

Local Thirst for Ancient Knowledge

Excitement surrounding the Jones-Miller Site in the early 1970s rolled over the region like a spring thunderstorm. For many residents, it was the biggest thing to ever happen in Yuma County, a fact underscored when a story, “Ice Age Bison Kill,” appeared in the January/1979 edition of *National Geographic Magazine*.

Citizens turned out in droves to see what was taking place a dozen miles or so south of Laird on the Arikaree. A photograph appeared on the front page of the *Wray Gazette* showing crowds at the excavation site, each group of visitors listening intently to tour guides, absorbing every word and studying each artifact recently uncovered. The accompanying caption read: “Approximately 1,500 persons went to the Jones-Miller site last Sunday south of Laird to view research and work done by Dr. Dennis Stanford and other archeologists.”

Local rancher Bob Bledsoe was certainly impressed by what was happening east of Wray. “It gave the community a sense of just how long people have been living here on the plains, and I think it really sparked an interest in archeology. Local folks began to understand the presence of the bones and the logic of the dig site. And the more they learned, the more they wanted to know.”

Looking back recently, Bledsoe believes that much of the credit for the excitement went to the young students and archeologists uncovering the bones and artifacts. “They were all more than accommodating. In fact, they relished the attention and enthusiastically shared the knowledge they were accumulating, which was clearly evident in the steady crowds that assembled for tours.”

And while the discovery of an ancient bison bones surprised many longtime residents, it didn’t surprise Bob Bledsoe who was already aware of the presence of ancient man in northeastern Colorado. While finalizing the paperwork on the purchase of the land that would become the well-known Bledsoe Cattle Company, the former owner of the property reportedly told him there were “dinosaur bones all over the place.”

It didn’t take long for the new owner to confirm it. In addition to dinosaur bones, Bledsoe and a few close friends had also discovered evidence of large megafauna from the late Pleistocene – mammoth among them – and the weapons and tools of the ancient hunters who pursued them.

Before digging officially began on the Jones Ranch in 1973, Bledsoe graciously provided a training ground for Dr. Dennis Stanford and the first excavation team that arrived in Yuma County before work began at Jones-Miller. “Pete Brophy and I had found some old points north of Wray. They sent some folks out here to kind of get some area ranchers and local folks interested in what was going on. One of the guys who arrived was J.P. Matheson, a rancher from New Mexico who had a real talent for finding ancient sites. So J.P. approached me and Pete.

When we identified a few promising places on the ranch, Dennis took a team out there as kind of a warmup before they started digging down on the Arikaree.”

The advance teams were able to find several Paleo-Indian artifacts before they started on the main course at Jones-Miller the following spring. “It turned out to be a very exciting time around here,” Bledsoe recalled.

And that quest for knowledge quickly began to spread from area ranches and farms to local coffee shops, knowledge that continues to be showcased inside the Wray Museum today.

– *MATT VINCENT*