

# The VBJ and the Apache Odyssey

By Gene Gade

*“Apaches? Living in the Black Hills? Using the Vore Buffalo Jump? You must be mistaken! Apaches live in New Mexico and Arizona!”* That’s a common response when interpreters list Apaches as among the tribes who used the Vore site. The reaction is not surprising. After all, anyone who remembers anything about the “Indian Wars” of the 1800’s may well recall names of Apache leaders...Cochise, Geronimo, Victorio, Mangas Coloradas, and others. These Apaches gained a reputation as ferocious raiders who fought periodic hit-and-run battles with the US Army for decades. Perhaps because their conflict continued into the late-1880’s, a decade after

the Plains tribes were subdued, these images and stereotypes are indelible for many people when they hear the word, *Apache*. In these accounts, Apaches are always strongly associated with the Southwest mountains and deserts, never the Black Hills.

## The Great Odyssey

However, it is less commonly known that the Apaches, along with their cultural and linguistic relatives, the Navajos, accomplished one of the most dramatic north-to-south migrations known in North America. Their journey originated in subarctic Alaska and western Canada and wound up over 3,000 miles away in the southwestern US and northern Mexico. That’s a radical relocation. The ancestors of the Apache and Navajo had adapted well to lands of immense conifer forests, huge rivers and lakes, millions of bogs and minus-60-degree winters and had lived there for millennia.

Yet, they abruptly left, migrated through the perilous territories of numerous other tribes and ended up in lands of heat and aridity. Their new, and current, home includes the wild mountains, grasslands and deserts that are now parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Oklahoma and the adjacent Mexican states of Sonora, Chihuahua and Coahuila.

This exodus of the Apachean people from the subarctic apparently occurred a little over 1,000 years ago. However, by the time the history of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was written, their adaptation to the Southwest environments was so thorough that they, and most of the people they came in contact with, assumed that they had been in the hot, dry south for a very long time.

## Why Did They Migrate?

What could possibly have motivated such a radical movement? Clearly, the folks who became Apaches were not just proto “snowbirds”, making a seasonal journey to seek a milder winter. When they left their northern homeland, they had no clue of what awaited them in the south. Moreover, their incredible journey apparently occurred fairly slowly, in small groups and over five or six hundred years. Some groups moved along the eastern side of the Rockies. Others, probably the Navajos, passed through the Columbia Plateau and Great Basin. At least one sub-group adapted completely to the buffalo-hunting lifestyle and remained on the Great Plains.

The parent groups of Indians who did not migrate are collectively known as Athapaskan or Athabaskans. They still live as hunter-gathering people, spread thinly over an immense area of Boreal (a.k.a. Taiga or Northern Coniferous) forests in Alaska and northern Canada. The language of the Apaches and Navajos

remains quite similar to that of their relatives in the far north. Some of the Indian groups of coastal British Columbia, Washington and Oregon are also Athapaskan speakers, but their languages are not quite as similar, indicating that the coastal Athapaskan-speakers probably separated from the parent culture somewhat earlier.

The motivation for the exodus from what are now east-central Alaska and the Yukon Territories remains uncertain. However, an intriguing and compelling theory has emerged as the likely cause. Over the past couple of decades geologists have documented that two major natural disasters devastated huge areas of Athapaskan homeland, rendering their already difficult subsistence impossible.

Specifically, two of the most massive volcanic eruptions that have occurred in North America the past



**Projectile points like this one found at the Vore site suggest that the Plains Apaches used the buffalo jump**

two millennia may well have triggered the epic emigration. The eruptions covered thousands of square miles with thick layers of ash, probably killing the vegetation and wild animals and making the area essentially uninhabitable for years. For the Athapaskan people who survived these events, the choice may have literally been to leave or die.

## The Big Bangs — Athapaskan Style

The locus of the eruptions is now known as Mount Churchill, an Alaskan stratovolcano that is part of the Wrangell-St Elias range. The explosive mountain is located about 30 miles west of the Alaska-Yukon border and approximately 75 miles inland from the Gulf of Alaska. About 1,900 years ago, an eruption created a huge lobe of ash that extended more than 250 miles north. The plume was probably catastrophic beyond the current Dawson City region in Yukon Territory and eastern Alaska. This first eruption corresponds in time to the migration of some Athapaskan speakers through British Columbia to the Pacific Coast. (See maps)

