



One of Arizona's greatest mysteries exploded onto front pages of newspapers across the country in December 1925. One man's find of seemingly ancient crosses and swords buried in the earth outside Tucson raised the prospect that Europeans had lived in Arizona 700 years before Columbus. If true, history was going to get a substantial rewrite.

That rewrite never happened, of course, but the discovery of what were later called the Silverbell artifacts touched off a furious debate. The controversy sent reputations spiraling, spawned bouts of intellectual mud-wrestling and led to charges of fraud and fakery.

After all that—and more than 75 years of expert inquiry—the principal questions surrounding the mystifying leaden objects still remain unanswered.

On September 13, 1924, a World War I

veteran, Charles E. Manier, was returning to Tucson with his wife, son and father after a picnic at Picture Rocks, north of town. Out of curiosity, he told his son, who was driving, to pull over at an abandoned lime kiln on Silverbell Road, 8 miles northwest of town, on what is now private property.

As he inspected the kiln, Manier saw an object protruding from the bank of a wagon path out into the wash. He tapped on it with his father's cane and saw that it was trapped in solid caliche, a thick rocklike crust that forms underground from lime leaching out of the soil.

Hammering with an army pick, he dug out an 18-inch-long cross that weighed 64 pounds. After taking it home and washing it, Manier realized it was two crosses riveted together with lead. When he separated the pieces, he saw inscriptions of Latin words

and phrases, including the date A.D. 790.

Manier brought in on the discovery his friend and fellow veteran, Thomas W. Bent, who eventually homesteaded the property. The two men, with help from some University of Arizona professors, continued digging, and, by November 1925, they had unearthed 27 lead castings, a number that eventually would grow to 32.

The cache consisted mainly of swords, but also included crosses and spears. The items, inscribed with dates ranging between A.D. 760 and A.D. 900, were decorated with a mixture of symbols—a Christian cross, a Moslem crescent, a Hebraic seven-branched candlestick, freemasonry emblems and Latin phrases. Hebrew words adorned two of the crosses.

The story broke on December 13, 1925, with both the *Arizona Daily Star* and the

## ANCIENT ROMAN RELICS OR 18<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY HOAX?

[CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE RIGHT] The 1924 discovery north of Tucson of a trove of artifacts bearing dates from as early as A.D. 760 led to a frenzied, controversial re-examination of when Europeans first settled this continent. The items included a 14-inch lead staff inscribed with curious designs and combining a cross with a crescent emblem; and several swords, two of them pictured here.



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TEXT BY LEO W. BANKS / PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER NOEBELS

*New York Times* running long features. But in that first day's coverage and during the coming weeks, the papers took decidedly different tacks—the *Star* arguing for authenticity against a skeptical *Times*.

The *Star* endorsed a wild theory posed by a local schoolteacher, Laura Coleman Ostrander. She believed that the inscriptions described conflicts between members of an 8th-century Roman-Jewish settlement in the Southwest and Toltec Indians, forerunners of the Aztecs. She even claimed the scars on many of the swords and spears were the "result of having been used in battle."

The *Times* dismissed Ostrander's idea as "a fantastic and absurd dream," sniffing that Manier and Bent were merely ex-servicemen who contracted tuberculosis in the war and had come to Tucson five years earlier "as totally disabled veterans."

The paper also quoted experts, including Bashford Dean, curator of arms and armor for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He declared the specimens "modern forgeries, probably local and certainly without either interest or value."

FW. Hodge, of the Southwest Museum of the American Indian in New York City, strongly suspected an "archaeological faker" at work in Arizona.

A respected national figure and the University of Arizona's dean of archaeology, Byron Cummings presented the *Star's* side of the argument. Cummings staked his reputation on his belief that the relics were genuine articles of antiquity. "I don't see how they can be fakes," he said. "Anyone who says they are, can not have investigated."

He said he was absolutely certain that they had not been planted because the surrounding caliche, 4 to 6 feet beneath its crusty top layer, was undisturbed. Cummings also heaved a few verbal bricks back at the experts quoted in the *Times*, none of whom had visited the site. "The eastern scientists can have no knowledge of the discovery except what they have read in the newspapers," he said.

Almost immediately, hoax theory supporters got a boost when it was revealed that the anno Domini system of writing dates, as inscribed on the artifacts, didn't come into general use in Europe until the 10th century. How then could the Silverbell pieces be from the 8th century?

Later, someone also pointed out that most of the Latin inscriptions were copied verbatim from commonly used textbooks—Harkness' *Latin Grammar*, Rouff's *Standard*

*Dictionary of Facts* and Allen and Greenough's *Latin Grammar*.

On this basis, Frank Fowler, of the UA classical languages department, stated that the relics had to be of recent manufacture because the earliest edition of any of those books was 1864.

"The Silverbell artifacts are either a gigantic hoax, beside which all noted scientific fakes of history pale into insignificance," Fowler declared, "or they are the work of a demented or obsessed person."

