Sea Traveler

The Cave of Oldest Alaskans

Animal bones in later 42,000-year-old Tukanoan culture

By Doug O'Hara & Photos by Erick Hill
Editor's Notes

By GEORGE BRYSON

This Week

BIG DIG: We Alaskans staff writer Doug O'Hara and Daily News photographer Erik Hill travel to an excavation on Prince of Wales Island that has unearthed human remains 9,200 years old. Page 4

COVER: University of South Dakota paleontologist Tim Heaton sketches possible bones or a hand at the excavation on Prince of Wales Island. Photo by Erik Hill.

Among the finds this season are part of a lower jaw of a black bear estimated in centimeters to be 20,000 to 40,000 years old. Later testing can determine a more precise age for the piece.

Departments

We Alaskans

Frank Gerjvec

Clearing the bookshelves

Reading room

The Hastings' trip to Alaska

Crossword Puzzle

By The New York Times

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Letters

taliation cost in error!

I was interested in the letter in the Daily News on August 13 about the Taliaferro article, "Alaska Wireless: the story of a town," which appeared in a recent issue of the Anchorage Daily News. I was particularly interested in the section about the cost of the service, which was mentioned as $1.50 per hour.

The article states that the cost of the service is $1.50 per hour, and that the service is available in most areas of Alaska. However, I believe this information is incorrect. The actual cost of the service is significantly higher than $1.50 per hour.

Steve Hamlen, president
United Utilities, Inc.

Doug Fine responds:

I should just let Alaska Wireless, the company providing the technology in Taliaferro, defend itself. But company CEO Red Boucher and other sources confirm that the figures I reported for its services are accurate. As I mentioned in the story, there are indeed government subsidies paying a part of the cost of providing Taliaferro service. Without these subsidies, the cost would be far higher than the $1.50 per hour mentioned in the article.

The $1.50 cost is based on the cost of using the local telephone service in Taliaferro. The actual cost of providing this service is significantly higher, and includes the cost of providing local telephone service in Taliaferro.

Doug Fine, Taliaferro correspondent

It's more than a post office

Ann Dixon's article "Postal Progress" reached out and touched folks as far away as Sutton. We too received a new post office a couple of years ago and we are slowly breaking it in - making it our own.

Our old post office had quaint old boxes with combination locks. Our new post office has boxes that require keys, but even after two years, many of us conveniently "forget" our keys just so we can chat and keep up with the local news. The local Girl Scouts planted flowers out from the summer, adding color to the regulation government-gray building. The postmaster planted a May Day tree. The sterile bulletin board now regularly announces local happenings, sales, and events of local interest, and we have a community "share the news." These events are beginning to "inhabit the larder" of our new building, and the town of Willow will begin to transition its new post office just as Sutton has. Thanks, Ann, for reminding us of the other important roles a post office plays in small towns like ours.

Steve O'Hara, president

United Utilities, Inc.
One of the most important archaeological discoveries made in North America in recent years, said lead archaeologist James Dixon, former curator of archaeology at the University of Alaska Museum and present curator for archaeology at the Peabody Museum of Natural History, "is the concept that best explains the available data.

The table's set once a day - at low tide and again at low tide.

Until the last decade, most anthropologists

never knew what you're going to find."

The table's set once a day - at low tide and again at low tide.
Cave

Continued from Page 5

From Southern Native groups and local communities, as supplied by Forest Service helicopter, a power cable is built on the site, located in dense pine forest, accessible, and inaccessible mountains. Upon ascension, scientists and volunteers have joined in the early season, often encountering a trial and muddy that it can take some people several hours to cross a half mile.

A power shortage has forced the crews to screen sediment in boxes of mosquito netting inside buckets, or move the mud down to the ocean in 10-pound sacks. So far, about 3 tons of contaminated soil has been excavated out of the cave's passages and dissolved to recover buried bones and tools.

Despite these difficulties, scientists have uncovered clues to understanding the region's prehistory. The cave has yielded the bones of at least 40 species of mammals, birds, and fish with telluric range over the past 40,000 years. The researchers included the furrow from a brown bear that died about 15,000 years ago — more than 20,000 years before the species appeared in the Lower 48 states — as well as ringed seal and other marine mammals that lived in the area during the height of the ice age. With a fossil record that extends back more than 800 centuries, Dixon and Heaton believe the cave demonstrates that portions of Southeast Alaska and the Northwest Maritime offered solitude and refuge during the peak of the Pleistocene.

This project is more than just an adventure — although that's the part that interests people, Dixon says. "The project is interested in the natural history of the life and culture of past peoples." The cave, he notes, especially has been a "fascinating help" in understanding the world inhabited by the human discovered in the cave, according to Heaton.

