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ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES ON THE DENALI HIGHWAY, ALASKA

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and

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The country south of the Alaska Range, nearly all of which was ice-covered during the late Pleistocene, has yielded relatively little "pre-Athapascan" material of the type commonly found in the Interior north of the range. However, in 1953 William Irving, working under contract with the National Park Service, discovered two flaking sites in the Lake Susitna-Lake Louise area (Irving, 1957, pp. 37-52). Scattered finds have been reported from the same general region from time to time, but no other "sites" were discovered until in 1957 when Chester M. Ratekin, Culvert Inspector for the Bureau of Public Roads, made a discovery near Mile 70 on the Denali Highway in a series of "blowouts". Mr. John R. Wilcox, Resident Engineer for the B.P.R., reported the discovery. Mr. J. McManners, Project Engineer of the Smith-Brown-Root Construction firm of Houston, Texas, also aided materially in the work by donating a number of surface specimens collected along the road and making the facilities of the well-equipped camp available to these writers. Mr. A. C. Divine, B.P.R. engineer at Glenallen, also donated a number of specimens gathered on the surface along the highway.

A few days after the discovery of the "Ratekin Site", Dr. Neil W. Hosely, formerly Dean of the University of Alaska, reported a somewhat similar site discovered by him in a blowout on a ridge (esker) near Tangle Lakes, also on the Denali Highway.

THE DENALI HIGHWAY

The Denali Highway, nearly completed and already passable by ordinary vehicles, is being constructed by the Bureau of Public Roads for the National Park Service to connect Mount McKinley National Park with the Richardson Highway and the North American highway systems. The road cuts through the Alaska Range in the Paxson-Tangle Lakes area, and continues along the foothills on the south slopes of the range to Cantwell on the Alaska Railroad, where it turns north through the range to McKinley Park. The total distance from Paxson Lake to McKinley Park is approximately 160 miles.

Most of the road runs near or slightly above timberline through a country which was heavily glaciated during the late Wisconsin stage of the Pleistocene Epoch. There are innumerable glacial formations and the road follows the tops of several eskers for many miles.

The country is the grazing grounds for the large Nelchina caribou herd which today ranges in a region bounded by the Alaska Range, the Richardson Highway, the Glenn Highway, and the Alaska Railroad. The Atna Indians (Ahtena) consider the country their hereditary hunting grounds, but it is not a reservation and the area was very inaccessible until the highway opened it up in 1957.

THE RATEKIN SITE

This site is located approximately 75 miles from Paxson. Actually, it is more than one site, it is a number of flaking stations with large numbers of refuse flakes, complete specimens, and a few broken implements. According to the available evidence, the "site" was apparently not a camp location but a killing ground. There is only a small trickle of running water today, and wood is too scarce for a permanent village. The large number of unbroken specimens, mostly "arrowheads" lost during the hunt, suggests that it was a butchering ground where the caribou were funnelled into a narrow corridor created by the muskeg to the south and the steep foothills to the north. Ancient caribou trails line the landscape, and the annual migrations still follow these trails which wind between ridges and hummocks nearly everywhere.

Most of the flaking sites were on the ridges and were laid bare in "blowouts" where all organic and fine-grained material is blown away. Most of these "blowouts" seem to originate as ground squirrel burrows, which are often enlarged by bears digging for these animals. Subsequent wind erosion has enlarged the exposed areas so most of the ridges now consist of a series of blowouts.

Some of the material was found *in situ* under two to six inches of overburden consisting of heather soil and a whitish material not yet analyzed, believed by the road engineers to be volcanic ash, but it might prove to be a strongly leached podsol. No organic material derived from human occupancy was left, but a number of small rocks showed evidence of having been used as "cooking stones".

The large number of specimens suggests that the site had been used for a considerable time and might well represent several time periods and culture phases. However, all the material except an "arrow-shaft shaper" was flaked. Blowouts lack stratification and mix up the different cultural layers and too little is yet known about the flaking cultures of this area to attempt the creation of a chronology.

