

The Penobscot War Bow

All museum collections contain artifacts of dubious authenticity. The Canadian Museum of Civilization has in its ethnological collections a bow that appears to be a reproduction of one owned by a notorious nineteenth-century showman named Big Thunder from Old Town, Maine. The original, the so-called Penobscot War Bow, is an attractive specimen that has taken on a life of its own in the popular and scientific literature, but it turns out not to be based on the material culture traditions of the people to whom it is attributed; in short, it is a fraud. This paper shows the extent of Day's interest in material culture; his devotion to fact, whether material or nonmaterial; and the role his background in forestry played in his ethnographic pursuits. The paper was originally published as pp. 1–15 in *Contributions of Canadian Ethnology*, 1975, Mercury Series Paper 31, National Museum of Man, Canadian Ethnology Service, Ottawa (1975).

A scientist's sole justification as a scientist is his search for fact and truth, and, though truth remain elusive, he must persist in his search for fact. He should insist that only fact is grist for his mill, and, to the extent that his "facts" are uncertain, to that extent, at least, must his hypotheses and general propositions remain doubtful. This is elementary, perhaps trite, yet it will bear restating, since in both anthropology and linguistics the descriptivist handed over authority to the theorist decades ago, and we have no reason to be complacent about the existing data on North American ethnology and linguistics. It cannot be doubted that decades hence North American studies will suffer from the data famine that has been and is being created by this attitude.

There is, moreover, a greater fascination in the search for new fact than in checking and verifying old assumptions and in correcting old error. To this human trait must be attributed at least part of the well-known phenomenon by which tentative statements by an investigator are repeated in the literature without the original qualifications and are paraphrased or reproduced in abridged form until they are accepted as fact even by scientists. When the popular and popularizing media present these old assumptions with colored and calculated half-truth and untruth, the general public adds to its store of knowledge "facts" which never existed. In my opinion, the proper reaction of a scientist to this situation may be found in the prescription of the late great Maritime toponymist William Francis Ganong:

In any genuine investigation, it is just as important to expose old error as to expound new truth . . . for, on the one hand, errors . . . have a wonderful vitality, and, on the other, if ignored, they are sure, sooner or later to be dug out and triumphantly displayed by the superficial student as the real truth overlooked by the investigator! The only logical way is for the investigator to recognize the error as a worthy enemy, and then proceed to demolish it by the same scientific methods which he used for the demonstration of the truth. (Eckstorm 1941:xiii)

Anyone who would reconstruct one of the North American cultures at the time of European contact must approach the facts by assessing historical documents and by attempting to distinguish aboriginal from borrowed traits in the data he acquires through his twentieth-century observations. Material cultures have been particularly subjected to European pressures, and their reconstruction is an area of ethnography in which it is easy to draw erroneous conclusions in spite of care and diligence. The character and even the very existence of a given artifact in a given culture around A.D. 1600 rests on three main classes of evidence: (a) its preservation in late prehistoric or contact-period archeological sites, (b) its recording in the writings of a very early observer, and (c) the inferring of its aboriginality at a much later time.

Requirement (a) eliminates that large fraction of a material culture which is subject to comminution and decay. Those who have worked with the extant writings of very early observers (b) know that their coverage of material culture is too occasional, too brief, and too incomplete for most purposes. Most of our conclusions about a material culture as it was about A.D. 1600 must be reached by process (c), and such inferences must depend on evaluations of native testimony, the character of the recorder, circumstantial considerations, and the evidence of distributional data.

Museum collections, which might seem to be a natural starting point for studies in material culture, contain almost nothing antedating 1750. The bulk of most collections postdates 1850 and, as museums continue to collect, an ever increasing proportion of their collections is being produced by twentieth-century natives according to what they think, and the collector hopes, are aboriginal patterns and materials. There are many obstacles in the way of establishing the authenticity, provenience, and aboriginality of artifacts found in museums. One encounters items collected or donated long ago without any documentation. Others may come from attics and have their origins two or more generations ago in a family which now remembers only that Uncle John traveled much and brought this piece back with him from "out West." There are artifacts acquired from twentieth-century Indians who know about their origins and uses only by hearsay. There are artifacts reproduced by Indians from memory at the ethnologist's request, artifacts which must carry an element of doubt unless they are accom-

panied by a full statement of the maker's qualifications. There are even occasional deliberate hoaxes palmed off on gullible collectors by Indians for money or sport.