"It's possible to document what animals have been in this area and in what periods," Heaton said. "By knowing what kind of mammals were here, it tells you what kind of plants, it's one of the keys to figuring all this out."

The passage containing Alaska's oldest human remains might have gone undetected except for an outcrop that began in the mid-1980s. Spahr and Forest Service expeditions have been cataloging and mapping remnants of coves and features that restrict the limestone bedrock of Prince of Wales and nearby islands, providing the subterranean drainage for the region's 100 inches of annual precipitation.

Among them was a passage in El Capitan Cave, where in 1991 and 1993 Heaton and Fred Grady, head of the paleontology lab at the Smithsonian Institution, documented the remains of a half dozen small mammal species, four black bears and three large brown bears — proving for the first time that brown bears once lived in Prince of Wales Island now — and many botanicals — including those they never did. Over the next few years, more ancient species were uncovered in several other caves, but some dated earlier than the end of the ice age, about 12,000 years ago.

In 1992, a survey crew noted a small, wet cave in a proposed timber sale on a northern slope of the island. It wasn't until the following summer that Heaton and Grady — a founder of the Andrus project — mapped the cave and spotted bones flying on the ground inside. The next summer, in 1994, he brought Heaton to the cave.

Heaton and Grady had discovered a small side tunnel that led into the main cave. Heaton met Grady, who prepared bones for exhibits at the Smithsonian, immediately recognized the remains as human.

"It was like, 'Oh my god!" Grady said later. "It was like, 'Oh my god!" We weren't even sure because we had found bones that were 30,000 or 40,000 years old. We were expecting a lot of animal bones.

What if the bones were as old as 30,000 years. It would have been one of the most extraordinary archaeological finds of the century.

That night, Heaton and Grady received a "cryptic" message from Terry Field, a Forest Service paleontologist, expressing interest in the discovery.

Terry Field, Field, an expert on human remains, urged the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which requires that local Native groups be consulted immediately. Field, who transferred to Craig in 1995, had already made it his goal to promote a dialogue about human remains. Field outlined the discovery to the two local tribal governments, the Klawock Cooperative Association and the Craig Community Association on July 4, the day he returned to the office.

"This is really opening up a whole window into an older period," Heaton said.

While the cave is less than 50 years old, it's still a major find. "We're really excited," Heaton said. "We're really excited." Heaton said the cave is a "fascinating" example of how the human story can be told through the cave's passages and dissolved to recover buried bones and tools.

The discovery of a distinctive microblade indicates humans used the cave site a few thousand years ago. Dixon says the use of small blades mounted in bone or wood shafts rather than single, larger blades reduced the amount of valuable obsidian or chert needed to create tools or points.

A second cave, away from the cave, has yielded a collection of ancient pollen, uncovering evidence of pine species from the ice age. Geologists have mapped the sea level and the glacial and interpreted the sediments. While the archaeology team focuses on the cave's entrance and the ground outside, the paleontologists excavate inside, moving deeper into two narrow passages. ( Generally, paleontologists study the fossils of ancient plants and animals, archaeologists study the life and culture of past peoples.)

Heaton's work, especially, has been a "fascinating help" in understanding the world inhabited by the human discovered in the cave, according to Heaton. "It's possible to document what animals have been in this area and in what periods," Heaton said. "By knowing what kind of mammals were here, it tells you what kind of plants, it's one of the keys to figuring all this out."

Heaton believes the cave reveals about the environment and what animals lived in the area during the height of the ice age. With a fossil record that extends back more than 800 centuries, Dixon and Heaton believe the cave demonstrates that portions of Southeast Alaska and the Northwest Maritime offered solitude and refuge during the peak of the Pleistocene.

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While scientists, natives and government fight over Kennewick Man and its relevance to racial origin controversy

Whose ancestor is it?

Just three weeks after scientists discovered a lakebed in a cave on Prince of Wales Island, Alaska, another set of human bones almost as old were recovered from the Union but River near Kennewick, Washington. These remains — nearly an entire skeleton — were initially identified by another forensic anthropologist as a white male settler from the last century. But since radio-carbon testing showed that the bones were actually about 7,000 years old — launching a bitter legal dispute that has remained unresolved since the early 1990's — the excavation continues. And the individual is the latest Americas.

The remains from Prince of Wales Island are about the same age as many of these discoveries and predate the “Kennewick Man.” But whenever this same train can be said with certainty is a matter of debate. And whether the remains from the excavation was found, according to E. James Oxler, the lead anthropologist.

"Perhaps the most significant comparison will be possible as the excavations continue and more of the individual is discovered," Oxler said.

