A NOTE ON SARCEE POTTERY

By EDWARD SAPIR

IN his "Material Culture of the Blackfoot Indians" (*Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, 1910, vol. v, pp. 1-175) Dr. C. Wissler makes no mention of the use of pottery in that tribe. In discussing the household utensils of the Plains Indians in his "North American Indians of the Plains" (*American Museum of Natural History*, Handbook *Series No. 1*, 1912, p. 69), however, Wissler remarks:

> Pottery was made by the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara, and probably by all the other tribes of the village group. There is some historical evidence that it was once made by the Blackfoot and there are traditions of its use among the Gros Ventre, Cheyenne, and Assiniboine; but, with the possible exception of the Blackfoot, it has not been definitely credited to any of the nine typical tribes.[1]

In his book on *The American Indian* (first edition, 1917), the same writer states (p. 67):

> As nearly as can be told, at the time of discovery, North America had but one large area in which no pottery was made. If we draw a line from Ottawa to the mouth of the St. Lawrence and another to Edmonton, and then one from Edmonton to Los Angeles, we shall have, in the rough, the northern boundary to pottery making. There seems to have been a narrow strip down into the bison area that should be excepted. This extended down through the country of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Comanche. On the other hand, certain early information for the Ojibway, Cree, and Blackfoot westward from Winnipeg, indicates that they made pottery; but this about exhausts the exceptions. Practically the whole of the Pacific belt and the great sweep of the caribou area is without pottery, but the Eskimo of Alaska and eastward at least as far as Coronation Gulf made it. Archaeological evidence does not change the boundary; hence, we may infer that the distribution of pottery was still in progress at the opening of the period of discovery and that it was distributed from the South. In Siberia we find a pottery somewhat like that of the Eskimo, which suggests that in this case the trait is intrusive from Asia. Yet, we must not overlook the

[1] See also Wissler's note (Science, April 26, 1912, p. 666) on "recent evidences for the former use of pottery by the Blackfoot Indians and its apparent similarity in type to that used by the Menominee and the Saulteaux."

possibility of contact with North American potters around Hudson Bay, a region whose archaeology is absolutely unknown. The improbability of this arises from the absence of the trait from the greater part of the caribou-hunting peoples, its tendency to fail the most typical bison hunters, and that its encroachment in each case resembles the fringe of an adjoining area. We see that its extension out into Saskatchewan and Alberta is coincident with the distribution of Algonkian-speaking tribes: the Blackfoot, Cree, and Ojibway.

Any information, no matter how scanty or unsatisfactory, that bears on the marginal distribution of aboriginal pottery in America is probably welcome. There is good evidence that the Sarcee Indians, of Alberta, used pottery in the old days, say one hundred years ago or even later. In the summer of 1921 Mr. D. Jenness learned from a Sarcee Indian named Otter that originally his people used clay pots, the manufacture of which they had been taught by the Maker. Iron pots were introduced at the same time as horses. To make a pot the clay was kneaded and hollowed out by hand. After it was shaped and dried in the sun, it was laid with its mouth towards a fire where the smoke would permeate it. This saved it from cracking. It is not entirely clear from this whether the pot was properly fired or consisted merely of a dried and smoked clay.

In the following summer I learned from two other Sarcee Indians, a middle-aged half-breed named John One-Spot and an old full-blood Indian named Two Guns, the owner of the only extant Sarcee beaver bundle, that it was a matter of common knowledge among them that the tribe formerly made extensive use of clay pots and that in telling stories of the old time they were in the habit of referring to "the days when clay pots were still used." When John One-Spot was a boy, he learned much about the older life of the Indians from an old Sarcee woman. She told him about the methods of making and using pottery, but unfortunately he could manage to remember but the veriest fragments, not altogether coherent at that, of what he had learned. The Indians do not seem to have been seriously hampered by their habit of traveling about. When the horse came in and locomotion became relatively rapid, pottery, replaced in any event by trade vessels, was doubtless an inconvenience, but in the earlier days the clay vessels were carried by their handles of withes or bone by

the women and children, who walked by the side of the dog travois. John One-Spot had very unclear ideas about the exact material that was used. He stated that the Indians used to repair to the Red Deer River country for their clay, if clay it was. The proper material was a whitish "stone" (limestone?) that was burnt down to a powder and then used. Apparently the reference was here to some ingredient that was mixed with the clay. The clay vessels, when shaped by hand, were baked black by fires applied both inside and outside. When the fire burned out inside, it was renewed until the pot was thoroughly baked. Before the burning, holes were cut out near the rim of the clay vessel so that a willow handle might be fitted on later. The pots were of different shapes. One was a kettle for the boiling of water, another was a shallow tray in which the meat was dished out from the pot. Besides handles of willow withes, the Sarcee also used handles of bone, which had been softened by boiling and bent to the desired shape. Also horn was used to make hoop-like rims for the tops of the deep vessels.

