

## **IN MEMORIAM**

**Mary Lou Larson  
1954-2022**



Mary Lou Larson, professor emerita at the University of Wyoming and longtime member and friend of the Wyoming Archaeological Society (WAS), passed away unexpectedly on April 1, 2022 at the Society for American Archaeology Annual Meeting in Chicago, Illinois. Mary Lou's lifelong interest and passion for understanding the past was perhaps destined from birth. Born in Laramie on August 18, 1954 to Mary H. and noted UW history professor T.A. Larson, Mary Lou had an early exposure to the world of academic research, writing, and teaching. But, unlike her father's focus on Wyoming's recent history, it was the ancient past through archaeology and anthropology that captured her imagination. As an undergraduate at the University of Wyoming, she took ethnographic survey classes from William Mulloy, Plains and North American archaeology survey courses from George Frison, and other cultural anthropology and linguistics classes, graduating with honors in 1976. During her undergraduate years, Mary Lou worked on many sites in the Big Horn area, including Medicine Lodge Creek and Laddie Creek. This fieldwork would prove pivotal in her later research. She then traveled to the University of California at Santa Barbara for graduate work and immersed herself in various approaches to archaeological method and theory, hunter-gatherer studies and California archaeology, earning her M.A. (1982) and PhD (1990) in anthropology.

Mary Lou's heart was always in Wyoming, and while finishing her PhD, she spent most of her time there, completing laboratory analysis of the Laddie Creek materials for her dissertation, conducting fieldwork at other, mostly Archaic age, sites and beginning her teaching career. Starting in 1982, Mary Lou served as a visiting assistant/adjunct professor in the UW Anthropology Department. In 1996, she was hired into a tenure track assistant professor position and was promoted to associate professor with tenure in 2000. Mary Lou was named Full Professor in

2007 and served as department chair from 2011 to 2014. She retired in 2020. During her career, Mary Lou published five books, dozens of articles and book chapters, innumerable technical reports, presented or co-authored over 100 papers at regional, national and international conferences, all the while teaching up to three classes a semester, supervising field schools, and shepherding over 30 students through their graduate studies.

Mary Lou's primary research interests focused on hunter-gatherers in the Plains and Rocky Mountains, and George Frison was a huge influence on her research. While other Frison students concentrated on Paleoindian bison kills and faunal studies, she and the senior author of this obituary (Francis) once quipped we both wanted to research other aspects of Wyoming's ancient hunter-gatherers. Thus, Mary Lou focused on chipped stone and other technologies, site structure, spatial organization, and geographic information systems (GIS), often as those topics pertained to the "less glamorous" Archaic period, and the transition between Paleoindian to Archaic adaptations. Beginning with her undergraduate field experience, Mary Lou went on to investigate the Helen Lookingbill, Mill Iron, Henn, Beehive, Bugas-Holding, Nelson, Two Moon, and Last Canyon sites and rockshelters. She also participated in several major regional archaeological surveys, the most notable (and perhaps the most arduous) of which was the Western Powder River Basin survey project. Her work, along with other Wyoming archaeologists, culminated in the 1997 publication of *Changing Perspectives of the Archaic of the High Plains* (University of South Dakota Press), co-edited with this obituary senior author. Mary Lou's desire to broaden the perceptions of Wyoming prehistory beyond big-game hunting resulted in the 2010 revision and renaming (with Marcel Kornfeld and George Frison) of the third edition of *Prehistoric Hunter-Gatherers of the High Plains and Rockies* (Left Coast Press).

After purchase of the Hell Gap site by the Wyoming Archaeological Foundation, Mary Lou (along with George Frison and her partner and spouse of 43 years Marcel Kornfeld) began long term fieldwork and research at the site in the late 1990s and continuing for the next 27 years. This started with analysis of the 1960s excavation records and collections of Cynthia Irwin-Williams and Henry Irwin from Hell Gap and continued with further, highly targeted excavation. As a result of this lifetime endeavor, *Hell Gap: A Stratified Paleoindian Campsite at the Edge of the Rockies* (University of Utah Press) was published in 2009. The work undertaken by Mary Lou was central to the designation of Hell Gap as a National Historic Landmark in 2017 and to the current Save America's Treasures Project, which will digitize the Hell Gap collections from the 1960s to the present.

Information sharing and collaboration between the public, avocational societies and professional communities served as the foundation for Mary Lou's practice of archaeology. To this end, she and Marcel hosted WAS summer meetings at their field projects for the past 30 years. She also organized and facilitated student presentations at WAS spring meetings for many years. Mary Lou was working on a popular version of *Prehistoric Hunter-Gatherers of the High Plains and Rocky Mountains* at the time of her passing, and she served on the Wyoming National Register Review Board since 2001. In response to the flood of data generated by energy development and Section 106 in the late 1980s and 1990s, she worked with the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office and Bureau of Land Management to help develop computer systems, GIS datasets for the Cultural Records Office, and contexts to be used in the evaluation of site significance. Mary Lou was also an organizer of two Plains and two Rocky Mountain Anthropological conferences.

Meticulous is the first word to come to mind when describing Mary Lou's approach to archaeological fieldwork, analysis, research, and writing. She had extremely high expectations for herself and approached all aspects of the practice of archaeology with care, caution, and

attention to detail. These traits enabled her to tease out extremely detailed observations of the nuances of stratigraphy, separate ephemeral cultural levels, and identify post-depositional impacts to buried deposits. Mary Lou's attention to detail also characterized her approach to the analysis of chipped stone debitage using "minimum analytical nodules" to identify individual episodes of reduction or tool manufacture. Mary Lou's analytical techniques will have an important influence on chipped stone analysis for years to come.

Mary Lou taught archaeology to countless undergraduate and graduate students during her years at UW and reached many students beyond UW through Hell Gap field schools. She taught courses ranging from European prehistory to the Archaic Plains and Rocky Mountains. Mary Lou was among the vanguard of scholars specializing in GIS and brought this important method into her UW classroom. Mary Lou was an exacting teacher and mentor who held her students to the same high standards she expected for herself. She accepted no excuses, which allowed those who met her challenges to find and reach their potential.

Mary Lou endured major health issues throughout her entire professional career. She faced these head-on with an iron will and infinite determination. She never let her health stop her from doing what she wanted, such as attend the 2022 SAA meeting. Mary Lou leaves a lasting legacy – through the students she trained, the greater understanding of Archaic and Wyoming archaeology as a whole, and through her bravery and grit. Mary Lou was quite simply a *grande dame* of Wyoming archaeology. She will be sorely missed by all.

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