

THE 1975 EXCAVATIONS AT THE JONES-MILLER SITE YUMA COUNTY, COLORADO

By

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Supported by funds from the National Geographic Society, the Smithsonian Institution continued excavations for the third and final season at the Jones-Miller site. The major goals of this year's work were to finish the excavation of the bone bed, to search for the kill site, and to test a hearth area found in 1974.

This year's excavation of the bone bed produced results similar to those from the first two years' excavation. An additional 10,000 bison bones were excavated, mapped, and collected. The bones all fit the same pattern as those from the previous excavations. We believe the remains are a nursery herd representing three kills during the course of several seasons (Stanford 1974:34). The estimated number of animals has, however, been increased to nearly 300. This represents approximately 100 animals per kill. No totally articulated bison were found this season and all remains were almost totally butchered. This is perhaps because the buffalo were killed during cold seasons and butchering could continue for longer periods of time before decay set in. This is unlike the early fall kills reported at other sites where warmer weather may have started putrefaction of unbutchered animals. Therefore the sites were abandoned before complete butchering was accomplished.

The most unusual feature found this summer was a large post mold located near the center of the site (Fig. 1). The post mold is 22 cm in diameter and extended 46 cm below the level of the bone bed. It seems to be too shallow to permit it to support any heavy weights, and therefore it seems to be nonfunctional for the butchering process. It is interesting to note that the antler flute, an extremely tiny, complete projectile point (Fig. 2-e), and butchered canid remains were found in the immediate proximity of the post mold.

Thirty additional stone artifacts were found. Of these, 26 are projectile points or fragments. This includes 11 complete points, 12 broken points, and 3 impact flakes (Figs. 2 and 3). All of the projectile points conform to the Hell Gap type. Four side scrapers or cutting tools were recovered (Fig. 4), one of which was made on a blade (Fig. 4-c). All of the artifacts found this season were made from Flat Top flint or Republican River chert from the Niobrara formation of Nebraska.

A number of additional bone artifacts were found, including a drilled antler tine which is believed to be a flute. This tool has a hole drilled completely through the long axis of the tine, with at least one intersecting hole drilled from the top. The tool was broken just behind the intersecting hole, so it is impossible to determine if there were additional holes.

During the 1974 field season, a backhoe trench uncovered bison bones in a buried draw 80 meters west of the Jones-Miller site (Stanford 1974:30).



FIGURE 1. Excavated cross section of the Post Mold.

Geological investigation indicated that these bones were in the same stratigraphic horizon as those of the site and it was reasoned that this second draw may have been a kill site associated with the butchering site. Therefore, three two-meter squares were excavated adjacent to the backhoe trench to a depth of four meters. A skull fragment, two scapulae, and a rib fragment were all that were recovered from these trenches. Two additional backhoe trenches were then dug, cutting both to the north and south of the excavated squares. As there were no additional faunal remains or any cultural artifacts found in these cuts, it is now assumed that this area was not the kill site associated with the Jones-Miller site.

The hearth area found during the 1974 field season has failed to yield any diagnostic cultural remains (Stanford 1974:30). However, additional excavations are planned for the hearth area to try to determine the age of the hearths and their relationship to the Jones-Miller site.

A number of working hypotheses can be discussed at this time. These are not conclusions and will be modified, corrected, or elaborated upon in the future. Although extensive exploration has been conducted to find a nearby kill site, none have been located. This is due to either poor luck in finding the location, that the geographical location did not withstand geological weather-



FIGURE 2. Projectile Points from the Jones-Miller Site, 1975 excavation.

