

# Havre dig uncovers hunting past

HAVRE — At about the time Christ walked the earth, bands of Indians were driving buffalo over a short, steep cliff just west of what is now Havre.

The drives continued periodically probably until the late 1800s. Remnants of

these uncounted buffalo kills can be seen just as they were uncovered at a remarkable exhibit called the Wahkpa

Chu'gn Archaeological Site. The 3½ acre site, which is still being studied, is covered with bits of buffalo bone and teeth.

Five sheltered dig areas are open for visitors to view the layers of bone, the ancient processing areas and cooking hearths. Here, you can descend into the earth and back into time. The lowest level yet uncovered, about 20 feet deep, reveals artifacts from about 2,000 years ago.

Everything has been left just as archaeologists encountered it.

As curator Elinor Clack said, "you can see the bones as they were laid down by the Indians as they hunted the buffalo. ... It's a living museum."

Clack, who runs the H. Earl Clack Museum in Havre, is the tour guide. The museum is at the Hill County Fair Grounds, located west of town on Highway 2 across from the Holiday Village Shopping Center. The buffalo jump is just north of the shopping area.

Clack will provide a wealth of information about the discovery and development of the site as well as what is known of the Indians who used it.

She'll tell you that Wahkpa Chu'gn (pronounced Wha-pa-shoe-gun) is an unusually fine archaeological display because the soils are generally soft and erode easily. And heavy erosion helps



Stuart S. White photo

Eleanor Clack stands deep in the buffalo jump site near Havre.

separate the different historical periods clearly. At Wahkpa Chu'gn, 2,000 years of human activity is clearly demarcated in the carefully dug pits up to 20 feet deep.

It appears that at least three different cultural groups used the kill site. The oldest is the Besant phase, which lasted about 800 years beginning some 2,000 years ago. This cultural group is characterized by the use of a weapon called the Atlatl — a short spear that is thrown with a piece of wood in a fashion similar to the sling. Atlatl points have been found at the deepest layers yet explored at the site. The

Besant people are believed to have subsisted almost entirely on buffalo meat.

One of the dig sites reveals a thin cultural layer believed to belong to the Avonlea phase, the earliest group of plains Indians known to use the bow and arrow. This dig site also reveals an abundance of shattered rock, which indicates an ancient method for boiling meat and rendering grease from bone. Some Indians who lacked cooking utensils suitable for an open fire would fill hide-lined holes in the ground with water. The water could be brought to boiling by dropping fire-heated rocks into it, a process that also eventually shattered the rock.

No evidence of the Avonlea phase exists at the site beyond about 800 A.D.

The last people to occupy the site belonged to what's known as the Old Women's Phase. There is evidence that the people of this phase constructed a pound, or corral at the east end of the site, to trap the buffalo which survived the stampede over the cliffs. A number of post holes, now several feet below the surface, have been found. Wedged in at the base of each post was a complete buffalo skull. Clack said the skull probably had a ceremonial purpose. Another ceremonial relic is a large bolder that sits near the edge of the cliff that has the print of a buffalo hoof carve in it.

Wahkpa Chu'gn was discovered in 1961 by a 13-year-old Havre youth who had heard rumors that deposits of buffalo bones had been dug out of the hillside when the Great Northern Railroad was built before the turn of the century.

The boy's name was John Brumley, who grew up to be an archaeologist who has overseen much of the work at the site.

— Gordon Gregory, Tribune Correspondent