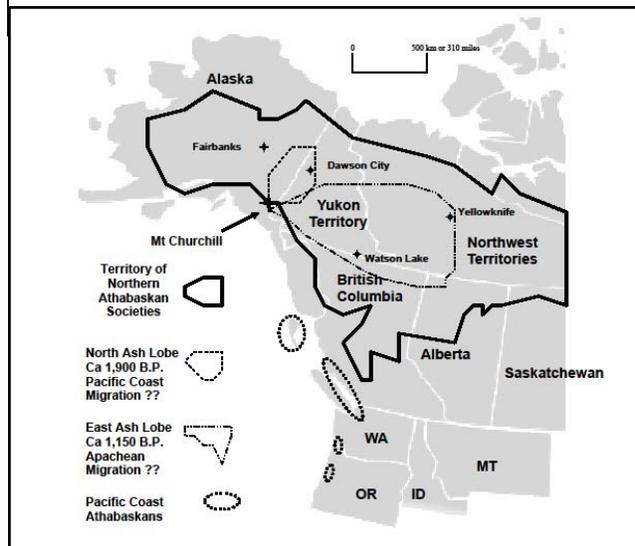
An even more massive eruption occurred about 1,150 years ago and essentially blanketed the southern Yukon as well as parts of northern British Columbia, Alberta and into Northwest Territories. This second plume resulted in ash deposits extending over 500 miles east of the volcano.

The explosions released energy equivalent to the detonation of 30 to 40 thermonuclear bombs! In all, more than twelve cubic miles of ash were ejected by these explosions...about 50 times the volume from the 1980 eruption of Mt Saint Helens. The total area impacted by the ash is at least 230,000 square miles! Enormous volumes of toxic gases were also ejected. The ash included tiny shards of obsidian and other volcanic particulates that, along with the noxious fumes, would have damaged vegetation and caused eye, lung and skin problems for mammals, including humans and the species they hunted. On the "Volcanic Explosive Index" used by geologists to categorize the magnitude of eruptions, the Mount Churchill events are thought to have greatly exceeded a Category 6. Of the 4,320 eruptions categorized for the last 10,000 years, only eight scored 6 or higher. (The famous Indonesian volcano, Krakatoa, was also rated a Category 6).

Cataclysms of that magnitude would be enough to convince almost anyone to seek a new home. The disasters are still part of the oral tradition

among Athapaskans of that region. (See sidebar on Page 5) The second eruption occurred at the time that the Apache migration probably began.

Linguistic studies estimate that, based on the amount of change that has occurred between the languages of the Apaches and Navajo compared with the Alaska-Yukon Athapaskans, the division of the two groups was probably around 1,200 years ago. It's probable that they took six centuries to complete the emigration. Apacheans began to appear in the Southwest about 600 years ago. Thus, the rough language-based measure supports the other timelines and the hypothesis that volcanic disasters triggered the exodus.



## Why & How Did Apaches Go So Far South?

The volcano may have been the initial shove that started the movement of the Athapaskans, but why did they continue moving so far south? John W. Ives, an anthropologist from the University of Alberta, has presented evidence from several anthropological sub-disciplines that shed light on the question.

Ives points out that along the transition or ecotone between the Boreal Forest and the northern Plains, there are large areas of "Aspen Parkland" and meadow. Even in early historic times, these parklands and meadows were populated by huge herds of wood buffalo and elk. The profusion of these animals only increased as they moved south on to the Plains. Such abundant game would have been greatly attractive to the Athapaskans, who were used to low and dispersed populations of moose, woodland caribou, fish and small game. (Continued on page 6)

## Volcanoes in Athapaskan Oral Traditions

Natural disasters of a magnitude that transform entire cultures and trigger major migrations will almost certainly become part of the oral traditions of the people involved. However, over centuries of retelling, details get lost or modified, and stories that begin as recounts of specific historical events tend to move toward the realm of more generalized myth and legend. That transformation does not imply that myths and legends are false. The underlying truth and wisdom is often retained in lore and is probably more important culturally than the original historic details.

In the 1862 to 1882 period, a Catholic missionary named Emile Petitot recorded some of the oral traditions of Athapaskan Indians he ministered to in the Mackenzie River valley — about 500 miles east of Mount Churchill and near the margin of the east lobe of the White River Ash. Petitot did not know about Mt Churchill or the ash deposits, but he documented that tales of volcanic catastrophes were prominent in the origin myths of the eastern Athapaskans and that they were used to explain the diversification of languages and the migrations of “The People”.

Following is an example of an Athapaskan story collected by Petitot. The legend titled “Collapse of the Mountain” describes how men had built a tall structure on high ground to avoid floods.