HOSLEY RIDGE

While the Ratekin Site was a butchering ground, the Hosely Ridge site was an old drive location where the caribou apparently were driven into the lake to be disposed of by men in canoes. Most of the material found consisted of refuse flakes with only one perfect blade (fig. 1, plate V). A number of specimens apparently were broken during the flaking process, but the scarcity of complete specimens suggests that the actual killing was done in the lake, not on the ridges. The country is seamed with ancient and recent caribou trails on and between the eskers, and some refuse material from flaking is found nearly everywhere in the vicinity of the lakes. Most of the ridges are above the present timberline and lack firewood and water.

From the information gathered in 1953 and 1957, it appears that a fairly large, early prehistoric population occupied the country south of the Alaska Range in a region which was ice-covered until quite

late in the Wisconsin stage of glaciations. These people were doubtless migratory and hunted the caribou by ambush and drive methods. Their culture showed little resemblance to that of the Athapascan-speaking people occupying this region today. No means of dating was found, but, on the basis of patination of flint specimens, one might safely assume that the material is at least 2,000, perhaps more than 4,000 years old. The closest resemblance is material from sites discovered by William Irving in the Upper Susitna drainage, about sixty miles south of Tangle Lakes. This region is occupied by the same caribou herd and was also hunted by the Atna Indians. There is less resemblance to Dixthada (Rainey, 1938), Birch Lake (Skarland and Giddings, 1948), and the Campus Site (Nelson, 1937; Rainey, 1939). The Ratekin and Hosley sites have yielded no burins, nor any retouched lammellar flakes so far.

The Denali Highway material has not been studied in detail as yet, but a rough, preliminary sorting gave the following results:

The Ratekin Site:

Scrapers, various types.....	79
Blades (knives and projectile points).....	65
Arrow shaft shaper.....	1
Large amounts of core and refuse material.	

The Hosley Ridge Site:

Worked specimens.....	22
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PLATE I, RATEKIN SITE

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Blade, flaked. | 5. Blade, flaked. |
| 2. Blade, flaked. | 6. Blade, flaked. |
| 3. Blade, flaked. | 7. Blade, flaked. |
| 4. Blade, flaked. | 8. Blade, flaked. |

PLATE II, RATEKIN SITE

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Blade, flaked, notched. | 12. Blade, flaked, notched. |
| 2. Blade, flaked, notched. | 13. Blade, flaked, shouldered. |
| 3. Blade, flaked. | 14. Blade, flaked, notched. |
| 4. Blade, flaked. | 15. Blade, flaked, notched. |
| 5. Blade, flaked. | 16. Blade, flaked, notched. |
| 6. Blade, flaked, notched. | 17. Blade, flaked, notched. |
| 7. Blade, flaked, notched. | 18. Blade, flaked, notched. |
| 8. Blade, flaked, notched. | 19. Blade (?), flaked. |
| 9. Blade, flaked, triangular. | 20. Blade, flaked, notched. |
| 10. Blade, flaked, notched. | 21. Blade, flaked, notched. |
| 11. Blade, flaked, notched. | |

PLATE III, RATEKIN SITE

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Side scraper, flaked. | 10. End scraper, flaked. |
| 2. End scraper, flaked. | 11. End scraper, flaked. |
| 3. End scraper, flaked. | 12. Discoidal scraper, flaked. |
| 4. Side scraper, flaked. | 13. End scraper, flaked. |
| 5. | 14. End scraper, flaked. |
| 6. Side scraper, flaked. | 15. End scraper, flaked. |
| 7. Side scraper, flaked. | 16. End scraper, flaked. |
| 8. End scraper, flaked. | 17. Side scraper, flaked. |
| 9. Side scraper, flaked. | |

