

Fossils & the Folsom Cowboy

by Preston, Douglas

Natural History 1997

Feb 1997 v106 n1 p16(6)

In September 1908, a cowboy named George McJunkin, foreman of the Crowfoot Ranch in eastern New Mexico, encountered a fencing problem. A month before, a huge cloudburst had dropped thirteen inches of rain on nearby Johnson Mesa. The resultant flash flood tore a ten-foot gully in the bottom of Wild Horse Arroyo, leaving a gap under a barbed-wire fence. (The same flash flood had swept through the nearby town of Folsom, killing seventeen people.) While pondering how to fix the fence, McJunkin noticed some freshly exposed bones at the bottom of the trench. He climbed down into the arroyo and, using his pliers, dug out a couple of bones, which he tied behind his saddle and brought back to the ranch house. He placed them in his room on a mantelpiece "museum," where they took up residence next to rocks, minerals, arrowheads, and an ancient Indian skull. Later, when McJunkin passed by Wild Horse Arroyo, he would sometimes dig out some more bones or a skull and add them to his collection.

McJunkin was not a typical cowboy. An avid reader of scientific books he knew enough to realize that the bones came from an extinct animal. Although they resembled those of a bison, they were much larger. He figured the bones must be very old, because they were almost thirteen feet below the surface and partly mineralized. He felt that the "bone pit," as he called it, was important and should be reported.

McJunkin wrote to a man in Las Vegas, New Mexico, who knew about bones, but could not persuade him to visit the site. He gave detailed directions to the bone pit to Carl Schwachheim, a blacksmith in the town of Raton, who collected bones. Schwachheim was interested but never had the time to make the two-day horseback ride to the remote site, thirty miles away. McJunkin also described the bone pit to Fred Howarth, the local banker who had once dug up a woolly mammoth. But Howarth was also averse to the idea of a two-day trip. The bone pit continued to slumber in obscurity.

We know very little about George McJunkin. Although a skillful cowboy, he was not captivated by the cattle business. His great interest was science. His saddle was rigged with two scabbards: in the left, he carried his rifle; in the right, his telescope, with which he kept track of cattle by day and studied the heavens by night. In his room at the ranch were a small but treasured library of encyclopedias, books about geology and surveying, and a tattered Bible. He was a man out of place in his world. McJunkin had another reason to feel out of place: he was an African-American, born a slave on a ranch in Midway, Texas, in 1851. His name then was, simply, George. His father--whom we know only by the nickname Shoeboy--had bought his own freedom and was saving up to buy the freedom of his son when Union soldiers arrived at the ranch to tell them the slaves were free.

George spent three more years on the ranch. At seventeen, he got a job on a cattle drive to Dodge City, Kansas, and adopted the surname of his former owner, John McJunkin. He worked cattle for various outfits, finally ending up in the valley of the Dry Cimarron River in northeastern New Mexico. He fell in love with the Cimarron valley. New Mexico had sided with the Union, and because of its racially mixed population of Hispanics, Anglos, and Indians, a black man was more readily accepted. The Cimarron valley seems to have taken on an almost religious significance to him; he often referred to it as "my promised land."

One of the ranchers he worked for asked McJunkin to train his two sons to ride and rope. In exchange, the boys taught McJunkin how to read from their schoolbooks, and he became a voracious reader. By the time McJunkin became foreman of the nearby Crowfoot Ranch, he was considered to be one of the top cowboys in the county, and in his new position he had a number of white and Hispanic cowboys working under him. He was particularly noted for his ability to castrate cattle as cleanly as a surgeon, without causing excessive blood loss and infections--a skill he had learned from a doctor he once worked for. McJunkin also taught himself to use a compass transit. White ranch owners called on him to survey and mediate boundary disputes and submitted to his judgment. When horse races took place, his honesty was held in such high repute that he was asked to hold the betting pool. Because he could speak Spanish, he sometimes acted as a bridge between the Anglo and Hispanic communities.

When McJunkin encountered Jim Crow laws and prejudice, his cowboy friends backed him up. One time he and a white cowboy named Gay Mellon decided to have a fancy lunch at the Eklund Hotel in Clayton, New Mexico. When they were told that the hotel did not serve Negroes, Mellon removed his long-barreled Colt .45 from its holster and pointed it at the manager's heart. "Your policy has just been changed," he said quietly.

