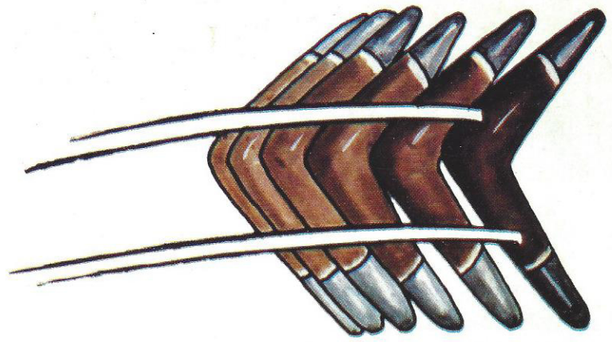

BOOMERANGS NEVER DIE—

THEY'RE JUST THROWN AWAY

by Jack Goldfarb

photo: Jack Goldfarb

Aboriginal boomerangs.

Photo P. K. De

In a deserted green field off Bambra Road in Melbourne, Australia, I tightly gripped the crescent-shaped stick of wood in my hand. Angling it slightly against the breeze, I flicked my wrist and hurled it into the air. It skimmed across the grassy turf, soared upward into a wide turn and started back in my direction. Morris Maxwell, one of Australia's better-known boomerang enthusiasts, stood by my side ready to congratulate me on the success of my first ever boomerang throw. But congratulations dissolved into consolations when my spinning missile abruptly plummeted to earth some distance away.

Maxwell insisted I keep on trying. Three attempts later, my whirling boomerang finally came hovering above our heads and floated down, near enough for me to catch it—which in my excitement I didn't—but Maxwell upped his thumb to signal a worthy throw.

For the past eleven thousand years people have been flinging boomerangs around in Australia. A specimen of that vintage rests in an Adelaide museum to confirm the fact. Like the kangaroo, koala, Sydney Opera House and platypus, the boomerang has been claimed by local devotees and patriots as indigenous, a uniquely Australian product, first invented by Aborigines.

Captain Cook and subsequent explorers who visited Australia, did much to popularize the country as the land of the boomerang by bringing back many examples along with tales of remarkable feats performed by boomerang throwers Down Under.

Historians and archaeologists, however, have disputed that throwsticks—the great granddaddies of boomerangs—originated solely in Australia. They have offered considerable evidence that throwsticks were used as combat and hunting weapons in ancient Africa, India, Europe and North America. The scholars assert that the throwing stick was devised "simultaneously" (if that word can cover thousands of prehistoric years) by primitive man on at least four other continents. They point out, for example, that dozens of throwsticks were found in the tomb of King Tutankhamun, which were believed to have been used for hunting birds. Included among King Tut's crypt collection were exotic gold-capped ivory throwsticks fashioned from naturally curved elephant tusks.

From ancient huntsmen stalking fowl on the banks of the Nile to more contemporary Hopi Indians chasing rabbits in Arizona, the flight pattern of a simple throwstick has fascinated

human beings. The belief is that some of the more ingenious warriors and hunters, having observed that their woodpieces flew in a curving path, experimented with the design and shape of the missile to increase its distance and accuracy. The Australians maintain that it was the Aborigine who first discovered that lengthening the shorter wing of the hook-shaped weapon would cause it to circle back to the thrower. Thus, if it missed its quarry, such as flocks of birds over water or swampland, it could be more easily retrieved. Predictably, when a throwstick winged outward, and mysteriously reversed its direction, the more credulous were convinced that magical powers were involved.

What *does* make a boomerang fly? Why *does* it return? The simplest explanations are 1) its "wings" generate lift, 2) its spinning gives it stability in the air, 3) its spin plus forward motion create "gyroscopic precession"—a veering to the left which gradually leads it back to the thrower. However, it has been said, that if you can really understand the intricate principles of a boomerang's flight, you will know all there is to know about aero- and astronautics.

Whether Australian Aborigines constructed the first returning boomerang or not, they have given it its name. With more than three hundred words used in Aboriginal languages to describe the flying woodsticks, the catchy sound of "boomerang" caught on with Aussies. It derives from *bou-mar-rang* used by the Turawal tribe who once dwelt near present day Sydney.

The original Aborigine boomerangs, shaped like large 7's, were cut from mulga and acacia trees. They were highly valued as weapons because they hurtled toward their targets with a greater spinning force than heaved rocks. The boomerang evolved into a widely-used artifact in Aborigine culture. It was employed for igniting fires, as a cutting and digging tool, as toys for children, and as musical instruments, rhythmically clacked together as accompaniment for dancers and chanters. Brightly painted boomerangs were used in religious ceremonies, including one special type for ritual defloration of young girls. As an art form the boomerang was colourfully decorated with designs and symbols related to Aboriginal legends and traditions.

