

Arrowheads, by another name

By TOM MAST

It if looks like a rose, and smells like a rose, and feels like rose, it's probably a rose.

The same can't be said for an arrowhead. If it looks like an arrowhead, and smells like an arrowhead, and feels like an arrowhead, it might not be a bona fide, 5,000-year-old killing tool crafted by the hand of ancient man at all. It might be nothing more than a hunk of rock.

Woody Blackwell is something of a legendary figure among flintknappers. Those are the folks who can take a piece of flint and beat it into the likeness of an 11,000-year-old mammoth-stabbing Clovis point, or a sleek and graceful Agate Basin.

The trouble starts when a flintknapper forgets to tell someone who might be interested in buying his semi-translucent, Knife River Flint beauty that it was not actually made 11,000 years ago. That's when a reproduction becomes a fake.

Jeb Taylor, who lives near Ucross, buys, sells and authenticates projectile points. That's how he and Woody met up.

But first, there's something you need to know about fake artifacts. Some people go to extraordinary lengths to make fakes look like those fascinating artifacts from the distant past grandpa collected on the ranch during the Depression years.

They'll bury them, bake them and paint them, sand them, coat them in all manner of age-imitating concoctions and then lie without shame about where they came from.

Most often, the motive is unvarnished greed. Genuine old-time artifacts might be worth hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars. It's the fakers goal to separate the unsuspecting from their hard-earned cash, by convincing you that their fakes are as real as those points grandpa kept in his top drawer.

And there's no shortage of fakes. Taylor says shows and flea markets and Internet auctions are clogged with such products of mendacity and avarice.

Taylor didn't set out to become an authenticator. He kind of backed into it. He has no archaeology degree, but his experience with projectile points and things aboriginal is considerable. He's a flintknapper of long-standing and has made thousands of bows. He has killed deer with stone-tipped arrows, run trap lines in Alaska and lived for months on end without metal tools. He also has written a book about projectile points -- spear points, darts thrust with a device called an atlatl and arrowheads -- of the High Plains.

In the beginning, Taylor didn't charge for looking at points and offering his opinion. The late Greg Perino, an authenticator who lived in Oklahoma, took to sending Folsom-style points to Taylor because of his familiarity with the type. Over time, his standing among collectors grew, and authentication is now part of his business.

"It's a thankless job," Taylor says. "You feel good when you save somebody from making an expensive mistake. But frequently, what you're doing is telling someone they've already made an expensive mistake."

It was his sad duty to tell one man he had paid \$250,000 for what amounted to a box of colorful rocks.

Taylor uses everything in his arsenal to help people avoid such costly blunders. He has a \$10,000 microscope to meticulously examine the surface of arrowheads for signs of improper wear, or for evidence of metal tools used in fabricating an arrowhead, or for surface deposits and patina that indicate antiquity. He relies on his knowledge of flintknapping and old Plains point styles to determine if the workmanship seems correct for the culture.

So back to Woody Blackwell. Somewhere along the way, Woody went over to the dark side. And he had them all going for a while, professional archaeologists and amateur collectors alike.

It was during the master flintknapper's shady period that he called Taylor, who was then on the road in North Dakota, saying he had seen a couple of Knife River Flint Folsom points -- those being finely crafted, 11,000-year-old projectile point with wide grooves front and back -- found by a fisherman in Montana.

Knife River Flint is a semi-translucent, chocolate brown stone found in western North Dakota, highly prized for its beauty and sharpness. The Hopewell people of Ohio traded for the stuff 2,000 years ago, and collectors love it today, although Badlands ranchers who drive country roads frequently cuss it for slashing up their tires.



Jeb Taylor, a buyer and authenticator of projectile points, poses at his workspace in his home near Ucross. Taylor relies on a precision German-made microscope to help him examine artifacts he comes across.

At first, Taylor says Blackwell didn't try to sell him the Folsom points. He only wanted to know what they were worth because the finder purportedly wanted to sell them. They even discussed the ethics of buying points and treating people fairly.

Taylor did express an interest in the points, but Blackwell said they were already spoken for.

"I never had a clue he was lying to me," Taylor says.

Not long thereafter, however, Blackwell called again to say the deal for the Folsoms had fallen through. So he offers them to Taylor, along with a spectacular Alberta point made from an obscure North Dakota material called Rainy Butte silicified wood.

Taylor, who was pretty much living on the road, agreed to buy all three for \$10,000 if Greg Perino authenticated them, which he did.

Pretty soon, another gorgeous Knife River Flint piece turned up, this time a Clovis. Now off the road and more settled in Buffalo, Taylor examined the artifact with microscopic care. He didn't like what he saw.

"By any chance," Taylor asked the owner, "did it go through Woody Blackwell?"

"No," he replied, "I bought it from a guy in Texas."

But the conversation prompted the owner to inquire further. Turns out, the person he bought it from, had bought it from, yes, Woody Blackwell. And once he started looking around, Taylor saw lots of exquisite "old" artifacts turning up.

"I actually liked Woody," Taylor said, "and I was thinking, 'I hope Woody isn't responsible for this. I hope he's been conned by somebody else.'"

But it didn't turn out that way. Taylor says somebody apparently told Blackwell that he, Taylor, was onto him and had called the FBI.

Shortly thereafter, Taylor got a call from Blackwell.

"He confessed everything to me," Taylor says. "He said, 'I don't want to go to jail, I don't want to go to prison.'"

"The deal that I made with him was that I keep the points, I get a signed confession and I get my money back."

Taylor says other people subsequently made similar bargains.

Besides his prowess as a flintknapper, Taylor says Blackwell had something else going for him.

"Where Woody's so good is that he's an incredibly good (BSer). I think his job in the military was counterintelligence. So his job was messing with people's minds."

Taylor believes Blackwell has truly forsaken fakery. From time to time, he gets indirect alerts from Blackwell that some of his bogus points might be back in circulation somewhere.

Blackwell was invited to join the conversation, but he declined.

"Bottom line, I did some things I deeply regret," he said in an email. "Along with the points, I sold my ethics and hurt some innocent people, Jeb Taylor among them. Jeb is a good honest man and knows artifacts as well as anyone alive. And that's about all I have to say."