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THE FRISON INSTITUTE

Supporting Archaeological Research at U.W.

From the Director,
Todd Surovell

I began my career at the University of Wyoming in the fall semester of 2003. In my 22 years in the department, I have seen many changes. Much to my chagrin, I am now the senior archaeologist, and I am humbled by the standards set by my predecessors, some of whom are no longer with us. George Frison, Charles Reher, and Mary Lou Larson were long-term fixtures in the department who worked tirelessly in their investigations of Wyoming’s past. We can say the same thing about Bob Kelly and Marcel Kornfeld, both of whom recently retired. Needless to say, our department is a different place than the one I walked into a couple of decades ago. I am thrilled to report, however, that we have replaced these luminaries with outstanding new talent. Dr. Bree Doering is an archaeologist who works mostly in the Tanana River Valley of Alaska but also recently renewed excavations at the Colby Mammoth site. Bree has been with us since 2020 and will soon be promoted to Associate Professor. Dr. Randy Haas joined the faculty in 2024. Randy has worked extensively in the Titicaca Basin of Peru and recently started another high-altitude project in Wyoming in Grand Teton National Park. Just this year, we added Dr. Kelton Meyer to the archaeology faculty. Kelton completed his PhD in the spring semester of 2024 at Colorado State University, and his dissertation research concerned the Reddin Folsom site in the San Luis Valley of Colorado. This fall, Kelton received funding from the Frison Institute to reinvestigate the Jimmy Allen site in the Laramie Basin, one of Bill Mulloy’s early projects at UW. I share this to let you know that the tradition of Wyoming archaeology that George Frison modeled for his entire career continues at the University of Wyoming. A strong and well-funded Frison Institute gives us the ability to do so more than ever, even in an uncertain federal funding environment. I am grateful for your support and interest in all that we do. We have a bright future ahead.



RENEWED EXCAVATIONS AT THE WILLOW SPRINGS SITE

Dr. Spencer Pelton, Wyoming State Archaeologist

The Office of the Wyoming State Archaeologist has since 2021 investigated Willow Springs, a prehistoric campsite and historic Stage Station around a perennial spring in the southern Laramie Valley. Work at Willow Springs was initiated in the early 1960s by the University of Wyoming's first archaeology professor, William Mulloy. Mulloy excavated 200 square meters of the extensive site, using it to train his students, most notably George Frison and Dennis Stanford. Mulloy stopped working at Willow Springs in 1967 having collected around 1,200 stone and bone tools, ceramics, and historic artifacts that indicated use for at least 12,000 years. The assemblage suggested an important archaeological site but one with complicated stratigraphy, and the site never got published for the larger community. OWSA returned to Willow Springs to understand site stratigraphy and age, find its true extent, and identify the locations of the Overland Trail Stage Station and buried late Pleistocene archaeology. Since then, we've succeeded in achieving these goals and more, most recently with the discovery of buried Early and Late Paleoindian localities around the spring margins. Continuing work at the site will focus on block excavation of a newly discovered Folsom/Goshen locality. Volunteers welcome!



Gwendolyn Christie and Connor Johnen of the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office screening matrix at Willow Springs

INSTITUTE FUNDED RESEARCH

STUDENT RESEARCH

Students are responsible for most of the projects we fund, and the Frison Institute has become the most important source of research funding for M.A. and Ph.D. theses at the University of Wyoming. This year, we funded 16 different student projects from the undergraduate to PhD level. Most of those students are from UW, but we also funded research for students from Michigan State University and the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

WILLIAM AND GLORIA TYRRELL FUND

Mackenzie DePlata Peterson, PhD Student, University of Wyoming

The Vore Buffalo Jump is an iconic landmark in Late Pre-historic Wyoming, well known for representing at least 22 different jump events throughout its active use. Until this past spring, only three radiocarbon dates had been produced from the original excavations. Thanks to the Tyrrell Fund we were able to produce four additional radiocarbon dates from bone collagen. Using our new dates, we built an age-depth model allowing us to better date each jump event. We found that longest gap between jump events was approximately 28 years, and the shortest was only four years, and on average jump events were spaced 13 years apart. Considering the time spans between jump events, it would have been possible for an individual to experience four different buffalo jumps in his or her lifetime.

