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Use of Minerals by the Copper Eskimo

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USE OF MINERALS BY THE COPPER ESKIMO

By JOEL MARTIN HALPERN

To most people the mention of the word Eskimo brings to mind a picture of a man clad all in furs; he is crouched over a hole in the ice patiently waiting to harpoon a seal. All around him are masses of ice and snow. To a limited extent this is true, but actually the Eskimo way of life is infinitely more complex than most people imagine. This article is concerned only with a specific group of Eskimo and a very specialized part of their technology. A brief description of general Eskimo life is therefore justified. The Eskimo occupy the shores of the Arctic Ocean and some of the inland territory all the way from eastern Siberia to northern Greenland. The Copper Eskimo, in particular, live in the Northwest Territory of Canada around the Coronation Gulf and Coppermine River regions. Throughout the central Canadian arctic areas and Greenland most of the groups specialize in the hunting of sea mammals, but even within this area there are groups whose main source of food is caribou; they are called the Caribou Eskimo. In Alaska many groups specialize in hunting large and small whales.

The very elaborate technology also varies to suit the specific needs of the group concerned. Before we look at the use of the mineral resources of the Copper Eskimo it might be well to mention that other Eskimo groups utilized minerals which were unknown in this area. The Alaskan Eskimo used jade extensively while those of northern Greenland used meteoric iron. Beside this quartz was used for religious purposes and iron oxide for decoration. Pyrites were also used for the making of fire by many different groups.

The two chief minerals we will deal with here are native copper and soapstone. The copper was usually in the form of float and was found in many places from the north shore of Great Bear Lake to Victoria Island in the Ca-

nadian archipelago. The Coppermine River and the Coppermine Mountains west of it, however, appear to have been the main source of supply. Some of the chunks seem to have been of a size which would rival some of the more common finds in Michigan and elsewhere. Jeness describes obtaining from a native a solid block which weighed forty pounds and which had originally been twice as large. This specimen was found on the Coppermine River. Stefansson relates the finding of a piece of float copper as large as a house building brick on the north shore of Great Bear Lake.

These deposits attracted the attention of traders of the Hudson Bay Company as early as 1766. Samuel Hearne was sent to investigate in the hope that these deposits might possibly lend themselves to commercial exploitation. After great difficulty he finally reached the river which he named the Coppermine. He reported that the native copper was extensively utilized by the Eskimo who lived there. As a result of his explorations, however, the section proved to be too remote and too inaccessible even if large ore deposits were to be found there. To date there has been no commercial mining of the mineral here. At a spot now called Bloody Falls the northern Indians who accompanied him massacred a small party of Eskimos camped on the shore of the river.

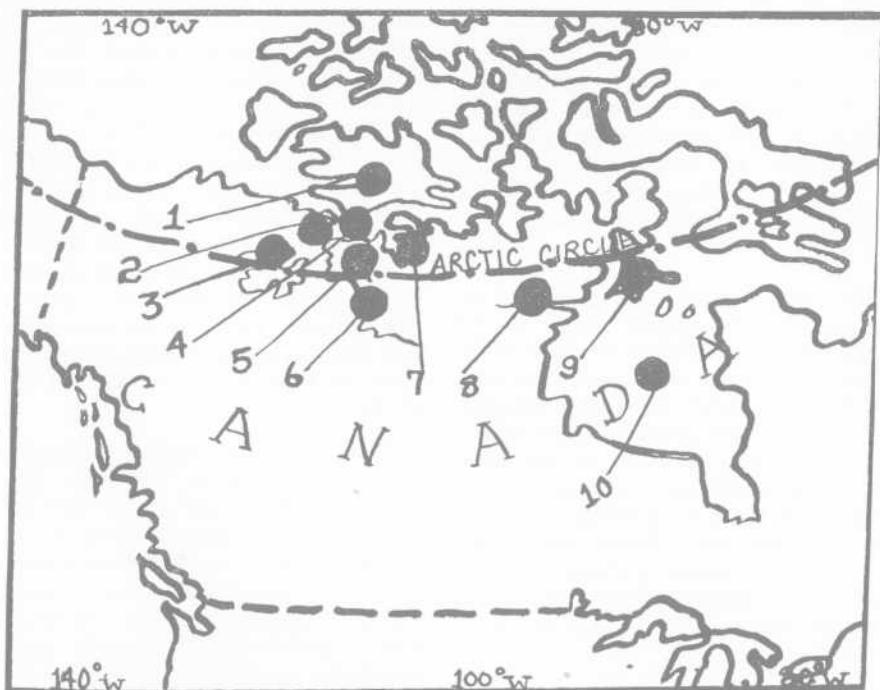
From the copper in these deposits the natives made knives, *ulos* (a special woman's knife similar to our half-moon shaped meat choppers), ice-picks, and harpoon heads. In the manufacture of certain of these copper objects considerable skill and ingenuity was shown. To make a gaff-hook, for example (see illustration), a rough prong was first hammered out of a small mass of float copper using a beach pebble. After that it was smoothed and finished by rubbing against a large boulder. A piece of caribou antler was shaped into a head and then holes were drilled through it, and each

prong was attached by passing one end through a hole and hammering it to a flat rivet-head. The prongs were then secured by being wedged in place with small pieces of copper. Copper rivets were sometimes used to strengthen the gaff-hook. The head was beveled where it was fastened to a wooden shaft, and it was held in place with copper pegs, the junction being securely wrapped with strips of raw sealskin. When completed the shaft was about fifteen to twenty feet in length and about one and a half inches in diameter.

