

“Curiously enough, though many excellent arrowpoints and other artifacts are made for the “tourist trade” in many parts of the country, the writer has yet to meet anyone who can produce a Folsom point” (Howard 1935:110). At the time that Edgar B. Howard made the above statement in his Ph.D. dissertation, he was probably the most knowledgeable academic on the subject of Paleoindians. Commenting on the above quote in his book **Folsom**, Meltzer points out “he had obviously not encountered McCormick or his work”(2006:254).

Marvin McCormick The First Modern Fluter

Tony Baker April 4, 2008



A McCormick Folsom Point

Marvin McCormick was an early maker (knapper) and seller of arrowheads, and most knappers and collectors know his name. He made thousands of points of all types during his lifetime, but he was famous for his Alibates Folsom point. He was so skilled that many of his creations, believed to be authentic, have found their way into museum collections and displays. I personally know of three museums that unknowingly house his work.

I first heard the name Marvin McCormick as a child at Baker family gatherings. He was a subject that always came up when the conversation turned to my grandfather, William E. Baker, and his arrowhead collections. As a result, a large part my knowledge of McCormick came from these get-togethers and, to a lesser extent, letters and photographs I inherited from my father. Over the years I have considered sharing my knowledge of McCormick via my web site, but just never got around to doing it. Early in 2008 I discovered I had nine slides of McCormick making a Folsom point, and the chance to share these was the impetus to finally add this paper to my web site.

Stories

William E. Baker, affectionately known as Uncle Bill, was the Cimmaron County Extension Agent located in Boise City, Oklahoma during the 1930s and '40s. This was also the time of the Dust Bowl and The Great Depression, and Uncle Bill was in the center of both storms. Arrowheads were easy to find on the savaged landscape and since Uncle Bill was always on the land working with the farmers, he began collecting them. Over the years his collection grew and, simultaneously, he became quite knowledgeable about the early man archaeology of the region.

My first story has Uncle Bill seated at his Extension Agent's desk with an unknown individual sitting on the other side. This unknown individual has brought a number of arrowheads for Uncle Bill to see. They are laid out on the desk and Uncle Bill is picking through them. He ultimately separates them into two piles and tells the individual that "this group was made by Indians and that group was made by a white man."

Another story occurs at the home of an unknown individual. Uncle Bill is looking at this person's arrowhead collection. After a time, the individual goes to his closet and brings out a cigar box filled with his prized pieces. Uncle Bill looks at the arrowheads in the cigar box and declares that they were made by a modern knapper.

These two stories are quite similar and may be different versions of the same story, but I have never believed that to be the case. A story that dovetails with these two comes from the archives of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science (047-11-01-94, Huscher Papers). In September 1938 Vincent Dale, a collector and attorney from Guymon, Oklahoma, writes a letter to Marvin McCormick. He asks McCormick if he had made the "4 Folsom, 1 Yuma, 2 drills" that Dale had purchased from him several weeks earlier. McCormick does not respond. Subsequently, in August 1939 Dale writes a letter to J. D. Figgins, director of the Colorado Museum of Natural History (now the Denver Museum of Nature & Science). In this letter Dale details his purchase of these artifacts from McCormick and suggests "... this craftsman could explain the growing number of Folsom points which have appeared from southeastern Colorado the last few years..." In October 1940 a brief article titled "Archaeological Frauds from Southern Colorado" by Betty Huscher and her husband appears in *American Antiquity*. Betty was Wormington's assistant and Wormington was the curator of archaeology at the Colorado Museum of Natural History (Baker 1995:4, Cassells 1983:251). In this article the Huschers do not name McCormick but write:

At or near Springfield, Colorado, in the "Dust Bowl," passable Folsom and Yuma points are being manufactured. These are being 'unloaded' on local collectors and tourists at various towns along the Arkansas Valley, particularly around Lamar. (173)

Joe Ben Wheat, Paleoindian archaeologist and curator of the University of Colorado Museum from 1953 to 1982 (Cassells 1983:249) told me a story at the 1988 Pecos Conference of another method McCormick used to sell his arrowheads. He said McCormick's kids would go around to the small towns and stop at service stations, etc, and look for arrowhead collections. They would marvel over the collections and ultimately indicate they, too, had found a few. What they would then show the proprietor was some of their father's work and soon they would have the

individual drooling so bad that he would offer \$5 or so for them. The kids would negotiate until they had the individual worked up to \$50 or \$60.

The third story from my family history also dates to about these times. Uncle Bill suspected that McCormick was the knapper of the arrowheads that were showing up in the area of western Oklahoma and surrounding states. He would, therefore, drive from Boise City to McCormick's house in Pritchett, Colorado. Uninvited and unannounced he would almost burst into McCormick's house trying to catch him making arrowheads. He was unsuccessful. My impression is that Uncle Bill did this more than once.

