

Ear Cuffs:

A small part of the Fur Trade era silver ornaments of the North American Indians

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There is rarely anything new in the way of Trade Silver. Sure, a new style of brooch or cross is dug up every now & then, but I'm talking about a new object type. I have long theorized these ear ornaments existed, and now I've found some solid evidence. Technically this evidence is not new either, but it has gone unnoticed since the objects were first found, and in some cases documented.

I'm going to call it an "Ear Cuff". If you google that, you see many different shapes, but the type I'm referring to is the rectangle of flat stock, that is rolled into a "C" shape which can be crimped over the back of the ear.

In an October 1940 issue of the Minnesota Archaeologist, it is called an ear ornament and there is a good drawing. (Figures 1 & 2) It was in a private collection then, and I have no idea where it is today. Looking at the way the disk bangles are attached, it would have to be worn with the opening of the "C" facing mostly downward for the disks to hang properly, and that would require the wearer to have the outside edge of the ear cut. (Figures 6 & 7) I don't know if the cut ears could ever be called common, but there is no shortage of documentation of the practice.

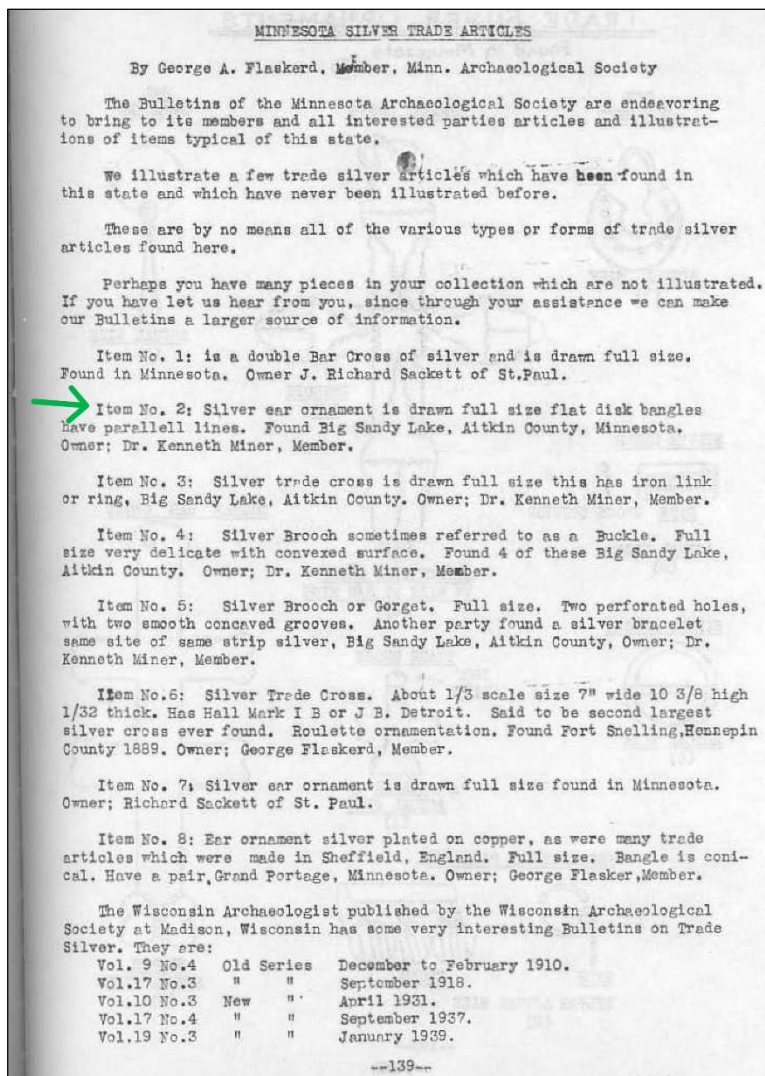


Figure 1

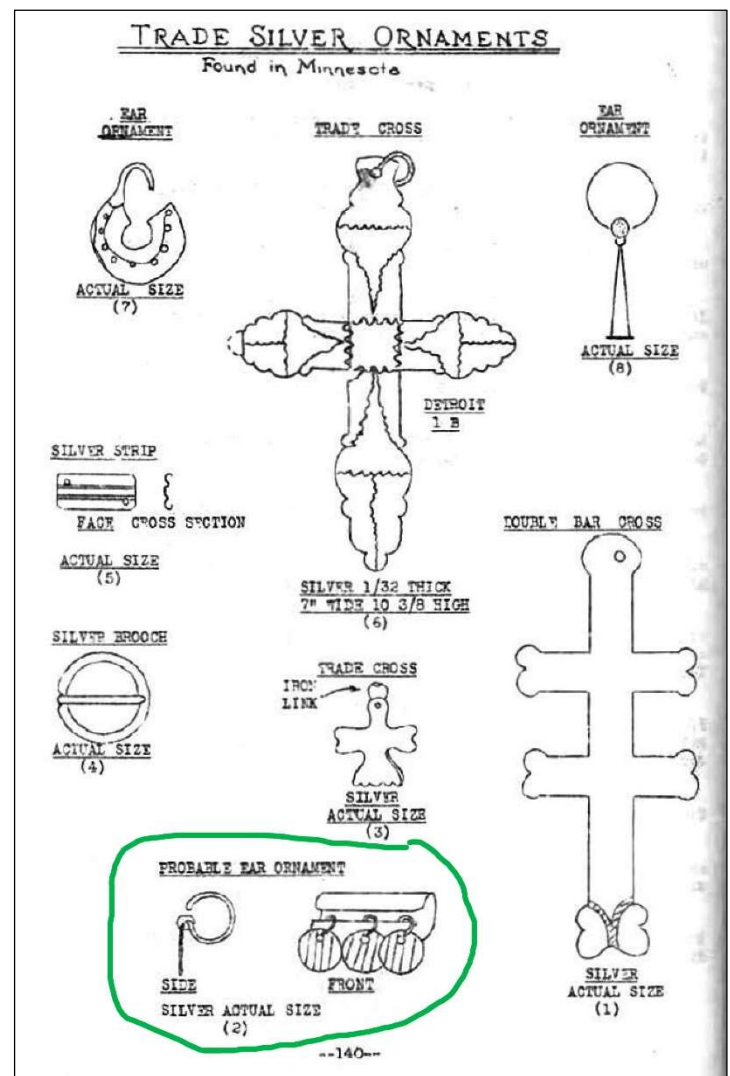


Figure 2

I reproduced this one as it was drawn, mostly as an exercise in bringing an obscure bit of history back to life. Then I made a couple more with the bangles hanging along the middle axis of the cuff so that it might actually be worn by someone with just the right ear shape. I managed to get one on me, but I doubt it would have stayed there over the course of the day. At one inch long it will probably not fit most people. (Figures 8 through 11)

For years I have made smaller versions because they are easy and popular, selling 3 to 5 a year, but they are not quite period correct... at least not yet. Who knows what future research will turn up.

There is a small object documented in the September 1982 Wisconsin Archaeologist that could have been an ear cuff – or almost anything else, so that is not very good evidence. (Fig 3), but I include here for completeness. The description says it was rolled until the ends “almost close”. I don’t think almost closed would work very well for a hair pipe, but it is more ideal for an ear cuff. It could also have been strung on a chord, provided that it was not so thin a chord that it would slip through the “almost” closure.