This is not written to call into question the immense value of museum collections for the study of material culture or the high degree of confidence which we can place in those items and details which are confirmed by solid documentation, comparative studies, repeated collection, and the testimony of early observers. It is written rather to insist that items in collections may not be accepted uncritically but rather demand the most careful scrutiny and validation. It is written to reassert Ganong's dictum that students should recognize error as a worthy enemy and should systematically demolish it. It is written to provide a case history, demonstrating how a dubious item of material culture can, especially if it is attractive, become so entrenched in the popular media and in the minds of the public that it can finally achieve general acceptance. It is written particularly to reopen the question of the so-called Penobscot war bow.

The National Museum Specimen

In the collections of the Ethnology Division, National Museum of Man,¹ is an artifact (Number III-K-84) carried in the catalogue as a Penobscot war bow collected by G. A. Paul at Old Town, Maine, in 1913 (fig. 3). G. A. Paul was almost certainly Gabriel Paul, a Maliseet Indian living among the Penobscots and an informant of Frank G. Speck for whom Paul did considerable collecting (Speck 1935b:2).

Throughout the remainder of this paper, this artifact will be referred to as the National Museum specimen, bow terminology will follow Mason (1894), and arrow release terminology will follow Morse (1922).

The National Museum specimen is composed of a single stave, to the back of which is lashed a shorter piece, henceforth called the reinforcing piece. The ends of the reinforcing piece are connected to the ends of the stave, with pieces of rawhide, presumably to augment the action of the latter. The stave is slightly reflexed at the middle and strongly reflexed at the ends. As presently strung, it is 52½ inches (1.37 m) long. The reinforcing piece is reflexed somewhat more than the stave and is about 22¾ inches (568 mm) long. Although the wood is aged and stained and the transverse grain is nearly covered with rawhide, there is little doubt that the bow stave is of sugar maple (*Acer saccharum* Marsh) and that the reinforcing piece is of red or black oak, probably red oak (*Quercus rubra* L.) (E. Little 1953). The stave is half-round in cross section, with a flat back and round belly. The reinforcing piece is also half-round, with its flat inner face

¹[The National Museum of Man was subsequently renamed the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The collections of the Ethnology Division were consolidated with those of other divisions of the Museum in a centralized collection.—Eds.]

Fig. 3. The Penobscot War Bow in the
Collections of the Canadian Museum
of Civilization, Hull, Quebec.
Catalogue number III-K-84; negative
number J19212-10.



Penobscot War Bow

placed against the flat outer face of the stave so that, when wrapped with rawhide, they together form a handle grip about $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch (32 mm) in width (from left to right as seen by the user holding the bow vertically) and about $1\frac{3}{8}$ inch (35 mm) in thickness (from front to back as seen by the user). The string is a single piece of rawhide which passes through holes bored in the stave just below the recurved ends and about seven inches (180 mm) from the tips. The stave has moderate notches on both edges about $1\frac{3}{8}$ inch (35 mm) from each end, and the string is passed twice about these notches at each end and secured with a half-hitch. The most striking feature of the bow is a strip of rawhide, averaging about half an inch (13 mm) wide, which encircles the entire bow stave except that part of the belly which faces the main portion of the bowstring. Each end of the rawhide is secured by the bowstring, which passes through the rawhide where it lies along the inner face of the stave. The rawhide strip then extends along the inner (belly) face of the reflexed end, and passes over the end where it is secured by the projecting end, which penetrates a hole in the strip. The rawhide strip then passes back along the outer (back) face of the stave, the string again passing through a hole in the rawhide, to the ends of the reinforcing piece, where, by means of a longitudinal slit in the rawhide, it is carried around to the inner face of the reinforcing piece. It then runs between the flat opposing faces of the reinforcing piece and the stave to the other end of the reinforcing piece, around it, thence to and around the other end of the stave, being penetrated by the bowstring on both sides of the stave. It is held in place at each end of the stave by about a $5\frac{1}{2}$ -inch (148 mm) expanse of rawhide thong wrapping and at the ends of the reinforcing piece by a few turns of thong wrapping. At both locations, the thong wrapping is prevented from slipping by squared shoulders which represent the points at which the full size of the two components of the bow—stave and reinforcing piece—are each reduced by about $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm) in width. This occurs about half an inch (13 mm) back from the tips of the reinforcing piece and about seven inches (180 mm) from the ends of the stave. The whole bow is cleverly designed and is executed in a neat, workmanlike manner.

