

HAVRE BUFFALO JUMP TAKES MANAGER FULL CIRCLE

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HAVRE - Buried beneath the clay soils behind the Holiday Village Shopping Center here is evidence of bloodshed. Hundreds of victims died, their bones crushed, their marrow and brains eaten.

This was the bison butcher shop for native people in these parts for more than 1,400 years.

"You're not going to get a better feel for what a major bison kill site is like than this," says John Brumley, who manages the Wahkpa Chu'gn (pronounced "walk-pa-chew-gun") buffalo jump site with his wife, Anna.

Three distinct groups used the site, according to Brumley: the Besant, who used a lever to throw a spear called an atlatl; the Avonlea, who used the bow and arrow; and the Saddle Butte, who descended from the Avonlea people.

Brumley, 55, stands overlooking the site, his vest collar turned up against a cool, brisk wind. He has a special attachment to this site. When he was a 14-year-old growing up in Havre, he found a small stone knife near the buffalo jump.

"I lived two miles away and ran all the way home," he says.

His fascination with the site led him to study archaeology at the University of Calgary. One summer he came back to Havre and helped excavate the buffalo jump. He now runs an archeological surveying business, Ethos Consulting, in addition to managing the buffalo jump with his wife.

"That got me launched on a professional archaeological career," Brumley says. "I've got an investment, an emotional interest, in the site."

Brumley speculates that the area was chosen by natives for its proximity to lakes, springs and the Milk River.

The jump site is framed by small, horseshoe-shaped bluffs along the Milk. The cliffs look incapable of killing an animal. They're not that steep. That's why the natives used the bluffs to camouflage wooden corrals built below. Once inside the corrals, the natives would kill the animals with spears, arrows or clubs.

"You have to be very impressed with their knowledge," Brumley says. "These people apparently had a mastery of the psychology of these animals."

The site was used from about 2,000 years ago to 600 years ago.

Visitors to the site have an opportunity to see bison remains protruding from the earth in excavation pits dug at the site. Small sheds cover the pits, trapping the earthy aroma.

Suspended on a bridge over a 12- to 20-foot excavation pit, visitors see jumbled bison bones protruding from the earth, filled in gopher holes, maggot husks and a thin black layer of soil - evidence of a grass fire. There's even a reddish layer, indication, Brumley says, of a large amount of organic material - meat and blood. There is even the remains of a corral's corner post, held in place by a bison skull.

"These are very good cultural deposits," Brumley says. "They're well-preserved bones."

Sunlight is the enemy of archaeologists. It quickly deteriorates bones. The kill site at Wahkpa Chu'gn is well preserved because the bones were covered quickly by the clinging clay.

By studying the site, Brumley has found out it was mainly used in the fall and winter, most intensively in the months of December and January.

Only certain parts of the animals were taken back to camp.

"It didn't make sense to use all of the buffalo all of the time," Brumley says.

Near to where bones were found, excavators found evidence of how the natives cooked their meat. They would roll fire-heated rocks into holes dug into the earth. The holes were lined with animal skin and filled with water. The hot rocks boiled the water to cook the meat.

Stones broken in the expansion and contraction of the fires and cooling waters litter the campsites.

Although the site reveals many details about how the natives used the bison, excavation has revealed no butchering tools.

Tours of the site began in the 1970s. Last year, \$170,000 was spent on improving the trails around the site and adding new stairs down to the excavations. Future projects include new interpretive boards and new sheds to better protect the excavation sites.

Although there are other buffalo jumps that have been excavated and studied across the Great Plains, Brumley says there are few others, if any, that have as much archaeological evidence on display.

"I think this is a unique site," he says.

If you want to go

On Saturday, the Wahkpa Chu'gn buffalo jump, a division of the H. Earl Clack Museum, will mark its 40th anniversary and hold a grand opening to celebrate.

There will be demonstrations of stone boiling, flint knapping, atlatl throwing. Michael Terry will display his replicas of Indian artifacts and tools and have a bison hide tepee with furnishings set up.

The cost to visit the site is \$5 for adults, \$4 for seniors and \$2.50 for students. Children under 6 are admitted free.

The site is open from mid-May through Labor Day from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, with one evening tour at 7 p.m., except on Sundays. The site is located behind the Holiday Village Shopping Center, on the western edge of Havre, off Highway 2.

For more information on the site, or to organize a group tour, phone 265-6417, or 265-7550, or log on to: www.buffalojump.org/

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