Joe Timbery, a latter-day Aborigine boomerang expert, has won many local throwing competitions and can even skillfully catch returning boomerangs with his feet. Though Joe is usually found carving artistic woodsticks in La Perouse, a town outside Sydney, he has travelled widely abroad in the past demonstrating the art of boomerang throwing. Recently, a distinguished-looking visitor arrived at his door saying Timbery had been "recommended by someone." Timbery's repeated query, "Who?" finally got the visitor to disclose, "The Queen in Buckingham Palace."

Morris Maxwell, my Melbourne mentor, and his brother, Dennis, have done much to elevate the status of boomerang throwing as an organized sport in Australia. As founding officers of the Boomerang Association of Australia, the Maxwells have helped to establish the Annual National Championship tournament at Albury, New South Wales, where trophies are awarded for distance throwing, accuracy of return, and consecutive catches. Fervent B.A.A. buffs, like the Maxwells, and Duncan Maclennan, who has instructed thousands at his Boomerang School in Sydney, and Hamish Robb, who has run a bustling boomerang factory in Wedderburn, have sanguine expectations that boomerang throwing will one day become an accepted international event at future Olympic Games.

Australian boomerang people believe it because of growing world-wide interest in these Stone Age projectiles which have now re-emerged as Space Age missiles. Like the frisbee, the boomerang is a kind of mini delta wing whose airfoils defy gravity. Coursing in an elliptical orbit on a sophisticated flight path, the well-thrown boomerang is the perfect "space capsule" as it unerringly glides back down to its launching site.

As one wag put it, "Boomeranging is a hobby that's gotten out of hand." Clubs and organised competitions have sprouted in the U.S.A., Great Britain, West Germany, Holland, Switzerland, New Zealand and just about everywhere else you can find an open field and not too much wind. One Australian manufacturer recently exported shipments to China and to Soviet scientists icebound in the Antarctic.

In the U.S.A. boomerangers from all over the country converge on the Mall in Washington, D.C., for an annual competition sponsored by the Smithsonian Institute Resident Associates. This springtime event combines a throwing tournament with a workshop featuring lectures, films, and carve-it-yourself boomerang making. The intriguing collections of rare boomerangs at the Natural History Museum and the Air and Space Museum are added attractions for the participants.

Though the boomerang-slinging rivalry is keen, a lighthearted mood prevails at the contest. The tournament rules include one borrowed from the Mudgeeraba Emu Riding and Boomerang Throwing Association of Australia which typifies the good-humoured atmosphere: "Decisions of the judges will be final unless shouted down by a really overwhelming majority of the crowd present. Abusive and obscene language may not be used by contestants when addressing members of the judging panel, or conversely, by members of the judging panel when addressing contestants (unless struck by a boomerang)." A favourite challenge to the competitors is to circle the Washington Monument with a boomerang toss, an exercise only possible at dawn—before the guards report for duty.

Ben Ruhe, prime mover of this yearly "Throw-in" is the compiler of boomerang statistics for the Guinness Book of World Records. Considered by many "the world's foremost authority on boomerangs," Ben wouldn't miss the fun on the Mall, which he calls a "corroboree," for anything. Herb Smith of Sussex, England, holder of the world's record distance throw (114.8 yards), also shows up, as do many government notables and hundreds of spectators.

The boomerang has come a long way from the primeval time when Australian Aborigines first trimmed a curved limb of a mulga tree, fluted its upper surface with an adze, coated it with red ochre, and let it fly.

Today's boomerang lore is filled with stories of left-handed, right-handed, and ambidextrous models made of fibreglass, styrofoam, aluminum, or lucite ("see-thru-merang"); boomerangs with three, four and six blades, with holes in the centre to be caught with one finger; boomerangs shaped like snakes, birds, and at least nine different letters of the alphabet.

There are reports of serious scientific research at major universities in the U.S.A., Great Britain and Holland, and of a "boomerang-throwing machine" at one university for computerized study of flight patterns. A Dutch scholar, Felix Hess, has spent seven years on an academic dissertation on the aerodynamics of boomerangs.

What has not changed, however —from primitive man to modern scientist—is the recurring sense of wonderment watching the boomerang sail skyward, spin, loop, and home in on the thrower. Astonishing behaviour for what is still basically a bent stick thrown away.

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Three boomerangs, from top to bottom: the Kylie (having one side flat and the other convex); the traditional boomerang; and a modern version in plastic.

photo: P. K. De