Nothing came of McJunkin's letters and conversations reporting the fossil bones. The years passed, McJunkin grew old, and the Crowfoot Ranch was sold. He moved from the main ranch house to an isolated line camp on the ranch. His cabin was struck by lightning and burned to the ground, and McJunkin lost everything: the fossils, his telescope, scientific books, and Indian skulls. He became ill and moved into a room at the Folsom Hotel. Eventually, he could not get out of bed and sustained himself on raw bootleg whiskey. His friends rigged up some rubber tubing that allowed him to sip the bottle from his bed.

Near the end, McJunkin's friends took turns sitting at his bedside, telling stories and reading him passages from the Old Testament. One man recalled that every one of them had been "taught about horses and cattle, about roping, about reading brands, by McJunkin." On January 21, 1922, McJunkin asked to hear the passage from Deuteronomy about the Promised Land. Then he said, "I'm going where all good riggers go" and died.

Some four months after McJunkin's death, Carl Schwachheim and Fred Howarth decided to visit the McJunkin bone pit. Howarth, the banker, had purchased one of the first motorcars in Raton, and suddenly the arduous horseback trip became an easy,

afternoon's drive. Schwachheim and Howarth found the bones just where McJunkin said they would be and filled a feed bag with them. That evening, the two men went through several books trying to figure out what kind of animal the bones were from. They decided they were from an extinct elk or bison, but as Raton was hundreds of miles from the nearest museum or university, four years passed before they had an opportunity to show the bones to a scientist.

In January 1926, Howarth had to deliver some cattle to a stockyard in Denver. He hired Schwachheim to look after the cattle on the train trip, and in Denver the two men carried the sack of bones over to the Colorado Museum of Natural History (now the Denver Museum of Natural History). They were ushered into the office of Jesse D. Figgins, the museum's director, and unwittingly stepped into the center of one of the most controversial scientific questions of the day: the antiquity of human beings in the New World.

At the time, Ales Hrdlicka, curator of the Smithsonian's Division of Physical Anthropology, dominated the field of anthropology. In the nineteenth century, many unsupported claims had been advanced "proving" the Indians had been in the New World for tens and even hundreds of thousands of years. But by Hrdlicka's time, a powerful reaction against such claims had developed. Hrdlicka became the leader of the skeptics, undertaking a crusade to debunk what he considered bad science. His view, based on skull morphology, was that Indians had arrived in the New World no earlier than 1,000 B.C. When any unfortunate archeologist made an assertion to the contrary, Hrdlicka reacted so vigorously that he sometimes ruined the career of his target. By 1925, the atmosphere was such that most archeologists were too intimidated to make a report. The subject of early humans in America was effectively taboo. In the process, Hrdlicka made some bitter enemies. One of them was Figgins, who had undergone a scathing attack from Hrdlicka over a site Figgins had excavated in Texas. (Figgins later wrote in a letter that he was "suffering" to prove Hrdlicka wrong.)

Figgins was deeply interested in the fossils that Schwachheim and Howarth dumped on his desk. He recognized them as being an extinct Pleistocene bison (now called *Bison bison antiquus*). He suspected the bone pit might be a prehistoric kill site--and might offer just the proof he had been looking for to take down the arrogant Hrdlicka. Figgins organized an excavation of the pit, hiring his son, Frank Figgins, and Carl Schwachheim to direct the work. They uncovered skeleton after skeleton--mostly intact, all from a species of giant bison that had been extinct for 10,000 years. They also unearthed beautifully knapped spear points, with a unique bifacial fluting, loose in the matrix.

Figgins suggested that these prehistoric bison had been killed by human hunters. Hrdlicka responded with derision: the artifacts had not been found in situ; they could have rolled into the dig from the surface or washed into the site at a later time. On July 14, 1926, Frank Figgins found the "long-sought" spear point in situ, removed it still embedded in matrix, and sent the block to the Colorado Museum for further analysis. Figgins published the historic discovery in *Natural History* magazine in 1927, and even paid Hrdlicka a courtesy call to discuss the evidence with him personally. Hrdlicka was not satisfied. He

criticized Figgins for not inviting other scientists to the site to see the point in the ground--the subtle implication being that fraud could have taken place.