Two Guns, the older Indian, stated that he had heard that in the early days, before he was born, the clay vessels were as well made as the vessels in use among the whites today, but the Indians have forgotten how to make them properly. There was a way of smoothing the surface of the pots, but this is no longer remembered. Not only was the clay modeled into pots and trays, but pipes were made of it as well. When Two Guns was a boy, he saw an old Indian smoke a clay pipe; this was the only actual example of Sarcee pottery, or rather of pottery used by the Sarcee, he had ever seen. It is not likely that even the oldest living Sarcee has ever seen a native vessel of clay. Two Guns further stated that children's toys also were made of clay—images of dogs, buffaloes, and other animals and objects. Asked whether there were any Indians still living who could make models of the old-time Sarcee pottery, Two Guns replied that no one could be depended on to make them accurately but that his wife would make me a couple of samples. In a few days he brought me a cylindrical pot and a tray (Fig. 48).

Two Guns explained apologetically that his wife, though one of the oldest Sarcee women, had not seen them made. They were in use before her grandmother's time. She claimed merely to have made them as well as she could manage from such descriptions as

FIG. 48.—Crude models of Sarcee pottery, made by wife of Two Guns. Victoria Memorial Museum, Ottawa, nos. V. D. 255 (cylindrical pot) and V. D. 317 (meat tray).

she had heard years before. The models are evidently poor. The clay is presumably not of the right quality, it was not sufficiently fired and is therefore hardly more than a dried, unbaked, and somewhat crumply earthenware, and the vessels are too clumsy

in outline and too heavy to be of practical use. John One-Spot thought the present specimens were failures partly because of uncertainty in the method of manufacture, partly because the proper clay had not been used. However, if suitable material was not available, he explained, emergency pots could be and were made of ordinary clay.

There are several features about these crude models that are interesting and possibly significant. The willow-handled, flat-bottomed, cylindrical pot is an aberrant pottery form and legitimate doubts as to whether it can be considered a truly traditional type weaken the force of any remarks which one may make about it. Both the cylindrical pot and the tray look almost like older Athabaskan models in bark (or wood, if one thinks back to Alaska), which have been crudely adapted to a poorly mastered pottery technique. On the other hand, Holmes figures a flat-bottomed or but very slightly round-bottomed clay pot from the Alaskan Eskimo, credited to Nelson, in his article on "Pottery" (Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico, Part 2, p. 298), though I find no mention of such high earthenware vessels in Nelson's monograph on "The Eskimo about Bering Strait." Most of the examples of Alaskan pottery vessels that we possess are shallow, tray-like forms (see, e.g., Plate XXVIII of Nelson's monograph). Murdoch, in his monograph on "The Point Barrow Eskimo" (pp. 91, 92), remarks:

> I obtained three fragments of pottery, which had every appearance of great age and were said to be pieces of a kind of cooking-pot which they used to make "long ago, when there were no iron kettles." The material was said to be earth, bear's blood, and feathers, and appears to have been baked. They are irregular fragments of perhaps more than one vessel, which appears to have been tall and cylindrical, perhaps shaped like a bean-pot, pretty smooth inside, and coated with dried oil or blood, black from age. The outside is rather rough, and marked with faint rounded transverse ridges, as if a large cord had been wound round the vessel while still soft.

Murdoch compares this ware with "the cement for joining pieces of soapstone vessels mentioned by Boas ("Central Eskimo," p. 526) consisting of seal's blood, a kind of clay, and dog's hair."

