



The Chugwater archaeological site is shown during excavation. Eleven thousand years may be compressed into 20 inches of loess.

photo courtesy UAF

Potentially oldest in the Interior

Campsite to be excavated this summer

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Much of Interior Alaska, including the Tanana Valley, was ice-free during the last Ice Age, and Alaska Native people have been using this area since the first human migrations from Siberia to the New World.

Over the last 10 years, Dr. W.R. Powers has been investigating several sites in the Nenana Valley where evidence for human occupation is dated to more than 12,000 years ago.

The first movements into Alaska surely were considerably earlier than that, and they await archaeological rediscovery. We are looking — and have been looking — in some likely places.

In the Tanana Valley, two prominent bluffs near Fairbanks were used repeatedly by groups of Native people over at least the last 10,000 years.

The Campus Site in College, now buried beneath the Bunnell Building, and a road on the UAF campus produced tiny blade tools, which had been inset into bone or antler points, along with the small cores from which they



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had been removed.

Neis Nelson, famous for his Gobi Desert travels in Mongolia during the 1920s, recognized strong similarities between the Alaskan and Asian tools. This Siberian connection has been reconfirmed at many Interior sites.

Chugwater, the site on Moose Creek bluff, actually represents hundreds of campsite remains left by hunters and fishers in small family groups who sought the high ground of the bluff during their annual cycle of travel.

The sites are spread across some 50 acres and buried in the thin loess — wind-blown silt — mantle that covers the bluff.

For the past three years, as it will again this June, the UAF Department of Anthropology has conducted research at Chugwater in conjunction with a field practicum course.

There are two aims for the 1987

research. The first is to complete the survey of the entire bluff for evidence of human use in the past. This involves randomly digging test pits in those sections of the bluff that we have already surveyed and marked out.

We have found numerous locations with tools and identified several main times of human presence on the bluff. These are indicated by the depth at which the sites lie below the surface and are confirmed by carbon-14 dates.

We are most excited about plans this June to excavate a campsite lying near the base of the loess mantle which produced a date of 9,000 years ago.

The tools found so far are similar to those found at Healy Lake that date from more than 9,000 years ago, and they also resemble some from even earlier in the Nenana Valley. The tools include blade insets, knives and a scraper.

The locality, partially excavated by Ralph Lively and eight students last summer, may contain remains of a dwelling or shelter used by the campers thousands of years ago.

Investigating the apparent shelter, potentially the oldest in the Interior, locating the several activities associated with the camp and trying to determine the type of groups present — a family or a group of hunters — are the main goals of the 1987 research/field practicum.

Continuing research in Interior Alaska is contributing greatly to our understanding of early cultures. For example, people in the Nenana and Tanana valleys 9,000 to 12,000 years ago hunted on land that was open rather than forested.

The extra height afforded by the bluffs allowed them to locate the herds of large mammals, such as bison, that were their favored prey.

These people faced challenges different from those of later Interior people who had to re-adapt their cultures to reforestation of the Interior and the replacement of herd animals with smaller and more solitary game.