

FINDINGS

Case in point

Artifacts roadshow connects archaeologists to lost treasures

LeeAnn Hartner strolled into the Utah State University Museum of Anthropology one Saturday in April holding a weathered 9 mm cartridge box. "I think I've got something real neat," she told the small, expectant crowd of archaeologists and enthusiasts milling around a table.

She slid the top off the box and withdrew her find from 40 years ago. Working on her cousin's farm in Idaho's West Teton Valley as a 17-year-old, Hartner had spotted something unusual climbing the belt of the combine among the clumps of sod and potatoes. She grabbed it, cleaned off the dirt. It was a six-inch blade of sparkling, hazelnut-hued stone.

People gasped and *aww*-ed when Hartner set the point on the table. One man's hands began to tremble. Bonnie Pitblado, the museum's director and an archaeologist specializing in North America's oldest Native cultures, virtually screamed.

"So, I've got something pretty cool?" Hartner asked, beaming.

"LeeAnn," Pitblado said, catching her breath, "it's Clovis."

Many at the artifacts roadshow knew at a glance that the blade had been shaped by a member of the Clovis people, the first humans to North America, peripatetics who hunted mammoth and other Pleistocene game about 13,000 years ago. The blade's craftsmanship was distinctive: Where stone had been chipped away, large flake scars, known as "overshots," feathered clear across its face and laddered smoothly up its length. The point



A prehistoric point found in a bluff in Wyoming and later brought to the artifact roadshow (left) Below, Bonnie Pitblado (standing) and LeeAnn Hartner, who walked into the road show with what's believed to be the oldest artifact ever found in the region that Pitblado studies. COURTESY USU MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY

was made of a strange volcanic rock — welded tuff, perhaps, or rhyolite — with square, inset crystals, and it had never been finished.

This was the artifact Pitblado had been seeking. It was the oldest ever found in the region she studies: southeastern Idaho and Utah's Cache and Rich counties. The area is the confluence of several ecosystems and boasts a wide variety of food and other resources, so it should have "a mega-record" of paleo-Indian activity. Yet when Pitblado arrived at USU in 2002, there were "exactly zero" known archaeological sites older than 8,000 years in northeastern Utah, and only about a dozen in Idaho.

So like some other archaeologists, Pitblado began holding a yearly event modeled after the ever-popular TV program *Antiques Roadshow*. Amateur collectors line up on the sidewalk outside the museum in Logan long before the doors open, eager to show shoeboxes and drawers of long-cherished arrowheads and pottery shards to the anthropology faculty, who examine, but don't appraise, their finds. The roadshows help people connect the angular, inanimate objects they squirrel away with the landscape's fluid, spirited past — our collective heritage.

"I'm an anthropologist first," says Pitblado. "It's all about people. And with the

Clovis, you're talking about *the first* people. It gives me goosebumps every time I talk about it. I think we all wonder what it was like for the people who really had the West to themselves. They were here with Ice Age creatures we can't even imagine."

Of course, the roadshows are practical as well. Pitblado could spend all her time systematically exploring the landscape and still discover little of archaeological importance. So why not turn the public — the farmers and ranchers who know the land best — into a gigantic research team? And it's worked: Pitblado has identified and photographed hundreds of intriguing artifacts at roadshows. In 2008 alone, her team logged 57 new paleo-Indian sites in Idaho, while also teaching the public how to properly describe and, ideally, GPS a find's location — whether in a potato field or someone's backyard.

Pitblado hopes that Hartner's miraculous point — which has survived 13 millennia, and the show-and-tell sessions of Hartner's four kids — will lead to further discoveries. She suspects that the blade belongs to a cache: a collection of tools deliberately left behind for ceremonial or strategic reasons. The Clovis people couldn't count on always finding workable stone, so caches may have served as "insurance policies." Or perhaps the point's maker — who could only carry so much — left it behind when he happened upon something more immediately valuable. That also would explain why the blade's unfinished: It could have been fine-tuned later, as need arose.

This July, Pitblado and her graduate students will take their show on the road to the library in Driggs, Idaho, in search of more artifacts near Hartner's cousin's farm, below the Tetons. They'll start at whatever piece of ground Hartner identifies, and then slowly pace outward, scouring the furrowed earth. They'll use hand-held augers to sample the potato field's sediments for flakes or hearth remains. The odds of finding a cache are slim but tantalizing. In all of North America, only 20 or so Clovis caches have been discovered. Finding another would be a career- and field-defining moment.

"It could be the plow got them," Pitblado says of the theoretical stash of blades. "But if they're deep enough, they could be beneath the plow zone. This one" — Hartner's prized possession — "could have been pushed up by a potato." NICK NEELY



HOW TO ...

Return a pot

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Imagine discovering a pot tucked inside an ancient ruin on a hike. *That'd really look nice on my mantel*, you think, and grab it. Later, you learn that collecting artifacts from public lands is not only illegal, it permanently destroys the object's original context and meaning – the information that helps archaeologists piece together the larger story of how Native Americans lived on the land. To right the wrong anonymously, here's what BLM-ers recommend:



1 – Let it be!

Of course, the first step is NOT to take anything. But if it's too late, public-lands agencies and independent archaeological centers like Colorado's Crow Canyon occasionally host amnesty periods when artifacts can be donated, no questions asked.

2 – Location, Location, Location

It's important to let archaeologists know where you found the object. A good rule(r) of thumb?

Accuracy counts to 1 cm. DON'T: "South of town." DO: "Sixty feet southwest of lone piñon tree on east-facing slope, two miles south of highway mile-marker 143."



3 – The Drop

Find the address of the public-lands office that administers the place where you found the object (i.e. national park, BLM regional office), carefully bubble-wrap it, package and ship.

ADAM PETRY