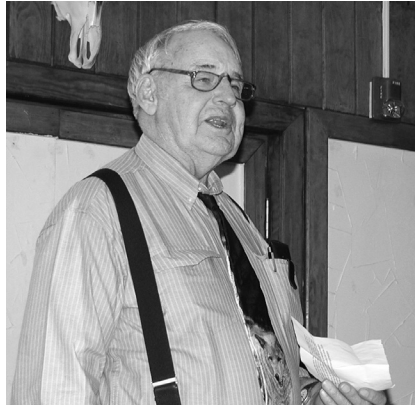


# IN MEMORIUM GEORGE CARR FRISON, 1924 – 2020



Every life is unique, but some are more unique than others. The life of George Carr Frison was one of those.

With George's passing on September 7, 2020, two months shy of his 96<sup>th</sup> birthday, the field of Paleoindian archaeology lost not just one of its giants, but also, figuratively and literally, one of the tallest among them; and many of us lost a kind, quiet, generous, unassuming friend and colleague. George's many professional accomplishments are enumerated in his autobiography, *Rancher-Archaeologist* (2014, Univ of Utah Press), which I highly recommend. Here, I want to focus on George as a person. But let me give a quick summary: He started college at the age of 37, after a life in ranching (sheep for much of that time, but always some cattle to "maintain respectability"). He completed his

BA at the University of Wyoming (UW) in two years (1964), and then went to the University of Michigan, the top school at the time, where, in an unbelievable three years (it normally takes seven), he finished his PhD in 1967. More unbelievable, he returned to the UW that year to become the first head of the newly-created Department of Anthropology, and, soon thereafter, Wyoming's first state archaeologist, positions he held for some 20 years. He authored his first book, *Prehistoric Hunters of the High Plains*, in 1978, at the age of 54 – and he would go on to publish another dozen books 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), the primary professional organization of archaeologists in the western hemisphere. He received the SAA Lifetime Achievement Award, as well as the American Quaternary Association Distin-

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gished 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.

And yet, to many who knew him, he was simply “Doc.”

George was born November 11, 1924 in Worland, Wyoming. He described his earliest days in a short paragraph in his autobiography: Three months before his birth, his father, George S. Frison, died in a hunting accident. His mother remarried when George was three years old, and his paternal grandparents “convinced her to let me live with them on the ranch.” And that was it; his autobiography never mentions his parents again. I don’t mean to imply George was unfeeling, not at all. But some people might have spent much of their life angry at being abandoned. Not George. I think there were many events in his life – like the kamikaze attack in World War II that injured him (in his autobiography he simply says he received a minor back injury while in the Navy) – that to him were just things that happened; no need to dwell on them.

The day he arrived at his grandparents’ house he was put on a horse. He would spend long hours in the saddle for many years after that. He found his first arrowhead at the age of five – spying it from horseback. He shot his first deer at 9, and his first elk at 13. Looking for arrowheads and hunting: these would be much of what his life was about. George was highly intelligent, and he became a keen observer of nature, especially of animal behavior. Growing up on the western side of the Bighorn Mountains, part of traditional Apsáalooke (Crow) territory, he was exposed from an early age to Native American culture. Chasing down cattle, he encountered hunting parties as a boy, as well as “war lodges,” travois poles, discarded or lost

equipment, crevice and tree-platform burials. For a while he rode a horse his grandfather acquired in trade with a Crow party. George once showed me his ranch guest book; the last signature was that of Joe Medicine Crow (1913-2016), an Apsáalooke war chief, historian, and author (and a man with his own fascinating life story).

George’s first school was the classic one-room schoolhouse with an outhouse and a small stove for heat (it gets cold in Wyoming, and not just in the winter). He was an avid reader. He told me that when quite young his grandmother caught him reading a book – some dime store novel of boyhood adventure – that included a scene of a boy being bitten by a rattlesnake. “That’s not the sort of thing you should read,” his grandmother said, taking the book away from him. But it did not stop George from reading. When he was in his early 90s, I found him in his office reading a textbook on mineralogy. “I need to know about this,” he explained.

After finding that first arrowhead George always kept his eye on the ground (often to the annoyance of his grandfather). With no professional training he excavated sites (he dug Daugherty Cave in 1957, the year I was born!). Today we’d say he looted them – but George kept notes and later published those – Daugherty Cave and Spring Creek Cave among them. Many others he visited as a boy or young man, logging them away in his memory and returning to them as a professional. As a teenager George joined ranch hands to drive cattle from Ten Sleep to Worland, where the animals were loaded onto a train for market. The crew watered the cattle at the only waterhole between the two towns – a spring where George would later excavate the Colby mammoth kill.

