



LAS July 2015 Headlines:

Wyoming rancher turned archaeologist has spent life tracking ancient hunters

Billings Gazette - May 28, 2015 by Brett French, BFrench@billingsgazette.com

George Frison, shown here in 1998, has uncovered some of Wyoming's most incredible archaeological sites during his professional career.

Nobody understands hunters quite like George Frison.

The 90-year-old Wyoming archaeologist has spent much of his professional career conducting research on ancient bison, woolly mammoth and pronghorn kill sites. One time, to better understand if paleo-Indian hunters could kill a mammoth with an atlatl, he conducted an unusual experiment.

"He's probably the only guy in the world to have killed an elephant with a Clovis point and an atlatl," said Todd Surovell, a University of Wyoming associate professor and director of the Frison Institute, named in honor of the professor emeritus.

"He also comes to this with a lot of practical experience — from weapons to butchery — that he knows from firsthand experience as a hunter and guide," Surovell said. "He's just a good old Wyoming boy."

TIRELESS RESEARCHER:

Although "pushing 91," Frison is still on the go. Two weeks ago, he gave a lecture in Cody, Wyo., before driving to Casper a couple of days later for another talk.

"It's a fascinating area," Frison said of his home state. "There are just all kinds of materials an archaeologist can go wild with."

When not on the go, he continues to write, adding to his 95 already published journal articles and 10 books — including "Prehistoric Hunters of the High Plains" which provides an overview of northwest Plains prehistory. Frison's most recent book came out last year, his memoir. He still keeps regular office hours, and he continues to read archaeological research papers.

"Every year somebody comes up with something new, and I can't wait to hear about it," he said.

Such dedication to the archaeological profession came late in life to Frison. He was 36 and a World War II veteran before he entered college to earn a degree at the University of Wyoming in 1962. Once enrolled, he blazed through his undergrad degree and then collected his doctorate at the University of Michigan in only three years. By 1967 he was the head of UW's Anthropology Department and a year later became the first Wyoming State Archaeologist.

Although somewhat intimidating to students, his UW colleague Marcel Kornfeld called Frison a humble man. Surovell said he's a "down-to-earth guy."

HISTORY LESSONS:

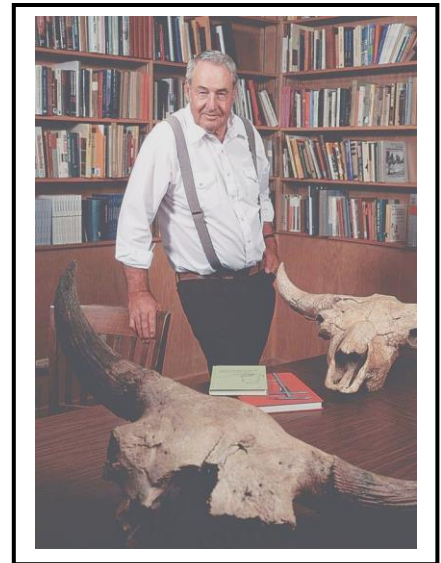
Frison got hooked on the past when he was a child growing up in the Ten Sleep area at the western base of Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. Ten Sleep reportedly got its name because it was 10 sleeps south from the Yellowstone Valley for historic travelers, and 10 sleeps north of campsites along the Platte River.

His grandfather was working on the railroad in Colorado when he moved his family to the Wyoming ranch he had bought.

"The place he settled was just a big archaeological site," Frison said.

Raised by his grandparents after his father died, Frison found his first artifact — a grooved rock maul — at age 7 while digging up potatoes in his grandmother's garden.

"Everyone said, 'That's a war club,' but it wasn't. It was designed to pound meat and berries to make pemmican. It was probably used for generations," Frison said.





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On his grandparents' ranch, he was surrounded by history. While wood gathering with his grandfather, an Indian skeleton wrapped in a worn buffalo robe rolled out at Frison's feet from a juniper tree they were cutting.

"Golly, you couldn't help but get interested," he said. "People used to say, 'He'll get tired of it.'"

Instead, Frison continued to dig deeper, eventually believing that he knew quite a bit. That led him to a meeting where an archaeologist called him a collector and said he was doing harm by removing artifacts from the landscape that provided context to their origins.