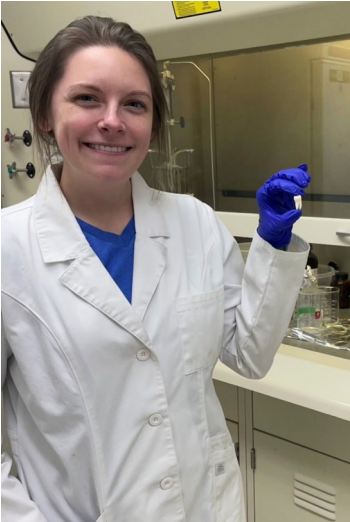


Stratified bonebed deposits at the Vore site

PATRICK ORION MULLEN FUND

by Courtney Clough, PhD Student, University of Alaska Fairbanks

With support from the Mullen Fund, I will use proteomic and isotopic data to create osteobiographies of health, disease, and survival during historically known migrations and periods of economic change. Specifically, I will examine variation in preservation and protein expression in dental samples from modern experiments, Archaic Greece, and Gold-Rush-era California. By contextualizing these studies with archaeological and historical data, I will explore the limits and power of biomolecular archaeology. I aim to illuminate past lives and inform broader anthropological questions about inequality, resilience, and human adaptation.



Courtney working in the lab.

JUNE FRISON FUND

by Josie Corbett, PhD Student, University of Wyoming

Supported by the June Frison Fund, my research in cultural-linguistic anthropology centers on women ranchers across the Intermountain West. Through their stories and daily work—managing livestock, land, water, and households amid drought, market shifts, and illness—I explore how ranch labor is an ongoing practice of care. Their efforts shape both families and the land itself, revealing ranching as a relationship of responsibility, knowledge, and endurance. These women show that family ranches are living cultural landscapes built through care, labor, and continuity.



Josie Corbett (left) attends a rangeland workshop for women ranchers in Paradise Valley, Montana.

FUND FOR WYOMING ARCHAEOLOGY

by Dr. Laura Ng, Grinnell College

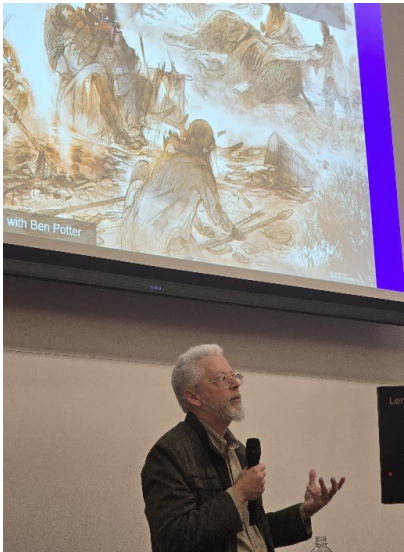
Last summer, a team of archaeologists (Dr. Laura W. Ng, Dr. A. Dudley Gardner, and Paul Hoornbeek), Grinnell College students, and several Wyoming Chinese descendants, excavated the former Rock Springs Chinatown—the site of a Chinese community between the 1870s and 1920s—and the scene of anti-Chinese violence 140 years ago. Our goal was to find evidence of the 1885 Chinese massacre via traces of an arson fire to understand the community before, during, and after racially-motivated violence. We located a burn layer that we believe is the basement of a pre-massacre structure. In this layer, we found shelves dug out of sterile clay where boxes made of burnt shingles and veneer lay. We also found charred wooden beams, tin cans, tools such as an axe head and a file, and fragments of Chinese ceramics and Euroamerican bottles. Follow our research at <https://buriedchinatowns.sites.grinnell.edu/>.



The burn layer uncovered last summer in Grinnell's Rock Springs Chinatown excavations.

FALL LECTURE

This year's Frison Institute speaker was Dr. Ben Potter of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. On September 11, Dr. Potter gave a wide ranging lecture about the significance of Eastern Beringia in studies of the colonization of the Americas. He discussed insights gained from dating, technology, subsistence, and ancient DNA.



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