One authority, Jeness, maintains that the Eskimo inhabiting the regions around Coronation Gulf were in the pseudo-metal age, — that is, the metal was used just as if it were malleable stone. This is supported by the fact that no refining techniques were used on ores and that the metal was not in any way treated

with heat. He goes on to state that the use of copper among the Eskimo is relatively recent and does not date back more than four or five centuries. Jeness thinks the wide-spread copper culture of the northern Indians was much older. The Eskimos are said to have acquired the use of copper from them. As partial evidence the lack of any copper artifacts in archaeological ruins excavated in this area is cited. These theories, however, have not as yet been completely accepted.

The other important use of minerals was in the making of stone pots and lamps. The latter were used in the snow igloo and were equipped with a moss wick and seal blubber to provide light and heat and were further utilized for cooking. Fresh soapstone (talc chlorite schist) is the chief raw material, although the Southampton Islanders, far to the east in Hudson Bay, lacking soapstone



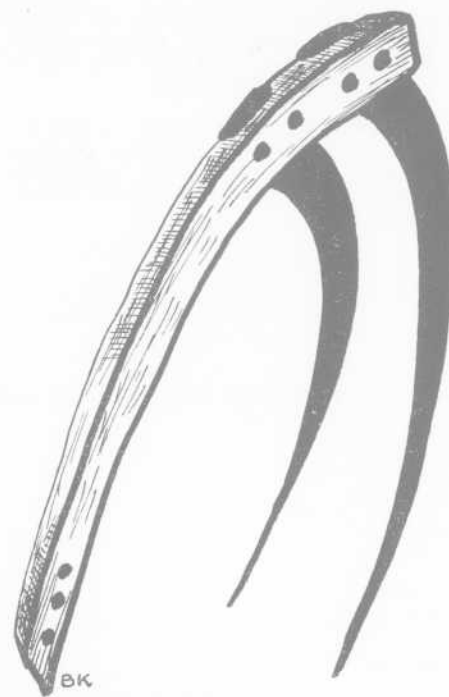
Map of Canada. Scale—1:41,600,000
Key to locations mentioned.

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Victoria Island | 6. Coppermine River |
| 2. Bloody Falls | 7. Bathurst Inlet |
| 3. Great Bear Lake | 8. Chesterfield Inlet |
| 4. Coronation Gulf | 9. Southampton Island |
| 5. Tree River | 10. Hudson Bay |

used limestone instead. This limestone had to be painstakingly cemented together and did not work out very well. The soapstone could be worked quite easily even with so soft a material as copper. No great skill was required, and even the largest lamps could be made by an Eskimo in a few days. Some people in need of lamps made a special trip in the summer to the area around Tree River and returned with newly-made pots even though they had never seen one made before.

All these objects — soapstone pots and lamps, copper implements, and even pyrites were valuable items for trade. Some nearby groups who lacked things to trade made special trips to the area inhabited by the Copper Eskimo to collect their own copper and soapstone. This was possible since none of these resources of nature were considered to be "owned" by the local tribe. These trade regulations were quite interesting; one group, the Naneragmiut, received copper and caribou skins from the north and articles of wood from the south. They then acted as go-betweens for two other groups. Their own local resource was some iron pyrite deposits which were universally used by all the Copper Eskimo in making fire.

Another tribe, the Kanhiryuarmiut, were widely known as the makers of weapons and implements of copper. They obtained their supply from pieces of float which occurred near the deposits northeast of Prince Albert Sound on Victoria Island. They made long-blade hunting knives, *ulos*, crooked knives for whittling, copper rods for foreshafts of seal harpoons, points for ice chisels, blades for caribou spears, prongs for fish hooks, needles for sewing, and nails and spikes used for mending wood, horn, and bone. Some of these articles as well as a supply of the raw material were taken on their long trading excursions to the head of Chesterfield Inlet on Hudson Bay, where they were exchanged for wooden articles. Similarly other tribes tended to specialize in the manufacture of soapstone pots because there were deposits



Head of gaff-hook with copper prongs.
(After Cadzow)

of the material in their own territory; they often supplied pots for people as far west as Siberia.

Besides this limited tribal specialization there was also some individual specialization. Lame men or others unable to hunt often acquired considerable skill in the manufacture of these implements so that their products were noticeably superior to others. They were paid in caribou skins and other items which were necessary to feed their families.

Today, of course, conditions have vastly changed, and copper implements and soapstone vessels are no longer used. Many modern Eskimo work for wages and live in tar-paper shacks. Others trap furs to buy flour, guns, and other commodities which have now become necessities.

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