

## George C. Frison Medallion Service Award

By Julianne Couch  
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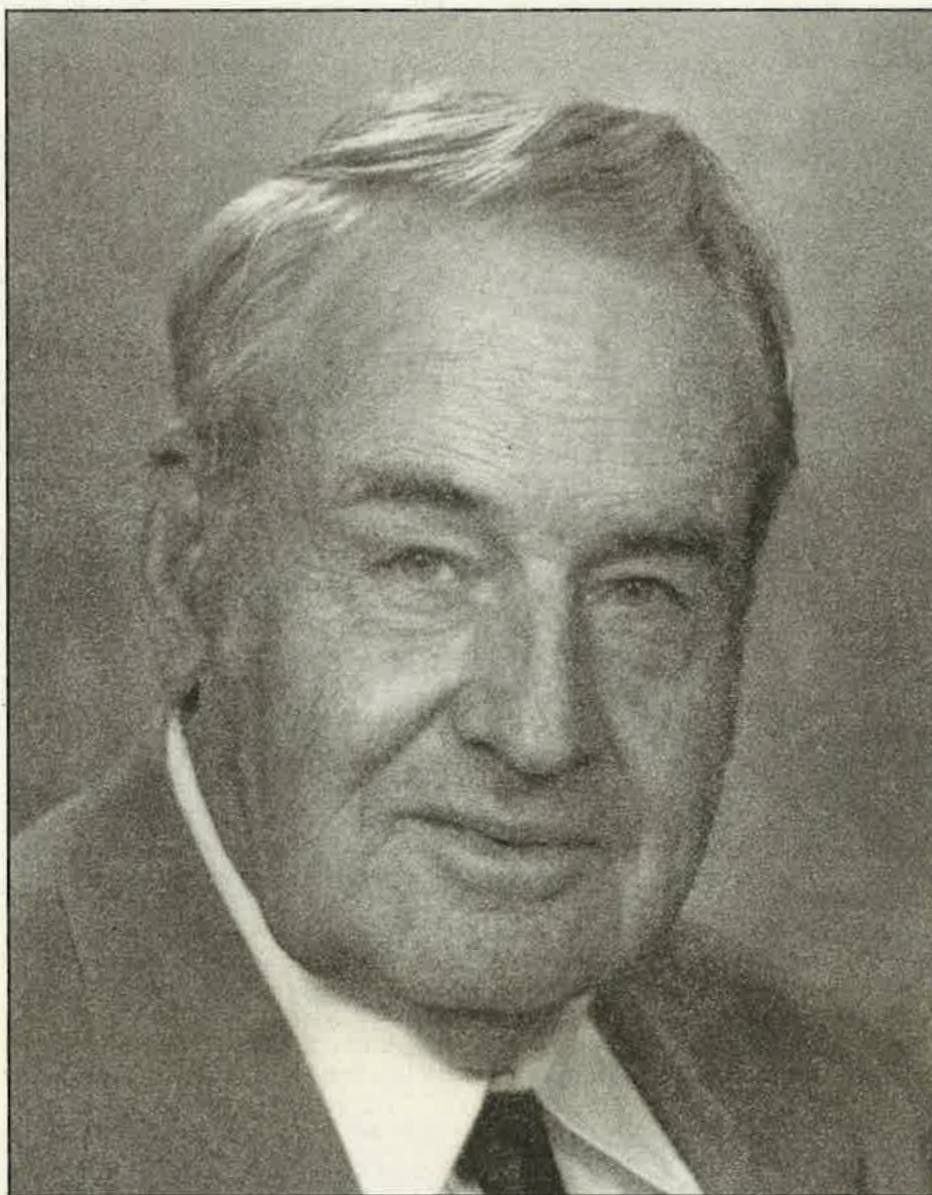
### Fast Facts:

