



# Interpreting the Prehistoric at Lindenmeier

## *Home of Ice Age Man*

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In 1935, 28-year-old Loren Eiseley was a member of the excavation crew at an archaeological dig in a remote area on the high Colorado prairie. He was a poet and a philosopher, but had a keen interest in anthropology. At the time, scientists believed and rigorously defended the theory that ancient humans arose in Asia and Africa, and had been in the new world for only a few thousand years.

Brushing away bits of dirt, Eiseley exposed a piece of a bone, probably from an Ice Age bison. He continued brushing when his keen eye saw something else: a piece of stone embedded in the bone. Looking closer, he realized it was a fluted point made by Folsom man and it had broken

off in an Ice Age animal. He knew immediately this was significant: it proved that humans had inhabited this land at least 11,000 years ago. The discovery made worldwide headlines and turned the scientific community on its head. This proved without a doubt that man had lived and hunted here during the Ice Age. Woolly mammoths, giant sloths, camels, pronghorn, jackrabbits, turtles, and, of course, *Bison antiquus* were all on the menu.

The City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department now owns this globally significant cultural resource: the famed Lindenmeier Archaeological Site (LAS). Encompassing only about three acres, the LAS is part of the 22,000-acre Soapstone Prairie Natural Area. It

is designated a national historic landmark and is the largest Folsom culture site in the western hemisphere in regards to the number of artifacts it contains. A plethora of needles, beads, and stone tools were found by the Smithsonian Institute in the 1930s; but it was the discovery by Loren Eiseley described above of an ancient projectile point lodged in the vertebrae of an Ice Age bison that forever changed the world's perception of early man in North America. When the Smithsonian closed their operations at the site in 1940, they carefully re-buried it to preserve its remaining artifacts. Today, visitors see the same scene as when the Smithsonian researchers first arrived in 1934.

When the City of Fort Collins

Natural Areas Department purchased this land in 2004, there was immediate interest from amateur and professional archaeologists around the world. Under private ownership, the site had no public access. Now publicly owned, people demanded information and access. Staff fielded a range of questions: *How will you protect and preserve this area? When can we get up there and start digging?*

Preview field trips for the public were conducted twice a week in the summers and falls of 2006–2008. Small groups of people strapped into a Suburban bounced slowly over ranch roads, enjoying the massive views and learning about the ecology of the steppe ecosystem. The tours always included a visit to the LAS. During the three years of preview trips, nearly every visitor appreciated the amazing beauty and landscape

Visitors enjoy interpretive signs and artwork at the Lindenmeier Overlook.

of the high steppe and most were extremely interested in visiting the LAS. People's perception of the LAS quickly changed when they became aware that it was not an open dig site as depicted in documentaries and museums. Instead, it is an arroyo with artifacts appearing as if by magic as wind and water cut into the land. In fact, that was how it was discovered by amateur archaeologists Claude and Lynn Coffin and C.K. Collins in 1924. It became clear that the Natural Areas Department needed to provide a viewing place that protected the site from amateur collectors and curious tourists, yet satisfied their strong desire to experience this place.

Working closely with the Fort Collins Museum of Discovery, Colorado State University's Laboratory for Public Archaeology, and Native American Indian groups, the Natural Areas Department's education team carefully crafted a two-day mandatory training in 2009 for all staff and those

volunteer educators who wanted to deliver programs at Soapstone Prairie Natural Area.

Since then, mandatory training for new staff and volunteers has been held annually (now condensed into one day) for interpreters who want to deliver programs at this location. They have access to extensive background information and replicas of artifacts, and can even invite their audiences to try throwing an *atlatyl*, an ancient hunting device. They are also trained in the correct protocol if artifacts are found on their field trips. All artifacts are strictly protected and enforcement efforts remain very high.

Soapstone Prairie is only 26 miles from downtown Fort Collins, but it feels very remote. There are no services on the way or at the site and it takes about an hour and a half to arrive at the north parking lot. Today, visitors make their way up the short accessible trail to the Lindenmeier Overlook. On the



way, they can step on replica woolly mammoth tracks stamped in the concrete. The overlook building fits in with the landscape and is large enough to comfortably accommodate a group of 20 to 30 people, as well as several smaller groups at the same time. There are places to sit and relax and take in the landscape. There are creative interpretive panels depicting scenes from 11,000 to 13,000 years ago that include both humans and wildlife. Interpreters bring real and replicated artifacts, photos of Ice Age animals and the Smithsonian dig, and weave together the many stories of this special place. The Lindenmeier Overlook is now a destination for many people and attendance at cultural history programs is high.

Additionally, Jason LaBelle, director of the Laboratory for Public Archaeology, has conducted field research on the LAS and the surrounding natural area. He and his graduate students have accommodated interested citizens who volunteer for a few days or a week, working and camping on the site. He has also presented several well-attended community programs in Fort Collins about his research and discoveries.

The year 2014 is the 90th anniversary of the Coffins' and Collins' Folsom point discovery and the 80th anniversary of the Smithsonian's first archaeological investigation at Lindenmeier. To mark the occasion, the City of Fort Collins and the Museum of Discovery, along with eager volunteers, will



Visitors learn about research on prehistoric artifacts on a preview field trip to the Lindenmeier Archaeological Site.

present a series of programs about the significance of the site, recreate a 1930s-era field tent with changing displays (such as the director's quarters, cook's tent, or workers' tent) with all the equipment that would have been used, display special exhibits at the museum, and present a four-day symposium featuring professional archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists. (Visit [www.fcgov.com/naturalareas](http://www.fcgov.com/naturalareas) and [www.fcmod.org](http://www.fcmod.org) for updates.)

Through creative storytelling, use of imagination, real and replicated

artifacts, accurate illustrations, depth of knowledge, and a deep passion for the topic, the interpreters, along with the amenities on the site and at the museum, satisfy visitors' desire to experience this place. They cannot walk on the site or touch the sides of the arroyo, but it doesn't matter. They understand it. They appreciate it. And some are deeply moved by it.

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