Attachments 1 and 2 are copies of letters between E. B. Howard of the University of Pennsylvania and Uncle Bill. These are dated October, 1940 and coincidentally this is the same month and year as the Huscher's article above.

The following is from the second paragraph of Howard's letter dated 10/25/40 to Uncle Bill. See Attachment 1. Note that Howard seems to still believe that a Folsom point cannot be made by a modern knapper.

In this connection, young Porter Montgomery, at Dalhart, wrote me sometime ago that he was convinced that these Folsom points were fakes. I disagreed with this and he gave me the name of a man in Kansas who, he said, could positively tell me about the matter. I have written him twice but have never had any reply. There is something queer about this whole thing but I am not certain just what it is. It seems to me we ought to follow it up and make some report. It has occurred to me that these points I saw from Texline came from one of the caves near Albuquerque since there was a type in there which I do not believe could have been faked as it has only been known a short while. A good many people I showed these to when I had them here agreed with me that they were not fakes. Porter Montgomery basis his opinion largely on the fact that the patination was faked.

Uncle Bill responded almost immediately on 10/31/40 and this is the third paragraph of his letter. See Attachment 2. Note the last sentence. Is this party, who lives in Guymon, Vincent Dale?

My final analysis is that absolutely they are fakes. First thing to attract suspicion is the false patination; second, is that Wilson has learned since my seeing him before, the name of the party who sold them to him. This party is Marvin McCormick. The McCormick boys, according to information, have been making the common side-notch and corner notch and selling them the last several years. I have been informed during the last two or three years that they have been selling folsom and yuma points in groups like the Wilson Group to collectors in both Kansas and Colorado. Also, to one party at Guymon, Oklahoma.

My last family story is set at an artifact show in Colorado. I have the impression that it was probably one of the early Loveland Stone Age Fairs. Uncle Bill had been invited to bring his collection for a couple of years and this was the first time that he was able to attend. As luck would have it, McCormick also attended that show. Uncle Bill corners McCormick and again asks him if he had been making the arrowheads. This time McCormick admits he has been.

In the late 1970's, I contacted McCormick and made an appointment to visit him. I did this out of curiosity. I wanted to meet the man who was famous for spreading alibates Folsom points across the collections in the country and ultimately into the museums. Also, the Baker family stories always portrayed an angry feud between Uncle Bill and McCormick and so I wanted to explore this. Finally, I wanted to learn how he made Folsom points.



William E. (Uncle Bill) Baker in 1946

The day before the appointment I drove from Denver to Pritchett, Colorado and spent the night in a nearby motel. The next day I met McCormick and his wife. They lived in a small simple house, and I remember it was without an indoor toilet. They had a pet magpie that they had raised from a chick and it flew freely around the house and out into the yard through the open doors. The cats avoided the bird.

McCormick was a big man and both he and his wife were very gracious and seemed to enjoy my visit. I inquired about the relationship between him and Uncle Bill who had died in 1957. To my surprise his perspective on the subject was much more amicable than the Baker family stories had led me to believe. He even commented on how knowledgeable Uncle Bill was on the subject of Paleoindians.

To my question on how he made a Folsom point, he answered that when he first started making them he used percussion. And, he added that it produced a thin, realistic point. However, the failure rate was too high for him. He said he couldn't get a job during the depression and never had one. He fed his family by making and selling his arrowheads. So, to reduce the failure rate, he developed a levered pressure system that would press off the channel flakes. This greatly reduced his failures, but it produced a thicker, less realistic point. He also said that in the recent years some of the universities had asked him to make for them study-collections of all the Paleoindian points. In his desire to be as authentic as possible, he had attempted to return to percussion for the channel flake removal on the Folsom points. However, he discovered that he had forgotten how to do it, and was forced to stay with his leveled pressure technique.

He had one complete Folsom point in the house and he was not real proud of it. So, he sold it to me for \$10 and it is the one pictured at the beginning of this paper. He also gave me some channel flakes and broken preforms. When I left that day, it would be the last time I ever saw or spoke to him.

During the preparation and writing of this paper, I learned of a Roger Crabtree of Boise City. He had spent some time with McCormick before he died. I immediately contacted him and he told me that McCormick told him that he made his first Folsom point in 1929.

