27. VANCOUVER'S CALIFORNIAN BOWS

By Eugene Robinson

Among the ethnographic specimens collected by the Vancouver expedition on the California coast in 1793, and now in the British Museum, are three sinew-backed bows.[1] Collected, as they were, during the exploration period of California when native culture was but little influenced by European contact, they afford interesting comparisons with the more recently made ethnographic specimens to be found in museum collections.[2]

Two of these bows (Figs. 1, 3) were briefly described in 1891 in Read's summary of the Vancouver collection,[3] the third specimen (Fig. 2) apparently has not previously been reported on. Although at first glance these bows all appear alike, there are certain minor, yet significant, features which tend to identify each with its ethnographic area. Comparative notes are appended to the descriptions given below.

Figure 1. British Museum designation: Vancouver Voy. A.W.F. 16.3.91 Trinidad, Cal. This reflexed,[4] undecorated bow is figured by Read and described as from "Trinidad Bay, Upper California."[5] Of dark, reddish-brown yew wood (Taxus brevifolia). Length along curve, 99.1 cm.; maximum diameters, 40 mm. by 16 mm. Cross-section is biconvex with edges worked to a thin edge. Grip is not constricted. The rather smooth sinew backing extends up and over the nocks, which are bent back at an angle. A narrow, thick wrapping of sinew encircles the nocks an inch below their extremities; these bands or collars serve as seats for the bowstring loops (Fig. 4, a). The handgrip is a flat buckskin thong wound spirally about the center of the bow for a distance of 12 cm. Read's sketch shows sinew or buckskin wrappings just below the nocks, but these are now missing.

Figure 2. British Museum designation: Vancouver Voy. A.W.F. 16.3.91 Trinidad, Cal. As noted in the discussion below, this bow has been mislabeled as to place of origin; it is certainly not of Northwestern California type. Length along curve, 106.7 cm.; maximum diameters, 32 mm. by 17.5 mm. This reflexed, unpainted bow is made of a light brown wood -- definitely not yew. Cross-section along central three-fourths of bow is deeply biconvex (Fig. 4, b), which merges into a more or less round cross-section near the ends. As shown in the figure, the rather coarse sinew backing is brought around onto the belly side of the ends so that the last inch of each tip is completely enclosed; sinew extends beyond tips to form small hooks which, being very hard, effectively serve as bowstring nocks. Definite recurving of ends is not apparent although these, as with the other two bows, would evidently retain some of their reflexed shape if the bow were strung and drawn. Handgrip is a 14 cm. wrapping of buckskin thong.

Figure 3. British Museum designation: Vancouver Voy. A.W.F. 16.3.91 Sta. Barbara, 221. The word "Sta Barbara", in faded longhand, appears on the belly side of one limb, half way between nock and grip. Read's sketch shows the belly side of this bow.[6] Length along curve, 105.5 cm.; maximum diameters, 35 mm. by 18 mm. Wood is yellowish

tan in color, very straight grained. The bow is markedly reflexed and the ends appear to have been slightly recurved. Surface of sinew backing is smooth; sinew does not extend over ends and back of nocks as with the Yurok bow of Figure 1. Nocks are of the pin or shouldered type (Fig. 4, c). Handgrip is bound for a distance of 15.8 cm. with a buckskin thong apparently once colored red. Read states that ". . . the two ends are bound with sinew and strips of leather;" only portions of thong wrapping now remain. The belly side of the bow is painted solid black on each side of the grip for a distance of about 18 cm. A short length of bowstring still remains attached to one nock; this is of 3 ply sinew.

On the basis of an examination of pertinent Californian ethnographic literature and museum material, the following observations are noted.

Fig. 1. The form of this bow (short length, of sinew-backed yew, relatively broad and thin in section with sides worked to a thin edge) is typical of the general type common in Northwestern California. The specific type of nock (bent back at an angle, with sinew collar) tends to localize this bow's ethnographic provenience and confirms the designated place of origin. To judge from a rather large number of museum specimens, all collected during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this nock was a standard type on Yurok, Karok and Hupa bows, and was also used by the Tolowa.[7] In short, Vancouver's Yurok bow from Trinidad Bay serves as a link indicating that the historic form of bow of the lower Klamath and Trinity River area has remained unchanged from early historic (and probably aboriginal) times down to recent years.

