We made it!
The VBJF is debt free!

As we shared in our last newsletter, in 2012, the VBJF board took out a $250,000 loan in order to drill a well and raise our exhibit tipi. The response to our request in the last newsletter for help paying off this loan was overwhelming, and the loan has been paid in full! The VBJF board extends our thanks to all of you who assisted us by renewing your memberships and with your donations. We would especially like to thank the board of the Sundance State Bank for believing in the value of the Vore Site to the region and supporting that belief with the original loan and donations each year that went toward reducing the principal. Paying off this loan will allow the VBJF board to move forward on projects such as new exhibits focused on the archaeological record and the projectile point collection, improvements to the bonebed, and application of modern research techniques to further exploration of the sinkhole.
A Fortuitous Rainy Day Visit

We entered those who donated to the effort to pay off our loan in a drawing for a cap beaded by Northern Cheyenne artisan Clara Caufield. The winners were Rob Hursh and Jane Scheer from Iowa. They shared with us how they became VBJF members:

"On a rainy day during our pre-pandemic road trip west we stopped by the Vore Buffalo Jump. Unfortunately, the site was closed but a volunteer, Ted Vore, happened to be on site and provided a private tour of the above ground exhibits. We found the VBJ fascinating! The organization continues to peak our interest through their expanding educational and research programs. The VBJ’s passion to protect and expand access to Native American contributions are important reasons to support. We look forward to our next visit! In the meantime a VBJ poster hangs in our office as an important reminder of the Native American people - past, present, & future."

Help needed:

a request from VBJF board president
Jackie Wyatt

I’ve been in the sinkhole hundreds of times, often in the company of my late father, Glen Wyatt, who was one of the VBJF’s biggest supporters, often accompanied by a gaggle of 4th graders, sometimes alone. The site of the bonebed never fails to make me pause as I think about the thousands of bison killed in the sinkhole and the people who depended on them to survive here in the Black Hills. The goals of the VBJF are to preserve the record that the Vore Site sinkhole provides of these hunters and to share this site with the public.

Our most important educational outreach is through our field trip program. We usually host about 1,000 students each year, most are 4th graders as that is the year that students study state history. A typical field trip brings about 50 students and 10 adults to the Vore Site for about 2 hours. We rotate groups of students through activities that include lectures on the archaeological excavation, discussion of the uses of the bison and the life ways of the Plains hunters, and digging for a souvenir arrow point. We attempt to make these field trips both educational and fun, and if the teachers who bring their classes back year after year are an indication, we do a good job. Already, we’ve booked nine schools for the spring, so we are expecting to host about 500 students. This program wouldn’t be possible without volunteers. If you would like to help, please contact me either by phone (307 281-0011) or email (info@vorebuffalojump.org).
VBJF/UW Interns Continue Curation Effort

This semester the VBJF is supporting two interns through the Vore Scholars Program. This program was established by a very generous, anonymous donation given to help the University of Wyoming Archaeological Repository begin efforts to curate the Vore Collection. This donation and a “Save America’s Treasures” grant provided by the National Park Service, in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment of the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities have made possible incredible progress to properly archive the approximately 22,000 artifacts that make up the Vore Collection. We first funded interns during the spring semester of 2020. This will be the last semester funded by the original donation, but continuing this program is a priority of the VBJF board.

Vore Scholar Haley Purifoy is in her third year at the University of Wyoming, working toward a Bachelor’s in Anthropology and a Minor in Honors. She is interested in archaeology because of what it can reveal about past human accomplishments and histories. She’s interested in identification of macrobotanicals, or plant remnants, from excavations, and her undergraduate research project is focused on charcoal spatial distribution from the La Prele Mammoth site near Douglas. In addition to excavations at La Prele, Dakota was part of the team that excavated a dugout at Red Buttes near Laramie. She has done survey work in and around Carbon City, the first coal mining town in Wyoming near Medicine Bow and helped members of the Wyoming Archaeological Society catalog rock circles near the Glendo Reservoir. She also took part in an excavation of an early modern human campsite in a rock shelter in Croatia and a possible bronze age burial in a cave by the Serbian border. When asked why she applied for the Vore Internship, she stated, “Working with the Vore collection will be a wonderful chance to learn the morphology of bison bones so that I can better identify faunal bones in the field. I am most excited to learn how to make photogrammetry models and take photos of human modifications on the bones.”