But who? How could anyone, demented or not, manage to plant so many large, heavy objects 4 to 6 feet underground in solid caliche? And why?

In a matter of days, publicity had made these questions the subject of national curiosity. But the more coverage the issue received, the deeper the facts seemed to recede into a tangle of egos and ambition.

The UA, still a comparatively young educational institution at the time, was seeking to gain respectability and saw in the artifacts a chance to achieve it, said Mark Santiago, who cataloged the artifact collection for the Arizona Historical Society after they were acquired in 1996. He added that the university had already attained some status with the work professor Cummings had done in his excavations of Mesoamerican cultures in the Yucatan.

"But the discovery of a Roman-Jewish settlement in Arizona really would have been astounding," Santiago explained. "I think they acted rashly. When people started looking into the claims, that's when the acrimony started and careers were made and unmade."

A new theory seemed to pop up every few weeks.

Perhaps the relics had belonged to Jesuit priests, whose mission near the site was destroyed by Apaches in 1705.

No, someone else would say, the culprit was a prankster from the Coronado expedition, explorers of the American Southwest in 1540, who wished to play a practical joke on future residents.

A member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who was not an official spokesman of the church, said the inscriptions obviously substantiated the story in the Book of Mormon that claimed Indians of North America were direct descendants of the ancient Israelites.

Laura Coleman Ostrander returned for a second try. This time she said the artifacts were records of Quetzalcoatl, the bearded white man worshipped as a god by Mexico's Toltec Indians.

The *Star* did its best to defend Cummings,

in one story lining up local bigwigs, such as author Harold Bell Wright, to testify to his character.

"True, most of the persons interviewed disclaimed any positive opinion of their own," the *Star* said, "but asserted that 'what was good enough for Dean Cummings was good enough for them.'"

The *Tucson Citizen*, the afternoon newspaper, played contrarian with its competitor, seeming to delight in the *Star's* editorial soft-shoe as it became clear that the paper's initial claims were far-fetched.

But the best line of the imbroglia came from the *Prescott Evening Courier*: "What does a newspaper know about tablets with inscriptions anyway? If they were aspirin tablets, it would be different."

In January 1926, perhaps the most plausible theory emerged. A retired rancher, Leandro Ruiz, told reporters he remembered a young Mexican sculptor, Timoteo Odohui, who lived with his parents at the lime kiln 40 years before and was known to have molded articles in a soft alloy metal resembling lead. Ruiz recalled seeing a metal horse that Odohui had carved and a stone cross that recorded an injury Ruiz had suffered in a fall. The cross was placed a short distance from the kiln where the Odohuis had camped during the 1880s.

These recollections were confirmed by a second man, Eduardo Machado.

The Odohui family was said to have been educated and cultured and to have owned a library containing several volumes of the classics. People recalled Vicente Odohui, Timoteo's father, saying that the books were heirlooms and that some were more than 200 years old.

"The object, if the relics were 'planted' by the Odohuis," wrote the *Times*, "may have been with a view of creating a sensation later with the discovery."

Is it realistic to believe that a brilliantly artistic boy, a pauper from Mexico with an appreciation of Cicero, created all 32 relics, inscribed them and somehow buried them under generations of caliche, with the intention of stumping a few intellectuals?

One recollection of Timoteo seems telling: He was described as unstable and obsessed with buried treasure. But his story dead-ends. The Odohui family, according to newspaper reports, stayed in Tucson for eight or nine years. Then, when Vicente died, decades before the Silverbell find, Timoteo and his mother returned to Mexico and were never seen or heard from again.

Ultimately, the university's involvement in the controversy of the unearthed "treasure" proved embarrassing. In an agreement with



Thomas Bent, the Arizona State Museum in Tucson displayed the artifacts for more than a year, with the possibility of purchasing them later for \$16,000. In return, the school was allowed to excavate the site with the hope of solving the dilemma.

But in January 1930, in a four-page statement signed by Cummings, the university withdrew its offer to buy the artifacts, citing questions about their authenticity.

Among them was Fowler's finding about the Latin expressions and the fact that one item was an inch shorter than the hole in which it was found, leading to suspicions that it might have been inserted.

Also weighing against their authenticity was the discovery that a piece of copper ore from the Bisbee mining district was embedded in the first cross Manier had unearthed. Mining didn't get under way in Bisbee until the 1870s, and an analysis of the metal contained in some of the other artifacts indicated that it was not primitive. Rather, it was strikingly similar to type metal, which was produced by modern refinery methods

and used by publishers in the production of printed matter.

In his 1930 negative recommendation, Cummings wrote, "From the foregoing facts I do not feel justified in advising the State Museum to purchase these lead artifacts from Thomas W. Bent and Chas. E. Manier."

The press portrayed the UA's decision as acknowledged that the artifacts had been planted as part of a hoax. But Cummings' carefully worded statement listed reasons only to question the relics' authenticity without actually stating that they were bogus.

