

## AN ILLINOIS CORNER-TANG

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One of the most unusual and highly prized Indian artifacts is the corner-tang or, in everyday words, a special kind of knife blade. This is undoubtedly a prehistoric implement which was developed, not by an agricultural race, but by tribes who lived for the most part by hunting.

In considering the origin of the corner-tang knife blades it may be assumed that these artifacts did not spring into existence with the suddenness of a new chance discovery, but, like most all man-made implements, were gradually developed and perfected throughout long periods of time from some basic tool.

Mr. W. K. Moorehead has suggested that the corner-tang must have been used for cutting soft meat, like that of fish, and this suggestion undoubtedly constitutes the source of the term "fish knife," which is one of the common names applied to these pieces.

It is a well established fact that the American aborigines used this tool as a two-edged cutting knife and it is therefore reasonable to assume that the corner-tang knife represents an evolution of the spearhead type of knife. Many corner-tangs have a curved edge which would make an excellent knife for skinning.

Corner-tangs were made from flint, the predominate shape is triangular, and the distinctive structural feature is the tang. The tang, or projecting prong, is the part to which the handle was hafted or fastened, and is located at any one of a number of places, such as the corner, base, back, mid-back, etc.

The diagonal corner-tang knife should probably be regarded as the common or standard type for corner-tang tools, since fifty per cent of all reported specimens are of this type (Fig. 1.). It is generally composed of a triangular blade with the tang located on one of the corners at the base, and with the main axis of the tang touching the long axis of the blade at an angle of about forty-five degrees. The tang located at this angle would have the effect of raising the free end

of the attached handle considerably above the level of the cutting edge and this would make the knife more suitable and convenient for skinning than could be the case in the hafted base-tang knife.

According to distribution studies made by Professor J. T. Patterson of the University of Texas at Austin published in 1936 and 1937, corner-tang pieces were developed and used in central Texas. However, they have been found in the group of states located between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains extending from Texas to Montana, and also in Illinois and Mississippi. By far the greatest number of these artifacts have been found in central Texas. The main line of distribution follows for the most part the course of the Balcones Fault Line. The flint exposures throughout this region furnished an abundant supply of raw material from which to

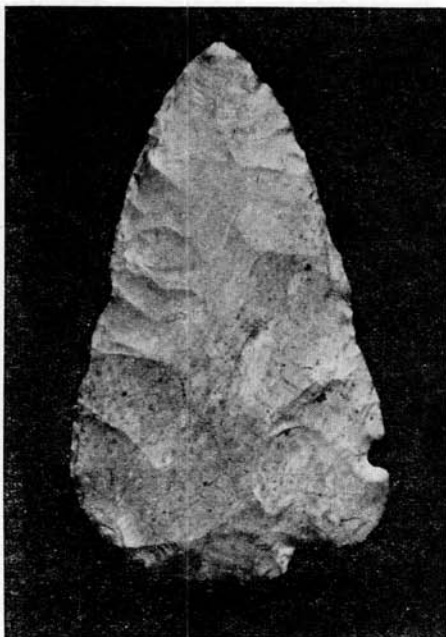


Fig. 1.—A diagonal corner-tang, actual size.

make these unusual stone tools. The many large springs along the fault line furnished the water necessary for Indian habitations, and large herds of game animals roamed over this territory even after the first white pioneer settlers arrived. Once these corner-tangs were developed they must have been used by succeeding generations of aborigines, even down into the times of the pioneer whites. Therefore it is not surprising to find artifacts in this region which reflect the huntsman's type of life.

It is interesting to note that B. W. Stephens of Quincy, Illinois, reported to Professor Patterson a single specimen in his own collection from Calhoun County. If others have been found in Illinois,

they have not been recorded so far as the writer knows.

The writer found his specimen in a cornfield due north and about two hundred yards from the Dickson Mound site on Sunday, September 29, 1940. Dr. Don Dickson made this comment at the time, "A corner-tang is one of the rarest Indian artifacts to be found in Illinois."

The occasional finding of one of these coveted and unusual pieces furnishes a thrill not to be duplicated in any other hobby. The long hours involved, the countless miles covered, and the great amount of energy expended in its search are quickly forgotten when such a prize lies safely in one's hand or pocket.

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