

The Tucson "Lead Crosses"



The text following this introduction is from a small introductory paper written for an excellent display that was organized by Peter L. Steere of the Special Collections staff at the University of Arizona Library. No author is listed, but I give full credit to Special Collections for the excellent and informative article. I post it here for educational purposes and research.

I do not necessarily agree with some of the statements in the article, by various people. I have discussed the subject of caliche formation with Dr. Cyclone Covey (mentioned in the article) and a few Geologists. From my research, the subject of the rate of deposit of caliche is still somewhat of a mystery. Some of the artifacts were buried under at least five feet of hard caliche. Dr. Covey has said in a communication to me: "Concerted efforts to discredit (the age of the find) have found no way to insert heavy lead objects up to 6 1/2 feet deep through caliche to lie flat, without fracturing the formation conspicuously" - communication March 26, 1999

I agree here with Dr. Covey. In the early days in Tucson, caliche deposits, sometimes called "desert cement" were a constant problem to those who needed to dig in the soil. (as they are today) Some of the "old timers" resorted to dynamite to break through the thick hard layers. I have personally used a jackhammer to dig holes large enough to plant small trees. (when I worked as a landscaper) here in Tucson. I find it hard to imagine that Timoteo Odohui buried 30+ heavy lead objects nearly six feet deep through solid caliche by himself, and then covered all the objects, simply to create a hoax. When the objects were excavated with University of Arizona supervision, It took a crew of several Mexican laborers using picks to forcefully hack their way down to the objects through the hard cement-like caliche. Also, some of the objects were personally witnessed to have been dug from undisturbed caliche and soil, by University of Arizona professors, . - *Jack Andrews*

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"The Tucson Lead Crosses, Fact or Fantasy?"

Special Collections, University of Arizona Library

March - April 1990

The discovery in 1924, of a series of metal objects, some shaped like crosses, swords, javelins, batons and paddles at an old lime kiln site, seven miles north of Tucson, along Silverbell Road ignited a controversy that lingers on today.

The "Lead Crosses," as the artifacts came to be called were covered with Christian crosses, Moslem crescents, Hebraic seven-branched candle sticks, Freemasonry symbols, Latin phrases and Hebrew phrases. A translation of the inscriptions was interpreted to tell the story of a group of Roman Jews who migrated to America which they called "Calalus" during the last half of the eighth century. The writings also tell of a military struggle with the Toltec Indians of Mexico. Other interpretations attributed them to the early Spanish explorers of the Southwest and to the Mormons.

A feature story in the "Arizona Daily Star" of December 13, 1925 and in the New New York Times started a editorial battle of words across the country. Many prominent University of Arizona professors were quoted in the newspaper stories.

The objects were first unearthed by Charles E. Manier in September of 1924, at an old ruined lime kiln site on Silverbell Road, seven miles north of Tucson on the property of Thomas W. Bent. The feature story in the Arizona Daily Star included photographic reproductions of the artifacts and interpretative translations of the inscriptions by a Mrs. Ostrander, a local history teacher at Tucson High School. The

descriptions of their discovery and unearthing were witnessed and attested to by Frank Fowler, professor of Classical Literature at the University of Arizona, Dr. A.E. Douglass, Director of the Steward Observatory, Dean Byron Cummings of the Arizona State Museum and Charles T. Vorhies of the Agriculture College at the University of Arizona.

The New York Times reported the discovery of the lead crosses on the same date, but cast doubt on their authenticity by quoting Bashford Dean, Curator of Arms and Armour at the Metropolitan Museum of Art who called them the "poorest of forgeries." F.W. Hodge of the Southwest Museum thought that an archaeological faker who had been making false inscriptions of the Coronado and Fray Marcos de Niza expeditions in Arizonawas responsible for the Tucson lead crosses. Dr. Neil M. Judd, anthropologist and curator of American Archaeology of the United States National Museum, came to Tucson to examine the site and stated that he thought the artifacts were no older than 1540. Widespread interest in the artifacts continued as a newspaper battle raged across the country.