"By golly, the old guy was right," Frison said.

That challenge led him back to the university. After diving into archaeology, Frison found a niche that others in his profession were ignoring and was in great supply in his home state of Wyoming — Paleo-Indian sites.

"The number of important Paleo-Indian sites George has dug is unparalleled," Surovell said. "He has a record of sniffing out great sites and doing incredible work on them."

FIELD WORK:

One of Frison's most unusual finds was a 12,900-year-old mammoth kill site outside of Worland, Wyo., one of the largest such sites in North America.

"That mammoth kill site came as a real surprise," he said. "And here it was out in the old badlands, not the most exciting country in the world, but it must have been nicer at one time."

Frison said the site is the last evidence of mammoth hunting in that time period. Was it human hunting pressure that led to the extinction of the mammoth? Frison is skeptical.

"People at that level of social organization have very strict rules about hunting," he said. "If they don't treat that animal respectfully, they won't have them for food."

Yet the site shows the ancient hunters were targeting small mammoths and females, avoiding large males that were more dangerous. If mammoths, like their closest living relative the elephant, didn't have their first pregnancy until they were 15 years old, and have a long gestation period, a breeding population could quickly be depleted, especially if the animals were already struggling with climate change, Frison explained.

In another discovery in the 1960s, an old grizzly bear guide showed Frison a strange-looking wooden structure he had discovered in the Sunlight Basin area. Frison took a photo and when a game warden on the Wind River Reservation pointed out a similar structure in a gully, Frison realized the similarities and figured out they were ancient animal traps.

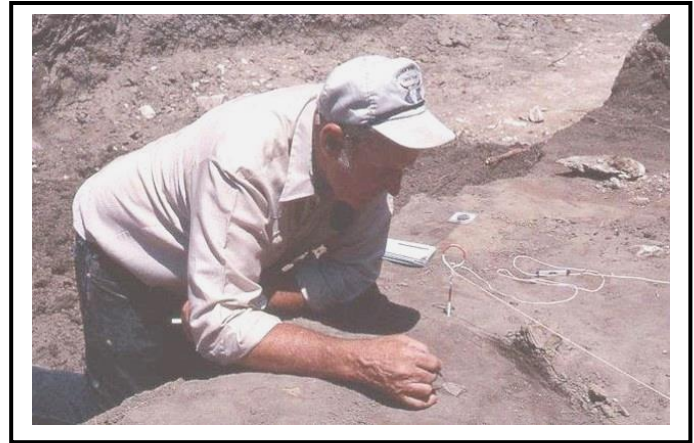
Frison speculated the Indians would herd animals like bighorn sheep into the traps and kill them with clubs.

"In terms of animal behavior, they had that thing figured out," he said. "They understood antelope behavior, as well. There are some pretty good antelope traps in the Fort Bridger area."

He noted that the recent documentation of the pronghorn migration from Jackson Hole to Pinedale by wildlife biologists has likely been going on for thousands of years based on archaeological evidence of 5,500-year-old pronghorn kills near Trapper's Point, a bottleneck along the route.

"They weren't dumb by any respect," Frison said of ancient hunters. "They were a pretty sophisticated people. What they were doing with chert and flint still has us shaking our heads."

He noted that a sinew-backed bow made out of a bighorn ram's horn that was found in a cave in the Gros Ventre Mountains demonstrates incredible manufacturing techniques.





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“Just making the glue to glue that sinew to the back is no simple matter,” he said. “That horn is far superior to wood.”

LESSONS LEARNED:

Surovell marvels at Frison’s energy, noting his one-time professor has not slowed down much.

“I think the most important lesson I’ve learned from George, and most archaeologists have, is the importance of working with local people and people who collect artifacts,” Surovell said. “Most of his sites were found by people out working or hunting on the land.”

Kornfeld first met Frison at a bison kill site in 1975 and has worked with him at the University of Wyoming since 1983.

“I think George is a kind of researcher and scientist that he just simply thought the results of something we were doing ... we would get something out of it regardless if we were on the right track,” Kornfeld said. “He’s very attuned to practical experience, whatever that happens to be.”

Frison wishes he had his youth back to explore high-elevation archaeological sites one of his students discovered, as well as to employ new and better scientific methods for dating finds.

