

The VBJ Was A Pit Stop On The Black Hills Race Track

By Gene Gade

The Red Valley

If one looks at a satellite photo, shaded relief or geological map of the Black Hills, it's easy to discern a relatively unforested band around the perimeter of the uplift. The band generally has a distinct light-red color and varies in width from a few hundred yards to several miles in width. Geologists usually refer to it as the Red Valley because its floor is the mixture of red shales and siltstones of the Spearfish Formation. The sediments are relatively soft and easily eroded compared to the hard limestones, schist and granite that form the inside margin of the Red Valley. The outside rim is formed by a ridge or "hogback" of the Dakota Sandstone that is also much harder than the mixture of sediments in the Red Valley.

The relatively soft sediments of the Red Valley also contain substantial layers of whitish mineral called gypsum that is soft (hardness of only 2 on a Moh

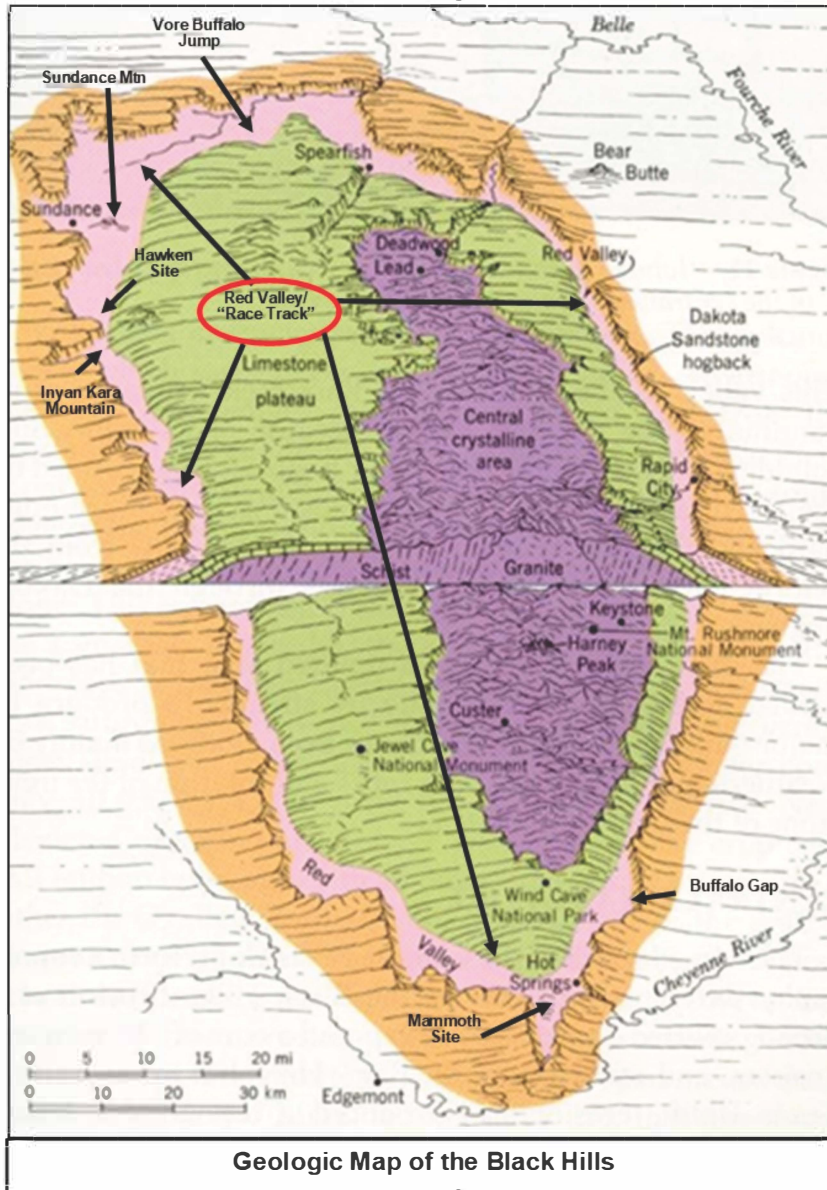
scale where 10 is hardest) that is often used in construction materials (sheetrock, plaster, cement, etc.). Gypsum is also more soluble than the core rocks of the Hills and, as water runs downhill, some of it becomes ground water. This water dissolves the gypsum in places, creating many, small, shallow caverns in the Spearfish sediments. When the roofs of these caves collapse, sinkholes of various sizes form at the surface. Dozens of sinkholes exist in the Red Valley. The famous Mammoth Site near Hot Springs, South Dakota is one such sinkhole.