In January of 1925, under the direction of Dean Cummings, the University of Arizona took over the excavation of the site. In July of 1925, "The Improvement Era", an official publication of the Mormon church published an article on the artifacts by J.M. Sjordahl, former editor of the "Desert News", who stated that "the inscriptions on the crosses were exceedingly significant and have a significant bearing upon the Mormon claim that the descendants of the Lamanites crossed to the American continent.

Now the "Tucson Daily Citizen", jumped into the battle of words taking sides with the New York Times, and published a headline story suggesting that the inscriptions had been copied from some published dictionary glossaries. The "Daily Star" continued to defend the artifacts.

Back at the University of Arizona, Dean Cummings had taken the artifacts to Kansas City to present a paper on them at the annual meeting of the "American Association for the Advancement of Science".

The newspaper battle continued into the fall of 1925 with the New York Times publishing a final story comparing the Tucson artifacts to celebrated archaeological fakes of the past such as the Cardiff giant. On December 23, 1925, the "Daily Star" replied with an article by Gilbert Cosulich, "If Dean Cummings says they're genuine, they are", declared Tucsonans, Harold Bell Wright, Albert Steinfield, Mayor John E. White and Mrs. Allie Dickermann.

The controversy became more complicated with a "Daily Star" story of January 5, 1926, reporting that Leandro Ruiz, a retired pioneer cattleman, had known forty years before, a young Mexican sculptor named Timotto Odohui, who lived at the lime kiln site on Silverbell Road where the artifacts were found. Ruiz suggested that the young sculptor had made the artifacts. The sculptor's father Vicente was well-educated and possessed a classical library. His son was an accomplished sculptor, molded objects in metal, carved in stone and had a fondness for burid treasure stories. The family had lived at the lime kiln site for ten years. After the death of the father, the family had returned to Mexico.

The New York Times elaborated on this story, but the "Daily Star" continued to defend the artifacts and welcomed Dean Cummings home from Kansas City where he had shown the artifacts to a scientific meeting with a headline that read "Cummings firmer than ever in belief Tucson artifacts are genuine." Cummings reported that there had been interest in the artifacts at the meeting in Kansas City, but also a great deal of doubt as to their authenticity.

In February, 1926, Mrs. Ostrander, the teacher from Tucson High School who had first proposed the Roman-Jewish settlement theory, now came up with another theory. In a paper presented at a Phoenix meeting of the "American Association for the Advancement of Science", she now suggested that Israel III, one of leaders mentioned in the inscriptions on the lead crosses was actually Quetzalcoatl, the "bearded white man" of Aztec and Toltec legends. In the spring of 1926, the University of Arizona withdrew its financial support from any further excavations at the Silverbell Road site. Dean Cummings explained that this was due to an inability to reach agreement with Manier and Bent.

Interest in the lead crosses did not die however, as the "Citizen" reported that Charles Manier expected an out-of-town financier with an interest in scientific research to continue to fund the excavation work. The "Daily Star" in a March 7, 1926 story reported that Dr. Fowler of the University of Arizona felt all of the inscriptions on the artifacts could be located in some basic Latin textbooks of the time including Harkness Latin Grammar, the Latin Grammar of Allen and Greenough, and Rouf's Standard Dictionary of Facts (1864 edition). In the same story the newspaper also reported that Dean Cummings now thought that the lead crosses may have been buried by members of the Mormon church to lend credence to the beliefs expressed in the Book of Mormon that Native Americans were direct descendants of one of the Lost Tribes of Israel.

In summarizing, the various explanations for the artifacts included: 1) Phoenician sailors who reached America, 2) Spanish explorers, 3) Mormons, 4) Quetzalcoatl and 5) the record of a Roman-Jewish settlement from 775 A.D. to 900 A.D. Arguments against the authenticity of the artifacts included 1) incorrect dating, i.e. the use of A.D. in the designation of dates before this had become common, 2) the use of modern words in the inscriptions, and 3) a Mexican sculptor, familiar with the classics who lived on the site for ten years in the 1880s-1890s. Explanations for how the artifacts were buried under the gravel-caliche beds has never been satisfactorily explained although we do now today that caliche beds can form in a relatively short period of time.