Finally, McCormick was "... also one of the first to use heat treatment" (Whittaker 2004:49). I had heard this from a number of people, but since I am uneasy about when and where heat-treating was used, I had intended to omit the subject. However, when Mike Collins of the University of Texas read a draft of this web page, he again reminded me that McCormick used heat-treating. He pointed me to an obscure 1963 article by J. M. Shippee and suggested that I add its information. Shippee is reporting on finding a cache near Manhattan, Kansas. It was a "... cache of flint flakes and cores capped by three limestone boulders, spread evenly over a bed of ashes which remained from a fire of considerable intensity." Shippee further writes:

Speculation as to the association of this cache of flint and the bed of ashes led to the memory of a discussion by Shippee and Shewey with Marvin McCormick, the flint flaker PAR EXCELLENCE, during a week long visit to the McCormick workshop in Colorado. McCormick related on several occasions that he found it necessary to "temper" much of the material he used by burying it and building a hot fire above the deposit, then letting it cool slowly. Some flints needed more than one heating. Among these were those from the Alibates quarries, the quartzites and the agates. Obsidian could be worked without "tempering."

In conclusion the writer has this to say, "I still have my doubts about annealing flint but McCormick's declaration and this discovery cause me to ponder the possibility of preparing flint for flaking by the use of confined heat and a slow cooling process." (271-272)

Collins believes McCormick may have been the first modern knapper to use heat-treating and asks the readers of this article to inform him or the author if they know otherwise.

Slides

As I stated at the beginning, I found a set of nine slides in a shoebox full of my father's (Ele Baker) old slides, showing McCormick making a Folsom point. I know my father did not take these slides, and they are not originals. They were reproduced in December of 1967, so they were taken during or before 1967. My father wrote a brief description on each slide, which I have included with each image. Additionally, I have included Bob Patten's observations of McCormick's techniques that he deemed from the slides. Bob is an experienced knapper and a maker of Folsom points. Larger version of the images can be opened in a separate window by clicking on the images.

Slide 1

Ele Baker: *Selecting flint for Folsom point.*

Bob Patten: *This is the only evidence I have seen for how McCormick accomplished the early stages of his knapping. Accounts have focused primarily on his fluting. He apparently used a hammer to prepare flake spalls of relatively uniform size and thickness. Note the glass shield that Marvin used to protect his eyes from flying stone debris.*



Slide 2

EB: *Percussion tool used for shaping.*

BP: *Initial shaping was done by a jabbing stroke with a four-inch long, half-inch diameter copper rod. The blunt end tells me that primary blows were impacted axially. Supporting the preform between thumb and forefinger is a very effective way to develop uniform thickness and lenticular edge-to-edge contour.*



Slide 3

EB: *Percussion shaping and tool used.*

BP: *The waist tapering to the rear of the hammer was probably developed by skidding oblique blows designed to clear away overhangs and other edge irregularities. It looks like the percussor was supported at the base of the right forefinger. Note how the percussor is tied by a cord to the glass shield so it could be easily dropped and retrieved. Final outline shape is already established when percussion is complete. Flakes visible on the tarp are small and irregular.*



Slide 4

EB: *Pressure tool and final step before fluting.*

BP: *Note the extremely battered gloves on both hands. The pressure tool appears to be a soft nail imbedded in a half-inch diameter dowel. Hearsay accounts have Marvin removing flakes by lifting upwards, to peel flakes in an oblique pattern from the upper surface. Obviously, this is where the glass shield would be most useful. This lifting motion would also place pressure on the first bone of the forefinger, and explains the tape visible in the first two photos.*



Slide 5

EB: Striking platform ready for fluting.

BP: Unlike authentic Folsom preforms, this preform is tapered to an acute tip. The platform is not clearly visible, but appears to be highly isolated.



Slide 6

EB: Point in special lead sheet holder and punch in position for fluting.

BP: A right-angle corner of lead provides soft seating for the fluting blow. The punch is two or three inches long and could be made of copper, but bronze would have less chance of being buckled by the fluting blow. Note the near-vertical tool placement.



Slide 7

EB: *Hammerstone and punch in position for fluting.*

BP: *The punch seems to be solidly seated on the platform, but the hammer is held loosely by Marvin's fingertips. There seem to be stains on the face of the stone discoidal hammer, indicating that the blow is directed axially into the punch.*



Slide 8

EB: *Fluted point and channel flakes.*

BP: *The flute is both full length and relatively wide. Many of McCormick's later replicas are thick and have a thin channel that arcs from end-to-end. I think that those varieties may have been fluted by direct hand pressure.*



Slide 9

EB: *Completed point.*

BP: *The boat shape is typical of a McCormick replica. Oblique flake scars intruding into the channel of the replica pictured at the beginning of this essay are also typical of McCormick's work. Note the lack of detailed serial retouch, and the pseudo-nipple left in the base of the completed point. Every McCormick "Folsom" that I have seen has been heat treated to make working easier.*



Acknowledgements

When I began to write this web page, Jeb Taylor directed me to Roger Crabtree. Roger relayed the information that McCormick made his first Folsom point in 1929. Jason LaBelle provided the information about Vincent Dale. Finally, Mike Collins pointed me to the heat-treating article.