“If I was 30 years younger, I’d probably be leading the pack,” he said. “It’s just real interesting to see what people were doing back then.”

(Story provided by Darrel Wilson, Kansas Archaeological Society Membership Coordinator and Secretary)

Rancher Archaeologist: A Career in Two Different Worlds

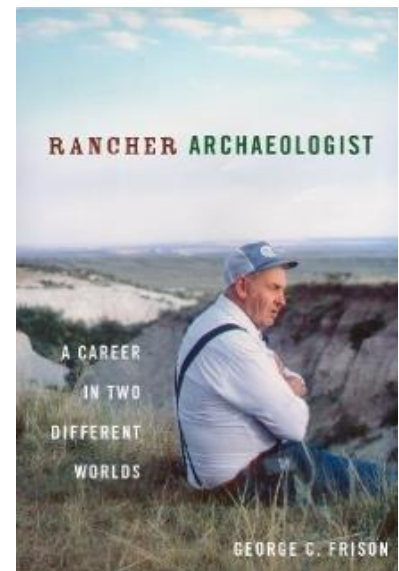
By George Frison

Foreword by William "Bill" Woodcock

Sometimes childhood events can shape a person’s destiny. Such was the case for George Frison. His father’s accidental death meant that Frison was raised by his grandparents, thus experiencing life on a ranch instead of the small town childhood he otherwise would have had. He was fascinated by the wealth of prehistoric artifacts on the ranch; eventually, this interest prompted him to change his life’s course at age thirty-seven.

In this memoir, Frison shares his work and his atypical journey from rancher to professor and archaeologist. Herding cattle, chopping watering holes in sub-zero weather, and guiding hunters in the fall were very different than teaching classes, performing laboratory work, and attending faculty and committee meetings in air-conditioned buildings. But his practical and observational experience around both domestic and wild animals proved a valuable asset to his research. His knowledge of specific animal behaviors added insight to his studies of the Paleoindians of the Northern Plains as he sought to understand how their stone tools were used most effectively for hunting and how bison jumps, mammoth kills, and sheep traps actually worked. Frison’s careful research and strong involvement in the scholarly and organizational aspects of archaeology made him influential not only as an authority on the prehistory of the Northern Plains but also as a leader in Wyoming archaeology and North American archaeology at large.

This book will appeal to both the professional and the lay reader with interests in archaeology, anthropology, paleontology, plains history, animal science, hunting, or game management. Frison’s shift from ranching to academic archaeology serves as a reminder that you are never too old to change your life.





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LAS Find of the Month, July 2015:

Members can bring an artifact to be entered into the competition at the monthly meeting, which will be judged based on the following rules:

1. Must be a member of LAS in good standing.
2. The artifact must be a personal find.
3. It must have been found within the specified time frame, i.e., within the month prior to the meeting.
4. The artifact doesn't have to be a Colorado find—all that matters is that it was found in the last month.

The Find of the Month for July 2015 was made by Dalton Campbell.

Type: Temporal

Material: Obsidian

Location: Central New Mexico
(Private Land)



LAS News and Upcoming Events:

Speakers Needed!

Really!! We need speakers for our 2015 meetings! If you would like to give a presentation or know of someone who would give a great program please contact Andy Coca, Jean Steinhoff or Kevin Zeeck. No experience is necessary, just a passion for our hobby and a willingness to share that passion. Thanks!

- July – August 2015 Hell Gap site excavation. Dr. Marcel Kornfeld has extended an invitation to all LAS members to come by and visit the site, or even volunteer to help with the dig. If you are interested see the website at <http://www.uwyo.edu/pirl/summer%20schedule.html>.
- August 4, 2015 August meeting. Program: Annual picnic/potluck at the Pulliam Community Building from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Come whenever you can. Bring your own service and a dish to share.
- September 1, 2015 September meeting. Plan your presentation and give me a call today!
- September 5-7, 2015 Loveland Archaeological Society Labor Day Weekend field trip to the Harris Ranch at Bosler, Wyoming. A map and instructions will be included in the August newsletter.
- September 26 & 27, 2015 2015 Loveland Stone Age Fair. More information will be provided in the coming months. Put the dates on your calendar, and plan now to attend!