Dig

Continued from Page 7

"When I first got out here, and slept out in the field for the first time, I couldn't believe the stars," he said. "I've lived in a city all my life — I didn't know you could see so many."

Wiehn scanned the small buttes across the horizon, squinting against the glare of the mid-morning sun.

"I don't know if I could do this as a career, but it's definitely been worth it."

* * *

Back at the bonebed, David Rapson looked eagerly into the pit before him.

The professor of archeology at the University of Wyoming has been working at the Hudson-Meng Site for the last three summers. He has overseen most of the excavation since 1991.

And he is still doing it now.

The student in the pit gingerly removed the bison bone from it's resting place in the earth. Rapson mentioned something about the shape and length of the bone, pointing at a small protrusion on the bone's surface. The student nodded, carefully labeled the bone and put it away.

His lecture about the site is technical but warm; he is obviously passionate about his work, and wants others to feel that way as well.

Rapson explained that the bonebed, which could contain over 1,000 complete bison skeletons, is the largest natural death site in the country. There has been nothing like it before, and may not ever be again.

As Rapson looked out at the sheds covering the exposed bone sites, he did not see a hot and dusty tomb for an extinct species: he saw an ancient plain brimming with life.

Huge *Bison antiquous*, almost 10 percent larger than modern-day *Bison bison* and sporting longer, straighter horns, roamed these plains, moving wherever food allowed.

And following them was a tribe of Paleoindians.

Rapson doubted it was Indians that killed this herd, however. There is too much evidence that states otherwise.

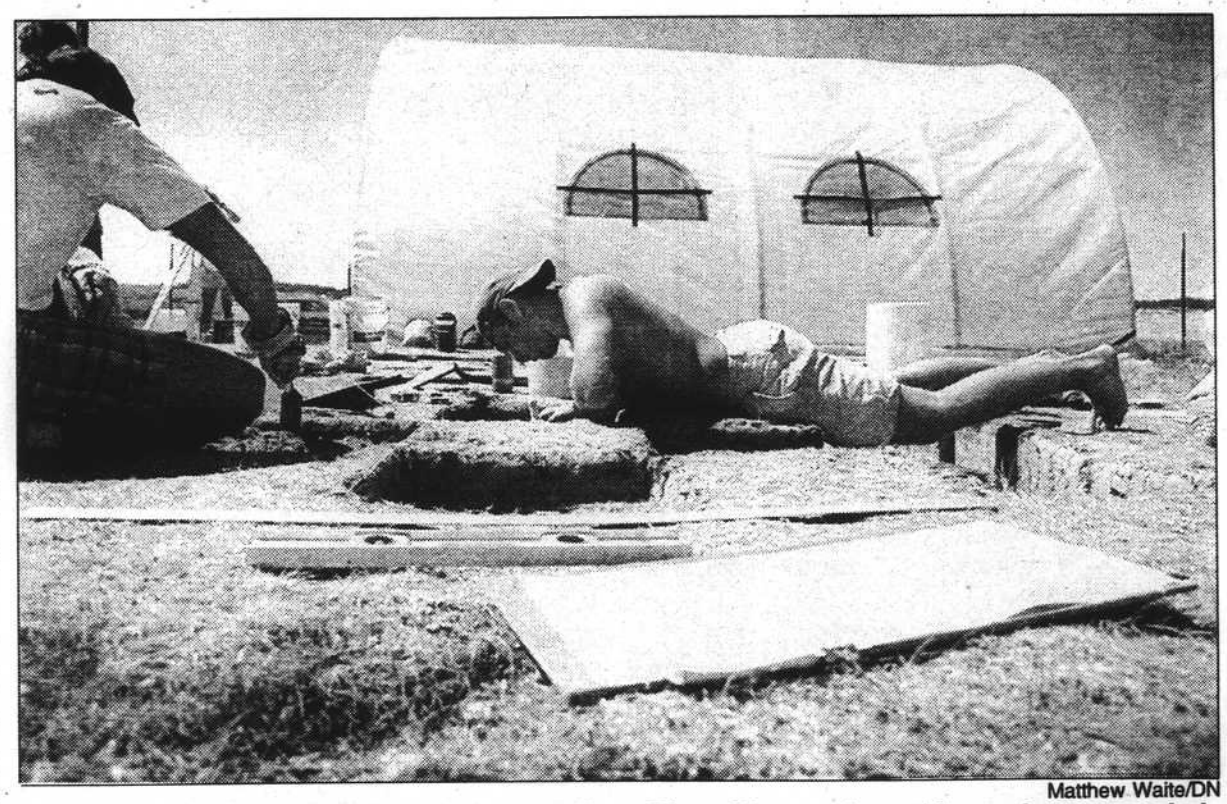
He said a prairie fire, or some other natural event, killed this large herd 10,000 years ago.

The mission to find out the truth began in 1991 for Rapson. He was asked to help re-excavate the site by Larry Todd, an adjunct professor of archeology at Colorado State University.

There had been the discovery of possible human occupation at the site, which had been originally excavated in 1971 by Larry Agenbroad from Chadron State University. For Rapson, the chance to piece together ancient history was enough to make him commit his summers for the next three years.