More noteworthy than the forms of the Sarcee models, because less open possibly to the charge of being spurious evidence, is the

fact that their maker mixed the clay with bits of twigs and with horse hair. The exposed surface of a charred twig is visible in the figure of the cylindrical pot, and tufts of hair in both figures. These materials were evidently intended to stiffen the ware and suggest a rather imperfect knowledge of pottery technique, particularly of firing, on the part of the old Sarcee potters. The Sarcee use of horse hair (originally, no doubt, dog hair or caribou or buffalo hair) is faintly suggestive of the Alaskan Eskimo use of feathers mixed in with the clay.

Archaeological evidence proves the former use of pottery in Alberta, though the finds are scanty. In the Victoria Memorial Museum at Ottawa there are two such finds. One (no. x.C.24) consists of fragments of one pot, fabric- or cord-marked, from Red Deer River, west of the fourth principal meridian of Alberta; it was collected by a geologist, T. C. Weston, in 1889. The other (no. x.C.25), from Long Lake, Alta., is the fragment of a crude rim of a pottery vessel, decorated with transverse notches along the top of the rim; it was presented by W. Dickson, of Pakenham, Ont., in 1890.

It is natural to look upon the pottery of the Blackfoot and Sarcee country as but a marginal outpost of the more intensive pottery culture of the Mississippi Valley and the western Great Lakes. Is it not at least possible, however, that the old Sarcee pottery, of which the Indians retain such a clear tradition,[2] is the survival of a northern type that is historically connected with the Eskimo ware or that it represents a compromise between northern and eastern streams of influence? It is useless to speculate at present, but it is worth while reminding ourselves that we do not know anything about the archaeology of the region extending from Hudson's Bay west to the Rockies. It is by no means a

[2] It may not be without significance that while Dr. Wissler's intensive researches among the Blackfoot apparently disclosed no knowledge on the part of the present Indians of their former use of pottery, Mr. Jenness and the writer each casually learned of pottery in the course of a brief visit to the Sarcee. This is probably a mere accident, but it may indicate that pottery was more extensively used among the Sarcee than among the Blackfoot or, at any rate, the Piegan, the southernmost of the three Blackfoot tribes. The early habitat of the Sarcee, as reported by Mackenzie and other writers, was pretty well to the north, in the headwaters country of the North Saskatchewan and Athabasca rivers.

foregone conclusion that the Eskimo pottery area is geographically disconnected from the southern area. That the present Athabaskan tribes north of the Sarcee (aside from Alaskan peoples close to the Eskimo) know or seem to know nothing of pottery proves little. Archaeological findings as to the distribution of pottery in northern Algonkian areas are not corroborated by anything that we can learn from such tribes as the Malecite or Cree or Saulteaux of today or that we could have learned from some of them even a hundred years ago. Pottery may have lingered longer among the Sarcee because they early gave up the use of bark vessels. It is not exactly likely that pottery will turn up anywhere in the caribou area, but the possibility should not be too summarily dismissed. Few would have ventured to surmise fifteen years ago that pottery would be found in the region of Coronation Gulf.

Linguistic evidence is not clear in such a case as this because the name of a type of utensil of one material may be readily carried over to an equivalent utensil of another material. There is a widespread Athabaskan term for "pot, kettle":**ons·a'*, **as·a'*. For Anvik Ten'a (lower Yukon) Chapman gives *e'ço*, *eço'xû*, *e'çok* "pot" (properly "clay pot," according to personal information obtained from Thomas B. Reed, a young Indian from Anvik); Petitot renders "marmite" (i.e. "kettle") *oṇsa* in Carrier, *oṇsha* in Sekanais, *oṇfwa* in Hare, and *oṇfa* in Montagnard; Goddard gives *ūsa'* for "pail" in Beaver; I have recorded *as·ą'* (*a* is high-pitched, velarized *ą* is low-pitched) for "pot," specifically "clay pot," in Sarcee; and the Franciscan Fathers give *ă'sā'* in Navaho for "pot" and "native pottery." The term is apparently absent in Pacific Athabaskan. Presumably the Athabaskan term originally referred to a pail-like or kettle-like receptacle of bark, only secondarily to one of clay. And yet can we be sure that its primary meaning was not "clay pot"? If it was, we could understand why it was lost in the Pacific dialects, for a term for clay cooking vessel would not be readily used for one of twined basketry, while a term for bark vessel conceivably might be. Admittedly, however, this is a tenuous argument.

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