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Caprock Chronicles: The Plainview bison kill site

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Editor's Note: Caprock Chronicles is edited each week by Jack Becker, a librarian at Texas Tech University. He can be reached at jack.becker@ttu.edu. Today's essay, by Paul Carlson, professor emeritus of history at Texas Tech, reviews the Plainview, Texas, archaeological site, a pre-modern hunting locality dating to some 10,000 years ago.

There is an ancient bison kill site near downtown Plainview. Now buried under layers of debris (once a garbage dump), it is located in a gentle curl of Running Water Draw, the once-impressive watercourse that forms the upper reaches of White River.

Historical and archaeological information on the site remains difficult to pin down, associated with controversy and disagreement and often presented in jargon-rich prose understood best by geoarchaeologists, paleontologists and related Paleoindian specialists.

Archaeological evidence there suggests that late Paleoindian people about 10,000 years ago used the site at least twice (once in the fall and once in the spring) and maybe many other times. The ancient hunters either drove a now-extinct species of bison (bison antiquus), which stood about a third larger than modern bison, over a small, steep cliff at the site or trapped the large mammals in a marshy section of Running Water Draw's then meandering but perennial stream.

Discovery of the site dates to the late 1930s and early 1940s when a local company began mining caliche from the draw. In the resulting quarry and its tailings, Plainview-area residents found and collected stone projectile (spear) points and related artifacts, some scattered through the wide, shallow, but once deep, draw.

The news brought in professional archaeologists, who visited the site in 1944. Then, beginning in the summer of 1945—June through October—the professionals through systematic excavation discovered a large bone bed that contained partial skeletons of more than 100 bison. They also found at least 28 projectile points (some refashioned into butchering knives) and, according to Vance T. Holliday, "a few amorphous flake tools."

E. A. Sellards, Director of the Bureau of Economic Geology and the Texas Memorial Museum of the University of Texas, led scientists at the Plainview "dig." His chief assistant and close collaborator, geologist Glen L. Evans, guided much of the field work at the site (originally called "Locality 8"), and Grayson E. Meade, a vertebrate paleontologist with Texas Technological College (Texas Tech University), joined the team.

The Sellards team dug pits in Running Water Draw and along the draw's walls. They wanted to study the site's stratigraphy and, of course, examine the bone bed.

In his subsequent report of the Plainview site, Sellards described the bone area as "a mat of closely spaced, disarticulated bones and skeletons . . . of approximately 100 bison . . . in an area of about 500 square feet" with "an average thickness of scarcely a foot." And, as Holliday and others have noted "an unknown number of artifacts probably were removed by collectors."

As indicated, the Sellards team collected plenty of animal bones and other significant lithic artifacts, but it found no bison skulls or tailbones, suggesting that the people who used the Plainview kill site removed the heads and hides—tailbones intact—for processing elsewhere.

The hunters may have saved the skulls for religious purposes. Or, in some cases they may have cracked open the skulls to use the brains during hide tanning.

After taking from the site a portion of the skeleton assembly in 1945, the Sellards team returned four years later in November 1949 and removed another key section of the principal bone bed.

Significantly, Sellards and his team realized their projectile points differed from earlier Clovis and Folsom

(Paleoindian) stone weapons. The Plainview (late Paleoindian) points occurred lanceolate in shape or structure—that is, without the fluting or grooving as existed in earlier projectile styles.

Moreover, according to Holliday, the Plainview site contained "the largest collection of lanceolate points in the region found in place" to that time. Partly as a result of the different point patterns, scientists noted that new cultural traditions characterized the period around 10,000 years ago and dubbed it the Plainview complex or culture to distinguish it from earlier Clovis (ca. 11,500 to 11,000 years ago) and Folsum (ca. 10,800 to 10,300 year ago) life patterns.

In the 1970s one of the important dig sites in the draw became a garbage dump, destroying some of its research value. Additional pits in the draw also provided important geological and stratigraphic information, including a shift towards a drier, warmer climate, before they too became buried under garbage.

Nonetheless, in 1977, Eddie Guffee, associated with the Wayland Baptist University Archaeological Research Laboratory, found some of the old bone bed intact, but not before removing nine feet of garbage and other debris. The location has not been investigated systematically in nearly forty years.

Still, because of what it reveals about shifting life patterns, bison evolution, and environmental transformations, the Plainview bison kill site remains significant. The bones, stone points and other lithic material suggest a Plainview Culture that represents the divide between Paleoindian times and the Archaic period that followed.