

# GEORGE CARR FRISON

## 1924-2020

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With the passing of George “Doc” Frison on September 7, 2020, two months shy of his 96th birthday, the field of Paleoindian archaeology lost one of its giants, and perhaps figuratively and literally, one of the tallest among them.

George’s career moved along a unique path. He was raised in Ten Sleep, Wyoming by his paternal grandparents as his father died before he was born and his mother remarried. He lived the life of a rancher, and encountered Crow hunting parties in the Bighorn Mountains, as well as “war lodges” and tree platform

Shearing sheep on the home ranch near Tensleep. Photo by June Frison.



burials. He hunted deer and elk from an early age. It was a childhood that no other archaeologist has ever had.



In the Navy.

In 1942, he joined the Navy, serving in the Pacific theater. That service left him with a nagging back injury that encouraged him to turn to pursuits that did not require hours in the saddle, and so in 1962, at the age of 37, he attended the University of Wyoming. He earned his BA in two years, and then went to the University of Michigan, the top school at the time, where, in an unbelievable three years he finished his PhD in 1967. He returned to the University of Wyoming that year, and equally unbelievable, become

the first head of the new Department of Anthropology, and, soon thereafter, Wyoming’s first state archaeologist, positions he held for some 20 years. He simultaneously built the department, including an MA program, and the state archaeologist’s office. He offered students, from Wyoming and elsewhere, decades of remarkable fieldwork opportunities.

He authored his first book in 1978, at the age of 54—and he would go on to publish another dozen or so, along with

over 100 professional papers. He trained dozens of students and traveled widely: Europe, Africa, South America, Russia, China. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1997 and is still the *only* faculty member at the University of Wyoming in any field *ever* to achieve that honor. He was president of the Plains Anthropological Society and later of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA). He received the SAA Lifetime Achievement Award, as well as the American Quaternary Association Distinguished Career Award, the Asa Hill Award of the Nebraska Historical Society, the UW George Duke Humphrey Distinguished Faculty Award, the Distinguished Service Award of the Plains Anthropological Society, the UW Distinguished Former Faculty Award, the Wyoming Archaeological Society Golden Trowel Award, and was inducted into the Wyoming Outdoor Council Hall of Fame.

George found his first arrowhead at the age of four or five—spying it from horseback. That began a lifelong passion. Before he had any formal training, George excavated sites such as Spring Creek Cave and Daugherty Cave. And although they weren’t model excavations, he did later publish the findings. Paleoindian archaeology was his first passion, and the list of sites he worked at and reported on is a who’s who of Paleoindian archaeology: Agate Basin, Hanson, Hell Gap, Horner, Casper, Carter/Kerr-McGee, Sheaman, Mill Iron, the Fenn cache, and the Colby mammoth kill (at a spring where he used to water cattle driven from Ten Sleep to Worland). But he covered all facets of Wyoming archaeology, excavating Medicine Lodge Creek, Leigh Cave, Rice Cave, Paint Rock V, Beehive, Piney Creek, Wedding of the Waters . . . the list goes on. He literally wrote the book on Wyoming archaeology, *Prehistoric Hunters of the High Plains*. And he never stopped. Into his 90s, George was still involved, particularly in Powars II, the ochre mine near Guernsey whose use dates back to Clovis. He published on that site in 2017, and a week before he passed, a paper on which he was co-author, about the La Prele mammoth kill site, was published.



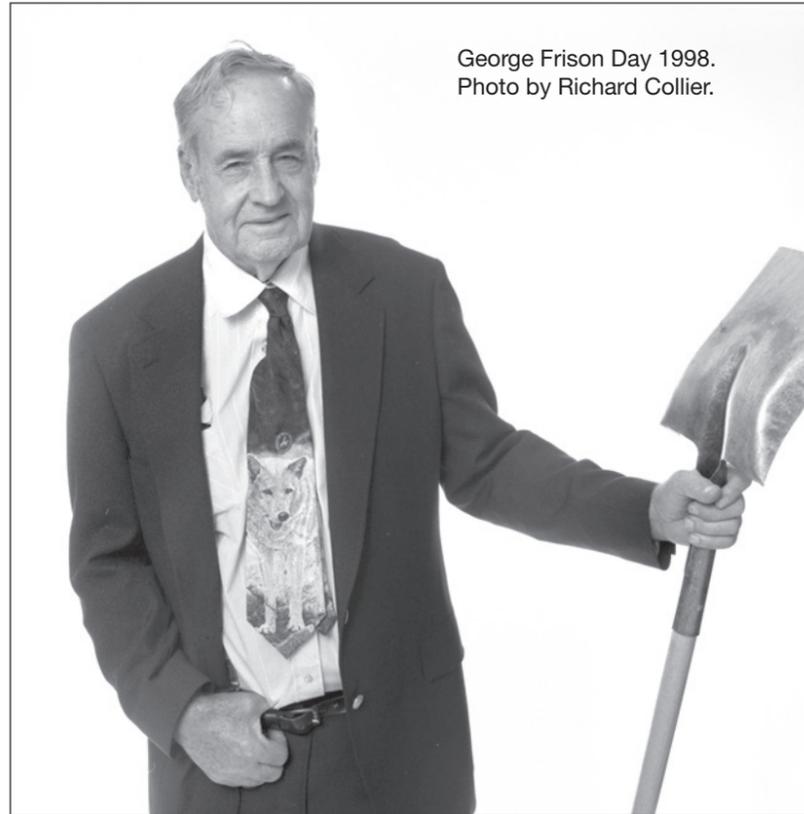
Top: Initial testing of the Scoggin Bison Kill in 1971. Bottom: At the Hell Gap site with Vance Haynes.

