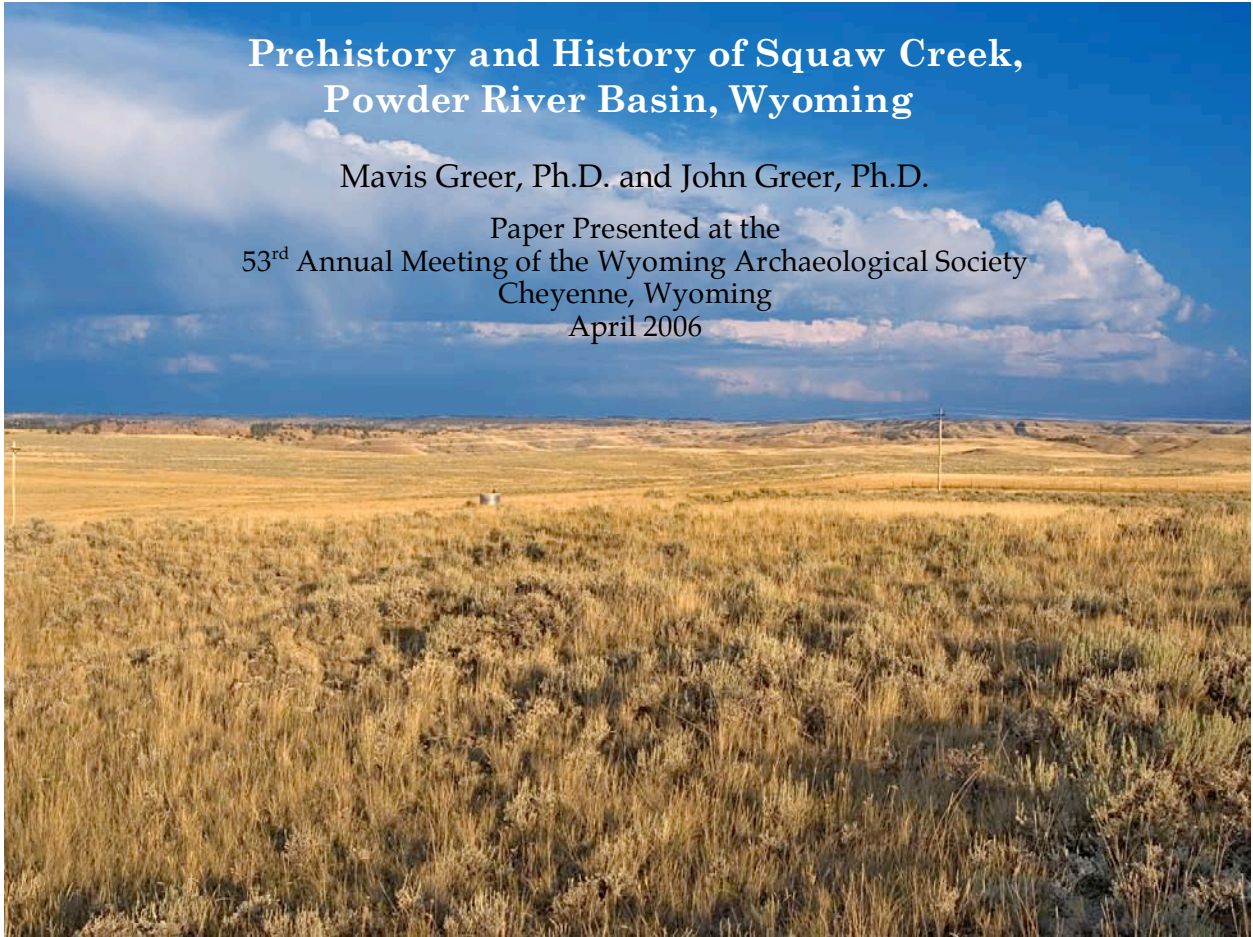


# Prehistory and History of Squaw Creek, Powder River Basin, Wyoming

Mavis Greer, Ph.D. and John Greer, Ph.D.

Paper Presented at the  
53<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting of the Wyoming Archaeological Society  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
April 2006



The Squaw Creek drainage is located north of Gillette in a typical Powder River Basin setting characterized by sandstone, clinker, and scoria-capped ridges, buttes, and knolls interspersed with sage-covered undulating plains. Squaw Creek is a main tributary to Horse Creek, and the two valleys parallel each other for several miles as they flow east before converging. The environment along the drainage provides settings for high promontory sites protected by steep flanking slopes, and wide benches provide occupation areas not far above the relatively flat valley bottom. A coalbed methane survey of over 6000 acres along the drainage resulted in recording more than 80 cultural localities.

