

TRADE EARRINGS — AN OVERVIEW

by Charles Hanson, Jr.

Throughout our history, ear ornaments have been as popular as finger ornaments and they have often taken more varied and fanciful forms. The ear seems to offer an irresistible challenge for human display, perhaps because it is so easy to pierce and otherwise manipulate.

North American Indians were making all sorts of ear ornaments of shell and copper before white contact. It was an easy transition to use wampum, glass beads, small brass pieces and brass wire for the same purposes. By the middle of the 18th century traders had begun to stock the earbob, which remained the most popular ear ornament until very late in the 19th century. Consisting basically of an ear wire, an ornamental ball-shaped bead and a hanging cone, it was generally made of silver but brass earbobs appeared before 1850 and a few late ones were made of German silver.

Baynton Wharton & Morgan of Philadelphia were shipping silver earbobs to Fort Augusta (Pennsylvania) in 1767.¹ Archaeologists at Fort Michilimackinac found 5 silver earbobs and 7 more elaborate brass bobs with glass sets, all in the general period 1730-60, "possibly French."² The more elaborate bobs with glass sets were generally made in England and the Hudson's Bay Company was apparently still selling them more than 100 years later.³

In the early 1780's Thomas Forbes gave the Spanish government a "list of goods of English manufacture absolutely necessary for the Indians who inhabit the western frontiers of both Floridas" and it included "Silver ornaments for the ears."⁴ Ramsey Crooks' estimate of goods from Montreal at Michilimackinac for 1819 included "round & square ear bobs."⁵ At this time we do not know exactly what the "square" bobs were but they may have been the old French style with faceted cones. Early in 1819 Crooks ordered a complete set of silverwork samples sent to Mr. Astor from W.M. Mathews of Montreal. The set was to include "1 pr. each size & kind of ear bobs" and "1 pr. each size of earwheel."⁶

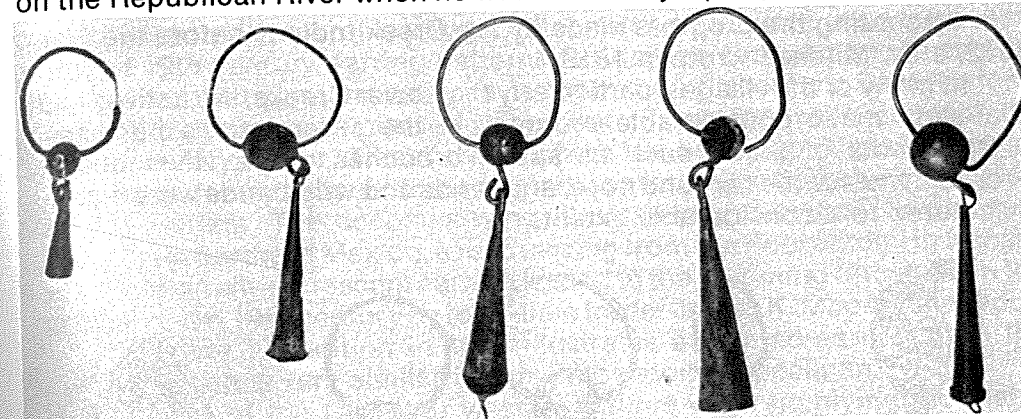
The earwheel was a thin circular piece of sheet silver from about 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 3 inches in diameter, pierced in fancy designs and designed to hang from the ear on a wire hook. They appeared on the market about 1760 along with silver arm bands, brooches, crosses, gorgets, head bands and other ornaments fabricated in Philadelphia, Montreal, New York, and even in London. One of the early orders noted for earwheels was to Gerrit Guverat from traders Rankin & Edgar at Detroit in 1768.

