

University of Wyoming Archaeological Field School 2017

AIA Report

Jonas Chang

During the summer of 2017 I had the opportunity to attend a six-week archaeological field school in Wyoming through the University of Wyoming and under the direction of Drs. Robert Kelly and Todd Surovell. The field school was unique in that it operated in three separate locations throughout the six weeks, each focusing on a different aspect of archaeological work. All three ten-day sessions required students to camp near the sites. The locations were too remote to make dormitory housing a possibility. The generous aid of the Jane C. Waldbaum Archaeological Field School Scholarship allowed me to purchase the camping and hiking equipment needed to attend and participate in the field school.

The first session of the field school was located at the Alm Site, a rock shelter set alongside Paint Rock Creek that showed human habitation dating back to around 13,000 BP. It was at this location that many of us students had our first exposure to archaeological work. The ten days focused on precision archaeology and the skills associated with it: setting up and running a total station, the extensive paper work needed to document artifact finds, and learning how to use a trowel properly. We also had the opportunity to open up a test unit and learn the very different style of archaeological work, specifically shovel work, more commonly found in Cultural Resource Management assignments.

It was also at this location that we learned how to work outdoors. Sleeping in a tent each night, waking up at five in the morning, and adjusting to the chilly Wyoming mornings and very hot Wyoming afternoons were all important aspects of Wyoming archaeology. No matter where I work in the future I will be prepared for work like this.

The second session was located at the Le Prele Mammoth Kill Site near Douglas, Wyoming. The purpose of the session was to find further evidence of human interactions with the mammoth remains found there in 1983. This site exposed us to several difficulties not found at Alm. The sediment at the site was very difficult to trowel through, requiring frequent soaking, and yielded very few artifacts. The nature of the sediment also required water screening, a project that many of us gladly volunteered for. It was a nice reprieve from the hot Wyoming sun.

The second session also gave us first-hand experience with the importance of maintaining good relations with land owners. The site was originally excavated in 1983, but, because it was on private land, further excavation was prohibited by the land owner in the years afterward. It was not until 2014 that archaeologists were allowed to return, and only because a new owner who was friendly to archaeological work acquired the land.

La Prele, with its few and sparse artifacts, had one more lesson for us shortly after we left. We students were often told that finding a Clovis point would be a very important find for the research being conducted on the site. However, we only found a few scrapers, some bifaces and ochre, and a bone needle. All important finds, but not the sought-after Clovis point. So, we left for the third session content, but a little disappointed. A week later, we received word that the field school of graduate students working at La Prele after us had uncovered a Clovis point. We were thrilled by the news, but a little jealous. Sometimes you are at the right place at the right time. Sometimes you aren't.

The third location was at Wold Ranch near Kaycee, Wyoming. It is incredibly beautiful country and the perfect place for us to conduct survey work. With a recent bison jump site, wall art, the Jameson Site located near a Paleo-Indian refuge site, the region is abundant with evidence of human occupation. Under Dr. Kelly's instruction students conducted survey across the region and learned this incredibly important skill. A few of us additionally had the opportunity to work with rock art specialists for a day and learn about the paperwork and thought process that goes into that branch of archaeology.

By the end of the third session I was ready to return home and sleep in a bed again, but was so grateful for the opportunity to learn skills used in so many branches of archaeology. I also had the opportunity to meet and form close friendships with people that I expect to meet at academic conferences in the future, students and instructors alike. I want to thank the Archaeological Institute of America for making this a possibility.