

Tribes That (Probably) Used The Vore Buffalo Jump

By Gene Gade

Plains Indian tribes were amazingly dynamic during the three hundred years of Vore Buffalo Jump (VBJ) use. Tribes moved long distances, adopted new life styles, incorporated new technologies, traded and fought with each other, expanded and contracted in size and power. European-Americans were having a profound, though largely indirect, influence on this rapid cultural change. Archaeology at the Vore site will help illuminate a truly fascinating period in the history of North America.

The Verendryes Imperfect Adventure

In the winter of 1742 & '43, the vanguard of the Europeans arrived in the Black Hills area in the persons of French traders Louis and Francois Verendrye. The journals the Verendrye brothers kept on their nearly year-long journey to the west and south of North Dakota's Mandan Indian villages are maddeningly vague about geography and many of their interactions with Indian tribes. Aside from a general desire to find new trading partners and travel routes to the Pacific Ocean, it's clear that the brothers had no idea where they were going when they left and not much more about where they had been when they returned. However, there are important and surprising nuggets of history embedded in their often hazy journal narratives.

For example, nearly all historians believe that the Verendryes skirted the Black Hills and many believe they traveled through eastern Montana and the Powder River basin to the base of the Big Horn Mountains—the first Europeans to do so. Verendrye's sighted mountains they described as "very high," "wooded" and "snow-covered." On their return, the Verendryes buried a lead plate claiming the territory for France on a hilltop at the confluence of the Teton and Missouri Rivers, east of the Black Hills and near modern Pierre, South Dakota. One hundred and seventy years later, school girl discovered this plate inscribed with the Verendrye name and the date, March 30, 1743. The journals and the plate are authentic and they document that the traders were almost certainly in the vicinity of the Vore site and in the company of Indians who were probably using it.

For most of a year the Verendryes moved about the northern Plains from one Indian village to another, generally in the company of tribes they referred to as "*The Horse People*" and "*The Bow People*." (It's not clear whether these were the Cheyenne, Kiowa, Crow or some other tribe, though the first two make most sense to me.)

Contact With The Shoshone

While the Verendryes were traveling with them, the Bow

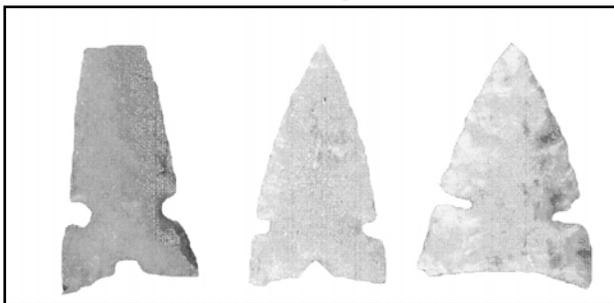


Washakie, respected chief of the Eastern Shoshone, lived a few generations after his people used the Vore Buffalo Jump

People decided to invade the territory of a tribe they called the *Gens du Serpent*— or "Snake People" - who lived near the eastern side of the high mountains. This reference is important because the tribe that we now know as the Shoshone were commonly called "Snake" Indians in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Verendrye journal is the first written documentation that the Shoshone were occupying the Plains east of the Rockies. According to the Verendrye account, the Snake (Shoshone) raided and were feared by most of the other tribes in the region.

Excavation at the Vore Buffalo Jump also suggests that the Shoshone were in **(Continued on next page)**

(Shoshone—continued) the area and that they used the site in the 1700's. Prominent among the projectile points found among the buffalo bones at the VBJ are a group that are shorter and wider than the acutely pointed Kiowa and Apache arrowheads discussed in the previous article in this series. Principal archaeologist at the Vore site, Dr. Charles Reher, indicates that these Vore site artifacts (shown below) are very similar to points found throughout the Intermountain/Great Basin area that are known to be of Shoshonean origin.



Probable Shoshone projectile points from the Vore site

The Verendryes were at the extreme western margin (and represented the last gasp) of French colonialism in America. The brothers were the first and last traders representing France in the area, and they just happened to be in the northern Plains as Shoshone power had peaked and possibly started to decline.

Twenty years after the Verendryes visited the Black Hills area, France lost Canada to the British in the so-called “Seven Years” or “French and Indian” War. In the four decades following the France’s exit from the northern Plains came American Independence, the French Revolution, Napoleon, and the Louisiana Purchase.

Between the French traders and the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Shoshones had been pushed to the west and south by tribes that were bigger, more aggressive and in possession of guns. They had declined from a position of significant regional power, to a nearly destitute condition. The expansion and decline of the Shoshone occurred while the Vore site was being used and part of the story can be illuminated there.

The Shoshone Saga

Anthropologists don’t generally consider the Shoshone to be classic Plains Indians. Their cultural and linguistic affinities are closer to those of the Great Basin and the high country between the Front Range of the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada. The Shoshone tongue is derived from the Numic branch of the Uto-Aztecan language family which includes 30 languages and numerous dialects. Their closest relatives are mountain-basin tribes such as the Ute, Piute and Bannock and the Comanche who branched from the Shoshone and ended up on the southern Plains. (More distant relatives include the Hopi, and some tribes in southern California and Mexico.)

The Great Basin Shoshoneans were usually dispersed

in small subsistence clan or extended family groups that roamed the mountains and deserts, hunting and gathering whatever seasonal resources their environments provided... small game and birds, roots, berries, pine nuts, and, in places where they were available, salmon or other fish and larger animals such as bighorn sheep or antelope. The Basin Shoshone lived primarily in brush, grass or rock shelters or small tents. They often gathered in larger groups in the spring and fall for ceremonies, social interactions, decision-making and communal hunts.

There are numerous sub-bands of the Shoshone proper scattered from southern Utah into Wyoming and Idaho. However, the groups of concern here are the Northern and Eastern Shoshone who came over the mountains into Western Montana and Eastern Wyoming to hunt buffalo. In the process, these Shoshones adopted many aspects of the Plains culture.

Horse Power

Shoshones were among the first of the northern mountain/plains tribes to acquire large numbers of horses. Probably they got some of them through their Comanche relatives and others in trades or raids directly from the Spanish in New Mexico. (Meriweather Lewis noted Spanish brands and bridles on some of the Shoshone horses he observed in western Montana in 1805).

In any case, horses gave the Shoshone a short-term advantage over tribes in the northern Plains that had few, if any horses. The new power allowed them to expand out of the mountains and basins into the Plains and compete for the huge resource represented by the buffalo herds and to adopt some of the Plains culture that went with it...ex. tipis, a version of the Sun Dance, the practices of counting coup and taking scalps, etc. The Eastern Shoshone expanded into eastern Wyoming at least as far as the Black Hills. Their northern cousins, such as the Lemhi Shoshone, controlled much of southern Montana. Accounts gained from Blackfeet and Flathead sources indicate that and Shoshones raided other tribes as far north as Alberta and Saskatchewan in the early 1700's. This regional dominance was relatively short-lived—probably from about 1730 to 1770—but it was in place when the Verendryes visited the area. The Shoshones almost certainly used the Vore site a number of times during the period.

Guns Change The Balance

While trade did provide the huge benefit of horses to the Shoshone, the Spanish were unwilling to provide firearms to Indians. The trade corporations in the U.S. and Canada had no such policies. The French, Dutch, British and later, Anglo-Americans, traded guns to their Indian allies in the Great Lakes region generations before they were available on the Plains. (The main “stick” that encouraged former woodland tribes like the Cheyenne, Arapaho and Sioux to move west was the aggression of gun-toting tribes like the Chippewa. The main “carrots” were bison, horses and a huge **(Continued on next page)** →

