A FOOTNOTE ON FIRE STEELS[1]

Fire making is an essential of human existence. Stone-age men mastered the art and devised instruments, more or less ingenious, for its practice. In 1827 friction matches were invented in England and nine years later they were first produced in the United States. Until that time, the most practical tool for starting a fire, particularly by hunters and other travelers, was the fire steel and flint. As the friction match came into use, the fire steel went out, so that today even the very word is absent from most dictionaries and comparatively few people now alive have any knowledge of the implement which was an ordinary necessity of life to our great-grandfathers.

The Indian, no less than the white man, had to make fires. When the white man first appeared in his midst, bearing an assortment of "white" goods for barter, the spectacle was so overwhelming that the red man was inclined to look upon the newcomer as a god. At one bound he passed from the Stone to the Iron Age. The superiority of iron knives, awls, hatchets, and other tools to his own stone-age implements was so obvious that the Indian was eager to acquire them, and eventually, having lost his stone-age arts, found them indispensable to his continued existence.

Herein was the basis for the Indian trade, whose conduct became, with the passage of time, thoroughly standardized. One of the staple articles of the trade was the fire steel, a small oval piece of iron designed to slip over the fingers of one hand and present its outer surface or edge to the con-

[1] This paper was presented at the afternoon session of the eighty-eighth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul on January 18, 1937. In the absence of the author, it was read by Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock, curator of the society's museum. *Ed.*

tact of a flint held in the other hand. Students of the history of the Northwest are acquainted with the role played therein by the British Indian department at Amherstburg during the first half of the nineteenth century. To Amherstburg (sometimes called "Malden") went annually several thousand Indians, most of them from the United States, to counsel with their British "father" and to receive from him the presents which were regularly doled out. The Indian department was an important branch of the government of Canada, and careful rules for its procedure were made and rigidly enforced. The goods given to the Indians must be ordered a year in advance; they were consigned to the keeper of the storehouse of the Indian department at Amherstburg; they could be given out only by the Indian agent, upon requisitions countersigned by the military commandant; and the storekeeper kept an exact record of all articles received and dispensed by him.[2]

For a third of a century following the building of Fort Malden in 1796, the Indian storekeeper at Amherstburg was George Ironside, and he was succeeded in the office by his son, also named George. The official papers of these two men have been preserved, and they are an indispensable source of information concerning the operations of the Indian department of Upper Canada during the first four decades of the nineteenth century. From them, one learns that fire steels were one of the staples regularly given to the

[2] An amusing illustration of red tape as it existed a century ago is afforded by the correspondence concerning an Indian who died at Amherstburg in January, 1820. It was customary on such occasions for the government to issue a certain amount of cloth to clothe the deceased for burial. For some reason the commandant, in this case, refused to approve the requisition of the agent for the material needed, referring the request to his superior at Quebec, four months distant, for his decision. "You must be well aware," the agent wrote in reply to this action, "that it is unnecessary for me to return the Requisition for the purpose you mention, as you cannot for a moment suppose the corpse of an Indian would be allowed to remain unburied until a requisition for a funeral suit [can] return from Quebec. I have myself purchased the articles for his interment and the Indian is already buried."

Indians by the government, and the annual advance estimates of the supplies needed for distribution disclose that the government assumed that every warrior would require a fire steel on each of his annual visits to the post. How many more he might find need for during the twelve-month interval between visits, one can only surmise.

Since the fire steel never wore out, and was seldom broken, it is obvious that it was frequently lost by its possessor. Inspection of the records of the government storehouse discloses some interesting facts concerning the issues of fire steels. During the decade of the twenties, the number of Indians resorting annually to Amherstburg ranged from five thousand to seventy-five hundred. Perhaps a third of the total were men, and fire steels were issued only to them. For several years the annual estimate of warriors expected to visit the post the coming year was fixed at 2,051, and this was the number of fire steels laid in for distribution each year. In practice, the records disclose that the actual issues fell considerably below the quantity provided, and the individual returns disclose, also, a rather surprising variation in the outgo of fire steels to different bands of visiting Indians. Although every warrior *might* lose his fire steel annually, it is evident either that some of them did not, or else that they procured new ones from some other source than Amherstburg.

The figures that follow are selected for illustrative purposes, from the vastly greater mass of data available. On June 24, 1816, at the beginning of the summer quarter, 996 steels were in store. During the quarter 308 were issued, leaving 688 on hand on September 24. Like present-day tourists, Indians did most of their traveling in warm weather; in the quarter closing December 24, 1817, but 180 steels were given out. A few years later, the number of annual visitors, and alike the quantity of presents issued, was much greater. For 1821 there were 1,737 fire

steels received at Amherstburg, while for 1824–31 inclusive the number annually laid in was fixed at 2,051.[3]

The annual estimates disclose, also, the basis of distribution of the various articles given out as presents and the relative numbers of each which were required. For 1820, for example, two hundred hoes, a hundred half axes, two gross of jew's-harps, four gross of fire steels, and six gross of awls were ordered. The jew's-harp was intended for diversion, while the awl was used in numerous ways daily. Awls were easily lost and might readily be broken; they were used by the women even more than by the men. The supply of two-thirds as many fire steels — issued only to men — as awls sufficiently indicates that the steels were indispensable to the red man's domestic economy.