History

The National Museum's specimen is not the first known bow of this type, and it is probable that others of the same general type still exist. The recorded history of this type of bow seems to have begun in the year 1900. On 12 December of that year Ernest Thompson Seton, the well-known writer on woodcraft and nature lore, attended the Boston Sportsman's Show and there met a Penobscot Indian who called himself Big Thunder and who showed Seton a two-piece compound bow with an extra reinforcing piece, which was attached to the bow in much the same manner as has just been described. It was 5 feet $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches

(1.70 m) long and made of "hornbeam," probably *Ostrya virginia* (Mill.) K. Koch. The string, the handle lashing, and the cords connecting the extremities of the bow and of the reinforcing piece were of caribou hide. Seton's sketch is not perfectly clear, but the reinforcing piece appears to have been considerably shorter and the cords connecting its ends to the stave ends considerably longer than those in later models.

Big Thunder told Seton that this was the war bow of the Penobscots, that it had been in the tribe for over 200 years, and that it had been put in his charge by his uncle, the late Chief John Nepta. He was probably referring to the former Governor John Neptune, whose story has been written by Eckstorm (1945). Big Thunder also had a featherless arrow with a stone head and a very shallow nock which he pulled for Seton, using a thumb grip which Seton called the Mongolian. He told Seton that this was formerly the only grip used by his tribe, but that lately they used the secondary style. Seton sketched this grip, and his sketch shows a thumb pull but a grip otherwise not like the Mongolian. Seton thought the bow a very slow one and estimated that it pulled about 20 and not more than 25 pounds (between 9 and 11.5 kg). It is perhaps irrelevant that Big Thunder said that hornbeam practically never decays or loses its power with age, except perhaps to record what may have been an attempt to support his claim for the age of the bow. Actually, hornbeam is heavy, hard, strong and tough, but not particularly resistant to decay.

Seton may have made subsequent mention of Big Thunder's bow, but Seton's bibliography (Anonymous 1929) shows over a hundred titles which appeared after 1900, many of them in obscure periodicals, and the writer has not been able to make a thorough examination of them. A picture of Big Thunder with the bow is reproduced in John Francis Sprague's *Sebastian Rale*, published in Boston in 1906 (Eckstorm 1932:12) and in *The Museum Journal* (Speck 1911:22). The latter picture shows the details of the bow rather clearly, and generally confirms Seton's sketch. A comparison of this picture with the picture of Big Thunder in Speck (1940:fig. 59) seems to indicate that Big Thunder is holding the same bow in the latter picture, but the angle at which it is held obscures the details of the construction. The bow apparently remained for many years in Old Town, where it was seen in 1903 by an emissary of Miss Virginia Baker (Delabarre 1935:126) and, according to Eckstorm (1932:12), was purchased about 1928 for the Heye Museum of the American Indian in New York, although she could not obtain confirmation of this from the museum a few years later.