The probability of leaving ranch life in Ten Sleep was low. But George wanted an education and he left the ranch for the University of Wyoming after graduating from high school in 1942. After a semester, though, duty called, and he joined the Navy to help in the war effort. (My

father and he apparently served in some of the same places in the Pacific.) Like many vets, he didn't speak much about the war. When I asked him about it, he simply said, "too much water." (This was not due to a fear of drowning. Unlike many Wyoming kids, George could swim; he learned to do so in Ten Sleep creek. I've put my toe in that frigid, rocky creek and wondered: how the heck did he learn to swim in this?)

George returned to the ranch after the war and, when his grandfather passed away, took over its operation with his two uncles. He also re-connected with a high school acquaintance, Carolyn June Glanville. They married in 1946 and 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 she was never subservient. In 1998, after George was elected to the National Academy of Sciences, the Wyoming legislature declared a "George Frison Day" (how many archaeologists can claim that honor?). He and June stood before a joint session and George acknowledged people who had helped him along the way. He finished by thanking June, claiming that he could never have done anything without her. June leaned out to the legislators and in a stage whisper said, "that's true, you know." The legislators roared. George beamed.

Sometime after June had passed, I went into George's office and he handed me a yellowed letter, addressed to June Glanville. "Look at that," he said. It took me a moment before the post mark registered on me: November 21, 1941, U.S.S. Arizona. "My God, two weeks before Pearl Harbor!" I looked at the name with the return address. "Did he die there?" George nodded. "Was he a suitor?" George nodded. "And you got June?" Again he nodded, with moist eyes.

It wasn't unusual to walk into George's office and have him launch into some tirade – on

just about anything: Once it was: "I don't know why people think camp cooks are jolly, friendly fellows. I never met one who wasn't a bigger SOB than the last one." That was a prelude to a story of a camp cook, the fellow's lost pipe, a large pot of coffee, and a kicking horse. Another time it was about the college dean – who had retired decades earlier (Maybe George forgave slights, I don't know, but he did not forget them). More often than not, though, it was about Clovis points or chert or bison bones – and for the last few years it was about Powars II, the ochre mine whose use dates back to Clovis. George's office was awash in the site's chert samples, artifacts, notes, maps, early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs – and everything was stained red.

He was enthusiastic and hands-on involved, right to the end. He published on Powars II in 2017 in *American Antiquity*, and a week before he passed, a paper on which he was co-author (about the La Prele mammoth kill site), appeared in print in the same journal.

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, the Colby mammoth kill. He literally wrote the book on Wyoming archaeology, *Prehistoric Hunters of the High Plains* (1978; now in a third edition with Marcel Kornfeld and Mary Lou Larson, *Prehistoric Hunter-Gatherers of the High Plains and Rocky Mountains*, 2010), and published on all facets of Wyoming prehistory, including excavations at Medicine Lodge Creek, Leigh Cave, Rice Cave, Paint Rock V, Beehive, Piney Creek, Wedding of the Waters . . . the list goes on. George approached archaeology like it was ranch work: just git'er done (but take notes). He had no problem with moving large volumes of dirt ("if you want to make an omelette, you got to break some eggs"), and he loved working with a backhoe.

In 2000, when George was 75, he returned to the Agate Basin site. The crew exposed a profile

at the Brewster locality, as George had done at many other sites, and while he was examining it, the wall of sediment collapsed, burying him completely. Students jumped in, digging wildly. They managed to drag him out and get him to an ambulance. George survived with a few cracked ribs.

He had a classic Wyoming sense of humor about these things, these things that just happen. At the time of his Agate Basin work, I was excavating the Pine Spring site in southwest Wyoming. I had dropped a 50-gallon drum of water on my foot and hobbled into the department as soon as I arrived in town. George was the first person I saw, and in those ancient, pre-cell phone days, I knew nothing about the previous week's near-death experience. "What happened to you?" he asked, noticing my limp. I explained and he said, "Is that all?" and walked away.

In 1982, I excavated a cave site with George on the North Fork of the Shoshone River, outside Cody. It was perched far above the river, at the top of a steep talus slope. None of us in

the crew expected to find anything (we were right). George and I excavated a large, deep test unit just outside the entrance. By deep I mean George was excavating at the bottom, throwing the dirt up to the level I stood on, where I shoveled it out, above my head. We dug and dug. But then George stopped, and with a finger to his lips indicated I should be quiet. He slowly pointed to the top of the excavation. There, perched on the edge, was a small bird, cocking its head, letting out an occasional chirp. George smiled, and we stood there for the few minutes that the bird found us interesting, appreciating a small, brief moment of the natural world's beauty.

George cared deeply about where he came from, about June, and about archaeology. So it's fitting that his cremated remains were spread in the beautiful Ten Sleep Canyon, where June's ashes were spread, and also near his and June's tombstones in the Ten Sleep cemetery, and finally at the base of the highway sign on Route 16 that marks the nearby Colby mammoth kill site. Next time you drive between Worland and Ten Sleep, stop at the sign and say hello.