"It was in all the books that Hudson-Meng was a kill site, that Indians wiped out this herd somehow and used them for food and supplies," Rapson said. "It seemed strange though, so we decided to have another look."

Now the truth is starting to come to light.



Matthew Waite/DN

Work at the Arner site is a speculation game. Here, Diano Circo works on his one-foot square hole the students are using to find a pit hearth, an oven in the ground.

Rapson said there was evidence of a tribal occupation of the site, anywhere from five to 50 years after the herd's death. Why the tribe decided to stop there and whether the bison's presence was a factor were anyone's guess.

"These were two close, separate events," Rapson said. "It's not strange that people would live here, but it is interesting that we have evidence of two separate species right on top of each other."

Rapson said it was unknown who the descendants of the Paleoindians might be, but it was clear they were very different than the tribes that developed a horse-based culture after European contact.

"Who these people were and what killed these bison may always be a mystery, but it's not important," Rapson said. "What matters is that they have both left behind things that tell us what their world was like."

* * *

In the middle of nowhere, music played.

It was The Rolling Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want."

For Kat Geiger, it is the truth.

Climbing a mesa in the middle of a small valley, the UNL junior anthropology major eagerly awaited the results of her modern pit hearth experiment.

With her instructor and two other students, Geiger helped unearth a sack of potatoes that had been baking in the ground for 16 hours.

"I hope this worked," she said. She pointed to a small mound of charred vegetation. "Our yams didn't turn out too well."

She reached in the hot burlap sack, fished out a potato, cut it and hesitantly took a bite.

She winced and swallowed, turned to her instructor and said, "Done, but not enough."

LuAnn Wandsnider, a UNL assistant professor of anthropology and director of the UNL field school, smiled at Geiger and said three words.

"Maybe next time."

It is Wandsnider's third year of research on the Grasslands. Much like her associates at the bonebed, she wants to find out the truth.

But she is not interested in bison, or the habits of 10,000-year-old Indian tribes. Her research is much more closer to the present-day.

The tribes she studies are only 2,000 years old, if even that.

"What I want to do out here is discover what these tribes did and how they operated," she said. "A lot of that traditional knowledge has been lost by modern people, and we'd like to find it out for ourselves."

The "we" is Wandsnider and her students. The field school is a chance for interested students to help Wandsnider learn more about ancient people, while helping the scientific community and enriching their own lives.

"We've got a great group of kids out here," she said.

"We always do; they all want to learn and help out, and they all think the sacrifices are worth the benefits."

The field school is funded through summer sessions and the Nebraska National Forest. The students pay tuition for nine credit hours, then take a week of class, spend six weeks in the field and return for another week of class.

The final week in the field is upon them.

"These kids work hard," Wandsnider said. "It's boring work sometimes, especially when you don't find any goodies, but in the end, all of them have said they feel it's been worth it.

"To them, and to me, archaeology is truth. That's what matters to all of us."

Wandsnider followed Geiger and her friends down off the mesa, into a valley that had once been a river that sustained an Indian tribe thousands of years ago.

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At 3 p.m. the UNL students return from their site. They are hot, dirty and tired.

Normally they would take naps, play volleyball, read or just talk, but tonight is a little different.

Tonight they celebrate their final week in the field.

A few of them pick up large plastic bags laying on the ground and walk to a row of wooden partitions set up on the far end of camp — close to their small community of "Little Lincoln."

The bags are solar showers, specially-treated bags filled with water and left out in the sun during the day to heat the water.

It is a refreshing experience for them, to be sure, but is soon delayed by the pincer-like movement of a wall of storm clouds closing in on the small camp.

Soon hail falls and rains beats down on the tent community, but it is not enough to dampen the spirits of the group. Even as it rains, the students eat buffalo roast and laugh, talking about all the things they have done.

It is a community; a warm, safe place in the midst of cold weather and a cruel environment.

A west wind blows across the camp, clearing a place in the clouds and stopping the rain. A rainbow appears, signalling the return of the sunshine.

There are many different people in this group. At one end of the field, Dan Paxton, a sophomore general studies major, tells stories about his time in the Gulf War.

At a table near the kitchen, Jan Peterson, a volunteer worker from Las Crucas, N.M., tells about the four other digs she has been on or will be a part of.

Over by the volleyball net, Koji Oyama, a Japanese student, talks about studying archeology in Japan.

Wandsnider leaves her place at a picnic table inside the kiosk at the edge of camp and walks outside. It has started to sprinkle again — the clouds are closing in again, this time much thicker and darker.

But she does not run for cover, and neither does anyone else.

She looks up at the clouds and jokingly says she and her crew may have to bail out their hearths the next morning.

"This is the most rain we've had in a long time," she says. "I'm sure everyone's going to enjoy it while they can."

Wandsnider walks to her van to get some notes, stopping at the door and picking up a piece of paper on the ground.

She looks at it thoughfully for a moment and says, "You know, we look at people's garbage to find out how they lived. Garbage doesn't lie."

She drops the piece of paper in her pocket, gets her notes and heads back to camp.

"It's funny when you think about it," she said. "In a couple thousand years, some other camp may be right here, trying to figure out what we were doing."