Today we will show the variety of sites and artifacts along this portion of the drainage, with a purpose of directing those looking for research projects toward the large databases provided by block inventories common across Wyoming. It is an example of the contribution large-scale

surveys can make to cultural resource distribution, and various aspects of cultural history. And it exemplifies limitations placed on understanding local history using only survey data.

The upstream western end of the drainage is more of a lowland area, as shown here, while dissected and fragmented uplands are more concentrated in downstream areas to the east.



This difference in topography is reflected in the kinds of sites in each area, with prehistoric campsites, herder camps, and a variety of rock features in the high crest areas to the east — and smaller lithic scatters, homesteads, and early historic ranch irrigation systems in the broader, flatter upstream zone. At the point where west Squaw Creek gives way to east Squaw Creek, two high ridges flank the valley. These promontory features dominate the viewshed from much

of the bottomland, and both topographic features support intensive prehistoric use.



The southern Promontory Site is much larger than the northern. Remains occur on the extensive flat crest, on slopes off the east side, and in rockshelters surrounding the crest. Three of four rockshelter areas, some with multiple shelters, contain surface artifacts, and one has a possible petroglyph. Hearths, a rock cairn, and

numerous artifacts (including bifaces, scrapers, and diagnostic projectile points) are present, even after many years of probable collecting, as suggested by intensive historic use of the area and the prominence of the site. The abundant lithic debitage is dominated by porcellanite, and nonvolcanic glass is the next most common material. Two arrowpoints, two arrowpoint preforms, and three dart points suggest an Archaic to Late Prehistoric use of the high mesa crest.

The northern Promontory Site is across Squaw Creek from the southern site and on the opposite flat crest. It is made up mostly of bedrock sandstone with only a few areas of sediment, which combined with previous collection in the area, probably accounts for the smaller size of the site. Sandstone outcroppings occur as small rockshelters and niches just below the rim like the south promontory, but



unlike the sister site, no cultural remains were found within the shelters. A hearth and many lithics are exposed on the surface, and typical of the general Squaw Creek area porcellanite dominates the unmodified flakes. Only one arrowpoint was found, suggesting a date during the Late Prehistoric Period for at least one use of the site.

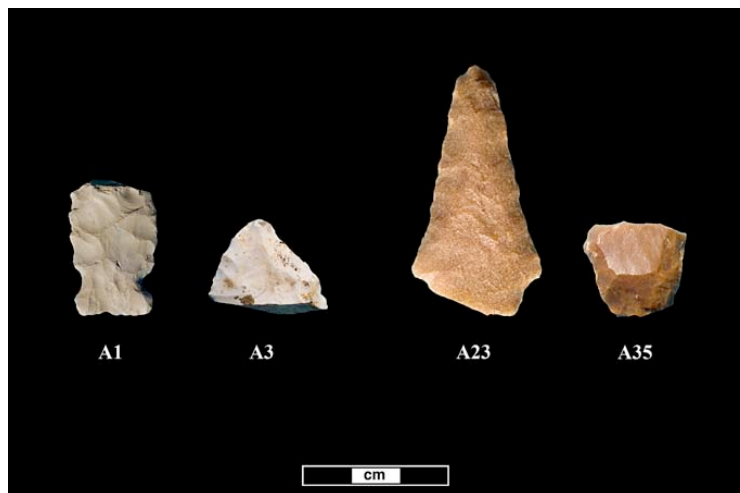


We think the two promontory sites may be the main base camps for the drainage, over a considerable period of time. The only other base camp of note may be the Divide Ridge Site, southeast of the Southern Promontory. It is on a high divide ridge separating Squaw Creek to the north from Horse Creek to the south and does not directly overlook either creek, although it is possible to see the southern promontory from here. Small sandstone niches below the surrounding rim provide shelters for animals

and presumably in the past for humans, but cultural remains have only been noted on the flat ridgecrest, shown in the upper right.

The numerous artifacts — more than 200 still remaining — are dominated by porcellanite of various colors and quality. The only diagnostic tool is an Archaic dart point fragment, obviously reflective of modern collection.

The 33 smaller lithic scatter sites and 29 isolated lithic artifacts along



the drainage may have functioned as outlier residential or use areas or hunting camps. Here are a few examples of lithics from these smaller locations. In addition to porcellanite, chert, quartzite, and nonvolcanic glass are represented here. Future study of relations between these sites will be heavily dependant upon artifact assemblage analysis, arguing for mitigation plans that involve complete collection, not only from the surface, but from large plaza excavations aimed at obtaining all artifacts.