On August 29, 1927, Carl Schwachheim found, one of the distinctive Folsom points embedded in matrix between the ribs of a bison skeleton. Still smarting from Hrdlicka's criticism, Figgins ordered the find covered up and the next day fired off telegrams to various colleagues around the country. Three preeminent scientists made the arduous trip to the site. They were Barnum Brown, the great paleontologist at the American Museum of Natural History; Frank H. H. Roberts, Jr., a brilliant archeologist from the Smithsonian Institution; and Alfred Vincent Kidder, who had established the entire cultural sequence of the Anasazi Indians. The covering was removed, and Brown carefully cleared the matrix from one side of the point without dislodging it. It was a fluted point just like the others. Here, finally, was convincing evidence that human beings had been in the New World for at least 10,000 years. These early bison hunters were named the Folsom people, after the nearby town.

So entrenched was the opposition, however, that when Brown, Roberts, and Kidder reported on the discovery at the next American Anthropological Association meeting, they were greeted with an uneasy skepticism. Not even the editors of Scientific American were immune to the climate of intimidation that Hrdlicka had fostered. In the summer of 1928, when Harold J. Cook, a curator at the Colorado Museum of Natural History, published a report on the Folsom discovery in Scientific American, the magazine printed a boxed statement at the beginning of the article stating that "the editor disclaims all responsibility" for "claims concerning the proof of the antiquity of man in America."

Further painstaking excavations by a joint American Museum of Natural History-Colorado Museum expedition at the bone pit finally convinced the world that this mass of bison skeletons was a prehistoric kill site. The Folsom hunters had evidently driven a bison herd to the head of a boxed valley, where the animals milled about in confusion. The hunters then heaved a bunch of spears into the herd and backed off, waiting to see which animals died. There were more than twenty-seven skeletons--an unusually large Folsom kill--and most were still intact. The hunters left behind many of their spear points still embedded in the bisons' flesh.

McJunkin's bone pit was one of the most important archeological discoveries made in America, and it caused a permanent shift in the prevailing paradigm. All of a sudden, archeologists had another 7,000 years of human history to account for. The find also made the search for early Americans respectable again, and it provided a time span that was sufficient to explain the bewildering diversity of languages and customs of Native American tribes. Once such a shift occurs, a flood of new discoveries and a reevaluation of older ones often follow. In the two decades after the Folsom find, dozens of Paleo-Indian sites came to light, and papers came pouring out of museums and universities across the country. The fluted Folsom points had been turning up for years--only nobody had recognized them for what they were. The Folsom find led directly to the discovery of an even older culture, the Clovis mammoth hunters, who were the immediate ancestors of the Folsom people. Hrdlicka found himself increasingly isolated, and yet the grumpy old

warlord of physical anthropology would not admit his error. When the association of human artifacts with Pleistocene mammoths, horses, camels, and bison could no longer be denied, Hrdlicka suggested that these animals had become extinct far more recently than was supposed. Like the Swiss zoologist and geologist Louis Agassiz, who went to his deathbed denying Darwin's theory of evolution, Hrdlicka never accepted the antiquity of human beings in the New World.

Today, Folsom and its Clovis predecessor remain the oldest generally accepted cultural complexes in the New World. Claims of older sites have been advanced, but these are controversial or have been discredited. Now, any report of a pre-Clovis site is likely to be greeted with skepticism and even hostility--a situation not unlike that which existed prior to 1927. (One archeologist told me that he hoped to God he wouldn't stumble on a pre-Clovis site, saying it could easily "ruin" his career.) It would seem that if human beings reached the New World before Clovis, there were mighty few of them.

Not one scientific publication about the Folsom discovery mentioned McJunkin. *Natural History* and *Scientific American* both gave Howarth and Schwachheim full credit for discovering the bone pit. Although McJunkin's legend did not die, by the 1960s many archeologists assumed that the persistent story of the ex-slave turned cowboy-scientist was no more than a colorful myth.

Then, George Agogino, a Paleo-Indian archeologist at Eastern New Mexico University, became curious about the persistent tale. He went to Folsom and, through interviews with local ranchers, cowboys, and townspeople, pieced together the McJunkin story. Indeed, he found that one of the largest gravestones in the Folsom cemetery was McJunkin's. Half a century after his death, McJunkin was still held in high regard by the citizens of Folsom, who, while knowing little about the scientific revolution he had caused, remembered with great affection the remarkable black cowboy with the telescope, bones, and scientific books.