

Paleo Indian Culture in California

On Saturday, October 15, 2015 Sacramento Archeological Society, Inc sponsored a seminar on Paleo Indian Culture in California. The event was hosted by and held at Maidu Museum and Historical Site, Roseville, California. Dan Foster kicked off the event by leading a group of 24 on a tour of the Maidu Historical Site. After describing his involvement to survey the site and praising Roseville for their preservation efforts he showed attendees the location of several village sites and pointed out the numerous bedrock mortars that were used for acorn food production. He also showed the group very old rock art, incised in boulders.



Moving the event indoors John Foster reviewed Sacramento Archeological Society's visits to ancient archeological sites. These included Borax Lake, California; Gault Site, Texas; Spring Lake, San Marcos, Texas; Black Water Draw, Clovis, New Mexico; Santa Cruz Island; Paisley Caves, Connley Caves and Rimrock Draw, Oregon. Tours to these locations have expanded member awareness of the peopling of the Americas. No longer are we bound by thinking that the first people to come to the Americas came from Asia via the Beringia land bridge and ice-free corridor and used Clovis lithic technology to prepare weapons to hunt mammoth and other mega fauna. Mounting evidence supports an older than Clovis population.

Three distinguished archaeologists next spoke on Paleo Indian Culture in California. The Paleo Indian period refers to late-Pleistocene and early Holocene occupations in North America and encompasses the Clovis, Folsom, Agate Basin, and Cody cultures. Clovis dates to about 11,500 - 10,900 radiocarbon years BP, or about 13,325 – 12,975 calendar years ago. During this period the northern latitudes of North America were covered with vast sheets of ice, and the Southwest was a mosaic of pine woodlands and desert scrub. Clovis period people hunted large mammals, including the mammoth, with the distinctive stone point known as the Clovis point.



Gerrit Fenenga, Senior State Archaeologist, Cal Fire spoke on the finds from older than 10,000 years ago California sites especially the Witt Site (CA-KIN-32) on the shores of Tulare Lake in the southern San Joaquin Valley. Some of the oldest artifacts in the state have been found there. These artifacts—called fluted spear points—have been dated to the end of the last ice age 13,500-11,500 years ago, shortly after glaciers had receded from much of North America. Gerrit shared with the 40 attendees a large number of artifacts including crescents (scrappers) and fossilized bones from this site.



Rick Fitzgerald, Senior State Archaeologist in his presentation, “The Paleo-Coastal Tradition Real or Imagined 30 Years Later” also reviewed excavated Paleo Indian sites in California. He highlighted several Southern and North Central California sites on the coast and inland from as early as 12,900 BP (Santa Rosa Island). He began his presentation with a review of the earliest migration theory through the ice free corridor between Laurentide and Cordilleran ice sheets. Recent data suggest, however, that the ice-free corridor was blocked from about 21,000 to as late as 11,000 BCE. and may have remained a relatively bleak and barren proglacial landscape for centuries after that. Since evidence of occupation predates 11,000, this theory is in question. Rick also relayed the theory that Clovis technology was not in California. Archeological evidence shows that this theory is also in question. Hundreds of fluted projectile points have been found in California but few have been found along the coast. A fluted point found in Crystal Cove State Park in Orange County suggests a Clovis presence along the California littoral at the end of the Pleistocene (11,050 to 10,800 BP). During this period the discovery of *Olivella biplicata* beads in central California suggests established trade between coastal and inland California populations.

Greg White, Archaeologist, SubTerra Consulting focused on the California Paleo Indians at the Borax Lake Site (CA-LAK-36). It is considered the best representative site for Paleo-Indian occupation in the Far West simply because Borax Lake, alone among pluvial lakes, didn't dry up at the end of the late Pleistocene. From the time of Paleo Indians into the early- and middle-Archaic Periods—millennia of increasing regional aridity—Borax Lake and nearby Clear Lake were among the few permanent lake environments not only in the North Coast Ranges, but also in the whole Western Great Basin and California area. Because Borax Lake was a stable lakeshore environment, successive prehistoric cultures deposited their material culture over some 9000 years. Greg traced the archaeological exploration of this site from Harrington's excavation in 1936 to the site's National Historical Landmark status in 2006.

Photos by Jan Johansen

1. Dan Foster and group at Maidu Historical Site viewing bedrock mortars.
2. Speakers: Rick Fitzgerald, Gerrit Fenenga, Greg White
3. Gerrit Fenenga showing artifacts