Our other Vore Scholar is Dakota Buhmann. She is an Evanston, Wyoming native who transferred to the University of Wyoming from Sheridan College in 2021 after completing her Associate’s Degree in History. She is in her senior year at UW pursuing a Bachelor’s degree in Anthropology with two minors, one in Honors and one in Museum Studies. Dakota says that she is specifically interested in bioarchaeology and loves working with bones and skeletons because of the stories they tell and the insights they can provide into the life they once contained. In the future, she hopes to work on human remains recovery and reclamation. In addition to her work with the Vore Collection, she is currently working on an oral history of the 1960s archaeological excavations of Hell Gap National Historic Landmark where she excavated in the summer of 2022. Hell Gap is a Paleo-Indian stratified campsite located north of Guernsey, Wyoming. We are glad that her interest in faunal remains led her to apply for the internship supported by the VBJF.
The Apachean Saga -
On The Other Side Of The Mountains

By Gene Gado

An immense inland area of what is now Alaska and northern Canada is populated by groups of people who speak variants of the Athabaskan language and who are loosely related as shown by genetic analyses and similarities of cultures. Many Athabaskan speakers remain in their original homeland, an area characterized by long, dark, fiercely cold winters and dominated by vast conifer forests. Much of the land there is poorly drained because it is underlain by permafrost or bedrock. It is also pock-marked with millions of glacial depressions that fill with water. Within the forests are myriad ponds, lakes, marshes, bogs, and muskeg areas that provide habitat for caribou, moose, fur-bearing mammals, fish, an astonishing variety and quantity of birds, and a gazillion blackflies and mosquitoes. Large slow-moving rivers meander across the landscape enroute to cold oceans. The Athabaskan groups have subsisted there, primarily by hunting, fishing, and harvesting wild plants, for a very long time.

The Epic Migration

A little over a thousand years ago, some groups of Athabaskan speakers fled south, out of the frigid, well-watered spruce-fir forests. Centuries later they occupy a region that could hardly be more different from their starting point. They now live in the hot, dry, plains, deserts, plateaus, and mountains of the Southwest. They are most commonly known now as Apaches and Navajos.

The extraordinary migration of these Apachians, a term that includes both Apaches and Navajos, has intrigued anthropologists for more than a century. All the classic questions — who, what, when, where, why, and how — pertain to this mystery. Some answers have emerged via oral traditions, archaeology, linguistic studies, cultural comparisons, genetics, and other sciences, but questions remain.

The “who” question was answered first. As early as early as 1852, William W. Turner recognized that there were many similarities between northern Athabaskan and Apachian languages. Research by Edward Sapir in the 1930s confirmed the linguistic relationship and showed that the migration had been from north to south. Many other lines of evidence, including genetic and cultural affinities, have also established the northern Athapaskan and Apachean relationship.

“When” the Apachian folks arrived at their current locations has been narrowed down by archaeology, oral traditions, and written records of the Spanish explorers and missionaries. There is no definitive date for Apachian presence in the Southwest, but the first groups were certainly in what is now New Mexico and Arizona between 1300 and 1400 A.D., quite possibly earlier. Others, like the Apachean Dismal River people and the so-called Plains Apaches and Kiowa-Apaches were still hunting buffalo on the southern Great Plains as late as 1800 and are now located in Oklahoma. The Dismal River/Plains Apaches probably used the Vore Buffalo Jump before being pushed to the south by other tribes.

“Why” there was a migration has had scholars scratching their pates for many decades. What would motivate an exodus that played out over thousands of miles, multiple routes, unfamiliar ecosystems and terrain, through or among the territories of many potentially hostile tribes and, probably, several centuries. Several hypotheses have been put forward, but the debate continues.

There is now a growing consensus that there were at least two major Athabaskan migrations. In recent decades many scientists have accepted the hypothesis that both waves were triggered by catastrophic volcanic eruptions in the Wrangell-St. Elias mountains of southern Alaska (most

Explosive eruptions like this one in the Philippines can cover enormous areas with thickly with ash and blast it over 30-40 kilometers into the atmosphere. It can circle the earth many times and reflect enough sunlight to cause significant, temporary lowering of global temperatures.
probably Mt. Churchill). According to that theory, the first eruption occurred about 500 A.D. and sent the refugees to various parts of the Pacific Coast ranging from what is now British Columbia to northern California. The Apachean migration to the Southwest likely resulted from a volcanic catastrophe that occurred about 803 A.D. If that event and date are correct, it may have taken 250 years or more for the leading edge of the Apachean migration to reach the Southwest from eastern Alaska and Yukon.

