

Blades & blanks

Tribal Elder Don Day continues knapping obsidian, opal

By Ron Karten

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It was the kind of hot day that if there were buzzards above, they would have been circling.

Tribal Elder and Cultural Protection Specialist Don Day, 61, sits on an aluminum and canvas fold-out chair near the fish weir on Agency Creek in the blinding sun and strikes glasslike obsidian with a softly rounded stone.

Day is making blades and blanks for blades in the traditional ways. He does not sweat.

Tribal member David Lewis, the Tribe's Cultural Resources manager, introduced Day's work this way: "Don Day is an expert flint knapper. He is producing some truly excellent blades. He also works with Australian opal. He actually flint knaps opal! He is likely the only person in the world to do this type of art.... He will be a legend someday."

"I got into opal," Day says, "because everybody is doing obsidian. The price is too high for their work, especially when they use a machine. I came up with idea, if I could learn to work opal I

could make it into a market, but the supply is difficult. I found the material and workability to be challenging. If you break a piece in half, you're out. There may be a future in it, though."

Day has produced 40 opal points for sale or trade, but the future of this effort, he says, depends on obtaining quality opal at an affordable price.

On Aug. 14 in the afternoon, he is wearing khaki shorts in the hot sun, and has two layers of leather on top of his thigh. He knows from experience. He's already had chips and blades cut him down to the bone.

The chips pile up at his feet as he strikes obsidian blank with an oval stone. He steadies the obsidian on the leather. The stone is slightly larger than what you might pick up at the riverside to skip across the water, and it has that same soft-edged oval shape.

With many strikes on the edges of a piece of obsidian, the new chips leave sharp edges and form a blank for later use or trade.

One edge, Day says, would be good for cleaning fish. Another for cutting through game.

He tosses the stone he has been using five feet to the gravel of the roadway. It stands out for its soft-



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Elder and Cultural Protection Specialist Don Day abrades a piece of obsidian to make a blank which he will then make into a tool as he demonstrates flint knapping on Thursday, Aug. 14. At left, Day uses various stones, elk antler billets and bones as his tools for flint knapping



ness and roundness, and though you couldn't tell by looking at it, its hardness, too. All around it are sharp-edged, mined rock less than half the size of the stone.

"If you looked at that, would you know it was a tool?" Day asks. Rocks, he says, are what you find in nature. Stones are rocks made into tools. And each stone has its own name – an abrading stone, for example, removes sharp edges and prepares the sides for striking – depending on its use.

"Look for what doesn't belong to the stone from the rocks around it," Day says. For one thing, they all have sharp edges. "If it wasn't a tool, in this place it would have sharp edges," he says.

Day brought a collection of hundreds of pounds of obsidian rock in all different stages of completion down by the creek to show what this part of Indian culture may have looked like as it was practiced.

He points to finished blades, to sharp edges that when tied to a pole, he says, would "go right through a buffalo."

He takes up a billet made of elk antler to chip away at the edges of obsidian blank. As the glasslike material splits off leaving sharp edges behind, he stops and shifts the billet in his hand and says,

"You're looking for a different area of the billet to strike it with." He goes back to striking the obsidian.

One piece has some unfortunate cracks in it, what Day says is part of "the makeup of the material," and when at one point the striking removes too much, he says, "We're losing ground on this one."

On top of a frayed, once green or blue tarp spread out in front of him, obsidian sits in finished blades on a chunk of wood, the kind of display a knapper might set up for sale or trading.

The obsidian also sits in blanks that will be made into blades and larger chunks that don't look at all like the volcanic glass that obsidian is on the inside. (They look just like big regular rocks.) And five feet underground where they may be found, Day says, you have to recognize what they are to know to dig them up.

And you have to know where to dig. "Nobody will tell you where they are," Day says.

Day has been knapping obsidian "on and off" for the past six or seven years.

"I just had an interest in it," he says. "I have an interest in primitive technology."

His teachers were "this person, that person. Someone in Idaho taught me to work Folsom points. It was one of the earliest points found around here. I can't do that yet, except sometimes I get lucky."

As many in the community know, Day also is a traditional craftsman with cedar, splitting it and build-

ing traditional structures. He has been involved in the effort to put the plankhouse up above the new Uyxat Powwow Grounds and has also been a part of many other traditional structures, including an exhibit at the University of Oregon Museum of Cultural and Natural History, and the miniature plankhouse at the Roloff farm in Hillsboro featured in the cable TV show "Little People, Big World." He has long been respected as a teacher of these traditional skills here in Grand Ronde.

Traditional practices often come with stories, and Day knows many of those, too. He points out finished blades that back in the day may have been used by a teenaged boy or girl to indicate an interest in the other.

Day calls it a "youth dance blade," and says that it worked like an invitation. After being presented with a blade as an invitation to a dance, for example, "You would return the blade to her if you accept," Day says, "and you would return it to her lodge if you did not."

Another blade might have been used as "a wealth blade," Day says. "It was for trading. You could trade one for a canoe. It was not used as a tool, but only as a show of wealth."

He calls one blade "a Molalla hundred dollar bill." Tools made of obsidian were a form of currency for thousands of years, he says.

Day is now completing his master's thesis at the University of Oregon about western red cedar plankhouses in the Northwest. ■