

A Tradition Like No Other

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What does the word “tradition” mean to you?

When we use it in everyday conversation, it’s probably with reference to a “family tradition” that members have been following for decades or even generations. Phoning faraway grandchildren each and every year on their birthdays, or spending the holidays at the cottage each summer, would be examples of family traditions. Holding annual observances on Remembrance Day is a national tradition here in Canada. Just about any custom that goes back a long way and that’s continued for a lengthy period of time is a “tradition.”

How long does something have to have been in existence before we can call it a tradition, or “traditional”? Because Canada is a fairly young country, our Remembrance Day and Canada Day observances only go back a few generations, and so as far as traditions go, they’re relatively modest thus far. By contrast, there was a tradition here in Manitoba that was routinely practiced for 11,000 years – a tradition of very long-standing indeed! It’s called “flintknapping.”

According to the dictionary, the verb “knap” means to break into pieces, and that’s exactly what flintknapping involves: it’s a series of techniques used by early Aboriginal peoples in breaking down and thereby shaping pieces of flinty stone into a wide variety of useful workaday tools such as scrapers, knives, chisels, drills, gravers, awls, and projectile (arrow and spear) points. The process was rather like whittling away at a piece of wood with a certain end-product in mind, only in flintknapping, you’re breaking away and discarding “flakes” of stone with a hand-held hammer-like implement or a pointed piece of antler, rather than carving away wooden chips with a sharp knife.

Basically, there are two kinds of flintknapping – percussion, and pressure. Percussion flaking, shown as A and B in Figure 1, involves striking a blow with a hammerstone or a piece of antler to remove fairly large fragments of stone from the artefact in the making. Pressure, on the other hand, is a more delicate operation: here, as shown in drawing Figure 1C, tiny flakes are carefully snapped off around the edge of the artefact to give it its final thickness and shape.

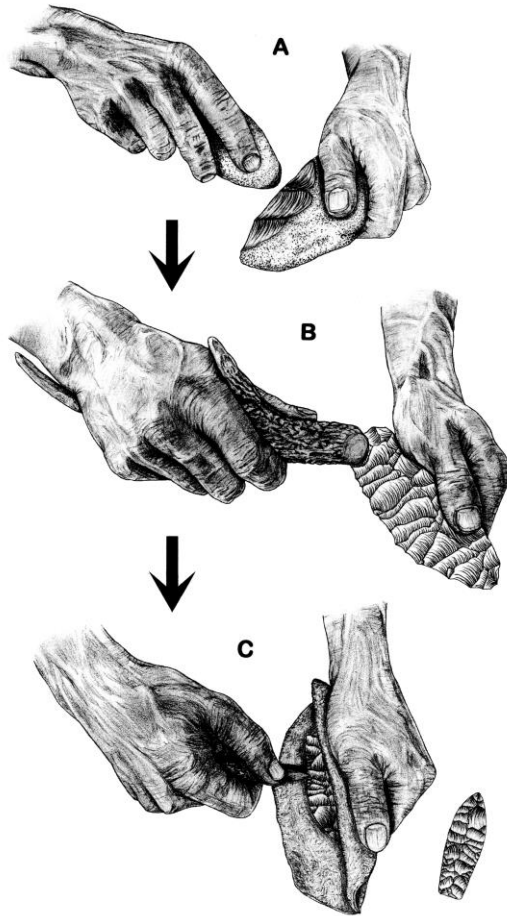


Fig. 1. Three stages of flintknapping: A – hard-hammer percussion; B – soft-hammer percussion; C – pressure flaking. Drawings by Donalee Deck, courtesy of Enbridge Pipelines Inc.

These procedures were in use early in the human history in Europe, Asia and Africa (that’s why they call it the Stone Age on those continents). In northern Manitoba and throughout the prairie provinces, these methods of creating stone implements for everyday use has been traced all the way back to the last Ice Age, or for well over 400 generations. From time immemorial, the flintknapping “industry” formed the very foundation of Aboriginal peoples’ technology here and elsewhere, since sharp-edged and pointed stone tools were in turn used to manufacture other goods from softer raw materials such as wood (arrow and spear shafts, knife handles), leather (clothing, footwear, tent covers), and bone (sewing needles, decorative beads, harpoon heads), to mention just a few.

In Manitoba, it wasn’t particularly hard to locate the raw material from which flintknappers made things: workable stone could be found widely distributed about the countryside, having

been deposited by the glaciers hundreds and thousands of years beforehand. It was especially abundant along riverbanks, in streambeds and on stony beaches that are themselves common in Manitoba. It also outcrops as quartz veins in the bedrock of the Canadian Shield. An important quarry and open-air workshop site has been discovered in the greenstone belt near the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border where rhyolite slabs were extracted and processed into “blanks” or “roughouts,” as shown in Figure 2A-D. These could then be cached around the countryside for manufacture into finished artefacts in winter when quarrying was difficult and the people were moving from place to place in search of game. Also, during the warm months, the blanks could be transported and finished as needed at campsites located some distance away from the quarry workshop itself. Fine-quality chalcedony could also be gathered or imported from the faraway Knife River Flint deposits in North Dakota, and the ultimate in the flintknapper’s choice in raw material – natural (volcanic) glass, also known as obsidian – was traded across the plains into Manitoba from the Rocky Mountains of Wyoming. All of this went on long before the arrival of Europeans.



Fig. 2. Rhyolite roughouts/blanks from a quarry near Flin Flon. Photo by Rob Barrow, courtesy of the Manitoba Archaeological Society.

With the coming of the fur traders, the custom of flintknapping eventually died out. One nice thing about trade goods was, you didn’t have to go through the trouble of making them yourself – they were already fully made when you got them from the trader. Also, the flinty stone of the flintknapper’s craft was rather brittle and vulnerable to frequent breakage, whereas metal trade

goods were much more durable. During the fur trade, certain more complex artefacts such as the bow and arrow were supplemented or replaced by flintlock guns, and even where the bow and arrow remained popular for a time, you could get metal arrowpoints from your friendly local trader -- you didn't have to make them yourself from stone in the traditional way. Native flintknapping did survive for a time in Manitoba during the fur trade, as is shown by the archaeological discovery of Indigenous-style hide-scraper bits made from bottle glass.

Flintknapping wasn't solely an Aboriginal custom: the early European trade guns were called "flintlocks" because pieces of flint, called "gunflints," formed part of the firing mechanism. These gunflints were turned out in the hundreds of thousands in Europe by specialist knappers for their armies and for the North American fur trade. These professional flintknappers got their supplies of raw material from quarries right there in Europe. But for Manitoba's Aboriginal people, the arrival of the Europeans and their trade goods sounded the death knell of one of their most ancient indigenous traditions. Today, flintknapping in Manitoba is all but a relic of bygone times, practiced occasionally by a few local archaeologists when putting on educational demonstrations of the ancient craft, or in creating replicas for historical displays.

And to that extent at least, we can truly say that the ancient tradition of flintknapping still lives on.