Speck (1940:113-114) mentioned Big Thunder's Bow in *Penobscot Man* and stated that at least a dozen reproductions of it had been made. He also reproduced an illustration of a bow of this type (Speck 1940:fig. 62), which according to Siebert (personal communication, 1968) was the only reproduction remaining at Old Town in 1935. The writer does not know the present where-

abouts of any of the other reproductions excepting the specimen in the National Museum of Man, if this is a copy, as seems likely. It should be noted also that the bow described by Speck is neither the same one shown in his figure 62 nor the one described and drawn by Seton and is unlike them in several particulars. The Speck bow was of rock maple, the Seton bow of hornbeam. The bow in Speck's figure 62 exhibits further differences in the rawhide bracing from the Seton bow, from the National Museum specimen, and even from Speck's own description. The bow of the illustration shows only a piece of rawhide attaching each end of the reinforcing piece to the corresponding end of the bow, while the Seton bow was braced in the ingenious and intricate fashion described for the National Museum specimen, as was the bow described by Speck.

Since Big Thunder's original bow is the only one which pretends to aboriginality, and since it is unique, not only among the Penobscots but also apparently in all North America, it is appropriate to examine its credentials. Chief Big Thunder was a picturesque figure. Some information about his character and career may be found in Eckstorm (1932), Speck (1940), and Siebert (1941a), but the most detailed account is that of Delabarre (1935), from which most of the following remarks have been derived. His real name was Francis or Frank Loring, and he was known at Old Town as Big Frank Lola. Estimates of his birth date vary from 1821 to 1827, and he died on 7 April 1906. Lola is a family name at Old Town, and Big Thunder claimed that John Neptune was his uncle. Arthur Neptune, the oldest surviving Neptune and a direct descendent of old John Neptune, denies this relationship, and some Penobscots claimed that Loring was a full-blooded white man (Siebert, personal communication, 1969). Nothing definite has been written about his parentage, and by his own statement he was orphaned at an early age. He traveled with his sisters making and selling baskets, traveling as far as New York and Philadelphia, where he met and became associated for a time with P. T. Barnum. Estimates of the time spent traveling with Barnum's shows vary between eight months and 20 years, but no occupation other than showman has been attributed to him. It is known that in 1855 he gave a show at Brewer, Maine, and that in 1860 he visited Warren, Rhode Island. In his later years at Old Town, he sold—and apparently made—Indian relics with interesting stories attached to them. He was first and last a showman. All who knew him agreed that he was unscrupulous, a liar, and a rascal. Fannie Eckstorm, who knew him, and his Penobscot tribesmen, who were Speck's and Siebert's informants, were in agreement about this. There is no record of a contrary opinion.

Opinions regarding the authenticity of Big Thunder's bow have varied in tone, but they have been generally negative. Eckstorm stated flatly that it had no authenticity. Siebert, whose elderly informants were acquainted with Big Thunder, stated that the bow was not authentic but rather was one of Big Thunder's fabrications. Two lists of Big Thunder's marvelous relics and the stories he told

about them may be found in Eckstorm (1932:12–13) and Delabarre (1935: 126–127). They included such treasures as a letter from Queen Isabella of Spain to the mother of Joe Polis, who lived into the nineteenth century, and a pictographic history of the Wampanoags on birch bark! When people wished to examine them, it was said that the first had been lost and the second accidentally destroyed by fire. Speck called the bow “Big Thunder’s fabrication,” pointed out that it rested on his “dubious tradition,” and mentioned the possibility that it would prove to be an “ethnological fraud.” Nevertheless, he included it in his description of Penobscot material culture on the chance that Big Thunder “could have been guilty of reproducing in his own fashion something actually described to him in youth by Indians then old” (Speck 1940:114). It is noteworthy that whereas Big Thunder told Seton that his war bow was 200 years old and had been inherited by him, Speck gained the impression at Old Town that he had inherited a tradition and had made a specimen according to it.

