell, triangular in shape, dark bluish-grey, with a hole in the outer edge. There were white or light streaks in the material, and these ornaments were highly polished, and were slightly less than an inch on each side, and flat.

One unusual item was very thin flat copper. Each piece of this, and there were many, had rather jagged edges and was rolled to make a bead. Copper is not worked by California Indians, and Judge Foote suggests that these pieces were probably traded. He has been to burial mounds in southern Oregon where these copper beads were numerous.

There was nothing in the area cleared that would suggest a burial mound, and no other skeletons were found during the clearing operation. It would seem, on guessing, that this skeleton belonged to an Indian who was on a trading trip, and died along the trail. Either he lay down to die with his belongings on his chest, or companions buried him. In some Indian burials burning of the belongings of the dead person is usual, but these artifacts were not burned, which would make this seem a hurried, not a ritual burial.

Judge Roy Foote, as a young man in New York State, was a friend of Warren K. Moorehead, a national authority on Indian artifacts. The two men frequently went on digging expeditions together. Since coming to California Judge Foote has made a study of the California Indians and has a collection of most of the California types of arrowheads, spearheads, ceremonial and charm stones. Judge Foote is well known for his lectures to clubs and school groups.

*Author's note: There are many different opinions and conjectures about artifacts, but I have used opinions from the best authorities I could find, and given all of the possibilities mentioned by the authors who wrote my reference books.