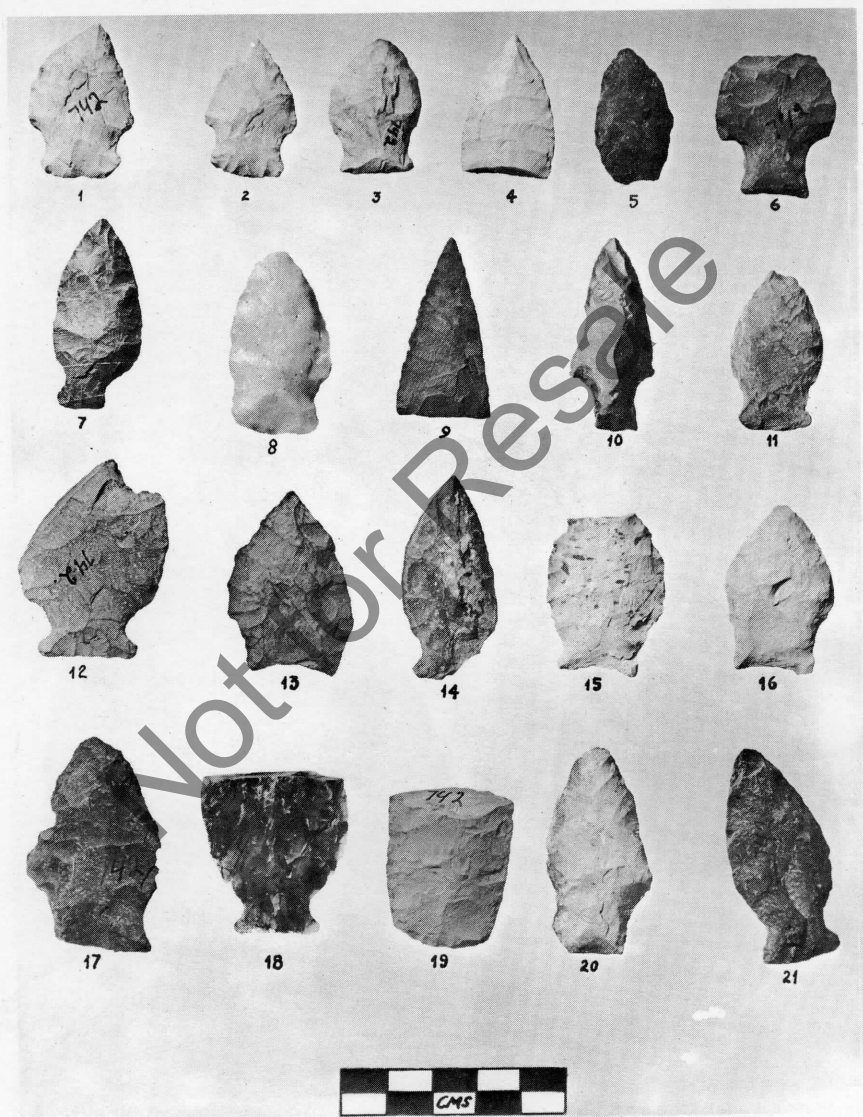
PLATE IV, RATEKIN SITE

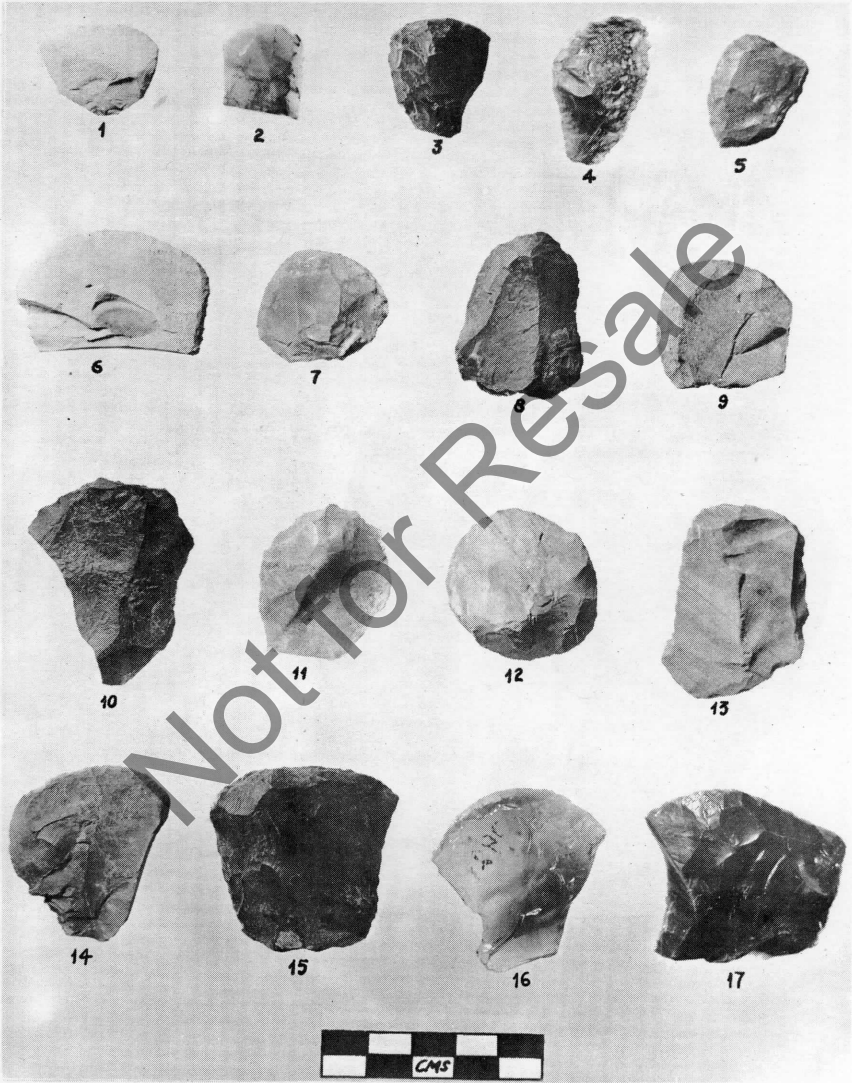
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|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Blade, flaked. | 5. End scraper, flaked. |
| 2. Blade, flaked. | 6. Blade, flaked. |
| 3. Blade, flaked. | 7. Arrow shaft shaper, pecked. |
| 4. Side scraper, flaked. | |

