

# Jones-Miller Revisited

## Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

By MATT VINCENT

**Special to the Wray Museum**

The old ones told stories over nighttime fires in winter camps. It was their custom. It was also an oral history and education. Sometimes they recounted the bygone days of the mammoth, the great beasts that once roamed the earth. They shared creation myths and great tales of stars and animals, many steeped in religion. Some merely to entertain. The stories reminded each other of who they were. From the shamans they learned why the seasons change and how to recognize the signs, knowledge vital to a nomadic people that depended on the cycles of life and the ebb and flow of the flora and fauna around them.

They knew, for example, that the winter solstice had just passed, and the nights would now grow shorter while the days grew longer. That knowledge meant it was time to hunt bison again. And so they moved as one.

Following the hunters and scouts, this nomadic band of people left their winter camp in bone-chilling weather, taking the first steps on a long journey that would take them back to a small valley. Centuries later, another group of indigenous bison hunters would call it “Bob Tail Deer Creek,” the same stream known today as the Arikaree River in northeastern Colorado.

The ancient people of this nomadic band were highly skilled hunters. Evidence shows they had killed a good many bison at this same location on an earlier hunt, and the meat they had taken had carried them through another harsh winter on the Great Plains. They had every reason to expect similar results in the coming weeks. There was no mistaking who they were. Garbed in the hides and furs of the animals that sustained them, they roamed a vast grassland ecosystem according to the changing seasons as they had for generations. Draped across the shoulders of the hunters were the weapons and tools that ensured their survival – stone-tipped “dart points” that

could be launched at extremely high velocity, up to 80 or 90 miles per hour, from throwing sticks called atlatls.

Modern archeologists would later classify their stone arsenal as “Hell Gap” projectiles, and weapons that brought down the largest of North America’s game animals for this unique group of hunters and gatherers who may have occupied the plains region as far back as 11,000 years ago.

Scientific evidence would later show this late-winter hunt had been carefully planned. That evidence included the quarry they targeted. They “cut out” a nursery herd, a group of *bison antiquus*, an extinct species of large bison from the late Pleistocene. Forensic analysis would show the herd was comprised mainly of young cows and calves, animals that would yield the best meat and hides for the people. Further evidence would also show the place where the hunt would take place had been carefully and thoughtfully prepared well in advance.

### **PERFECT PLACE FOR A TRAP**

It was a perfect location for a game “surround” or corral. Lush stands of conifers and junipers lined the river bottom and its numerous side canyons. Groves of deciduous trees like birch, ash and hackberry were widespread throughout the valley. Perpendicular to the river was an arroyo, a ravine created by centuries of runoff. And around the perimeter of this arroyo, the ancient hunters had previously prepared a natural trap using trees, brush and the topography itself. Further, the corral’s location in relation to the topography displayed the hunters’ intimate knowledge of the land, along with prevailing winds and changing seasons. Their trap was built just below the ridge where snowdrifts were most likely to form over the harsh winter months, which would cause any bison trapped inside it to thrash, flounder and panic in the deep snow.

Just as a modern farmers need to know when to plant seed, so too did ancient hunters need to know when to harvest. Timing was everything. The “surround” would take place before the spring equinox returned. They started for the harvest site in late winter, when the anticipated volume of meat they would take would be less likely to spoil, giving the time necessary to process and store as much meat as possible.

On that fateful morning, one can imagine dozens of hunters hidden along the bottomland and ridges. Slowly and carefully, a few would have begun moving the targeted herd toward the entrance to their trap. Those nearest the entrance would have the most important task. When the

bison instinctively broke into a run, spooked by movement and noise, several of the bravest hunters would have stood as the lead cows and calves approached the ramp leading into the arroyo, diverting hundreds of thundering animals into the carefully crafted surround. Momentum would lead to their demise.

Once inside the surround, one can imagine the men and women and even the young and old, rising in unison, waving hides or juniper boughs or any object they could grab to further the chaos of a deadly stampede. From around the rim of the “surround,” a cascade of deadly projectile points rained down, crashing into shoulders, humps and haunches, crippling and wounding hundreds of bison. The slaughter would have lasted most of the day and into the night and campfires would have glowed brightly along the little Arikaree River. Most assuredly, the people would have rejoiced loudly at a successful outcome, comforted by the knowledge this good day would carry them through the spring and summer months. And then the Herculean task of butchering and processing an entire herd of bison would begin, an undertaking that would have lasted weeks if not months.

