



500 A.D. Copper Knife

BY BRUCE BLAKE

Daughters of the American Revolution
Sioux Falls,
Lower Sherman Park

For several thousand years ancient people quarried veins of pure copper in the Lake Superior area. First, they built fires next to exposed raw copper to loosen it from bedrock. Next, they used handheld stone mauls to dislodge chunks of copper that were then pounded and shaped into weapons, ceremonial goods, and tools.

In 1960 while digging a drainage ditch about 300 yards south of this spot, local contractor Louie Heidebrink discovered a shiny, seven-inch, crescent-shaped copper knife buried 12-feet below ground level. Tests estimated the knife's

origin to be about 500 A.D. Once used to scrape the hides of buffalo and other animals, it is one of the oldest artifacts ever found in Minnehaha County.

Copper goods were highly prized in the trans-continental trade network among early people. During its 600-mile journey here, this knife was probably traded countless times. Heidebrink discovered the copper knife hundreds of years after it was lost or mislaid by its owner, who possibly lived in the nearby Mound Builders Village.

Dedicated in 2001 in Memory of Louie Heidebrink
by the Minnehaha County Historical Society and the City of Sioux Falls



Oldest Metal Artifact

Shown is an artist's conception of a woman from the nearby Mound Builders Village who is using the Heidebrink copper knife to scrape an animal hide. Heidebrink's find was radiocarbon dated at the University of Wisconsin and was determined to date at about 500 A.D. This prehistoric scraping tool is the oldest metal artifact ever discovered in Minnehaha County. It is on display in the Plains Indian Room at the Center for Western Studies, Augustana College. Drawing by Carl Grupp.



Louie Heidebrink

The Heidebrink copper knife has a thin, crescent-shaped blade with about 2/3 of the outer edge sharpened. Very little oxidation has taken place and the cutting edge is still surprisingly keen. Ripples from hammering are evident over the surface of the specimen. A similar knife is on display at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC. Prehistoric people made handles for their

copper knives by fastening wooden sticks, slotted bison ribs, or parts of deer antlers to the small pointed projections at each end of the knife. Ca. 1963. Image owner: Sioux Falls Argus Leader.