

Paisley Caves

June 24-27, 2010

June 24-27, 2010 was a spectacular SAS tour of archaeology and history in SE Oregon and NE California. The group was led by Dennis and Marty, who did the advance work and lined up fantastic points of interest along the way.

We began with a tour of Paisley Caves, a series of shallow rock shelters above the shore of a dry Pleistocene lake some 40 minutes north of Lakeview, Oregon. Dr. Dennis Jenkins of the University of Oregon has been excavating there each of the last 4 seasons and has recovered evidence of human occupation dating to 14,300 B.P. (before present 1950). He met us at his site and gave us an extensive tour while students continued to excavate the deep units. The Paisley Caves site is currently the oldest dated human presence in North America. Paisley Caves were occupied before Clovis hunters were taking down mammoths, so it is now clear that the makers of spectacular fluted points were NOT the first people on this continent.



Paisley Caves are a series of shallow shelters carved into a basalt uplift by an ancient lake. When the lake level dropped, they became shelters for human occupants. The University of Oregon team has carefully excavated deep archaeological deposits. A human coprolite was discovered while we were there!!

As explained by Dr. Jenkins, the evidence at Paisley comes mostly from human coprolites. Over 100 have been found so far. These have been well preserved in the deep rocky sediments and have allowed for 14C analysis as well as DNA extraction. A great deal of information is being assembled about these ancient lake-dwellers in spite of the scarcity of stone tools from the earliest levels.



Dr. Dennis Jenkins explains stratigraphy of the deposits at Paisley Caves to our SAS tour. It was a spectacular setting.

We archaeologists had been taught (and it's in all our North American Archaeology textbooks) that Clovis was the first culture to follow big game herds into North America – about 11,000 to 11,500 years ago. Anything earlier was considered a “crackpot” theory – to be rejected rather quickly. There are crackpots out there, but Paisley teaches an important lesson. We were guilty of not looking beyond Clovis because Clovis was first. That defined the universe; why look beyond? Nothing there. Well, crow tastes okay when properly prepared and so does the harsh reality of a human time in North America before Clovis. It must have been a harsh living – a cold, wet and fearsome environment dominated by megafauna and ice. How did these Paisley people survive? At this point we don't know, but this can't be the only place they occupied. Other sites must now be reexamined and further details teased out of the ancient archaeological deposits. The “Clovis-first” theory is now shattered and we presume there are earlier sites out there to discover and document.

Our SAS tour also took in Petroglyph Point and Captain Jack's stronghold at Lava Beds National Monument. These are awe-inspiring sites. Our group included Rick Fitzgerald, who directed some of the archaeological surveys at Lava Beds when he worked for NPS, so we were able to see some little-known gems of ancient times.

Important sites and historical events have a way of intersecting, as was the case on our tour. One of our stops was at the Tule Lake Relocation Center, where Japanese-Americans were rounded up after Pearl Harbor and interned. Tule Lake was the harshest of these camps. It was an

American Concentration Camp where families were held under guard and dissidents were jailed and beaten by guards. Their crime? Being of Japanese ancestry.