

The Mystery of Dismal River Culture

And Its Possible VBJ Connections

By Gene Gade

Winston Churchill once described Stalin's Russia as *"...a riddle, inside a mystery, wrapped in an enigma...."* In a less sinister context, Churchill's phrase could also describe the development of Plains Indian cultures and the conundrum of who used the Vore Buffalo Jump and when. Early 20th Century archaeologists studied material artifacts from Late-Prehistoric sites. Their findings, combined with those of academics who studied linguistic affinities, tribal social structures, oral traditions and the paltry information from early Euro-American journals provided a rudimentary, but fairly coherent, explanation of how the modern Plains Indian tribes and cultures coalesced.

The story these scholars developed was that many of the Plains tribes, including Cheyenne, Arapaho, Sioux, Crow, Hidatsa, Mandan and Osage had roots in Woodland cultures farther east. The Pawnee and Arikara had come from the prairie-woodland interface farther south. Shoshone and Comanche were clearly linguistically related to peoples from the Great Basin and Rocky Mountains. Many of these groups were known to have spent time in or near the Black Hills and, the Cheyenne, Crow and Sioux, had vied for dominance there in the century before the tide of Anglo-American immigrants flooded the region.

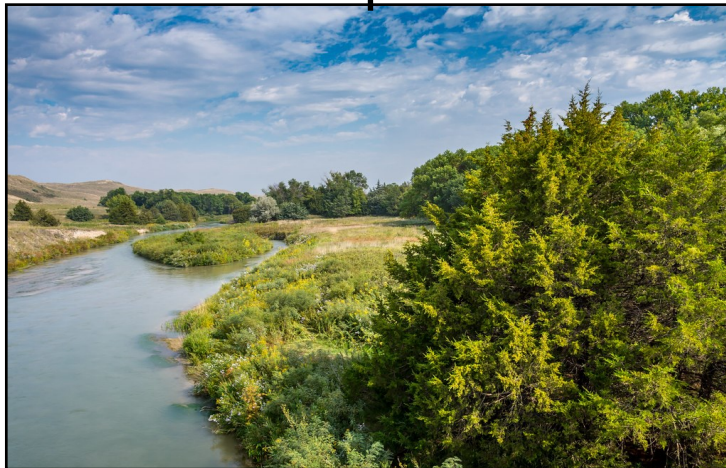
In the 1930's, archaeologists began excavating sites in central Nebraska and finding evidence of a culture that did not fit the pattern of Woodland-to-Plains development in that area. In common with their neighbors, this group depended on buffalo hunting. They also hunted deer, antelope, smaller mammals, even turtles and freshwater clams. Several factors indicate that they were less mobile than the tribes of the high plains. For one, they lived in long-term villages consisting of 15 or more large

dwelling. Their houses were not like the earthlodges that the nearby Pawnee and Arikara lived in. Instead, their homes were circular with diameters of about 25 feet and sometimes the walls of the dwelling were partially recessed into the ground. These residences had central hearths that presumably had smoke holes directly above. The roofs may have consisted of hides from bison or other

animals supported by a log structure. The people supplemented their hunting with small fields of food crops and they also produced a distinct style of pottery. All of these facts differentiate this culture from the other regional tribes.

Archaeologists called the assemblage "The Dismal River Com-

plex or Culture" because the original excavations were along a pretty stream with an unfortunate and inaccurate name. The Dismal River emanates from springs in the Nebraska Sandhills and flows east, eventually joining the Loup, Platte, Missouri and Mississippi rivers.



Dismal River in the Nebraska Sand Hills

Numerous archaeological sites along this stream are now known to have been the habitat of Plains Apaches who were possible users of the Vore Buffalo Jump

Major questions remain, namely:

Who were these people?

Where did they come from?

Did they use the Vore Buffalo Jump?

Later excavations in Kansas, South Dakota and eastern Colorado indicated that the Dismal River folks were an Athabaskan-speaking people who were near the end of a centuries-long migration. The journey took them, in small groups and a series of movements, all the way from the boreal forests of eastern Alaska and Canada's Yukon to the southern Great Plains.

These people are commonly called Plains Apaches. As they moved through the northern Plains, some established an enduring alliance with the Kiowa people who were also slowly migrating through the region. Despite having much different languages, the groups joined and became the modern Kiowa-Apaches. Their closest modern affinities are with the Jicarilla and Lipan Apaches. They are linguistically related, but not as close culturally, to the Navajos and Western Apaches who gained fame because their fights with the US Army in the 1800's.

Spanish and French expeditions contacted and described the Plains Apaches in the early 1700's. Initial contacts found them living in skin tents and using dogs as beasts of burden. The Plains Apaches acquired horses about 1725.

Dates from at least 18 archaeological sites in Nebraska indicate that the Dismal culture was present in the Sand Hills for only about 100 years, from 1650 to 1750. However, that places the Plains Apaches quite near the Black Hills while the Vore Buffalo Jump was being used.

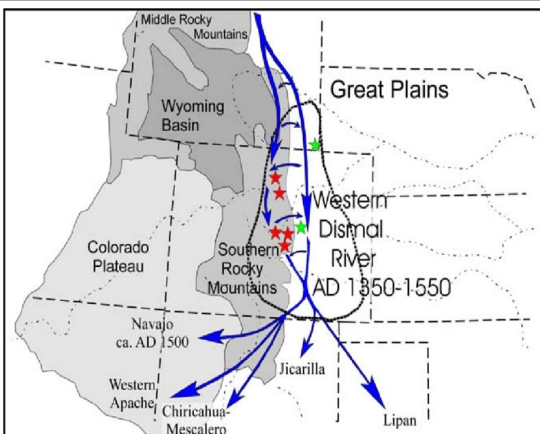
So, aside from the known presence of the Plains Apaches and Kiowa-Apaches in the Vore Site area, is there any evidence that they used the VBJ? Yes. As shown below, lithics may establish the link.

Excavations at the VBJ and elsewhere coupled with other lines of study have already produced much circumstantial evidence. Further excavation and analysis of artifacts and data, combined with discoveries in related fields, new technologies and sharp new minds may turn up some answers and, likely, more questions. However, the puzzle of who used the VBJ and when has not been not solved definitively. Like many other questions it is "...a riddle, inside a mystery, wrapped in an enigma...."



Comparing Projectile Points

The point on the left was excavated from a known Dismal River/Plains Apache site in the Nebraska Sand Hills near the town of Mullen. The center and right points were excavated from the Vore Buffalo Jump. The center point is thought to be fashioned from quartzite quarried in the famous Spanish Diggings in eastern Wyoming. The point on the right is made from Fall River quartzite from the southern Black Hills. Note the similarities in triangular shape, side notches and the slightly convex and angled bases. Do they represent the same group of people?



The Great Athabaskan Migration Saga

The map at left shows the hypothesized route of the Athabaskan migration through the central Plains. Some anthropologists believe that some subgroups migrated through or west of the Rockies. The map at right shows where the Dismal River-Plains Apache sites have been found.