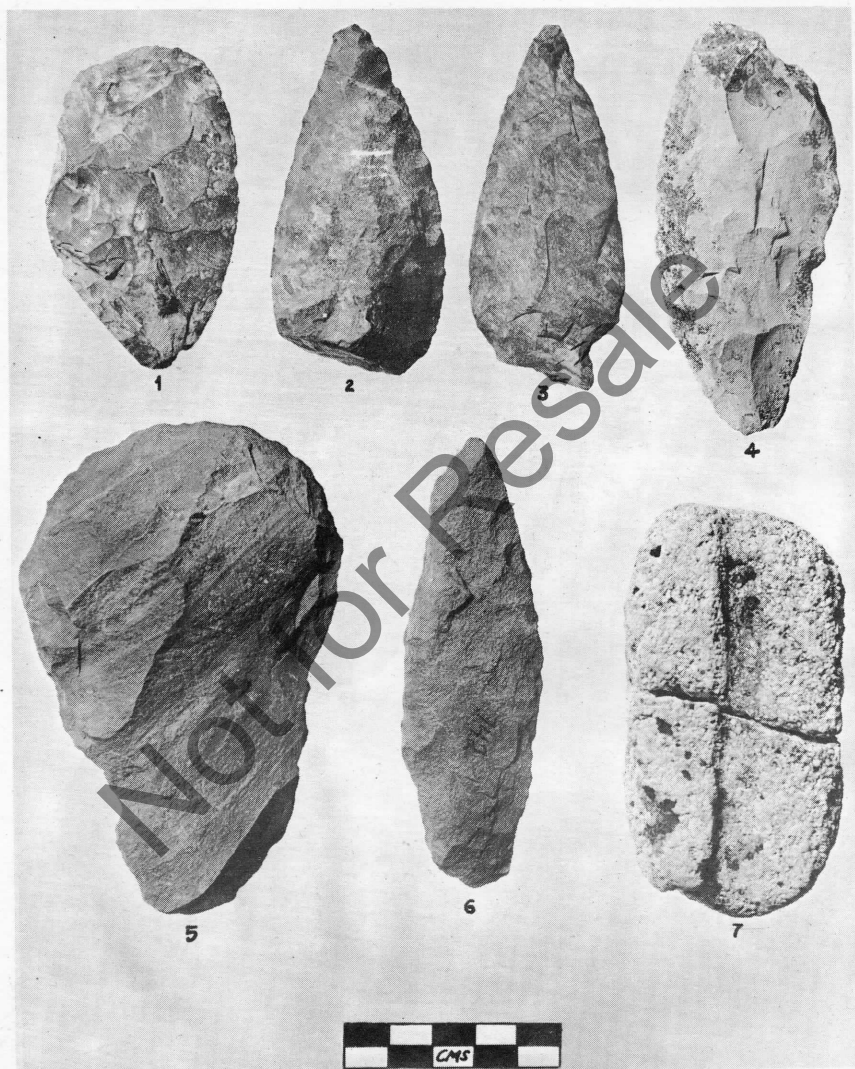
PLATE V, HOSLEY RIDGE SITE

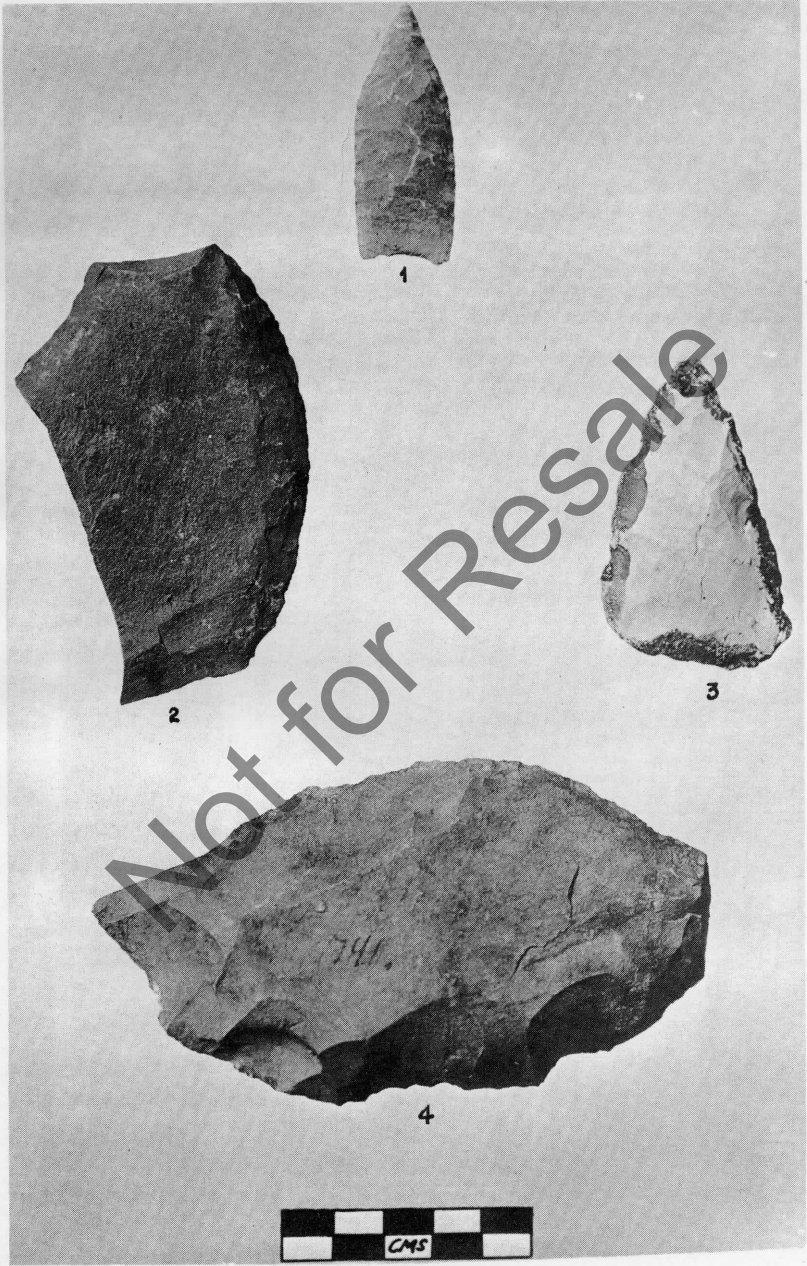
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|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Blade, flaked. | 3. Blade, flaked on all edges. |
| 2. Side scraper, flaked. | 4. Core tool, flaked. |











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