The North West Company sold a great deal of silverwork around the Great Lakes. A typical order to Robert Cruickshank, famous silversmith of Montreal, in 1800 included 100 ear wheels, 1,500 large earbobs and 5,000 small earbobs.⁷ This gives an idea of the relative demand for the two types of ear ornaments. Ear wheels continued to be included in most silver orders and John Johnston, U.S. Factor at Fort Wayne, was requesting several patterns of them shortly before the War of 1812.⁸ After about 1830 most types of silverwork began to decline in popularity. In March 1844, the American Fur Company ordered a general assortment of silver from A. & J. Scrymgeour of New York, including ear wheels and large and small earbobs, for its Northern Department. However, in September 1845 Samuel Abbot at Mackinaw returned a large lot of Scrymgeour silver-head bands, wrist bands, brooches and hat bands, with the comment, "It has been with much

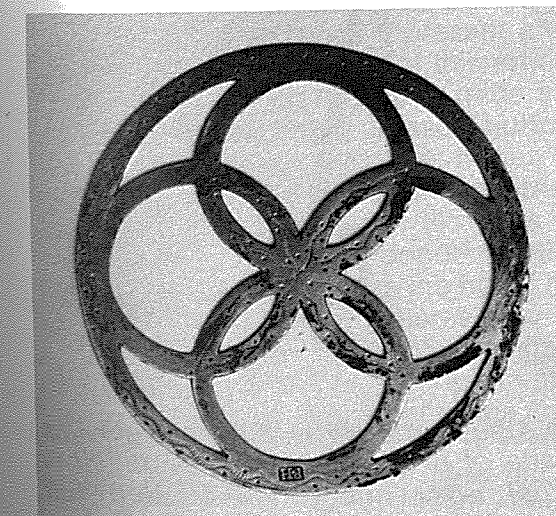
difficulty that I disposed of any of them as the Indians have discontinued the use of such articles."⁹

Meanwhile, the earbobs continued to enjoy high popularity. The Hudson's Bay Company was ordering them in some quantity by 1818. In 1828 the American Fur Company ordered a large outfit of silver from James Scrymgeour including: for the Northern Department — 12,000 large round and 2,500 small earbobs; for the Western Department — 8,000 large and 600 small earbobs, 20 1st size earwheels and 10 2nd size ear wheels; for the Detroit Department — 3,000 large and 5,000 small earbobs.¹⁰ In 1835 The St. Louis Indian Superintendency estimated that St. Louis traders had sold 1,400 pairs of earbobs and 50 ear wheels during the year.¹¹ In 1840 James Scrymgeour shipped 10,000 pairs of large round earbobs and 3,000 of the smaller size to Pierre Chouteau, Jr. & Co. at St. Louis.¹²

After 1860 most of the earbobs sent to the Sioux and other western tribes were made of brass. In 1866 Alphonse Richards was trading with the Sioux on the Republican River when he was robbed by a party of Cheyennes. The



Earbobs, left to right: small silver, from Delaware site, Pennsylvania; silver, from Illinois collection; two large silver bobs, Seminole site in Florida, left one had a bottom ball, now missing; brass, Sioux site in Nebraska, dangle is $\frac{7}{8}$ inch long. — MFT.



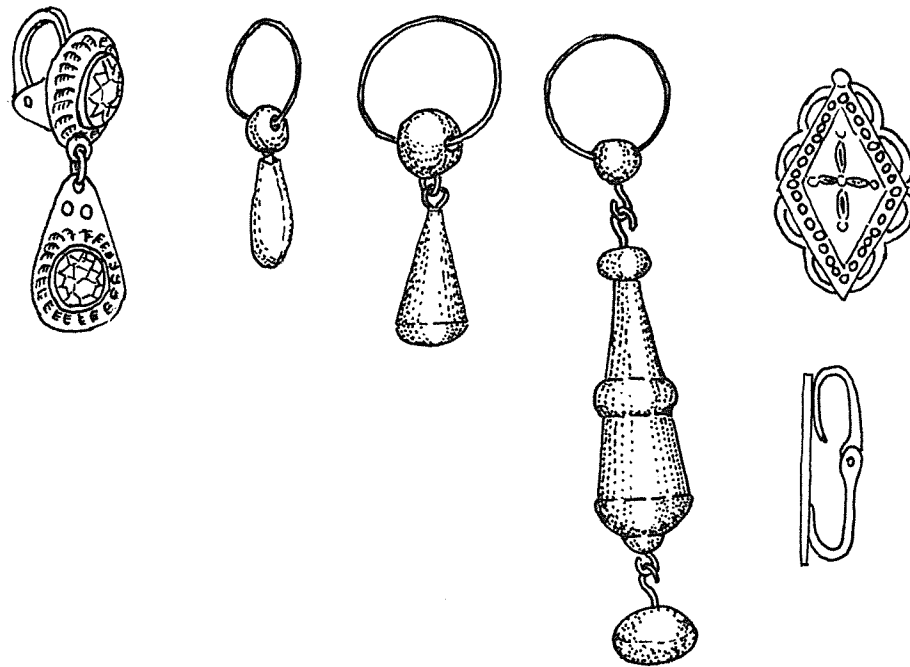
Silver ear wheel with touchmark of Pierre Huget, Montreal. 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches in diameter. — MFT