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** Contains additional information on Marvin McCormick.

Attachment 1

THE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA
33RD & SPRUCE STREETS, PHILADELPHIA

October 25, 1940

Mr. William E. Baker
Boise City
Oklahoma

Dear Uncle Bill:

I suppose you get over as far as Texline once in a while and I am wondering if the next time you are over that way you will stop in at the filling station museum and see whether the man who runs it ever received the points which I returned to him shortly after I got back here in April. I have written him several times to ask him if he ever got them but I have never heard. I have a receipt, however, to show that I sent them, but I would like to know that he received them.

In this connection, young Porter Montgomery, at Dalhart, wrote me sometime ago that he was convinced that these Folsom points were fakes. I disagreed with this and he gave me the name of a man in Kansas who, he said, could positively tell me about the matter. I have written him twice but have never had any reply. There is something queer about this whole thing but I am not certain just what it is. It seems to me we ought to follow it up and make some report. It has occurred to me that these points I saw from Texline came from one of the caves near Albuquerque since there was a type in there which I do not believe could have been faked as it has only been known a short while. A good many people I showed these to when I had them here agreed with me that they were not fakes. Porter Montgomery basis his opinion largely on the fact that the patination was faked.

It appears that the man I thought might be willing to raise some money for a research center like I discussed with you is a promoter and I am, therefore, a little wary of his being able to carry out his obligations. However, we are looking into it further.

My best to the family, including Ele when you see him.

Sincerely yours,

Edgar B. Howard

Attachment 2 (page 1 of 2)

Boise City
October 31, 1940

Dr. Edgar B. Howard,
Bryn Mawr
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Dear E. B.:

Yours under date of October 25th was gratefully received. I always enjoy hearing from you.

I drove to Texline the day following receipt of your letter, both to find out if Wilson had received the points all right and also to make a more careful detailed study of them than I had ever done before. Mr. Wilson had received the points but had neglected to so notify you.

My final analysis is that absolutely they are fakes. First thing to attract suspicion is the false patination; second, is that Wilson has learned since my seeing him before, the name of the party who sold them to him. This party is Marvin McCormick. The McCormick boys, according to information, have been making the common side-notch and corner notch and selling them the last several years. I have been informed during the last two or three years that they have been selling folsom and yuma points in groups like the Wilson group to collectors in both Kansas and Colorado. Also to one party at Guyton, Oklahoma.

The first two reasons of course, do not prove anything but leads to suspicion. The third reason, to me, is definite.

As you know, I have the last several years been making a study of all the various types of antique points; also the flaking technique of each type. In this manner I have been endeavoring to build up, as I have explained to you, a sequence of the development of these ancient cultures in flint work. In this study and my classifications I find that apparently each type belongs to a different age of this ancient culture and each has its own distinct flaking technique, so much so that generally you can cover both the base and the point of those different types and I can tell you the nature of the base, which I believe proves that I have a very fair knowledge of the types and technique of flaking.

Attachment 2 (page 2 of 2)

Page 2 - Dr. Edgar E. Howard - October 31, 1940.

In this collection sold to Mr. Wilson practically every type of the antique culture is represented excepting the Pinto and its kindred points. These points all carry the identical flaking technique with no variation whatever. The Yuma, Folsom, Folsmoid, the Bottle Neck and etc. all have the same flaking technique. This flaking technique is a poor attempt at the true Yuma flaking. While the flakings are long carrying well across the points in many instances they are broad with irregular outlines which is not found in the true Yuma flaking. This technique, however, is found on certain Folsmoid points but he has made the error of making what should be the true Yuma, Folsom, Folsmoid, and all the other types with this particular technique of flaking.

I have enough of each type in my collection to show the technique predominating in each type and believe by arranging my types according to their individual flakings and then comparing those in the Wilson collection with them that I could convince a group of trained men, who have studied these ancient points, that these are fakes. In fact, I am so sure that had we some way of obtaining actual evidence as to whether they are true or fakes I would be willing to wager a Thousand Dollars that they are fakes.

The next time you come this way I would like for us to make a comparison of my points together with those in order that I might show you more definitely the things which I am here trying to explain.

Hoping that everything is well with you and with kind personal regards, I am

Sincerely yours,

Wm. E. (Uncle Bill) Baker.