**EDUCATION:** BS, '64, Anthropology, UW; MA and PhD, University of Michigan  
**OCCUPATION:** Archaeological Anthropologist; Professor emeritus, Anthropology  
**SELECTED ACCOMPLISHMENTS:** member, National Academy of Science, Paleoarchaeologist of the Century award; Society for American Archaeology Lifetime Achievement award; UW Distinguished Former Faculty award  
**FAMILY:** Wife, June, daughter, Carol Placek  
**HOBBIES:** Hunting

George C. Frison has long been a steady presence in his field of anthropology and at the University of Wyoming. He has written or coauthored more than 100 academic articles and 14 books. He has given numerous presentations to civic groups around Wyoming. He has had a hand in most major archaeological finds in the state for the last several decades. And he has taught thousands of students, many of whom have become professionals in the field. To honor his career, Frison will be recognized with UW's 2010 Medallion Service award.

Frison was hired at UW in 1967 to head the newly formed Anthropology department. A year later, he was named the first Wyoming state archaeologist, a part time position established by the legislature. Frison explained the relationship between the two fields. Anthropology is the major field of study and is now divided into four approaches. These include cultural, physical, linguistic and archeological anthropology. "I'm a geo-archeologist more than anything else, since most of the information I work with is mammoth kills and bison kills, components that are buried in archeological deposits. But it all has to be interpreted within a framework of human behavior," he said.

Frison was born in Worland, Wyo., and raised on his family's ranch outside of Ten Sleep, in the Big Horn Basin. While herding



George C. Frison, Medallion Service Award recipient

cattle, he developed an interest in the chipped and ground stone tools, rock shelters, rock art, scaffold burials, war lodges and other prehistoric evidence of Native Americans that he found along the way.

"My family was always interested in things that occurred in the natural environment. They didn't have a formal education but they knew the name of every flower and tree." The richness of his upbringing led Frison to know what he wanted to do with his life, from an early age. For many years, though, he worked the family ranch and pursued archaeology as a serious hobby. He attended UW in 1942 but left to serve in the Navy's amphibious forces of the South Pacific during World War II. After the war he returned to ranching but continued his serious interest in archaeology. He finally returned to UW in 1962. He was 42 when he graduated from the University of Michigan.

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But as it turned out, there was a job at UW in what Frison described as "an area that had never

been touched in the last frontier in American archaeology. Here were mammoth kills, bison kills, pronghorn kills, sheep kills and the trapping that goes along with them." This evidence fit right in with Frison's background, since he had spent much of his life as a rancher and hunting guide.

"I'd worked with animals. All these people writing about the sites didn't understand animals at all. All this material with nobody who knew what to do about it. I came along at the right time. It was serendipity." Frison taught in the Anthropology department for 30 years before he retired as professor emeritus. In that time, his colleague and former student Marcel Kornfeld estimates Frison taught thousands of undergraduate and graduate students. "Many of them benefitted simply by increasing their education and awareness of prehistory and Native Americans, however some went on to become professionals in anthropology and other disciplines," Kornfeld said.

While Frison taught many students at UW, it is not the nature of archaeology to be confined to the classroom. On the contrary, Frison continued to excavate sites around Wyoming. "His investigations range from the first peoples of the Americas to the historic period forts, from open air campsites to rock shelters, from domestic structures to hunting facilities, and much more," Kornfeld explained. Kornfeld described Frison as the "public face of archaeology in the state, region, and internationally."

At UW, some of Frison's efforts have gone to the creation of the George C. Frison Institute. It is a UW research and outreach facility dedicated to the study of North American, High Plains, and Rocky Mountain archaeology and culture. The Institute fosters interdisciplinary and international scholarship, with an emphasis on early peoples and peopling of the Americas.

Another of Frison's legacies can be seen at the recently opened Washakie Museum and Cultural Center in Worland. It features displays of many of his excavation sites throughout the Big Horn basin.

In spite of the complexity of the work he's spent a lifetime doing, Frison's reaction to winning the Medallion Service award was as unassuming as could be expected of a boy from Ten Sleep. "Gee whiz golly, I was stunned." ❧