In any case, the use of the term “Caucasoid” has been widely criticized in academic journals. Some scientists believe these remains might fall within the range of natural variation among early Native American groups. The remains from the first place, making the label “Caucasoid” racially charged and misleading. Who these early people were, where they came from and whether they were the direct ancestors of modern Native Americans are all questions that remain.

The physical traits appear to the human population that probably spread across Northeastern Europe into Asia and even in the Japanese Islands, Oxler said. The Smithsonian Institution's Dennis Stanford, one of the plaintiffs in the suit, in an interview published by Smithsonian on the internet.

"It's very clear to me, that we are looking at multiple migrations through a very long time period — of many different peoples of different ethnic, religious and political origins, it is clear that there is no one 'Caucasoid' race as we have it today. There is no 'Caucasoid' race as we have it today. There is no one 'Caucasoid' race as we have it today.

The Umatilla Tribe, on the other hand, views further scientific study of the Kennewick man as culturally offensive. "If this individual is truly over 9,000 years old, that only substantiates our belief that he is Native American," said tribal leader Randie McNeil in a position paper. "From our oral histories, we know our people have part of this land since the beginning of time. We do not believe that our people migrated here from another continent, as the scientists say.

Subsequent investigations have only inflamed the situation. There are charges that some of the Kennewick bones are now missing from the vault. A Northern California group whose members practice a renewal of the old Norse religion claimed the Kennewick Man as an ancestor and performed religious ceremonies at the site where the bones were found.

Then the forensic anthropologist who first examined the bones produced an incorrect report of the Kennewick Man. It resembled Patrick Stewart, the British actor who played a Captain in "Star Trek."

Meanwhile The New Yorker magazine published an article that played up a controversial theory that interprets similarities between certain criteria. Points out an evidence of a European origin of the first Americans. And last spring, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dumped 600 tons of gravel on the site. The FBI, which was neutralized, was blamed by a lack of evidence. The FBI, which was neutralized, was blamed by a lack of evidence.

Science magazine quoted a lawyer in the case as saying the whole thing has become like "a soap opera for a movie". The FBI, which was neutralized, was blamed by a lack of evidence.

Dixon blames the furor on the 1987 publication of the term "Caucasoid," which he says has never been an acceptable term and is disreputable. Dixon added.

"Caucasoid" is an adjective — it describes certain physical traits that are shared by all people around the world. "It's very clear to me, that we are looking at multiple migrations through a very long time period — of many different peoples of different ethnic, religious and political origins, it is clear that there is no one 'Caucasoid' race as we have it today. There is no 'Caucasoid' race as we have it today. There is no 'Caucasoid' race as we have it today.

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After dinner in the kitchen tent, Tim Heston uses a laptop computer to catalog animal bones that have been unearthed in the last few days. The yurt also serves as a useful place to dry wet clothes above a propane stove.

CAVE
Continued from Page 7

the National Science Foundation sponsored two Native interns selected by the Klawock and Craig councils to work at the site with the scientists each summer. This year, they included Yarrow Vaara, a University of Alaska anthropology student with Tlingit heritage, and Patrick Olsen, a graduate student at the University of Idaho with Haida heritage. Vaara was one of two Native interns who presented academic papers at the Alaska Anthropological Association last spring.

During 1997, the Forest Service built the field camp, and the scientists surveyed and mapped the cave passages and grounds. A line within the cave marked the boundary between the paleontologists and archaeologists — nicknamed “the Heaton-Dawson line.” More artifacts and ancient mammals were uncovered, but there was no more...
Timm Heaton shows Kevin Allred, left, samples of bear bones found this summer in the cave. Allred, of Haines, is the caver who mapped the cavern and found bones there in 1993, alerting Heaton, his longtime friend.

DO 03430
Let me dig

Volunteer Linda Blankenship, who teaches Alaska studies and biological science at Ketchikan High School, washes silt from a sack of excavated material at the sediment screening station. Working with Blankenship to screen a backlog of material are Madeline Harrell of the Denver Museum of Natural History, cook and volunteer Peggy Whitehead of Denver and intern Patrick Olsen, originally from Ketchikan and a graduate student at the University of Idaho.

In a grove of cedar and hemlock on top of a ridge, Patrick Olsen looked glumly into the 1,000-gallon tank that stood nearly empty. A few pools of scummy, brown water had gathered in the folds of tank's rubbery floor. Connected by fire hose to the archaeological dig a few hundred feet downslope, the portable tank was supposed to supply scientists with a constant supply of pressurized water to wash mud off ancient bones and artifacts.

"There's probably enough to do a bucket or two, but it doesn't want to come out," Olsen said. "When you get a good rain, it fills pretty good."