It has also been reported that the waxy material that came from inside the two-piece crosses when analyzed, was found to have a petroleum base which was certainly not available in 800 A.D.

Mr. Thomas Bent died in 1972. Most of the other participants in the episode are all gone. Mr. Bent prepared a lengthy report in 1968, entitled "The Tucson Artifacts," in which the entire history of the episode is presented in great detail. This report, forms part of this exhibit. The artifacts themselves are believed to still be in the possession of the Bent family in California.

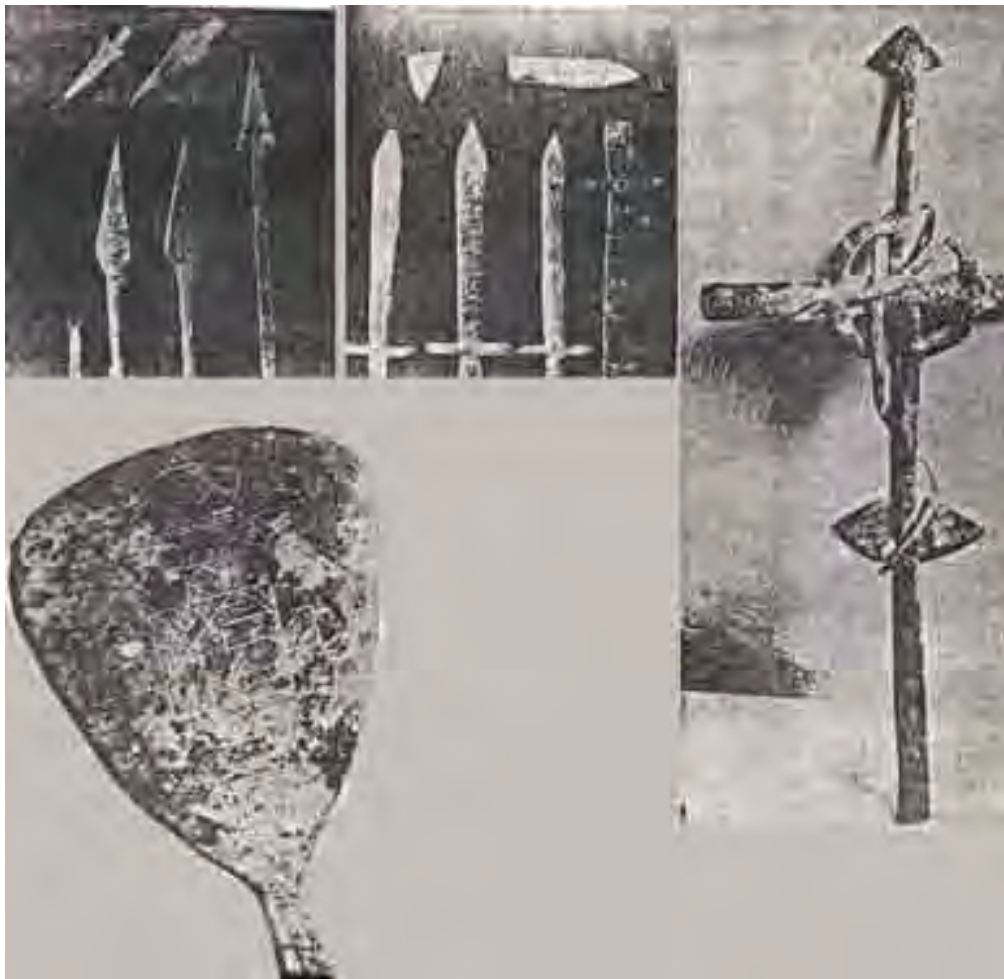
This exhibit in Special Collections of the University of Arizona Library has been organized utilizing primary materials from the papers of Dr. A.E. Douglass, the founder of dendrochronology and long-time professor at the University of Arizona. Dr. Douglass was an on-site participant in the lead crosses controversy in 1925-1926 and his collection includes newspaper clippings, photographs of the artifacts and the excavation site, field notes, reports and extensive correspondence between Dr. Douglass and scientists around the country from whom opinions as to the authenticity of the artifacts was solicited.