list of stolen goods included 50 pairs of earbobs valued at \$5.75.¹³ The retail price list recorded by Joseph Burbank, trader at the Omaha Agency in 1877, stated that ear bobs were being sold at 12½ cents per pair.¹⁴ The earbob held on for a long time as a trade piece for it was rarely imitated by native workers in either silver or German silver. The catalog of the G. Sommers Co. for 1900 proclaimed the company to be the "largest dealers in the United States in Indian beads and supplies, and aim to keep on hand all the Indian trinkets we have any demand for." They offered German silver ear bobs in conventional style at \$3.50 for 100 pairs, and also listed "gold plated ear drops" with stone sets for "Indians who will not wear the old style ear bobs."¹⁵

Other styles of earrings enjoyed regional popularity. Much of the silver found on old Cherokee and Chickasaw sites was made in England, Montreal or various places in the United States. However, some Creek, Choctaw and Seminole silver earrings seem to be of Spanish origin or were Indian — made following Spanish patterns. All of these tribes developed native silversmiths at a fairly early period.

In discussing the progress made by the Creek Indians before the War of 1812, a Dr. Mitchell wrote in 1818.¹⁶

In many of the villages, particularly the Lower Creeks, the natives had already made considerable progress in the silver-smith's business. Ornaments of silver, such as spurs, brooches, rings, silver beads, ornaments for the ears and nose, armbands and wristbands were manufactured to a considerable extent.



Left to right: early bob with glass sets, 18th century type found at Mackinac; small bob with teardrop dangle made of two pieces soldered together, Chickasaw site, Mississippi; unusual silver bob found at Mackinac; Osceola's earring, large style popular in South; silver earring collected from Iroquois 1849. (all natural size).

David Bushnell spent some time with a small group of Choctaw living near Bayou Lacomb, Louisiana in 1909. He wrote: "Among the older men are remembered several who were expert in the art of making silver ornaments." He saw a brooch made of a silver dime dated 1856 and mentioned earrings formerly used: "Pendant earrings were also fashioned, having glass beads attached to the lower part."¹⁷

John M. Goggin recently wrote of the Seminole: "By the end of the (18th) century the Indians themselves began to work silver (from coins) and we have several references to jewelry being made by the Seminoles during the period of the Second Seminole War." Goggin described Osceola's silver earbobs as having a second silver ball below the cone and reaching an overall length of 3½ inches. They do not appear to be Indian-made.

Another tribal group noted for the development of silversmithing was the Iroquois. Early in the 19th century they were extensively reproducing Montreal patterns of silverwork and the craft persisted in a small way to very recent times. We have not seen any Indian-made earbobs but more sophisticated patterns of earrings, often with sets, were produced. One series of 19th century earring patterns feature the early American eagle.¹⁸