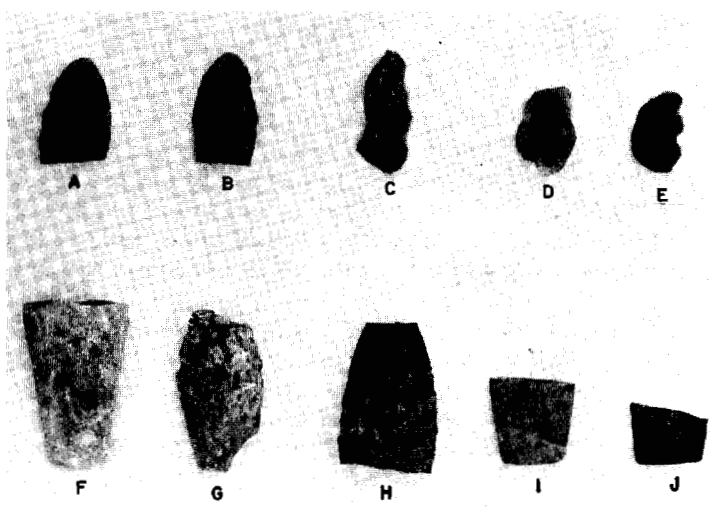


FIGURE 3. a-b, projectile point tip fragments; c-e impact flakes; and f-j, projectile point base and center section fragments.

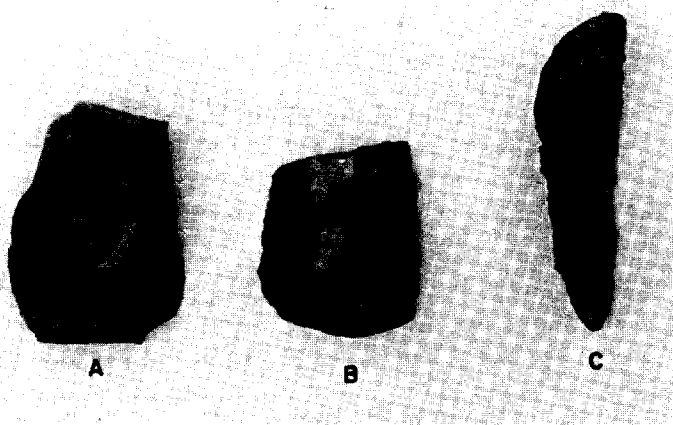


FIGURE 4. a-b, side scrapers; c, cutting tool made on a blade.

ing, or that the bone bed at the Jones-Miller site is the kill site itself. This latter idea is in part substantiated in that many of the bones reported as missing after last year's excavation (Stanford 1974:34) have now been found.

If the kill was at the site, and since there are no major geographical features which could have been utilized for a trap, it probably represents a pound type of kill. Further, from the work of George Arthur (1974:77), it is noted that the areas of flat or gently rolling plains and prairies away from the mountains favored the construction of pounds for bison killing. MacDougall reports that historic pounds were usually situated on the south or east side of gently sloping hills because timber grew there, with the country to the north and west being relatively open (MacDougall 1896:273).

All of these geographical conditions are present in our reconstruction of the paleotopography of the Jones-Miller site. Moreover, the dimensions of the site are 35 yards by 22 yards which conform to historic pound sizes of approximately 30 yards in diameter (MacDougall 1896:273; Hind 1971: 356).

The paleoecological reconstruction indicates that trees were growing to the north and west of the Jones-Miller site, and that the predominate wind direction was from the northwest. Given the winter aspect of the site, it is felt that these conditions would allow for a deep snow drift to fill the draw in which the site is located. The trapping of bison in similar snow drifts has been reported by both Catlin (1965:1:253) and Seton (1909:271).

Another interesting aspect of the Jones-Miller site is the occurrence of the large post mold. This could be interpreted as a medicine post as described by Denig (1930:532) in which the Assiniboine and Cree erected a medicine pole near the center of their pounds upon which offerings were attached. If this is, in fact, a medicine pole, it would support the interpretation of the site being the kill location.

Our tentative conclusion is that the Jones-Miller site represents a pound kill in which snow provided the major trapping device. Perhaps a ramp manufactured from frozen water and manure was used to hasten the bison into the snow bank such as reported from Cree kills (Ewers 1968:163). The bison would then be butchered in the impound, with the snow acting as a freezing agent to keep the meat fresh until complete butchering was accomplished.

The campsite which has not been found could have consisted of lodges located along the floor of the Arikaree valley and spaced out so that there would be sufficient wood for each group. During the winter, when meat was needed, the hunters would get together and impound the buffalo. This apparently happened three times at the Jones-Miller site.

If the post mold and artifacts found around it, do represent a medicine pole and its offerings, one must postulate 10,000 years of socio-religious continuity on the Northern Plains, a thought which is indeed worthy of careful consideration.

Further analysis is presently being conducted to either substantiate or refute these working hypotheses and the results will be published by the Smithsonian Institution.

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