*“...Then”, continues the story, “when they had raised their fort very high, they suddenly heard from the side of the mountain a terrible voice which mocked them and said, laughingly, “Your language is no longer the same; your language is completely changed!” it said to them, laughing in a sinister way.*

*The men trembled with fear. At the same time, the coal mines that smoked around them caught fire, the rocks exploded, the mountain opened up, and out of it came an enormous fire. Then it exploded with a great blast, and in its place was nothing but a vast plain of rubble, covered with smoking debris.*

*As for the men, stupefied and full of fear, they drifted away in all directions, completely unable to understand each other.*

*This collapse of the high ground happened in the west...”*

Father Petitot collected several other tales from the region in which volcanic eruptions, “in the beginning”, were the central feature. In addition to descriptions of the mountain exploding, collapsing and causing massive environmental damage, there are several references to the eruptions resulting in dispersal of people and major changes in their language. Almost certainly these so-called myths have their roots in actual events that forced the start of the Apachean migration.

### Source

D. Wayne Moodie, A.J.W. Catchpole and Kery Abel. 1992. *Northern Athapaskan Oral Traditions and the White River Volcano*. Ethnohistory. Vol. 39. No. 2 (spring 1992). Duke University Press. Pp. 148-171.

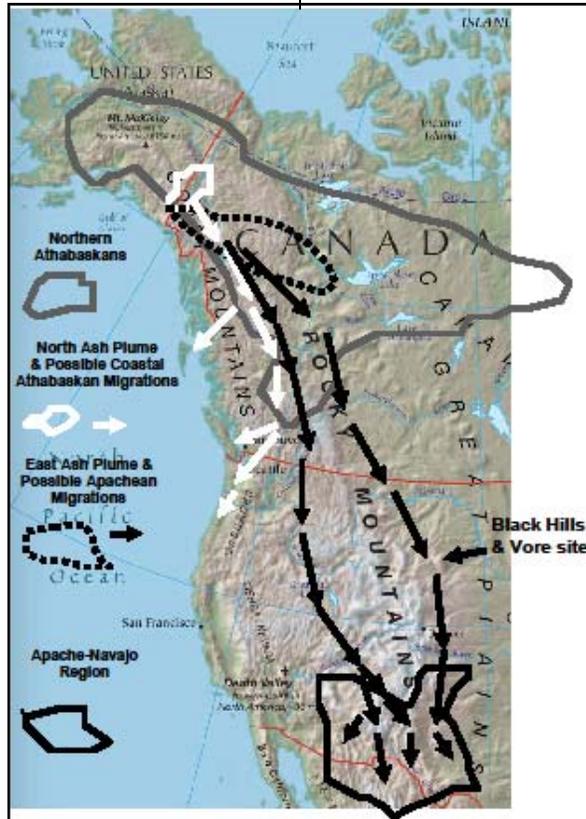
Ives also cites points made earlier by anthropologist Thomas Kehoe that the migrating Athapaskans already had a long tradition of big game hunting, including some communal hunts of caribou. Writes, Ives, *“Game drives were conducted in both open and forested environments, for single species including Barren Ground and woodland caribou, mountain sheep and goats, musk-oxen and wood bison, or mixtures of species (e.g. woodland caribou, moose and bears at once). These communal strategies involved intercepts (often at narrows, on water bodies or river crossings), drives down peninsulae or toward declivities (with waiting hunters), drives into drift fences with snares and drives into wing and corral structures. Both corrals and wings usually featured snares...elaborate communal hunting knowledge extended from Alaska to Hudson Bay in historic times and there is every reason to think that this knowledge had ancient roots.”* Further, Ives states that some of the eastern Apachean speakers continued communal hunts in historic times, including even the Navajos, who were known to have conducted communal antelope hunts into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Therefore, says Ives, the Athapaskans who fled the eastern lobe of the volcanic devastation were already familiar with and predisposed toward communal hunts. Moving on to the parklands and northern Plains did not represent as much of a dramatic cultural change as one might think. Ives thinks the Athapaskans probably adapted relatively easily to the bison-hunting lifestyle and eased into a niche on the Plains in three ways: entering alliances such as those between the Sarsi and the Blackfeet or the Kiowa and Plains Apache; hunting in more marginal areas not heavily used by the tribes already established in the Plains; and using buffalo jumps and pounds that were not being frequently used by other tribes.

From the Aspen Parklands south, there are

increasing numbers of buffalo “pounds” and jumps. Indeed, Ives says, “the socioeconomic geography was dominated by a system of pounds and jumps.” Climate change and development of new varieties of domestic

crops simultaneously allowed agriculture to expand farther north (into the Missouri River valley and the Colorado Plateau, for example). It is known that a trade network existed among many of the tribes. Products from bison kills were often used to trade with farming tribes for their corn and other produce. So, the southward migration of the Athapaskans may also have been stimulated somewhat by these opportunities to trade. In summary, it was probably a carrot and stick situation that motivated the Apachean Athapaskans to move south...the stick being the volcanoes that destroyed their former homeland...the carrot being the great buffalo



resources and associated trade available to them on the western Plains.