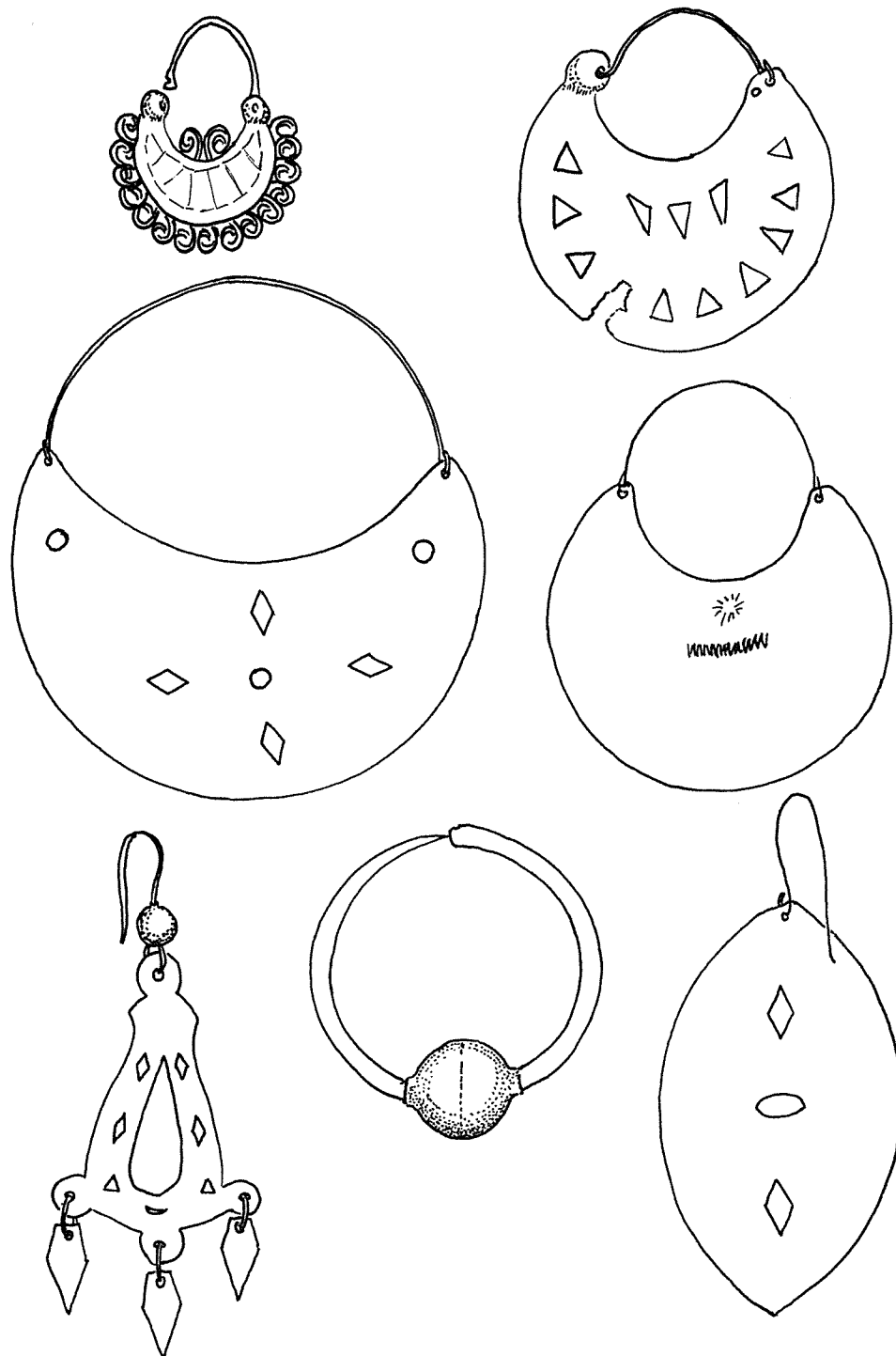
Some trade earrings, probably all dating in the 19th century, have the form of a wide crescent with pierced decoration. They, too, seem to resemble Spanish prototypes, or at least a style which has been popular in Mexico for centuries and was no doubt traded to Indians in the Southwest by early New Mexican settlers. The accompanying illustration shows a silver crescent earring from northern Mexico, a relic earring from the Potawatomi in Kansas and a German silver crescent earring traded to the Wyoming Shoshoni in the last third of the 19th century by long-time trader James K. Moore. The report of the Whipple Expedition in 1855 illustrates a pierced earring from the Shawnee which is very similar to our Potawatomi specimen.¹⁹

By the time of the Civil War western traders were supplying the Plains tribes with sheet German silver and anything made up in that medium until 1875 can be considered as relating to the fur trade. However, most of the people in that period seemed to have been content with the trade earbob or with large simple wire circlets, sometimes carrying a short hair pipe, with a bead or two, as pendants. The beautiful and elaborate German silver peyote earrings of recent times represent a completely different phase of Indian culture beyond the scope of this article.