Fig. 2. The somewhat narrower and thicker proportions, treatment of sinew backing and "sinew hook" type of nocks, indicate that this bow was not collected from the Yurok of Trinidad Bay. On the other hand, six ethnographic specimens (5 Miwok, 1 Mono[8]) in musuem collections are of identical type, which would indicate a more central California origin for the specimen.

The bow figured by Von Langsdorff (Fig. 5), who had contact with San Francisco Bay Indians in 1806, is also of this peculiar type.[9] Dixon, in his monograph on the Shasta, figures one end of a Miwok bow (AMNH 50.6439) and discusses the type.[10] He states that the probability is strong that many bows of this type in early collections, both here and abroad, are actually from the Bay region.

On the basis of Von Langsdorff's figure and Dixon's discussion, it is probable that the bow in our Figure 2, if correctly ascribed to the Vancouver collection, was collected at San Francisco or possibly Monterey, both of these ports having been visited by Vancouver's ships.

The occurrence of this type of bow so far east as the Miwok suggests a broad distribution across central California.

Fig. 3. This bow apparently represents the only known example from the Chumash area,[11] or more precisely, from the entire southcentral coast region inland to the Yokuts. The bow has no specific points to distinguish it other than it appears to fall within the general type

indicated for this region by the available ethnographic data: short, sinew-backed, rather narrow and thickened cross-section, with ends sometimes recurved.[12] The shouldered type of nock occurs in many parts of California and elsewhere.

NOTES

1. These bows form part of the original collection of objects purchased from native sources during the voyage by George G. Hewett, Surgeon's Mate on Vancouver's Discovery; the collection was acquired by the Museum in 1891. For a description or discussion of objects in the collection, see Read, 1891; Dalton, 1897; Heizer, 1938, 1952.

2. For measurements and details of the Vancouver bows we are indebted to Mr. Adrian Digby, Deputy Keeper, Department of Ethnography, British Museum. Photographs of bows courtesy British Museum.

3. Read, 1891, pp. 107-8, pl. XI, figs. 5, 6.

4. In Figures 1-3, side views, the back of each bow is the concave or upper side, which would become convex if the bows were strung. This reflexed condition is caused by tension of the sinew backing. This is not to be confused with recurved ends, a trait common in northern and central California, whereby the wood of the ends of a bow are heated and bent backward during the course of manufacture.

5. Read, 1891, pl. XI, fig. 5.

6. Ibid., fig. 6.

7. A total of some 45 specimens from this area examined. Examples are: Chicago Natural History Museum: Yurok 86729, 60097, 60098; Karok 86609, 86611, 86612. University of California Museum of Anthropology: Hupa 1-20812, 1-24340, 1-972; Tolowa: 1-2454, 1-2455. Seven bows in the collections have simple shouldered nocks in place of the old sinew collar type; such a bow, collected from the Trinidad Yurok during the period 1850-1856, is illustrated by Heizer (1952, pl. 3).

8. Miwok: University of California Museum of Anthropology no. 1-4488; American Museum of Natural History, 50.6439; Chicago Natural History Museum, 70242; San Diego Museum, Jessup Coll. 123; Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology (Cambridge), 64067. Mono: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 21-4163. The "sinew hook" type of nock is also described for the Western Mono by Gayton (1948, Pt. II, p. 218).

9. Von Langsdorff, 1814, vol. II, opp. p. 226.

10. Dixon, 1907, pp. 436-438. Dixon says: "In this connection, perhaps, should be mentioned a peculiar type of bow found in many museums in this country and abroad. In many instances these bows are labelled 'Shasta,' while in other cases they are simply marked 'California.' They are very characteristic in the roundness of the bow and the peculiar manner in which the sinew backing is curved around at the ends (Fig. 107). All these bows of which I have any knowledge are old, and were obtained somewhere in the period anterior to 1855 or 1860, some of them as early as 1820, or before. Careful inquiry in the Shasta territory has failed to reveal any specimens there, and no trace of the peculiar treatment of the sinew at the ends of the bow has been found among the Shasta themselves. The bow, however, exactly resembles the one shown by Langsdorff, who visited the region about San Francisco in 1803-07, and who came in contact, so far as known, only with tribes of the Bay area. The probability is strong, therefore, that these bows sometimes labelled 'Shasta' are in reality from the Bay region, and not from the Shasta, with whom the early explorers who visited the California coast could have had no communication. The evidence is also strengthened by the fact that, in the Museum of the Imperial Academy of Sciences at St. Petersburg, there is a large bundle of bows, unlabelled, but of this very type, which were probably brought back by Kotzebue in 1818; and he, as in the case of Langsdorff, came in contact only with the Indians of San Francisco Bay."