George figured out a lot about how people went about killing large animals with very simple technology—how to use cliffs and sand dunes and arroyos, how to make stone into lethal weapons, or how to build drive lines for bison as opposed to sheep. He figured out that stone tools change their shape, and their type, as they’re resharpened. By

throwing Clovis points hafted onto spears into dead elephants, he figured out the killing power of those points. Wyoming benefitted, but so did the international field of hunter-gatherer archaeology.

Finally, one cannot talk about George without mentioning his wife, June. Married in 1946, they had a legendarily happy 65-year marriage until June's death in 2011. June often served as cook on George's field projects, and accompanied him everywhere he went, always with books to read in the shade while George dug. She supported George but was never subservient. In 1998, after George was elected to the National Academy of Sciences, the Wyoming legislature declared a "George Frison Day." He and June stood before a joint session and George acknowledged people who had helped him

University of Wyoming reception honoring Frison's induction into the National Academy of Sciences. Photo by Dr. Danny N. Walker, RPA.



George Frison Day 1998.  
Photo by Richard Collier.

along the way. He finished by thanking June, claiming that he couldn't have done anything without her. June leaned out to the legislators and in a stage whisper said, "That's true, you know."

George cared deeply about Wyoming, about June, and about archaeology. So it's fitting that his cremated remains were spread in Ten Sleep Canyon, where June's ashes were spread, near his and June's tombstones in the Ten Sleep cemetery, and at the base of the highway sign on Route 16 that marks the nearby Colby mammoth kill site. He will be missed, and the field will never see anyone quite like him again.



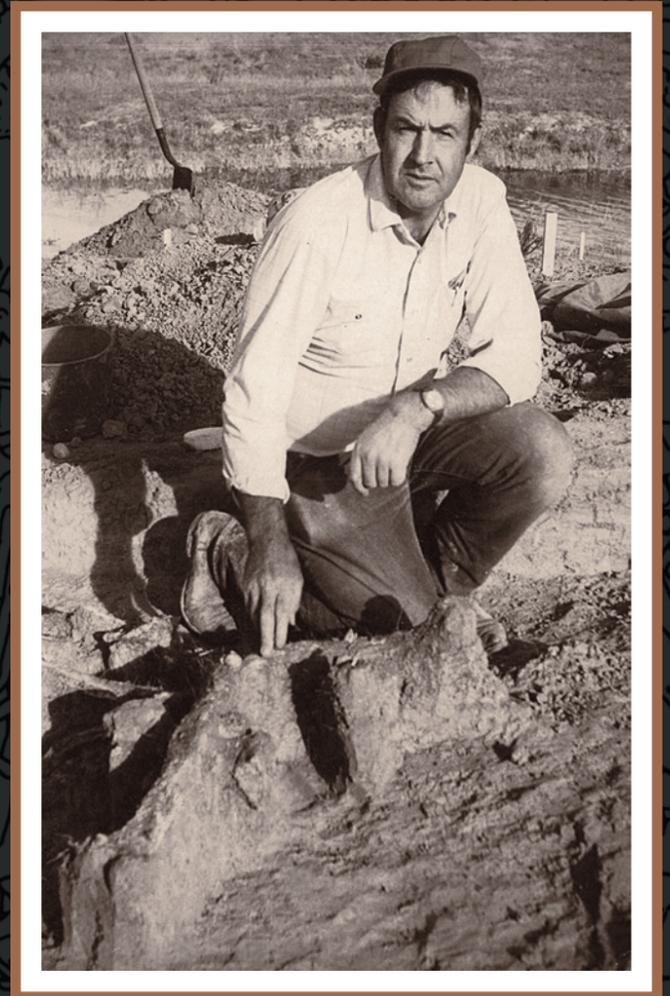
Doc and June. Photo by W. R. Eckles.

Sponsors: Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office; University of Wyoming Department of Anthropology; Office of the Wyoming State Archaeologist; George C. Frison Institute of Archaeology & Anthropology; U.S. Bureau of Land Management; U.S. Forest Service; National Park Service; Wyoming Army National Guard; Wyoming Department of Transportation; TRC Environmental Services; Cultural Resource Analysts, Inc.; Western Archaeological Services; SWCA Environmental Consultants; Cannon Heritage Consultants, Inc.; HDR; Bonneville Archaeology; Wyoming Association of Professional Archaeologists; Wyoming Archaeological Society; Rocky Mountain Anthropological Association.

Photograph of George Frison at the Colby Mammoth site, courtesy of the University of Wyoming Department of Anthropology.  
Bonebed plan map, courtesy of Lawrence C. Todd and David J. Rapson.  
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<http://wyoshpo.state.wy.us/index.php/events-training/archaeology-awareness-month>



**GEORGE CARR FRISON**  
1924 - 2020  
**RANCHER ARCHAEOLOGIST**