

THE INDIAN BELT

BY ANNIE BEECHER SCOVILLE

EVERY piece of weaving is a history of civilization. In fact any hand craft tells the story of man's and especially woman's mastery of the earth.

Only by imagination can we see the hunter who, after the killing, drank the milk from the wild cow's udder and learned to follow in a parched land the grazing creatures and find from them food and drink as did their young. Once attached to a herd, this dog-like man fought for them and became the first herdsman. Somewhere in that dim past a hand that had braided the hair belt, began to twist the woolly fibre of the wild sheep—that way goes the long story of weaving and we meant to tell a short one.

Of Europe and its primeval craftsmen we can dream much, but of America we have no need to dream, for we have seen her wild people face to face.

Before me lies a broad and glorious band woven by Indian fingers. It is not old as we count age in China; fifty years, perhaps sixty years ago an Indian woman made it, yet she was a wild woman. With her own hands she had made everything that she wore and that her man wore. She had prepared everything they ate and the shelter for her family. Her mother had done the same before her, and so back for long years ran the trail of wild life, unbroken to the beginning of time. Now the old life has snapped and all its little crafts are scattered as the beads are when the string breaks and they roll away in the grass. As I look at this bit of beautiful work, I think not only of its color and pattern, but that I have known wild people, that in those people I have seen,

passing by the beginning of time, such men and women as nourished the fires of our race on the dark trails thousands of years ago.

This broad bead band tells the story the woman consciously wove into it, but beyond that it lifts a veil and shows primitive man, the craftsman. And then again there is just my own story of how I found it.

Let us begin right there. About twelve years ago I was in a trader's store in the Northwest, looking at Indian work. It was a poor little place many miles from settlements, where the trader was busy buying the belongings of a broken Indian village. Fragments of their old handicrafts bought the coffee and flour, shoddy blankets and crude clothes that were necessities now that the buffalos were gone. Their old things the trader shipped to the railway to sell to tourists. Like all such collectors, as the supply ran short he started manufacturing by giving the Indians wool, beads and calf-skin to work up. The results were what all commercial art is, poor stuff; so I turned over his stock and refused to buy garish, brand-new marvels. But hanging on the wall was an old bag I went back to often. It was worn to holes, it was dimmed by the greasy dirt of long and smoky use, it was daubed with dried gumbo, and stuck up with feathers and blood from a late prairie chicken shoot. In spite of this, there were beads underneath and just a chance that it was a genuine old piece. I asked the price.

He laughed at me. "That? I can't sell that old dud. You can have it."

"No," said I. "I don't take presents. No, I don't like any of these" and back I went to look at the wreck. "Well, I'll give you fifty cents."

"You can have it," he scoffed, "but you might have saved your money. It's no good."

I took it very gingerly and carried it off to my quarters. There I ripped off its broad grimy belt. With anxiety I loosened the band from its old duffle support and dropped it into a basin of soap suds. I soaked and scrubbed it over and over until at last before me lay the most beautiful bead belt I had ever seen.

When wampum belts were sent from tribe to tribe bearing messages, men sat long to study their story; so we may read the history of Indian weaving that this belt tells.

Long ago, oh, very long ago, men gathered tide-worn shell fragments on lonely beaches and when they found one with a hole in it, strung it

on a deerskin thong and wore it about the neck for an ornament. On those same beaches you may to-day find bluish, water-ground scraps of clam shell that are easy to pierce with a hole and to trim into equal size and shape. That was the beginning of bead hunting and making. The first string of wampum was a fortune. More, it was a liberal education, for every new material the craftsman masters, enlarges the brain and trains the hand. See how it was with these crude shell beads. Some one found that they could be strung to tell a story. Two dark beads and one white bead, two dark, one white—oh, the joy of it! Such joy was paid for by solemn thanks to the Spirits that had inspired them.

The treasured story-telling shells were carried in a precious pouch and shown at great dances. There the strings were placed in different positions to make different patterns. Then the workers strung long fibres of cedar bark against the side of the bark house and with fingers for shuttle, patiently threaded in the bead strings. There was the first belt loom, with its long warp of fibre and woof of beads, and it produced a belt with a symbol woven in like Penn's belt, with the two figures holding hands. This was sent from council fire to council fire to tell its story—a very wonderful thing, good to look on, and it could talk. No wonder the people thought it holy, the gift of God.

We do not know whether they had fastened the strings of warp in place and woven with cunning turns the fibre belt to girt the loins and carry the pack before they added the beads, but we know they did it later, and woven bags and belts are the great craft of the woods Indians. They are natural weavers, while the men of the plains made their bags and belts of skin and painted their symbols. But in the end the bead weaving reached the plains, and there in the Bad Lands of Dakotah this belt was woven.

We have been talking of the shell beads made by Indians, but this belt is made of tiny jewelled beads, flaming in color: no Indian ever made those shining scraps and there lies another long story.

The wampum beads were the medium of a great inland trade in America: but the bead weaving opened trade with Europe. Every adventurer of the 16th Century tells how he traded with the savages for red cloth, for copper kettles and beads. He laughs at the barbarian love of gewgaws, but these European beads offered the Indian the perfection of what he himself was trying to make. The coarsest glass

bead was finer and more even than the finest wampum and therefore a more perfect medium for weaving the pictorial band. Fine sinews from the deer's leg were used to string them, and the weaving grew finer and more elaborate.