In earlier writings, Speck had made passing mention of the bow, which implied a measure of confidence in its authenticity. In his *Penobscot Transformer Tales* (Speck 1918:222), dictated by Newell Lyon, the culture hero Longhair was given his grandfather’s ivory bow. Speck’s footnote reads: “described [presumably by Lyon] as a composite bow made of three lengths of ivory lashed together.” In his comparative study of Beothuk traits, he opposed in a table a “reinforced bow” for the Beothuk (based on Howley 1915:271) and a “reinforced composite bow” for the Penobscot (Speck 1922:44). It should be noted that the Beothuk bow was said merely to have had a strip of skin fastened along the outer side of the bow, a form of Mason’s “veneer-backed” bow, for which numerous examples may be pointed out in North America, while the Penobscot bow (presumably Big Thunder’s) exhibited a completely unique wooden reinforcing piece. Eckstorm (1932:13) criticized Speck for being too hasty in accepting Big Thunder’s bow as an authentic Penobscot item, and this may have been behind his more cautious characterization of Longhair’s ivory bow in 1935 (Speck 1935b:53). The latter footnote reads simply, “Supposed by narrator to be a double-backed affair known as the war bow.” It is relevant here that Lyon’s competence as an informant was a bone of contention between Speck and Eckstorm (Eckstorm 1945:40–41; Speck 1947:286–287), but it may be too late to validate either one opinion or the other.

Discussion

The question is whether Big Thunder’s bow is an authentic item of old Penobscot material culture or not. The pertinent facts which were available to the writer may be summed up as follows:

First, there is no evidence in favor of the bow’s authenticity except the unsupported testimony of Big Thunder and the oblique, perhaps secondary, testimony

of Newell Lyon. Big Thunder was well known as a liar and as a professional maker and seller of Indian curios, and his reputation makes us doubt his testimony. Even a liar tells the truth occasionally, especially when there is no reason to lie, but in the case of his "war bow" Big Thunder did have reason to lie, since he was using it in his public appearances.

The opinion volunteered by Lyon, when narrating the transformer tales, that a bow (mentioned only in the text as an ivory bow) was a "double-backed affair known as the war bow" may have been independent of Big Thunder, or it may have been suggested by the presence of his bow in Old Town. Big Thunder died in 1906, the year before Speck commenced fieldwork at Old Town. The transformer tales were probably dictated between 1914 and 1918 (Speck 1940:4). There is no way to get behind Speck's footnotes on this question and learn how the information was elicited or volunteered, what prompted the statement by the informant, and how certain Lyon was of the identity of the war bow with the bow in the myth. We have already noted Eckstorm's low opinion of Lyon as an informant, an opinion which was shared by some but not all of his contemporaries, according to Siebert (personal communication, 1969) and to Speck's vigorous defense of Lyon's abilities and integrity. We are indebted to Siebert for what I believe to be the correct explanation. Two of his reliable informants told him that formerly the Penobscots had a "reinforced bow, made of any ordinary stave, reinforced on both surfaces with whale bone, with wood in the middle, wrapped together with sinew. . . . None of my informants say they ever saw one. This is apparently what Newell Lyon was referring to in his 'ivory bow' . . . but Lyon used his imagination to embellish it." Whether this was the ivory bow of the transformer tale or not, it explains how Lyon could have had an authentic personal tradition of a reinforced bow without validating Big Thunder's specimen in any way. In this connection, we should recall the magical properties accorded to articles of ivory and stone in Wabanaki tales and that, in Maliseet and Penobscot tales, both Gluskap and Mikumwes had ivory or stone bows, but there is no indication in these tales that the bows were of an unusual shape.

Second, not only does Big Thunder's testimony stand alone, his "war bow" also seems to stand alone. Speck said it was "thoroughly unlike any other American projector" (1940:114). The common and well-documented form of Penobscot bow is a single-curve self bow of hardwood. Speck described and illustrated it (1940:114-115). The Penobscot bows in the Heye Museum appear to be the same type (Eckstorm 1932:12) as were those collected by Siebert (personal communications, 1969). Other bows collected or described in the region are similar—the Beothuk (Howley 1915:271), Micmac (Wallis and Wallis 1955:31-32), and Saint Francis Abenaki (Canadian Museum of Civilization specimen III-J 28). At least some Beothuk and Micmac bows had a veneer backing of