Briana Doering, an archaeologist who joined the University of Wyoming in 2021, has excavated four Athabaskan sites in Alaska and analyzed data from multiple sites and sub-disciplines. She postulates that the migration could have resulted from more gradual social changes and population growth rather than catastrophic volcanism.

Debate also continues about the route Athapascons used on their way south. The Dismal River/Plains Apache saga establishes that at least part of the journey took place east of the Rockies and through the Great Plains. However, recent archaeological evidence suggests that some Athapascons passed through British Columbia, the Columbia River Plateau, and the Great Basin west of the Rockies. Some archaeologists argue that they moved through the mountains. It’s quite possible that all three routes were used.

**The Promontory Caves Bonanza**

Archaeological evidence from the Promontory Caves on the northern end of the Great Salt Lake in Utah provide nearly conclusive evidence that Athapascons lived in that area for 20 to 50 years, most likely be between 1250 and 1290 A.D. There are a few other probable Apachean sites in the Salt Lake Valley that are dated somewhat earlier or later (±1-2 century or so).

Excavations of the two Promontory Caves, first in the 1930s and again in 2011, yielded thousands of artifacts including intact bows and arrows and many stone tools and ceramics. The most remarkable find was a trove of well-preserved, well-constructed moccasins, most of them for children. Promontory Cave moccasins are quite unlike those made by people of the Fremont Culture who inhabited the region earlier or those of the hunter-gatherer Shoshone who are indigenous to the Great Basin. The construction, tanning, and style of Promontory moccasins, including some decorated with fringes and/or porcupine quills, are nearly identical to those created by Athabaskans in the sub-arctic.
Other Promontory Artifacts

The bows recovered from Promontory were recurve-style and sinew-backed like those of the far north peoples and the bison-hunting Plains tribes, but not like those associated with Great Basin people of the time. Likewise, the caves occupants used a D-shaped biface tool for cutting meat and scraping hides like those of sub-artic and some Plains hunters, but also different from those used by Great Basin peoples. The obsidian in the Promontory points were quarried from sources farther north in what is now Idaho than obsidian commonly used by other regional tribes.

Promontory Cave ceramics were crude compared with those of the Fremont Culture or the Puebloans of the Southwest. However, Navajo ceramics are generally of higher quality than those of the Promontory Cave folks and most other Apaches. That may be due to more contact with the modern Puebloans and their adoption of pastoralism, farming and dwellings that resulted in Navajos not moving as often or as far as the other Apaches.

Almost a century ago, archaeologist Julian Stewart, suggested that the Promontory Cave people were Athapaskans migrating south. The 2003 excavations of the caves by Jack Ives and his colleagues dramatically strengthened that hypothesis. Nearly all archaeologists who have looked at the evidence now believe that the Promontory folks were Athapaskans though some think that these people had branched off from bison-hunting Athapaskans who were migrating through the Plains or Rockies.

The consensus seems to be that there were Athabaskan groups migrating on both sides of the Rockies — the Dismal River/Plains Apache groups on the east and a separate group represented by the Promontory people on the west. Further, some scholars think that the Promontory folks were the ancestors of the modern Navajos and that the Dismal River people were the ancestors of other Apachen sub-groups. Thus, it seems there are only partial answers to the "what" and "how" questions. Clearly further study is still needed to understand the full story of the epic Athabaskan migrations.

Athabaskan Points In The Vore Site?

The July 2022 issue of Over The Edge contained an article about the Dismal River/Plains Apache Culture that pointed out the similarities of Dismal River projectile points with some found in the Vore Buffalo Jump. There is also a similarity with Athabaskan points excavated from sites in British Columbia (B.C.).

Canadian archaeologists have been publishing research related to the Athabaskan migrations since the 1970’s. Two Canadian archaeologists compared artifacts from Athabaskan sites with those of the Plateau Pithouse Tradition that occupied the same area of B.C. from 2500 to about 600 years before present. After that, Athabaskans dominated. If the volcano-trigger hypothesis is correct, these might be artifacts from the first migration toward the Pacific coast.

It’s not possible or appropriate to summarize all of that work here, however Martin Magne and R.J. Matson, archaeologists with Parks Canada and the University of British Columbia, respectively, published paper that included what they called “A Typical Athabaskan Point” shown below. It is remarkable how similar the British Columbian Athabaskan point is to the Dismal River/Plains Apache point from a site in the Nebraska sandhills and two points excavated from the Vore Site. They have the same triangular shape and side-notching, but the most unusual commonality is the concave but slanted base. It may not mean anything, but it’s intriguing!
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