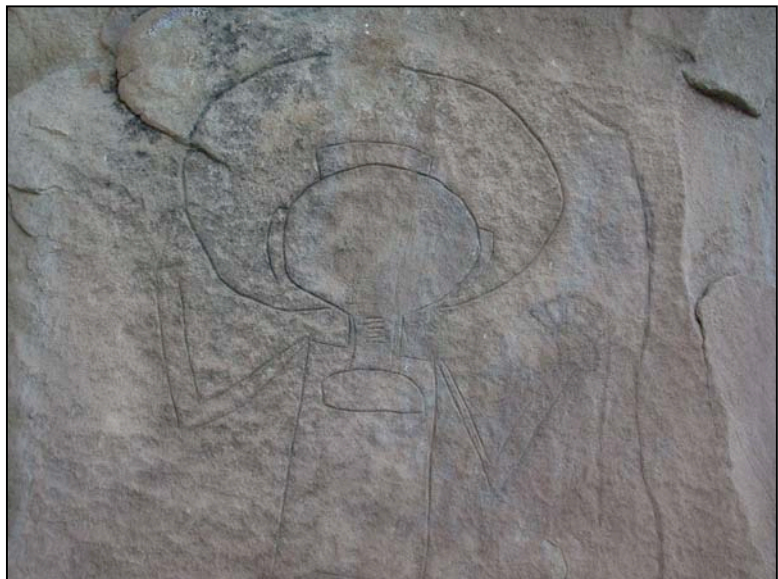


A possible skinning knife of fine-grained quartzite was found on a narrow point of a high crest, on gravel sandstone outcroppings. The piece is pristine and still useful, and it appears to have been intentionally left on this high rocky point as an offering.

Dart points along the drainage outnumbered remaining arrowpoints about two to one. Here are some of the observed dart points, arrowpoints, bifaces, and scrapers. Most of the tools are broken, and it is likely that the complete items were removed by collectors in the past. As we mentioned, lithics are dominated by porcellanite, mostly medium quality material available locally, probably from a nearby source on the south side of Horse Creek.

Although this is an area of extensive sandstone and clinker, that are excellent sources for constructing tipi rings, there is a paucity of ring sites. There has been only one ring site recorded in the Squaw Creek drainage and only two along a tributary to Horse Creek. Interestingly, both ring sites in the Horse Creek drainage are close to the Daly Petroglyph site, one of the largest and most complex rock art sites in the Powder River Basin. Bow and arrow technology is prominently portrayed at this location with some people shown carrying bows and quivers of arrows, and others shown with arrows piercing their body.

An unusual rock feature, an excavated pit, is on the edge of a



high ridge overlooking the wide, relatively flat valley bottomland. The pit was dug into a small, solid scoria outcropping. It is about 3 feet across and originally about 3 feet deep. It is a perfect location to oversee the valley bottom as shown in the upper left, with any person in the pit not visible from below, as can be seen in the bottom photo. It probably served as a rifle pit or hunting blind, but there are no associated artifacts to indicate age or affiliation. Another rifle pit, or defensive location constructed behind boulders, is nearby, on the same hilltop, and could be part of a single defensive network.



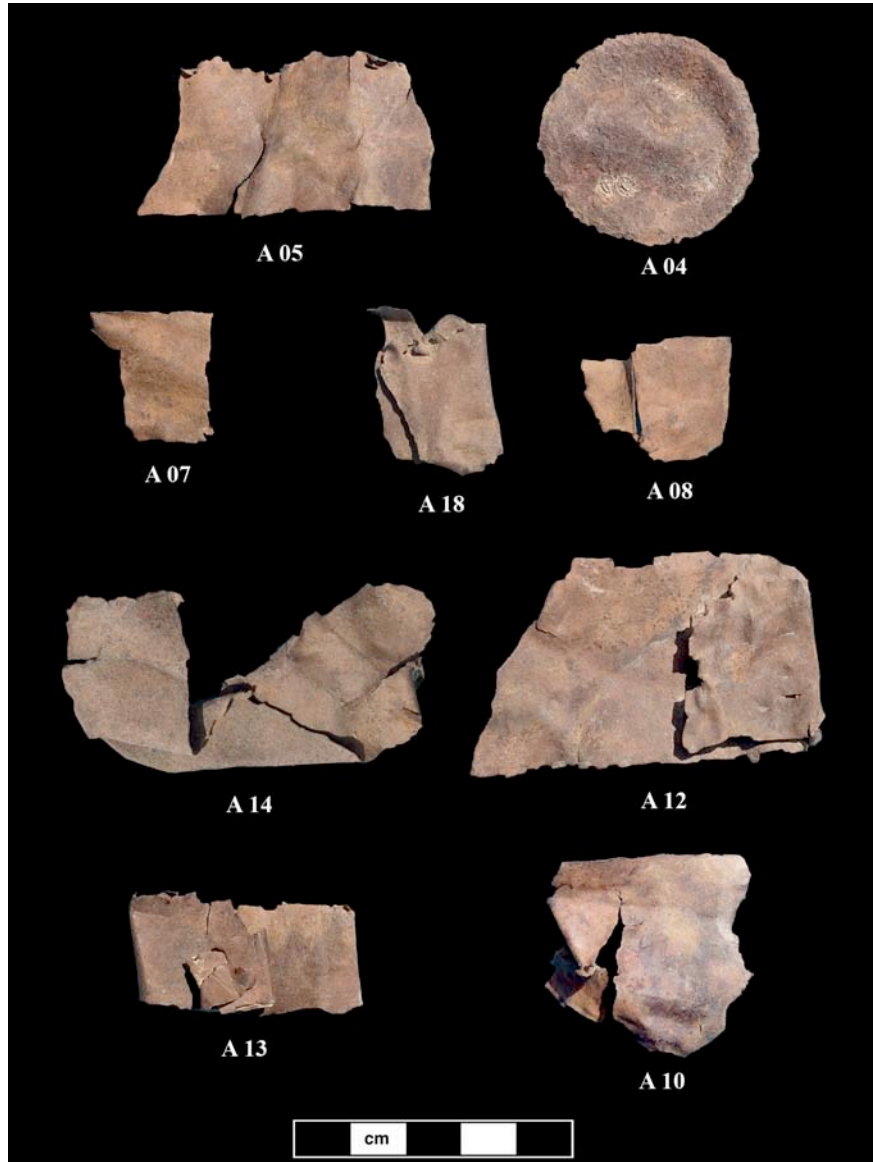
The valley sites are dominated by historic remains, but historic period use here was not limited to white activity. Even though Indians of the Northern Plains were established on reservations by the late 1800s, there are many accounts of at least temporary camps in other parts of the Plains in the early 1900s, although relatively few accounts can place the camp was at a specific time and place.