A Vore Site Connection

The drain of one the larger sinkholes sealed off at some point, forming a pit that is now about forty feet deep and nearly 200 feet in diameter, with about 20 feet of bone and sediment below the current floor. About 500 years ago, Native Americans saw the sinkhole's potential as a pit trap for bison hunts and began to use what is now known as the Vore Buffalo Jump.

The Race Track

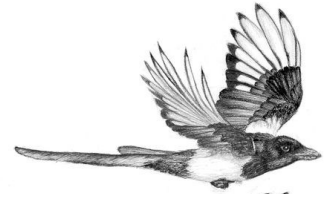
Several tribes in the region refer to the Red Valley as the "Racetrack" and, to many people, the associated story is at least as interesting as the geological interpretation. The Suhtai and their close relatives, the Cheyenne, as well as the Lakota Sioux have detailed legends about the Race-track. It is not just a tale about an exciting and entertaining event. The Great Race story is their explanation of how humans created order out of a previously chaotic world. Moreover, the Great Race is connected to other things of great importance to the tribes, including the Sun Dance and the Medicine Lodge. Several regional landmarks on or near the Racetrack are mentioned in the stories. Inyan Kara Mountain was supposed-



edly the starting point for the Race. Some say that Sundance Mountain was the location of the elders' four-day ritual that evolved into the Sun Dance and became a sacred ceremony that is held periodically by a number of Plains tribes around the summer solstice. Buffalo Gap, in the southeast corner of the Black Hills, is said by some to have been both start and finish line. Bear Butte, near current Sturgis, South Dakota, is also mentioned. Tribal versions of the Great Race differ in details, but some common threads tie them together. (Continued on next page)

The Great Race

First, tribal accounts agree that the ancient world was in chaos. That world was populated by many types of beings, including some gigantic animals now extinct. Species relationships were not clearly defined. Animals could transform into other species. Humans, for example, could become bison or other animals and vice versa. Humans could mate with other beings and have non-human offspring. Moreover, bison could eat people just as people ate bison. It was clear to humans that these relationships needed to be defined.



A great council among the animals convened and agreed that the issues would be decided by a Great Race around the Black Hills. The race would be between a young man and female bison known to be the fastest and most long-winded. The winner of the race would determine who could eat whom. That is, if humans won the race, they could eat bison, but bison could no longer eat man and vice versa.

All the birds and other animals showed up in the finest, most colorful bodies they still have today. Most species teamed with the bison. Swift hawk, crow, magpie and eagle were the only ones who raced on the side of the young man. The race was long and the young buffalo and her team led most of the way. However, just before the finish, magpie, swooped down and crossed the line first.



The elders had a four-day ceremony in the medicine lodge and decided in favor of human beings., because magpie, a teammate of the human, had won the race. The ceremony gave people power over the buffalo, but humans would recognize their dependance on bison and would thereafter refer to themselves as buffalo people. To this day, Cheyenne admire the magpie and it is the only bird they will not kill or eat.

The Racetrack was an easy pathway used by roaming bison herds to move through the Black Hills between the Powder River Basin and the Dakota prairies. No doubt it was used for thousands of years by Native American hunters who followed the great beasts. The Hawken Kill Site southwest of Sundance is one of several older archaeological sites on or near the Racetrack.

Modern highway engineers certainly recognize the importance of the Red Valley/Racetrack. Important highways including I-90/US 14, US Highways 85, 385 and 18 and several State Highways utilize segments of the Red Valley. The Vore Buffalo Jump was rediscovered during the survey and construction of I-90, but Native Americans knew about and used it nearly half a millennium ago. According to legend, their human and animal kin used the Racetrack in a much more ancient time.



For Further Reading About “The Race” and Other Native American Stories

Stands In Timber, John and Margot Liberty. 1972. *Cheyenne Memories*. Yale University Press. 330 pgs.

Grinnell, George Bird. 1926. *By Cheyenne Campfires*. Yale University Press. 305 pgs.

LaPointe, James. 1976. *Legends of the Lakotas*. Indian History Press, San Francisco

Powell, Peter. 1969. *Sweet Medicine: The continuing role of the Sacred Arrows,, the Sun Dance and the Sacred Buffalo Hat in Northern Cheyenne History*, University of Oklahoma Press

DaMiallie , Raymond J. edit. 1984. *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk’s Teachings Given to John Neihardt*. University of Nebraska Press

