

# Tribes That (Probably) Used The Vore Buffalo Jump

By Gene Gade

The Cheyenne have the strongest case for using the Vore site out of the six or more tribes that may have procured their groceries there. The evidence for this assertion is partly from the archaeological record. For example, much of the stone found in points and tools at the Vore site was quarried at the so-called "Spanish Diggings" area of east-central Wyoming. For example, the Cheyenne are known to have lived and hunted in both the Black Hills and in the Spanish Diggings areas during the period when there was active use of the Vore sinkhole and they are thought to have quarried stone at the "Diggings." Some arrow points found at the VBJ are consistent in style with those used by the Cheyenne. Inferential evidence of this type is useful, but in the case of the Cheyenne, substantiation of Vore site use can also be gleaned from oral traditions and written accounts.

## Oral and Written History

In the 1980's, a Cheyenne elder and oral historian named John Stands-in-Timber related the story of the Cheyenne tribe to a historian named Margot Liberty. Together they published a book titled *Cheyenne Memories*. Among many interesting details, Stands-In-Timber related how the Cheyenne sometimes trapped antelope in pits. He described one particular pit trap near present Belle Fourche, SD. Then he makes this remarkable statement: "...*Those old men* (elders who were Stands-In-Timber's sources) *were around seventy years of age in 1920. They said the last time the pit* (an antelope trap at Belle Fourche, SD) *had been used was before their time. They began using ones like it when clubs were the only weapons they had and they kept on until after the white man came. There were similar places also where they caught buffalo; one is between Sundance (WY) and Lead (SD). The highway goes through there quite near it...*"

That's almost certainly a reference to Cheyenne use of the Vore site. There was, at one time, a direct road to Sundance from Lead and it passed within a couple hundred feet of the VBJ. If that's a legitimate tribal memory, it indicates that the Cheyenne not only used the Vore site, but that they considered it significant enough to have made it part of their tribal lore for over 200 years!

Historian George Bird Grinnell in his classic book, *The Fighting Cheyenne*, also places the tribe in the valley where the Vore site is located. One of Grinnell's informants was describing how the tribe moved around during one of their conflicts. He said, "...*This left only the southern Cheyenne in the*



**This 1909 photo by Edward Curtis captured the brief, but glorious, period in Cheyenne tribal history in which they were horse-mounted buffalo hunters and warriors**

*camp on the Bear Lodge River and they soon broke camp and moved around the north side of the Black Hills, camping on the Red Paint River at the northwest side of the hills; thence they moved west, camping on the Antelope Pit River where in the early days the Indians caught antelope in pits."* Devils Tower was referred to as The Bear's Lodge by the Cheyenne and some other tribes and what is now known as the Belle Fourche River which flows past the Tower's base was then referred to as the Bear Lodge River. The Red Paint River is now known as the Redwater River which forms the valley and flows within a mile of the Vore site. The Antelope Pit River is now called the Little Missouri. Note that this quotation also documents

that the Cheyenne used pits to trap large game animals during the period when the Vore site was being used. They must have been ecstatic to find a natural pit (the Vore sinkhole) large enough to trap herds of buffalo, right on the interface between the buffalo pasture of the Redwater Valley and the northern Black Hills—where there was water, wood, stone for tools, great sites for processing camps, sacred sites, etc.

Finally, a collector named William Wildshut acquired a remarkable buffalo robe from a Northern Cheyenne in 1925. The robe was very old and was embroidered with porcupine quills as shown at right. A Cheyenne by the name of Limpy told Wildshut that the robe had been the prized possession of a Cheyenne shaman referred to as “The Caller of the Game.” As that name implies, Caller of the Game performed ceremonies using the robe to entice game animals to come and sacrifice themselves to the Cheyenne. Limpy said that the pattern on the robe is a schematic of a circular buffalo jump in the northern Black Hills. In one hunt, Limpy said that when he was a boy (60+ years before) he had seen as many as 300 buffalo driven into the pit. Limpy also told Wildshut that the Cheyenne believed the pit had been created by a cyclone. He said: *“the figures (on the robe) further indicate that as the driven animals neared the pit, the dust raised by their hoofs was caught by the wind and, whirling upward, helped blind and confuse them.”* Wildshut continued: *“According to my informant, the robe played such an important part in the early history of the Cheyenne that it was always given a prominent place in the Sun Dance and several other tribal ceremonies.”*