Until Cummings' death in 1954, at age 93, he never publicly stated that he had been wrong, and no one has proved definitively that he was.

Still today, scientists intrigued by the Silverbell artifacts trudge to the site to inspect and wonder, hoping to finally decode their origin. But the solution to the mind-boggler eludes them. Modern carbon-dating methods offer no help because the items contain no carbon.

"It probably took thousands of hours to make these artifacts and embed them in the ground," Santiago said. "It would've been a massive undertaking. But usually in hoaxes, someone comes forward and claims responsibility, and there's been no deathbed confession."

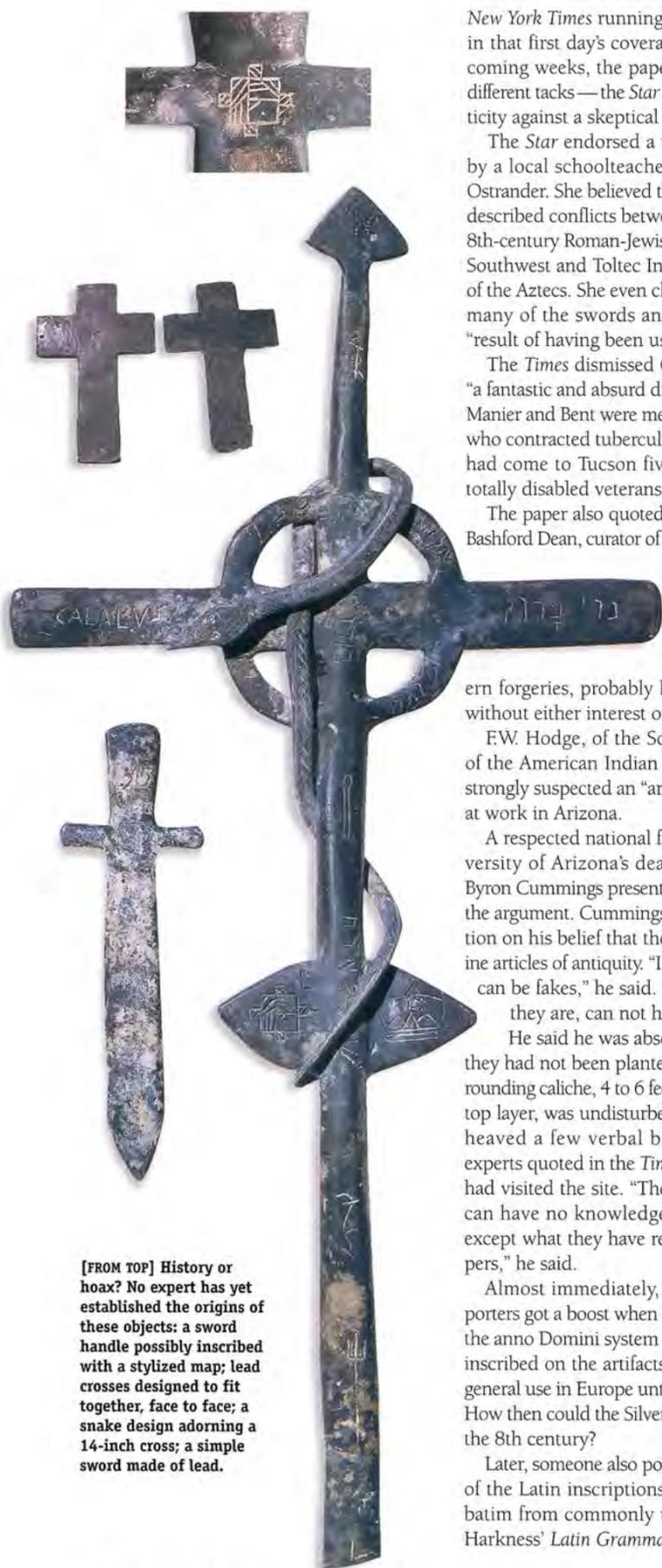
"And most importantly, there had to be a reason. Why would someone do this? We still don't know." ■■■

EDITOR'S NOTE: At press time, the Arizona Historical Society Museum announced plans to place the Silverbell artifacts on exhibit during February 2003.

*After studying the scene of the artifacts' discovery, Tucson-based Leo W. Banks has no good explanation for how they got there. He also wrote the "Back Road Adventure" in this issue.*

*Peter Noebels of Tucson says the Silverbell relics really are a mystery to him.*

**[ABOVE]** White-glove treatment at the Arizona Historical Society Museum preserves the artifacts of questionable authenticity. **[BELOW]** Detailed signs and symbols decorate a leaden paddle.



**[FROM TOP]** History or hoax? No expert has yet established the origins of these objects: a sword handle possibly inscribed with a stylized map; lead crosses designed to fit together, face to face; a snake design adorning a 14-inch cross; a simple sword made of lead.