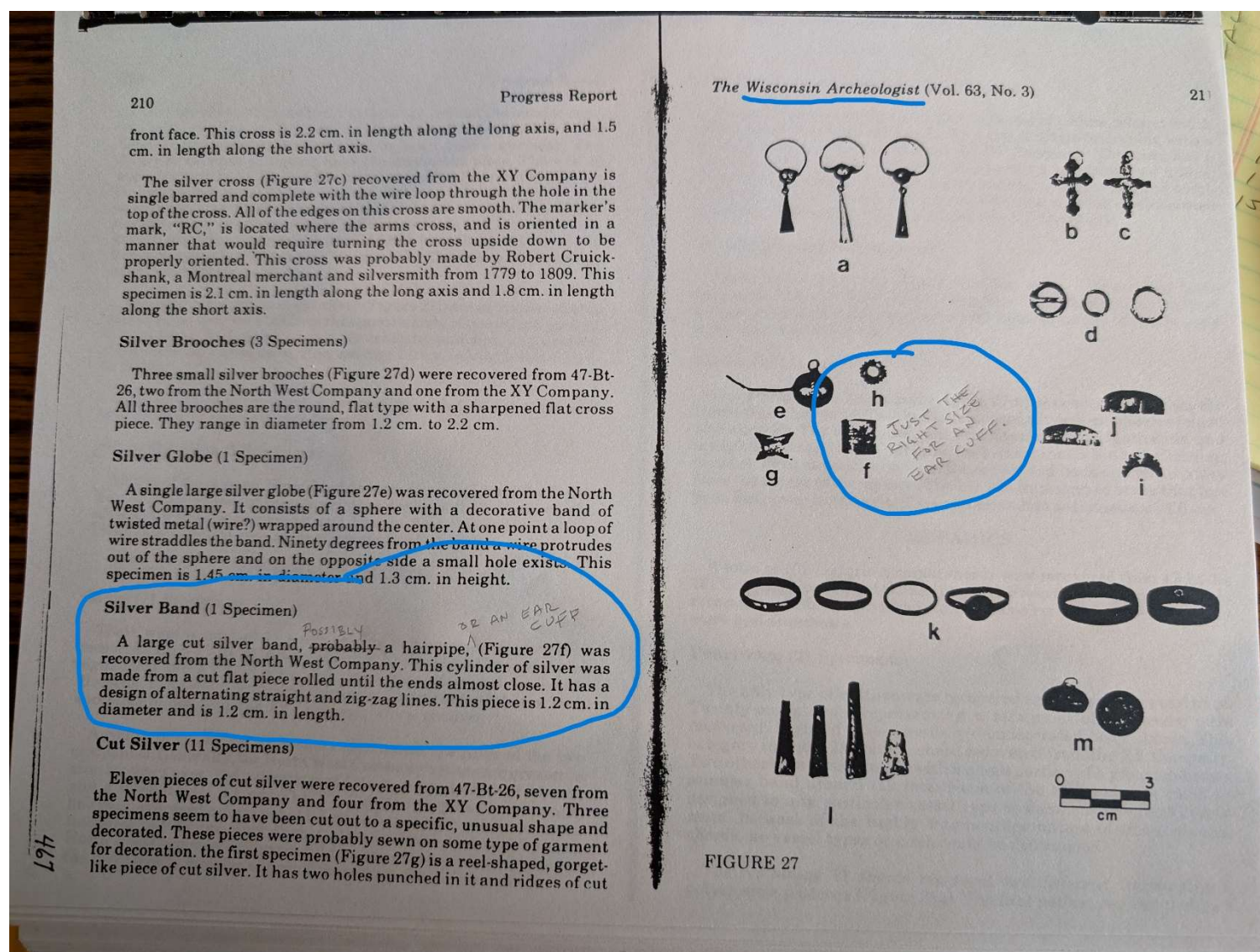


Figure 3

This next example is from a private collection. (Figures 4 and 5) This was displayed at a Frontier Antiques Show, held that the Washtenaw County, Michigan, fairgrounds in the Fall of 2023. I neglected to get the owner's name, so if anyone recognizes whose collection that is, then please contact me so I can update this article. (See Note 2 at the end of this article)



Figure 4



Figure 5

Like the previous example the bangles are at the edge – evidence that this was worn on a cut-back ear.

However this original is half the length of the previous example, which means that most people should be able to wear my versions. My “reproductions” move the bangles to the center axis so that you can wear it without mutilating your ear. ☺ (Figures 12 through 14)

I made one of them plain like the original. The other two are fully engraved, with the bangles made to look like they were cut & recycled from larger, broken, or no longer desired, trade silver objects.



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

*This would
work on a
cut-back
ear*



Figure 10

*Baubles
moved to
center axis*

*At 1 inch, it
is probably
too long for
most people*



Figure 11

*Not a
good fit*



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

A good fit

NOTES:

1. The above findings were first published by me in two posts to the Contemporary Longrifle Association group:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/236476743704892?multi_permalinks=1582820269070526
Links are unreliable in FB. You might have better luck searching for “Dave Leonard cuff”.
2. On Oct.11 2025, Dick Llyod told me that this was from the collection of Tom Amble of Minnesota, but I still need to verify that.