The wampum belt was still sacred to treaty and worship, but the new material with its changing color and especially the high relief of its pure whites was a delight to the eyes of the worker.

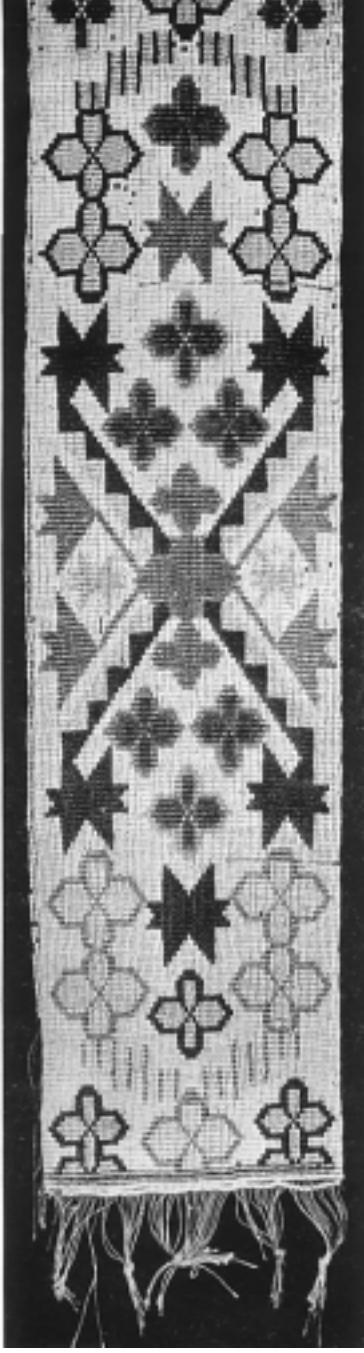
Most of us know the famous treaty belt given to William Penn by the Indians. It is a fine type of the original symbolic weaving. When such figures were reduced in size by finer beads, and repeated with a filled-in background of color or minor symbols, designing became a part of Indian weaving.

Always in every race when a craftsman receives a new material, life flames up in new desires. Hand and brain become more gifted and the craft strides forward. For three hundred years, during the 16th, 17th, and 18th Centuries, while the Indians were trading and fighting with the Whites, selling and losing their lands, falling back generation by generation toward the Great Plains, they were steadily developing this dearly loved craft of weaving. For these three hundred years that Europeans were winning America, they constantly imported beads for the Indian trade. With this trade we bought great lands and the Indians produced a beautiful craft. At times we have seen their handicraft develop other materials we have offered. So the Navajoe received sheep about fifty years ago, and make sensible blankets,—but a thousand thousand dreams of untold years and workers went into the making of this belt.

At one of our large art museums this work was said to be the finest piece of primitive design they had ever handled.

The old symbols of the "Four Winds," or cardinal points of the compass with the zigzag line of the lightning, is the motif of the design. These figures, in deftly balanced repetition, pass from blues to greens and back from green to blue, lighted with gold and gleaming ruby. Once the design meant an appeal to the Spirits of the Air to protect the frail tent on the plains: but all that had passed in the pure joy of beauty before the artist who wove this belt recorded her dream in color and form.

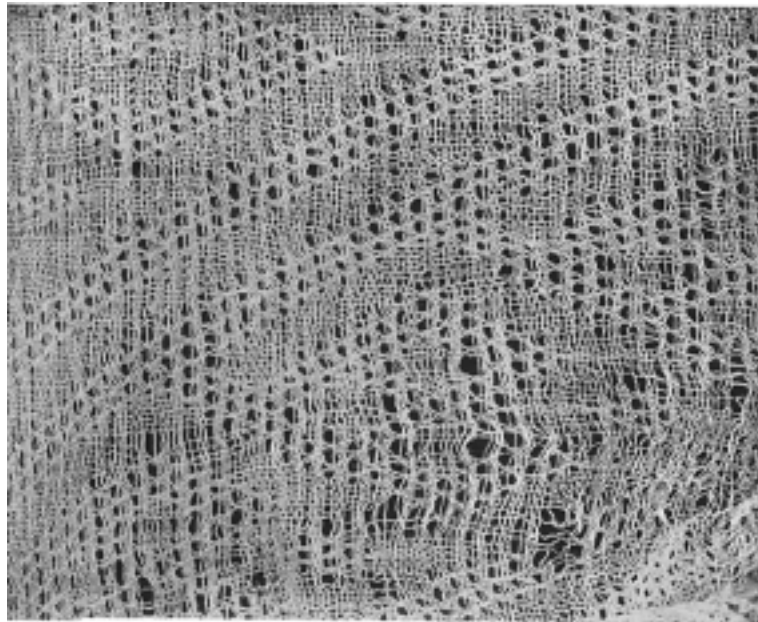
We can trace in this the upward climb of thousands of years and all



INDIAN BELT IN THE COLLECTION OF THE AUTHOR
THE BEADS ARE VERY FINE, AND TRANSLUCENT STARS ALTERNATE WITH OPAQUE

the slow victory of man over matter as he conquered the earth, but the weaver in the shadow of the lodge triumphed in skill and color and was satisfied.

As the Indian once sent his crude bead belt from council fire to council fire to tell its story, so this belt comes out of the past telling an old, old story of the world's making.



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