So far as anyone knows, the Vore site is the only major natural pit trap used to kill buffalo. Therefore, the robe is very probably a schematic depiction of the VBJ.

It’s amazing that the robe even survived to be collected given the fact that several major Cheyenne villages were totally destroyed and burned by the U.S. Army in the 1870’s. Clearly the robe and the place it depicted were very important to the Cheyenne.

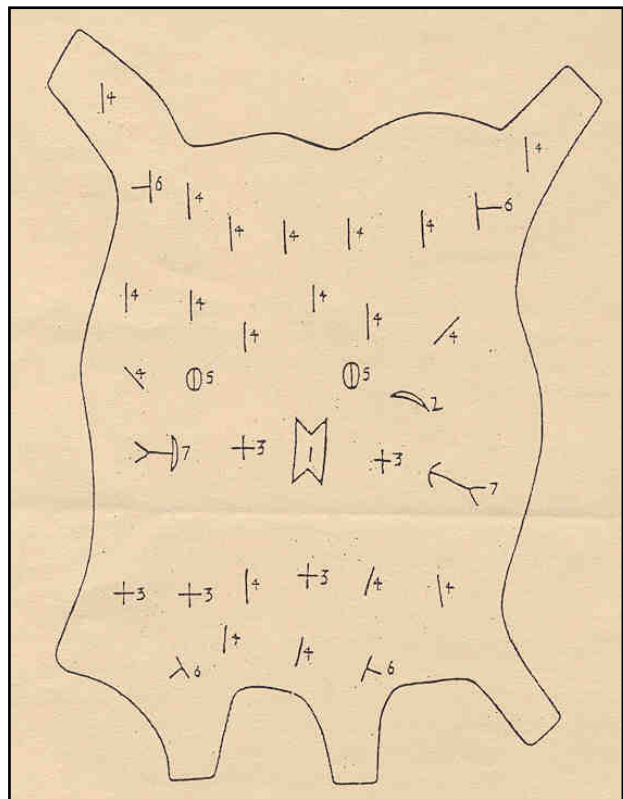
Caller of the Game’s buffalo robe is now in the collection of the Museum of the American Indian, a branch of the Smithsonian Institution. Perhaps some day it will be restored to the Cheyenne. It is hoped that a good photograph or replica can be a part of the display at the Vore Buffalo Jump Research, Education and Cultural Center when it is completed.



An arrow point with a broken tip (possibly Cheyenne) recovered from the Vore site.

Here’s what the numbered symbols on the robe meant according to Limpy:

- “1” represented the natural pit trap,
- “2” and “3” represented the moon and stars respectively.,
- “4” represented buffalo tracks leading toward the pit,
- “5” represented bison hoof prints,
- “6” symbolize the wings of brush or stone of the drive lines that the Indians used to funnel the buffalo toward the pit,
- “7” symbolize the cyclones the Cheyenne believe created the pit.



## Cheyenne — Cultural Odyssey of the Archetype Plains Indians

When Alfred Kroeber, one of the people who created modern anthropology, studied and wrote about the cultures of American Indians during the 1930’s, he used the Cheyenne as the premier example of the buffalo-hunting, tipi-dwelling, horse-riding Plains tribes. In the 1800’s when European-Americans encountered the Cheyenne, they were indeed an archetype of that culture... among the true lords of the prairie. However, it is amazing that historical and cultural evidence including the oral history of the Cheyenne themselves indicate that the tribe only developed and lived the cultural pattern Kroeber described

for a century or so. Before that, the Cheyenne lived for a few decades in sedentary earthlodge villages in what is now North Dakota and farmed in ways very similar to the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara tribes. Even earlier, they lived in wigwam houses in the more forested regions of the western Great Lakes or southern Canada.