One of our sites today is recognizable only as a relatively sparse lithic scatter on a high bench overlooking Squaw Creek, and shown in the upper left of this slide. Based on the observed remaining artifacts and oral history from the landowner, the site appears to have been a recurrent camping location for Indians from at least the Middle Archaic through the early 1900s. A dart point appears to be the oldest artifact on the surface, even though small dart points were locally used on arrows into the middle 1800s. Also here are nondescript flakes of nonvolcanic glass, a material more commonly found on Late Prehistoric Period sites. The present owner, reports that when his father homesteaded the area in 1910, Indians camped periodically or seasonally at this location. The elder Oedekoven used to ride his horse down the draw, past the site, while Indians were camped here and said that he never had any encounters or trouble with the Indians. Although we found no obvious historic artifacts, an intensive search with a metal detector might locate artifacts associated with the historic occupation.



The Indian camp is near the only tin strips and discs site in the drainage. We have long argued that strips and discs, cut from hole-in-top cans, are most likely associated with Indian activity in the latter part of the 1800s. In a summary of the general site type, we noted that the pieces might represent manufacture of tinklers (or similarly constructed tin beads), knives,

arrowpoints, conchos, decoration for clothing or horse trappings, decorations for knife handles or spears, or strip wrappings on knife handles or spears. The strips and discs are clearly by-products, but it is presently impossible from the incomplete available information to determine exact age, function, and cultural affiliation for these sites. The new BLM and SHPO stipulations have removed the entire site type from qualifying for Smithsonian site numbers, so we may never understand the sites or associated Indian activities in eastern Wyoming. Even so, we continue to study the site type in an attempt to confirm why the time and effort was put into making these carefully prepared items.



The Squaw Creek area has been the location of intensive ranching operations for over a hundred years, and a local irrigation system made by horse-drawn fresno is an example of the work that went into early land development for ranching. The present owner reports that the system was built by Peter Ricketts to improve water distribution to his hayfields sometime

before 1910, presumably in the period of 1880-1900. Later herders and homesteaders broke up his extensive operation into smaller family ranches, but they did not last long, and in the 1930s he again assembled a large commercial operation of at least 36 sections, which remained intact into the 1940s. Ricketts finally retired and moved to Sheridan, where his wife, locally considered a very mean person, was eventually shot.

Throughout this area, herders have left behind many rock cairns and several can scatters. They were also probably the main collectors of prehistoric artifacts, and chipped-stone tools are found on several herder camps. They also made tools from glass, such as this well flaked piece of plate glass, a recurrent form and shape. We have found fewer



than a half dozen of these in the Powder River Basin, although another is reported from the south side of the Pryor Mountains and two more near Cody. Others have most likely been found by other archeologists, but this is not an easy artifact type to trace. However, an interesting study could be done on the distribution and function of these pieces.



Thus, the Squaw Creek drainage has a rich history of use that began at least as early as the Middle Archaic. To expand our knowledge of local cultural history, and site and artifact function, of this or any drainage, collections and excavations are necessary to gather materials for more in-depth analyses. Large block compliance surveys, now common throughout the area, provide information that can be used in the future for explanatory models and other studies. Our work along Squaw Creek is an example of what drainage studies have to offer. We look forward to people using data such as these in their continuing studies.