



George Zeimens discusses specifics of his archeological dig in Lingle at an old, forgotten trading post on historic old Oregon Trail. Zeimens was formerly Wyoming's State Archeologist and is often assisted by students in his efforts.

DUST AND BONES

Archeological site open to the public

By John Miller *Staff writer/photographer*

It's an event thousands of years in the making.

Whether you're a history buff interested in the Old West's legacy or an archeology student looking for some on-site training, the Western History Center in Lingle is a hosting a unique event this summer that might be for you.

From May 22 through June 20, the public is invited to participate in an archeological excavation at an old trading post called Fort Bernard located on the Oregon Trail. Digs generally start on weekend days in the early morning and last until noon, or until it gets too hot to continue.

"The purpose of our organization is to salvage historic artifacts so as to gather information from

them," George Ziemens, the center's curator and former Wyoming State Archeologist, said. "We have a lot of artifacts in here, but we're not artifact collectors; we're infor-



A pair of mammoth tusks excavated last summer sits in the history center. The tusks are 10 feet long and weighed 1,000 pounds each when mammoths existed 11,000 years ago.

mation collectors."

The old trading posts buried under years of sediment are a treasure trove of Old West era utensils, buttons from clothing, arrowheads and many other artifacts. As a result, the U.S. Department of Transportation designated Highway 26 as a historic byway.

"It's really something to hold one of these artifacts and realize that it was in someone else's hand hundreds, even thousands, of years ago," Stu Short, a volunteer for the center, said. "I've lived here 17 years, and I never realized that all this history is right over there," he said while pointing to the pastures across Highway 26.

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“By the time settlers from back east made it as far as the Oregon Trail, they were in pretty bad shape,” Zeimens said. “Their horses were spent, their wagon’s were breaking down, and they were out of supplies. These trading posts were set up along here every five miles or so with blacksmiths, selling supplies. They were like convenience stores are today, and they charged exorbitant prices.”

A Torrington High graduate and former professor of archeology at Eastern Wyoming College, Zeimens has spent his life excavating Wyoming’s landscapes. He says the information obtained from archeological digs is crucial to understanding what really happened centuries, and even thousands of years, ago.

Zeimens said the oldest archeological site he excavated was about 11,400 years old. “It was a mammoth kill site,” Zei-

mens said, referring to the huge mammals that roamed the earth in the post-dinosaur era. “Among the bones we found tools made from stone that were used to either kill the mammoth or to later scavenge the bones.” The excavated tusks of the beast are on display at the history center, along with hundreds of other artifacts.

“When it was alive, these tusks were 10 feet long and weighed about 1,000 pounds each,” Zeimens said. “And the animal stood

as high as there,” he said as he pointed to the 20-foot ceiling.

Short, whose job it is to clean up items that are found, recalls cleaning a buffalo rib from a 1,000-year-old kill site southwest of Lingle. “While I was cleaning it, I could make out scrap marks from a stone tool,” Short said. “Someone had already scraped this bone over a thousand years earlier.”

The efforts of archaeologists like Zeimens, however, are about much more than simply

uncovering artifacts.

“Something that people don’t usually understand is the difference between paleontology and archeology,” Zeimens said. “Paleontologists deal with fossil remains. Archeologists deal with people and cultures. And we don’t have a history until about 12,000 years ago.”

Throughout the years, more than 400 kids have come to help excavate sites, either for pay through grant funds or as volunteers receiving school credit,

Zeimens said.

This year’s activities also mark the 21st year students have helped the longtime archaeologist with his digs.

“They do an excellent job,” Zeimens said.

The digs are open to anyone who shares Zeimens’ enthusiasm for archeology and history. For information on how to participate, call (307) 532-3324 or just visit the Western History Center, located at 2308 on Highway 26, about four miles north of downtown Lingle.

Monday - Friday 9 - 5
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