Before the butchering and processing began, drying racks would be constructed around the kill site itself, and on these sturdy wooden structures strips of fresh bison meat would be preserved on an industrial scale – massive even by modern standards. By conservative estimates, more than 400,000 pounds of bison may have been processed through this single “surround” on the ancient Arikaree.

### **10,000 YEARS LATER**

By January of 1972, the country felt exhausted. As hostilities raged across Southeast Asia, Americans learned that National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger had been meeting secretly with North Vietnamese leaders for over two years, trying to broker a peace deal with the North Vietnamese. Meanwhile antiwar protests continued across the nation unabated. The nightly news from Walter Cronkite was nothing but violence. Two years earlier the Ohio National Guard had fired into a crowd of protesters at Kent State, killing four students, and civil unrest had only gotten worse. But there was a glimmer of good news down the backroads of America.

After years of low commodity prices for corn, soybeans and wheat, due primarily to worldwide grain surpluses, American farmers finally heard some good news. Prices were rising, and Earl Butz, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture in the Nixon Administration, told farmers to begin

planting “fence row to fence row,” a catch phrase that drove energy and much-needed optimism back into small farming communities across the country.

Like other farmers who saw rising agricultural prices, Robert “Bob” Jones Jr., heeded the call and on a warm summer’s day in 1972, Jones proceeded with plans to expand the size of an irrigated cornfield above the Arikaree River in far eastern Yuma County. He began by improving a small access road in the field itself with his tractor. Next, he began blading contours, hoping to smooth the terrain to better accommodate the new towers he planned to add to a center pivot irrigation system. Thirty-eight-years old at the time, Jones was an old hand at this sort of work. Eyeing each pass, adjusting the box blade as he went, Jones graded for a good part of the day. At one point he glanced down and saw some white bones he had unearthed. “Probably some old cattle bones,” he thought, when later asked about his first reaction.

After all, he knew the history of the family’s ranch dating back to the 1880s. (See related story.) From the moment his father had purchased the property in 1937, the Jones children had been made keenly aware of its deep roots in ranching. It had once been part of the historic Rosenkrans Ranch founded in 1883. And prior to that, the region had been part of the vast open range of the American West, a time when hundreds of thousands of Texas longhorns roamed the bottomlands and pastures of eastern Yuma County.

However, the next day when he returned to the field, Bob’s opinion on those cattle bones changed. An overnight thunderstorm had washed some worked dirt down the hillside, exposing more white bones. Large bones. As he continued down the slope, he stopped. There on the ground, washed clean by the rain, was a beautifully crafted stone projectile. Although he wasn’t an expert at such things, he was aware of the implication; this was not an ordinary arrowhead. Its elongated base was slightly grounded, while its upper portion “above the shoulders” exhibited finely crafted flaking. Almost precision-like in design. As he continued walking, he saw several more along with more pieces of chert and petrified Black Forest wood. And more bones.

Jones reportedly placed the soon-to-be revered projectile point on the dashboard of his pickup truck where it bounced around for a bit on the rough roads of Yuma County. He would show this artifact to an acquaintance in nearby Wray, a fellow who might know more about this unique artifact; like maybe how old it was, for example, and to which Indian tribe it may have belonged. Cheyenne or Arapaho perhaps? Maybe Pawnee or Sioux.

## ENTER JACK MILLER

One of the first knowledgeable people Bob Jones contacted was Jack Miller, a former anthropology instructor at Colorado State University. Miller immediately realized this was no contemporary Native American point. He immediately contacted his father, Rueben Miller, a longtime artifact hunter from Sterling, and Mike Toft, a former CSU anthropology student who had just returned home from the Vietnam War.

“Rueben took me to the site just days after I got home,” Toft remembers.

“He was very excited about the site. I walked down the hill on the trail road Bob Jones made when he scraped through some of the bones. At the bottom of the hill in the washed road lay a point. As I walked back up the hill, Rueben could see my cupped hand and knew I had a ‘pernt,’ his word for point that would become part of my vocabulary.