11. Kroeber, 1925, p. 560.

12. Harrington, 1942, p. 14.

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Fig. 1

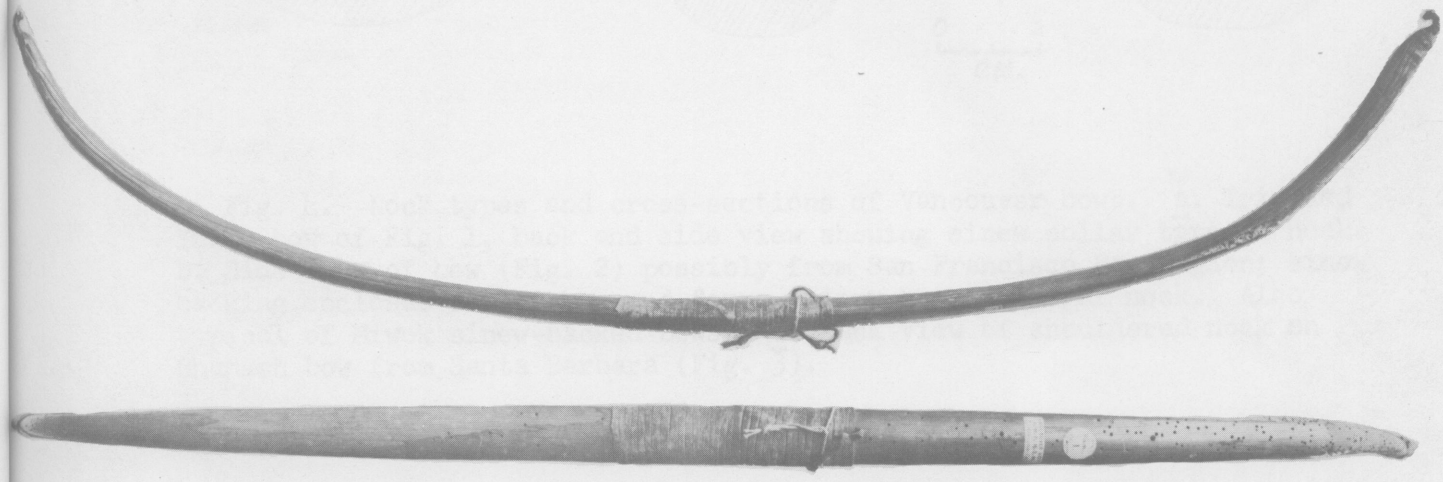

Fig. 2

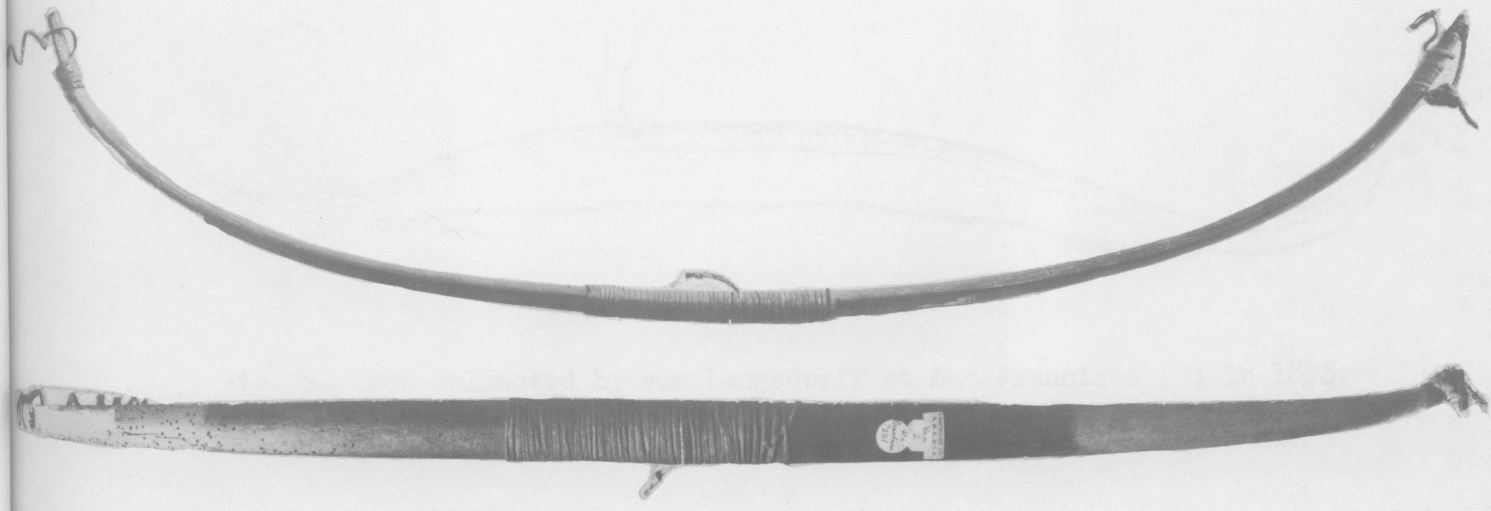

Fig. 3

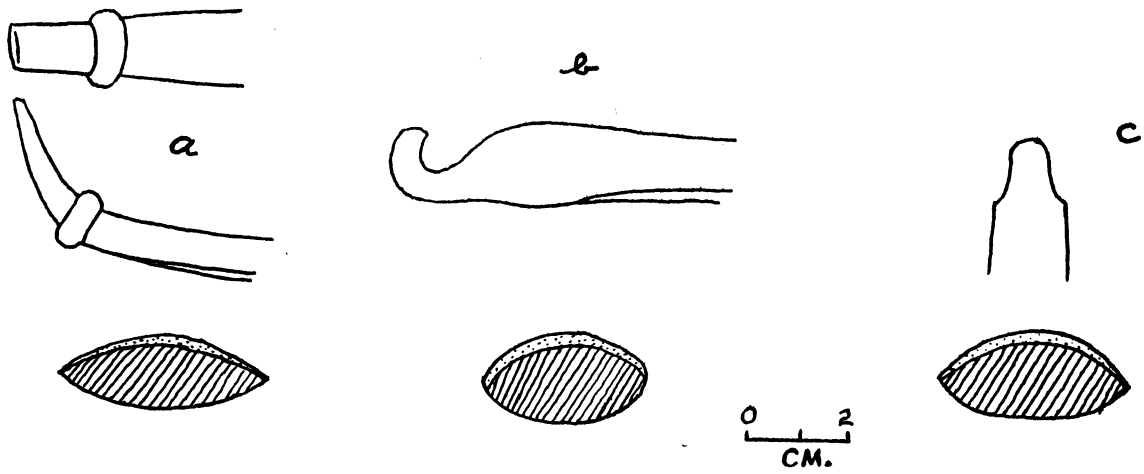

Fig. 4. Nock types and cross-sections of Vancouver bows. a. Trinidad Yurok bow of Fig. 1, back and side view showing sinew