The Cheyenne speak a variant of the Algonquian language family which is similar to the languages of many tribes that lived around the Great Lakes. Most references suggest that, a few centuries back, the Cheyenne probably lived in what is now Wisconsin near Lake Michigan. Others place them farther north and west (modern Minnesota) or in Canada, southwest of Hudson's Bay.

### Westward Migration

It is thought that the Cheyenne moved west to the forest-prairie interface in Minnesota and they may have been pressured by the Iroquois or even other Algonquian speakers who had received firearms from the English, French or Dutch colonial traders. Some say that they lived for a generation or so in the Minnesota River valley and were dislodged from there by the Sioux who were also moving west under pressure from better-armed tribes.

There is strong consensus (based on archaeological evidence, and both oral and written history) that the Cheyenne lived and farmed for a time in settled fortified earthlodge villages in southeastern North Dakota. The stream that they are thought to have lived along is still called by a variant of their tribal name, the Sheyenne River. During this late-17th Century period they practiced classic corn, beans and squash agriculture and probably hunted buffalo seasonally. During this period they were frequently attacked by Sioux, Cree and Ojibwa war parties that are known to have completely destroyed at least one Cheyenne village.

### Losing the Corn

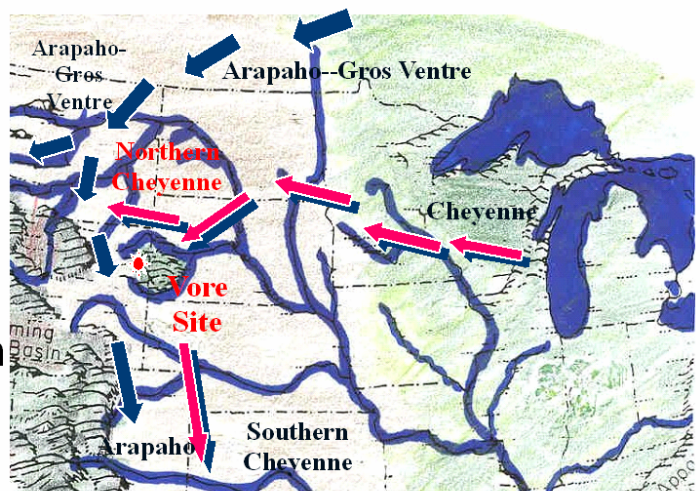
The Cheyenne moved again, this time to the Missouri River, south of the main Mandan and Hidatsa territory and north of the main Arikara settlements (i.e. between Bismark, ND and South Dakota). They also occupied part of the Little Missouri River valley. The farther west they moved, the less they farmed and the more they hunted buffalo. Some time in the early 18th Century they "lost their corn..." completely stopped farming. They moved even farther south and west, including the Black Hills as part of their hunting territory, and pursued the bison year-round. It is during this period that they almost certainly used the Vore Buffalo Jump. Sometime in the mid-to-late 1700's, they acquired horses and rapidly changed into the archetype Plains Indians that Kroeber described.

### Alliances and Splits

The cultural evolution and migration of the Cheyenne was similar to that of the Arapahoe, another Algonquian group displaced from the Great Lakes area. Similar language, history and culture made them natural allies and the Arapahoe very probably came to the Vore site with their Cheyenne partners. Both tribes split in the 1830's with some staying on the northern Plains and the others moving south of the Platte River to eastern Colorado and Kansas, drawn partly by trading opportunities at Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River and Santa Fe trail.

## Ancestors of Cheyenne and Arapahoe came from north & east

Both tribes divided into northern and southern Plains groups



Cheyenne and Arapahoe both spoke an Algonquian language and were usually friends and allies.