Sample issues of fire steels to individual bands of visitors to Amherstburg in 1816 are the following: on August 8, to 72 Indians, 12 steels; August 18, to 60 Indians, 10 steels; August 19, to 10 Indians, 10 steels; August 20, to 43 Indians, 16 steels; September 16, to 237 Indians, 100 steels; September 20, to 259 Indians, 96 steels; September 25, to 273 Indians, 116 steels; October 2, to 410 Indians, 125 steels. The foregoing parties included men, women, and children, and since the advance estimates provided for giving a fire steel to each warrior, one may infer that the number of steels issued indicates the number of men in each party. For certain later years, the returns disclose the ages and sexes of the members of the bands, suitable age groupings being utilized for the boys and girls. For such years as 1832, 1836, and 1838 the returns show that fire steels were issued to all men visiting the post. In the period from June 11 to July 9, 1832, for example, 18 parties, totaling 1,956 persons, went to Amherstburg. The number of men in the eighteen parties was 540, and 540 fire steels were given to them.

[3] The number for 1828 and 1829 each, was 2,049; no estimate for 1830 has been found.

The Indians who resorted to Amherstburg were from all the states of the old Northwest, and on occasion from Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota as well. Their number comprised but a minor fraction of the total Indian population of this vast area. Those who never went to Malden had the same need for fire steels as those whose wants were supplied by their British "father." The British officials were prudent, and the official provision of one fire steel annually for each man affords clear proof of the high incidence of loss of the tiny implement which commonly occurred. Today, comparatively few people have ever seen a fire steel. Yet the Indians carried them everywhere over the Northwest (the present note takes no account of the white man's use of them), and lost, or mislaid, them frequently.[4] Their small size and their indestructible character unite to support the conclusion that specimens are likely to be found almost anywhere, especially along highways of travel, or around village and camp sites. Illustrative is the fact that a large number have been picked up in recent years at Niles, Michigan, in the vicinity of Fort St. Joseph. Since they have no intrinsic value, or apparent use, it seems likely that farmers and other outdoor workers come upon many specimens which the finder does not recognize, or take the trouble to preserve.

The foregoing observations have a definite bearing upon the argument for the historical validity of the Kensington stone, recording the visit of a party of Norsemen to Minnesota in 1362. In his book on the subject, Mr. H. R. Holand devotes much space to certain "corroborative finds"

[4] For an illustration of the use of fire steels by white men, see Gurdon S. Hubbard, *Autobiography,* 99 (Chicago, 1911). The traders mentioned here lost their steels and narrowly escaped death from freezing as a result. A pioneer's narrative of life in Wayne County, Michigan, a century ago discloses that a jackknife might be used upon a flint to strike a spark. The fire steel, however useful, was evidently not absolutely essential to the ingenious pioneer settler. See William Nowlin, "The Barkcovered House, or Pioneer Life in Michigan," in *Michigan Pioneer Collections,* 4:499.

of supposed medieval Norse implements, whose discovery in Minnesota is presumed to afford proof of the expedition of 1362. One of these finds is a fire steel, said to have been found near Climax about 1871. In volume 17 of this magazine (p. 35), Professor Laurence M. Larson ridicules the contention with respect to the fire steel, and Mr. Holand, on pages 183–185 of the same volume presents his rejoinder, bolstering anew his argument upholding the probative significance of the fire steel.

The present writer has neither space nor purpose to traverse the arguments of the two writers, which the reader who is interested may better read for himself. It seems proper to note, however, that the Climax fire steel was found on a dry knoll, embedded in charcoal and ashes. Charcoal and ashes imply a fire, and a dry knoll implies a logical site for an Indian village, tepee, or camp site. If the place in question was actually an Indian village site, it is probable that many more fire steels than the one accidentally unearthed in 1871 are concealed beneath the soil of the immediate vicinity. The argument from negative evidence, which Mr. Holand employs, is valid only when one explores all possible sources of information. An important one that Mr. Holand evidently overlooked is the use of fire steels in the Indian trade, which dates from the first appearance of the white man in the Northwest. The Norsemen may, or may not, have visited Minnesota in 1362; the chance discovery of a fire steel near Climax in 1871 sheds no conceivable light upon this interesting question.

M. M. QUAIFE

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