“The word Dennis used was spike,” Toft added.

Preliminary excavations and exploration continued through the summer of 1972 with daily anticipation and excitement. By the end of the summer, Miller eventually uncovered hundreds of ancient bison bones along with dozens of unique “Hell Gap” projectiles and tools of extreme high quality made by ancient man. Recognizing the site’s potential significance, he eventually reached out to Dennis Stanford through a mutual acquaintance.

Stanford, a young archeologist who had recently been named as the curator of the Smithsonian Institution’s new Paleo-Indian studies, was a rising star in the world of archeology. Only 29 years old at the time, Stanford’s reputation was already known in parts of the High Plains. While growing up in Colorado and New Mexico, his interest in artifacts began early. He reportedly found his first arrowhead at the age of 9. After his family moved to Rawlins, Wyo., that solitary interest became a passion and everyone in Rawlins knew it. In fact, when he was just a junior in high school, a local construction worker brought the young artifact hunter some massive bones to identify. Dennis contacted the University of Wyoming and the bones turned out to be a rare Columbian mammoth. For his trouble and to return the favor, the teenager was allowed to become part of the excavation team on what became known as the “Union Pacific Mammoth Site” in Carbon County. And the die was cast, so to speak.

Dennis Stanford’s passion for ancient blades and bones was past the point of return. After graduating from high school, he attended the University of Wyoming where, together with another soon-to-be-well-known classmate, George C. Frison, he studied under the legendary

William Mulloy. Frison later became part of the Wyoming's highly regarded Department of Anthropology. In May of 1972, Dennis completed his doctorate work at the University of New Mexico. Ironically, just a few weeks before Bob Jones's tractor unearthed the massive bone bed on the western bank of the Arikaree. After becoming aware of the discovery in northeastern Colorado, Stanford traveled to Yuma County to inspect the site and his initial excitement was obvious. It may have resembled the facial expression of young boy who just ascended a windblown hill covered in flint chips and pottery shards. Stanford returned to Washington D.C. and began making plans for the following summer, sharing the possibilities with his many colleagues and friends in the nation's capital. At the same time Bob Jones and his family were also busy making plans, bringing power and water to the future dig site to accommodate the anticipated crew of archeologists and students.

### **THE DIG BEGINS**

With funding through the National Geographic Society, Stanford returned to Yuma County in June of 1973 and the excavation began. That discovery process would continue for three consecutive summers, bringing a wave of curiosity and anticipation in the surrounding communities of Wray, Laird and Haigler. Whether they knew it or not, Stanford's arrival would deliver some welcome news at a time when it was needed, and that was directly attributable to Stanford and the enthusiast assemblage of diggers and disciples that followed him to the dig site. What they eventually uncovered would "rock" the world of Paleo-Indian archeology, contributing knowledge about ancient hunters and gatherers that would last for generations. More than 41,000 bison bones were collected and catalogued, along with "125 stone tools, 11,000 retouch flakes, and thousands of small animal bones and gastropods," according to an international abstract Dr. Dennis Stanford published on discoveries and revelations that emerged from the Jones-Miller Site.

But it wasn't just the sheer size of the bison kill site nor the unique category of "Hell Gap" artifacts recovered that made the site so unique – it was the goodwill the discovery spread through the surrounding communities. Said one colleague quoted in an article written by Tamara Jager Stewart: "Both Dennis and George (Frison) were amazing at interacting with collectors, most of whom were ranchers or farmers. They had a great ability to talk with and relate to folks on their level, having grown up working the land themselves." Some members of the academic

world up until that time, in other words, may have projected a different image among the local populous, perhaps a stuffy and somewhat condescending attitude among amateur collectors and local folks unfamiliar with subjects like archeology, anthropology and human studies. Not Stanford.

With his floppy hat and wide grin, Dennis shared the excitement of discovery wherever he traveled, whether conversing with a local farmer at the coffee shop or a distinguished professor at a respected university. And whenever the opportunity presented itself, he employed local people. In fact, the late Earlene Edwards was a member of his original excavation team. Earlene is Ann Brethauer's mother, a longtime member of the East Yuma County History Society. Although it happened five decades ago, Ann remembers: "My mom became a close friend with J.P. Matheson, a rancher from New Mexico who came out here early and was friends with Dennis. They were all just really nice people."