## Plains Apaches

At least one group of great Athapaskan migration adapted so well as buffalo-hunting culture that they remained on the Central Great Plains and are known as the Plains Apache. Forensic evidence and oral traditions indicate that they lived in the Black Hills as recently as 300 years ago, and probably used the Vore Buffalo Jump. Though they were not closely related, the Plains Apaches allied themselves with the Kiowas...whose tribal trajectory was also from the north and west to the southern Plains. The two tribes lived and hunted together for generations and are sometimes referred to as the Kiowa-Apaches. The oral traditions of the Kiowa-Apaches, whose reservation is now in Oklahoma, make specific references to the Black Hills and Devils Tower. A similar alliance between an Athapaskan-speaking tribe called the Sarsi and the Blackfeet

also occurred in Alberta during historic times. Willingness to form alliances like these were probably a factor that allowed Apacheans to exist in what otherwise was probably very hostile territory.

## Plains Apaches and the VBJ

Dr. Charles Reher, Principal Archaeological Investigator at the Vore Buffalo Jump, believes that Plains Apaches and their Kiowa allies are almost certainly amongst the users of the Vore site. Among the several lines of evidence that support this assertion are the distinctive arrow points (small, triangular-shaped, usually with concave bases, with or without side notches) found at the site, which Reher believes to be of Kiowa-Apache origin.

There is very little doubt that some Apaches lived in the Black Hills region while the Vore site was being used. Ives suggests that the Apachean use of the Black Hills may have been an “outlier” for them.

However, regional archaeology suggests that Plains Apaches were resident in the Black Hills area for more than a century.

In 1960, archaeologist James Gunnerson, published a paper which described what he called “The Dismal River Complex” in western Nebraska. Similar sites have since been excavated in neighboring regions of South Dakota, Colorado and Kansas. Gunnerson and others have since documented that the people responsible for the artifacts he discovered were almost certainly Plains Apaches. The distinctive triangular arrow points were one of the characteristics of the Dismal River people. Moreover, Vore site evidence suggests that the Plains Apaches were in the region until at least the early 1700’s.

Noted scholar of Indian history, George Hyde, wrote in considerable detail about Apache migrations. Hyde documented that the Apacheans were not just a minor group slinking along the margins of the buffalo country. They, and their allies, were the dominant Plains tribe from the Black Hills to the prairies of west Texas and eastern New Mexico for several hundred years. The Plains Apaches also had substantial trade relationships with their kin in New Mexico and with the Pawnees and Arikara of Nebraska and South Dakota.

Plains Apaches were eventually displaced from the Black Hills by other tribes such as the

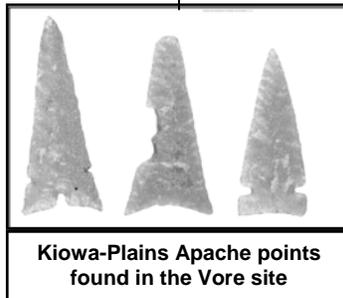
Cheyenne and Lakota, which is another factor in their continued move to the south.

In addition to archaeological evidence, linguistic analysis and oral traditions, there are very early references by the Spanish to Apache groups on the Great Plains. The Conquistador, Fernando Coronado, in his official report to the King of Spain, specifically refers to and describes Apachean people he encountered in Kansas in October, 1541. Francisco de Escobar, traveling with another conquistador, Don Juan de Onate y Salazar, in 1605, also referred to Apaches. Escobar described them as “living among the cattle” (*i.e. buffalo*), dwelling in movable hide tents and using dogs to transport their material possessions. The Apaches had probably developed this type of Plains life style over a period of five hundred years or more as they moved ever southward.

Apaches were not the only people who made the transition to a bison-based economy and culture during the

period. Speakers of the Siouan language group, Crows, Assiniboine, Hidatsa and the Lakota themselves all moved from other habitats and lifestyles on to the Plains, as did the Algonquian-speaking Cheyenne and Arapaho and the sub-arctic Cree and Salteaux people of central Canada. The “stick” in several of those cases was probably a result of Europeans and Americans arming their enemies to the east. However, the “carrot” was always that incredible resource, the seemingly inexhaustible buffalo herds.

Coming full circle then, yes, Apachean people did migrate through the Black Hills while the Vore Buffalo Jump was being used. Those distinctive triangular arrow points found there are strong evidence that they probably used the Vore site.



### Primary Sources

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