In the Southwest the early trade silver was Hispano-American — hair plates, bracelets, rings, crosses, buttons, bridle trimmings, beads, buckles and simple earrings that were hoops of heavy wire. The hoops were often plain but they could also be simply ornamented with a sliding bead. This was the only important style in the days when Indians traded silver from the whites and it remained popular until the turn of the 20th century. One acceptable alternative was the holed turquoise nugget suspended by a soft buckskin thong from the pierced ear lobe.

There were other styles of earrings sold on the Northwest Coast and in Alaska but documented historic examples are quite scarce. We do know that the Russians sold bronze earrings and also earrings with enameled glass pendants but no specific data is available concerning them at this time.

The variations in Indian ear decoration were endless. Some tribes including the Fox, Oto, Kanza and Iowa, liked little strings of trade wampum hanging from each ear. Many Indians wore as many as a dozen earbobs on each side by multiple piercings or by slicing loose long expanses of the



Left to right, all natural size:

TOP—Mexican silver crescent earring from Chihuahua; silver crescent from Potawatomi, Kansas. CENTER—German silver crescent, traded to the Shoshoni in Wyoming, ca. 1880; cheap German silver crescent sold by Frost of New York ca. 1900. BOTTOM—Silver Spanish-style earring from the Choctaw, Louisiana; old silver hoop with bead, Navajo; German silver earring traded to Shoshoni ca. 1880. — MFT.

outer rim of the ear. The Sioux and other Plains tribes in the 1840's loved long flat ear drops cut from abalone shell (see MFT Quarterly, Fall 1973).

And now we come to the final "fur trade" question — did the mountain men wear earrings? Yes, some of them did, generally those like Mike Fink who turned from keel-boating to trapping. In those days the small gold earring was the mark of the sailor rather than the hunter and the trapper. A good illustration of this fact is a little news item in the *St. Louis Republican* for March 18, 1835. If they knew the difference between a mountain man and a boat hand anywhere it would certainly be in St. Louis:

Man drowned — A man having the appearance of a boat hand of about twenty-five years of age with light hair and complexion was taken up from the river and interred on the opposite side Thursday last by a citizen of this place...Nothing found about his person in addition of the above but his knife, some tobacco and a pair of gold earrings in his ears. It is supposed he had been drowned 12 or 15 days. — *St. Charles Clarion*

NOTES:

1. *Baynton Wharton & Morgan Accounts, Invoice Book 1767-68*. Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg.
2. Lyle Stone, *Fort Michilimackinac, 1715-1781*, East Lansing, MI, 1974. 135-137.
3. See: John E. Langdon, *Canadian Silversmiths 1700-1900*. Toronto 1966. Plate 66.
4. *Cruzat Papers*. Younge Library of Florida History, University of Florida Library, Gainesville.
5. *Ramsey Crooks Letterbooks 1816-1820*. Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Letter Book of Angus Mackintosh 1798-1803*, MG 19 A 31. Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa.
8. RG 75, *Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Indian Trade, Memorandum Book, 1807-1813*. Page 33. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
9. *American Fur Company Papers, Letters Inward*. New York Historical Society, N.Y.
10. *American Fur Company Papers, Orders Outward*. New York Historical Society, N.Y.
11. *Records of the Office of Indian Affairs, Letters Received — St. Louis*. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
12. *American Fur Company Papers, Orders Outward*.
13. RG 123. *Records of the U.S. Court of Claims. Claim #883 — Alphonse D. Richards*. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
14. *Records of the Office of Indian Affairs, Annuity Goods 1870-1877*. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
15. Original in the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.
16. *The American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review, Vol. III*. New York 1818. 362.
17. David Bushnell, Jr. *The Choctaw of Bayou Lacomb, St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana*. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 48. Washington 1909. 11.