

# J.C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology

## GEORGE IRVING QUIMBY

1986



George Irving Quimby was honored at the 1986 meeting of the Society for Historical and Underwater Archaeology in Sacramento, California, as the fourth recipient of the society's J. C. Harrington medal in recognition of his outstanding contributions to historical archaeology.

George Quimby was born in 1913 in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he spent his boyhood. Quimby has written that he was raised in a community where people and artifacts of the Victorian and Edwardian era were an important part of the physical and social environment and were therefore a stimulus for his lifelong interest in the past. As a young man Quimby became an accomplished sailor of wind driven vessels; this and his sailing adventures on the Great Lakes in the early 1930s provided knowledge and experience which served him well as an archaeologist and as an enthusiastic supporter of underwater and marine research.

After graduating from the University of Michigan in 1936, where he concentrated on anthropology, Quimby pursued graduate studies in anthropology at both the University of Michigan and the University

of Chicago. During this time he undertook research on historic artifacts from Michigan Indian and fur trade sites. He became particularly interested in trade silver which was the subject of his first professional article in 1937.

During the late 1930s Quimby participated in a number of excavations and expeditions where he learned the archaeological trade and met the small group of professors and students who formed the core of the emerging discipline of American archaeology. Of particular note is his trip to East Hudson's Bay in 1938. Here he not only met and interacted with Cree Indians who were still active fur traders but also collected archaeological materials from Eskimo sites on the Belcher Islands which he published in *American Antiquity* in 1940.

In that same year Quimby joined the Louisiana Archaeological Survey as a supervisor for the Work Project Administration's archaeological program. Along with a number of prehistoric sites Quimby excavated the Bayou Goula site, which featured a historic Indian occupation dating from the period 1723 to 1739. He recognized that French artifacts from Bayou Goula, the Fatherland site in Mississippi, and those from Fort St. Joseph in Michigan were very similar and thus supported the article he had written in 1938 on European trade articles as chronological indicators for archaeology of the Historic Period in Michigan. In 1942 Quimby presented an article elaborating further on the similarity of historic artifacts in these two regions of New France.

In 1940 Quimby met and married Helen Ziehm of Pine Bluff, Arkansas, who was a student at Louisiana State University. In 1942 they moved to Chicago where Quimby joined the staff of the Field Museum of Natural History where he ultimately became Curator of North American Archaeology and Ethnology. During his tenure at the Field Museum Quimby conducted archaeological field work in the southwest and Great Lakes region and was responsible for the care and exhibition of the Field Museum's huge ethnographic collections.

The book, *Indians Before Columbus*, which Quimby coauthored with Paul Martin and Donald Collier in 1947, was an immensely popular summary of northern American prehistory and was the authoritative source for this subject for nearly a decade. Although concentrating primarily on prehistoric archaeology in the 1940s and 1950s, Quimby undertook a study of the relationship between historic creek pottery in Georgia and Oklahoma with Alexander Spoehr and studied some historic sites on Lake Superior with James Griffin.

This latter experience rekindled Quimby's interest in historic artifacts and ethnohistory and he began a detailed study of the fur trade of the Great Lakes region. This research culminated in his book, *Indian Cultures and European Trade Goods*, which was published in 1966. This book, in addition to his earlier work on the prehistory of the region, *Indian Life in the Upper Great Lakes 11,000 B.C. to A.D. 1800*, established Quimby as the preeminent authority on the archaeology of the northern midwest.

In 1965 Quimby accepted an appointment at the University of Washington where he became Professor of Anthropology and Curator of Ethnology at the Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum. Turning his attention to the Pacific Northwest, Quimby found familiar themes for his research and published several ethnohistorical studies on the Astoria fur trade. In Seattle Quimby was instrumental in reorganizing an amateur scuba club for the purposes of organized underwater research. Among other projects, this group was instrumental in the investigation of the wreck of the clipper ship, *Warhawk*.

Quimby became Director of the Burke Museum in 1968. Under his direction the museum underwent tremendous growth, including the development of a graduate program in museology. During the next decade, Quimby, along with his colleague Bill Holm, produced two highly acclaimed ethnographic films, *In the Land of the War Canoes*, and *The Image Maker and the Indians: Edward Curtis and his 1914 Kwakurth Movie*, as well as a well received book on Edward Curtis.

Quimby retired as director with the Burke Museum in 1983 and continues to actively pursue his research and writing as Professor Emeritus. Throughout his long and distinguished career Quimby has

been an imaginative and productive scholar. He has been instrumental in directing our attention to problems of substance in the relationship between Indians and Euro-Americans. As a student, researcher, teacher, and administrator, Quimby has always taken a holistic view of the past and demonstrated through his work that specialized knowledge of archaeology and ethnohistory can speak to our understanding of broader human issues. Perhaps most importantly, Quimby has approached archaeology with good humor. From his example we learn that serious scholarship should also be great fun.