Tiled remnants of large tarps ruffled between the trees and the tank's corner, ready to intercept any stray drop of water. But a virtual drought had hit one of the driest, most rain-forest rich areas on the Northwest Coast, complicating the excavation of a Prince of Wales Island cave for its scientific treasure. The lack of water was forcing scientists like Olsen to collect water in any way possible — or haul heavy bags of cave muck down a rugged, muddy trail to the sea.

Olsen, a graduate student in anthropology from the University of Idaho, reached over the

Continued on Page 14.
The solenoid screening station provided one place where camp members could visit outside of meal times. As they knelt down and poured the bags of dirt into the water, dissolving away the soil, they cracked jokes and discussed the identity of the man in the mask, the weather, the menu, the forest and life in general.

Among those volunteering Linda Blankenship, who teaches Alaska studies and science at Ketchikan High during the school year.

For weeks Blankenship had spent hours each day scooping sediment bags or sorting dried bones with care for tests. Partly because of her teaching heritage, she was particularly fascinated by the artifacts and bones that had emerged from the dirt. What her team had found had interested in particular was the microblades, sophisticated stone tools with edges honed sharper than stainless steel.

"It is just as impressive to think that they had this kind of technology and were moving around in watercraft to get material for 5,000 years before the Egyptians built the pyramids," she said. "People have recovered the resources for a lot longer than a lot of people think. That's what makes me mystified when I think about these things.

As an Alaska Native, Blankenship said it was the initial purpose at the prospect of digging in a site that may contain human remains. At first, she wouldn't dig but would only screen the sediment.

"I was very apprehensive about the possibility of finding remains and having to touch them," she said.

During a summer gathering in Klawock, she spoke with several elders from the community. "They all said, 'Go for it. It is just too much and more of our traditional stories, that people are finding proof.'"

"So I came back and said, 'Let me dig.'"

It takes about 15 to 20 minutes of soaking for the soil to settle, leaving behind a spoon full of bad debris that might turn out to be bones or tool fragments. That material gets dried in one of two ways, then sorted into large bags and painstakingly recorded. The sorting process continues all winter in various lower 48 laboratories by Heaton.

In the meantime, this summer paleontologists and archaeologists often spent several hours each day at their ellipsoid five-gallon buckets of muddy water. "You can't ever be too careful," explained Naran Carter, one of Heaton's students, as he

Neil and Pam were also interested in the archaeological site. They told him that another site, a few miles north, had been discovered recently. "It's the first good bone we've found in six weeks."

The paleontologists held it up to the light and admired it. "The thing that's amazing to me is that no human being has ever seen this," he said. "Every time I find something."
Not the most significant moment came about 12,000 years ago when the young marine hunter went to the cave and apparently killed there. Most of the tools appear to date from the same time.

It is a leap, but I think it’s possible that the age of the individual and the age of the artifacts were in fact very close,” Dixon said. “I think it’s reasonable to assume if they aren’t his tools, he was a member of a society that used those tools.”

What makes that possibility so fascinating, Dixon said, is the combination of macroblades and microblades — part of the Paleolithic culture that spread from Asia into Africa and then the North America about 5,000 years ago. Those people learned how to make tool blades sharper than stones, and they used them in bone or wood shafts. With this technology, a hunter could create tools and manufacture weapons faster and with more efficiency. Dixon said, “This is the first time we’ve had a glimpse of the physical remains of the humans who had these tools.”

The evidence at the cave seems to paint the story of an ancient adventure. A marine hunter — possibly a hunter — passed through a cave full of muck and emerged from a sack of muck being worked on at the sediment screening station.

Art school graduate Eric Parrish records profiles of walls to map sediment in preparation for archaeologist E. James Dixon.

DOI 03433
still mile up a rugged mountainside to the mouth of the cave. He set up camp and built a fire. He prayed and began to search, leaving behind note books and specialized bone tools. Then, at one p.m., he entered a cavern that had been home to thousands of years. That old time still lingers in the minds of the inhabitants of the cave, reminding them of the days when they inhabited the land.

The man's name, still preserved in the minds of the people, was Andy Vaara. Vaara was known for his ability to find and excavate ancient bones and artifacts. At one point, he stumbled upon a small chamber that looked promising. He dug into the area, carefully removing the dirt and rocks. As he delved deeper, he discovered a hidden entrance, leading to a larger cavern.

As he explored, Vaara came across a room filled with ancient bones and artifacts. He carefully removed them, placing them in a special box. The bones were carefully examined, revealing the secrets of the past.

The man who discovered the cave was later named Andy Vaara. His name is still remembered today, as he continues to explore and uncover the mysteries of the past.