The story of the Tucson "lead crosses" did not fade away. An editorial in the "Daily Star" in 1963 discussed "this most famous of Tucson hoaxes". In 1975, Dr. Cyclone Covey published a book entitled "Calalus a Roman Jewish Colony in America from the Time of Charlemagne Through Alfred the Great". Dr. Covey believes that the artifacts are genuine and supports the contention voiced back in 1925, that they represent the colony of Calalus established in America in the eighth century.

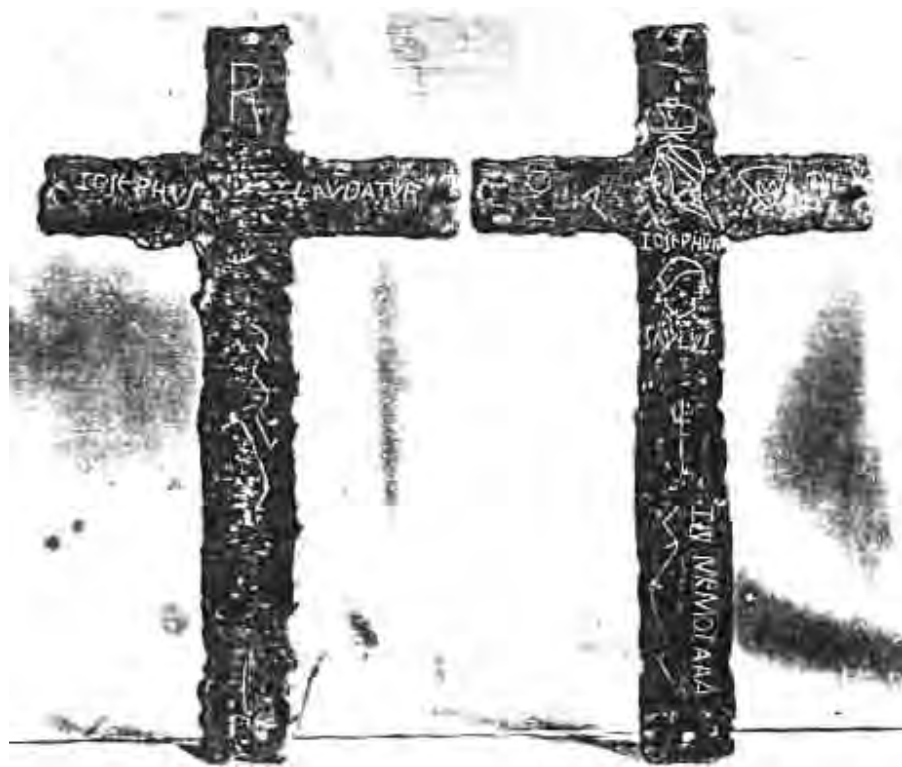
The late Ted Sayles, former curator of the Arizona State Museum in his book, *Fantasies of Gold*, published in 1968' by the University of Arizona Press, included a chapter on the lead crosses from which much of the information in this short summary was drawn, wrote, "They should be preserved in some Arizona museum" They are as much a part of the state's heritage as are the myths and legends that enriched it, as the documents of its historical backgrounds, and the records of its archaeological past. The Lead Crosses are as much a part of the Southwest as is the story of the horned toad found in the cornerstone of the Eastland County Courthouse in Texas, thirty-one years after it was built."

This exhibit will be on display in the Special Collections lobby through May 1, 1990. The exhibit was organized and planned by Peter L. Steere of the Special Collections staff.

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