Another factor that made the Jones-Miller Site so memorable was the groundbreaking archeological techniques that Stanford pioneered at Jones-Miller, according to his wife, Margaret (Pegi) Jodry, herself a nationally regarded Paleo-Indian expert and author. Among those techniques, relatively new at the time, was three-dimensional mapping, combined with aerial photography, that provided a detailed visual map of the entire site.

"Dennis trained a whole generation of bison excavators at Jones-Miller. The techniques, the way they set up and documented the bone bed, the way they photographed it, the way they numbered each individual bison, coordinating everything through the compass, it was brilliant work," said Jodry recently.

### **STANFORD'S EXCAVATION**

Unlike the excavation work performed on other Paleo-Indian discoveries prior to Jones-Miller, Dennis Stanford employed a fine-mesh water screen and flotation system that allowed researchers to collect and document what's called "microfauna" – everything from tiny gastropods to microscopic grains of plant pollen – that allowed for a detailed environmental reconstruction. Through that wealth of data, researchers were able to determine that the High Plains was a far different place 10,000-plus years ago. The climate was much cooler and the region far wetter than it is today.

In addition to world-class research and the value that it continues to deliver to the scientific community worldwide more than 50 years later, again thanks to Dennis Stanford and the people he brought to the Jones-Miller dig, were those who followed him into the field of modern archeological research. Among them is Marcel Kornfeld who received his masters from the University of Wyoming and his doctorate from the University of Massachusetts. Today, Kornfeld is a professor of archeology at the University of Wyoming and author of more than a dozen books on ancient hunters of North America. “I came on the second season [1974] of excavation,” Kornfeld said. Like many of the participants, he said it seems impossible that 50 years have passed. Equally hard to believe, he added, is the wealth of knowledge that emerged through the work done by a special group of people at Jones-Miller.

For those like Kornfeld and Mike Toft, memories of long days troweling hard-packed dirt off a bone bed under the sweltering Colorado sun, like a fine Cabernet Sauvignon or Chenin Blanc, have improved with age. “Our camp was at the bottom of the hill where Bob Jones had put in a well and electric service. One night I climbed the hill to the site and let my mind wander,” said Toft.

“Looking down on the camp the notion came to me that the 25–30-member crew, male and female, were the same souls that were here 10,000 years ago. All the drama going on below in the lives of the crew were similarly going on in the lives of the Paleo-Indians. They weren’t there merely to do a job; they had the baggage that all humans carry around.

“We worked 10 days on and four days off. The last day of the 10-day we got paid, \$15 in my case, and we got off early. Most of a us made a mad dash in every direction. Twice I ended up in Albuquerque. Once the whole crew visited the Hudson-Meng Site (Oglala National Grassland in northwestern Nebraska) and another time three of us hiked into the mountains above Crested Butte.”

Toft’s favorite memory was the day the legendary Dennis Stanford asked the young Vietnam veteran to take him up to the Flattop quarry outside Sterling and to the Nelson Site near Pawnee Buttes. “We set off in his beat-up pickup truck ‘Old Blue’ and I got to pick his brain all that day. Dennis would become a celebrity and it became hard to get a word in edgewise at [future] events, but I had had that day.”

Asked what he remembers most from his first summer of digging in the Colorado dirt, Kornfeld’s recalls the good times that were had: “Strawberry daiquiris, George Dickel whisky



around campfires, the Jones family (Bob, Janie and Mark), and Jeanne Gelvin's Star Liquor, Archies' and Delbert Holloway's restaurant, where we met up after four-day breaks for drinks, all-you-eat salad bar – and we could it all – and filets for \$3.99.”

And with the good times, Marcel also remembers the great sense of pride that came from witnessing archeology from the one place where it's best viewed – from the ground level cleaning, identifying and preserving masses of bones and ancient artifacts. In that sense, the Arikaree River became a priceless experience for everyone it touched.

“There was something intrinsically special about the energy that came out of that place,” noted Jodry.

And anyone who's lived or worked there anytime over the past 10,000 years would likely agree.