collar type of nock. b. Side view of bow (Fig. 2) possibly from San Francisco Bay region; sinew backing encloses end of bow and forms "sinew-hook" type of nock. Also typical of Miwok sinew-backed bows. c. Back view of shouldered nock on Chumash bow from Santa Barbara (Fig. 3).

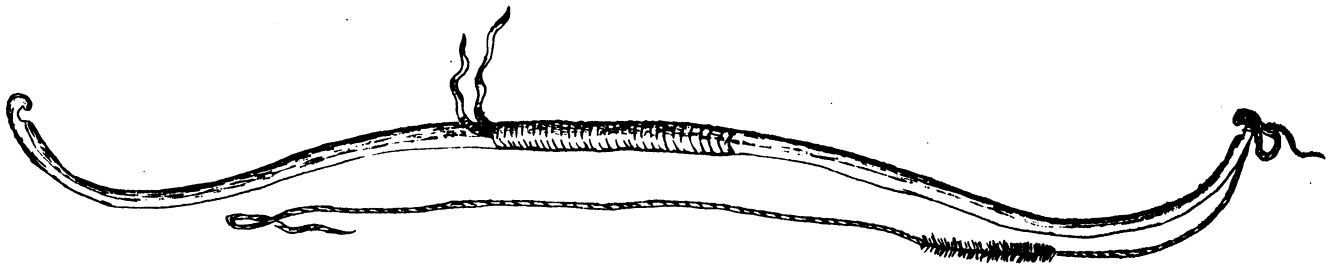

Fig. 5. Bow collected by von Langsdorff at San Francisco (?) in 1806.