



People of the Plain

*Archaeologists
trace the lives
of early cultures*

By Amy Stahl

Turn back Idaho's clock for a moment. It's the Pleistocene era, about 15,000 years ago, and the weather patterns have changed. It's getting colder and as ice fields grow, oceans are lowering. A land bridge has formed between what is now Siberia and Alaska, enabling people and large mammals like elk, bison and camels to migrate to North America.

That is the scene archaeologists have set for the first human inhabitants of Idaho. Using artifacts excavated from ancient sites, scientists have pieced together a rich and fascinating tapestry of human life in Idaho along the Snake River Plain.

The earliest evidence of human habitation in southern Idaho — about 15,000 years ago — is at Wilson Butte Cave, northeast of Twin Falls. In his book *An Introduction to the Archaeology of Southern Idaho*, BSU archaeologist Mark Plew says "some of the earliest evidence for a human presence in the New World was found at the site." A basalt knife and bone fragments excavated when the site



Above: Archaeologists sift through soil at the Danskin Shelter site in search of artifacts and debris from early cultures. Right: BSU archaeologist Mark Plew supervises the dig.

was discovered in the late 1950s suggest that people frequented the area and that they used caves as temporary shelters. The early people, categorized by archaeologists as being part of the Paleo-Indian tradition, were big-game hunters who stalked their prey with stone tools crafted from obsidian.

These were people who shadowed the movements of the large animals they relied on for their primary source of food. Their lives were simple, but Plew says they may have witnessed one of southern Idaho's great geologic spectacles: the Bonneville flood.

What is now a dammed and tamed waterway, the Snake River became a raging torrent 15,000 years ago when Lake Bonneville spilled over from northern Utah into southern Idaho. Car-sized boulders became little more than pebbles tossed by the river as it carved the canyon into the plain.

The prehistoric people were also witness to a change in the climate as the weather warmed and the glacial ice melted. The camels, sloths and elephants that once roamed freely across the plain were suc-

ceeded by modern bison, deer and antelope. As forage grew more sparse and game became more scarce, the ancient people of the plain altered their diets and habits to reflect the changing environment.

Plew points out, "People were making choices and developing tools to exploit the changes." Rather than rely exclusively on big game, the people of 7,000 years ago — the early Archaic period — began to look to the desert and river for plants and fish to supplement their diets. At the Wasden Site northeast of Pocatello, early inhabitants were found to have developed specialized tools, including grinding stones used to mill seeds. They also used more sophisticated strategies for hunting big game. According to Plew's book, one scientist "suggests that the Wasden Site was used as a natural corral for bison which were killed and butchered there."

As technology advanced, so did other aspects of early culture. The early people produced material goods in the form of simple clothing and woven baskets and they developed the atlatl, a spear-throwing device that made hunting more efficient.



Chuck Scheer photo

During this period 7,000-5,000 years ago, inhabitants of the Snake River Plain are thought to have moved more frequently from the river across the grasslands to the foothills to better utilize food sources available during different seasons.

The historic Shoshoni Indians, exemplifying this cyclical pattern, headed to the more temperate canyons during inclement weather to hunt, fish for salmon and take advantage of more plentiful firewood. In the late spring they traveled 50 miles to the Camas Prairie where they collected the mealy bulbed camas and other root crops. Here, they also hunted for smaller animals such as ground squirrels and traded goods with others on the prairie.

In the early fall, the Indians returned to the canyon to harvest salmon that had made their way up the Columbia River from the Pacific Ocean. Anticipating the lean months ahead, the Indians dried and smoked their catch and stored it in caches to use during the bitter winter months.

Excavations along the Payette River, in the Weiser area and in the Owyhee uplands show that while inhabitants were supplementing their diets with fish and

plants, they also continued to hunt for bison and other big game.

The "interface between the Plains and the foothills" is of particular interest to Plew, who recently completed a six-week dig at Danskin Rock Shelter on the South Fork of the Boise River. Plew hoped to develop an "environmental history" of the area's plants and animals in order to gain a better understanding of the prehistoric people who fished, hunted or lived at the site.

During the middle Archaic period 5,000 to 1,000 years ago, prehistoric people were spending more time in small villages by the river. At Givens Hot Springs near Marsing, archaeologists have found remnants of house structures and along the Payette River temporary workshops and hunting camps have been unearthed.

Seasonally, as the people followed their food sources along the plain, there was more interaction with other groups as they manufactured and traded goods and engaged in burial rituals.

The discovery of western Idaho burial sites by BSU archaeologist Max Pavesic is particularly important to understanding this period of human interaction and development in southern Idaho. In the Idaho Archaic Burial Complex, Pavesic has found blades, marine shells from the Pacific Coast, hematite pipes and red ochre, a pigment often used for native American Indian ceremonies. The items, some of which originated thousands of miles away, "clearly suggest that there was some sort of social interaction in the Archaic period," Plew says. Additionally, the contents of "high-ranked" burials indicate the existence of a more complex social structure, with privileged members of the egalitarian society being buried with more valuable items.

During the late Archaic period 1,000 to 1,500 years ago, early people increasingly put technology to work along the river, using net sinkers and hooks to snag their fish. Some of the people lived in small villages, and with a predictable food source and increased storage capacity

became more sedentary, a significant departure from the nomadic ways of earlier periods when people roamed the prairies following game.

In the upper Snake and Salmon river areas, inhabitants were increasingly using rock alignments, or hunting blinds, behind which they could stalk their prey undetected.

A Minidoka area farmer stumbled into this prehistoric world in 1985 when he discovered a lava tube near his farm that contained the remains of 17 bison. The bison bones indicated that early inhabitants hunted the animals and used the caves as a butchering site during the winter months.

An extraordinary site that was relatively undisturbed, the caves also contained ceremonial objects, awls and several types of projectile points in addition to the bison bones, providing a rich picture of the diversity of late Archaic life.

During the Equestrian period 700 years ago, some of the people of the Snake River Plain moved more easily and rapidly from higher elevations down into the canyon. They owed this increased mobility to the Spaniards who had re-introduced the horse to North America. With horses also came firearms, which enabled the

Indians to hunt with relative ease and speed and permitted them to trade and expand their economic base.

The Snake River Plain has undergone remarkable changes in 15,000 years. What had been a cool and drizzly land evolved into a hot, dry desert. The Bonneville flood carved a deep canyon, sinking the Snake River into the plain.

As the climate and geology changed, so too did the plants and animals. Adapt or perish, the native people altered their lifestyles within this shifting world. Archaeologists, fascinated by the changing world of these early people, continue to comb the land seeking artifacts that are the clues to early life of the Snake River Plain. □

