

DISCOVERING A 12,000-YEAR-OLD HOUSE • THE ENIGMAS OF CASAS GRANDES • A MEGAFAUNAL MYSTERY

SPRING 2004

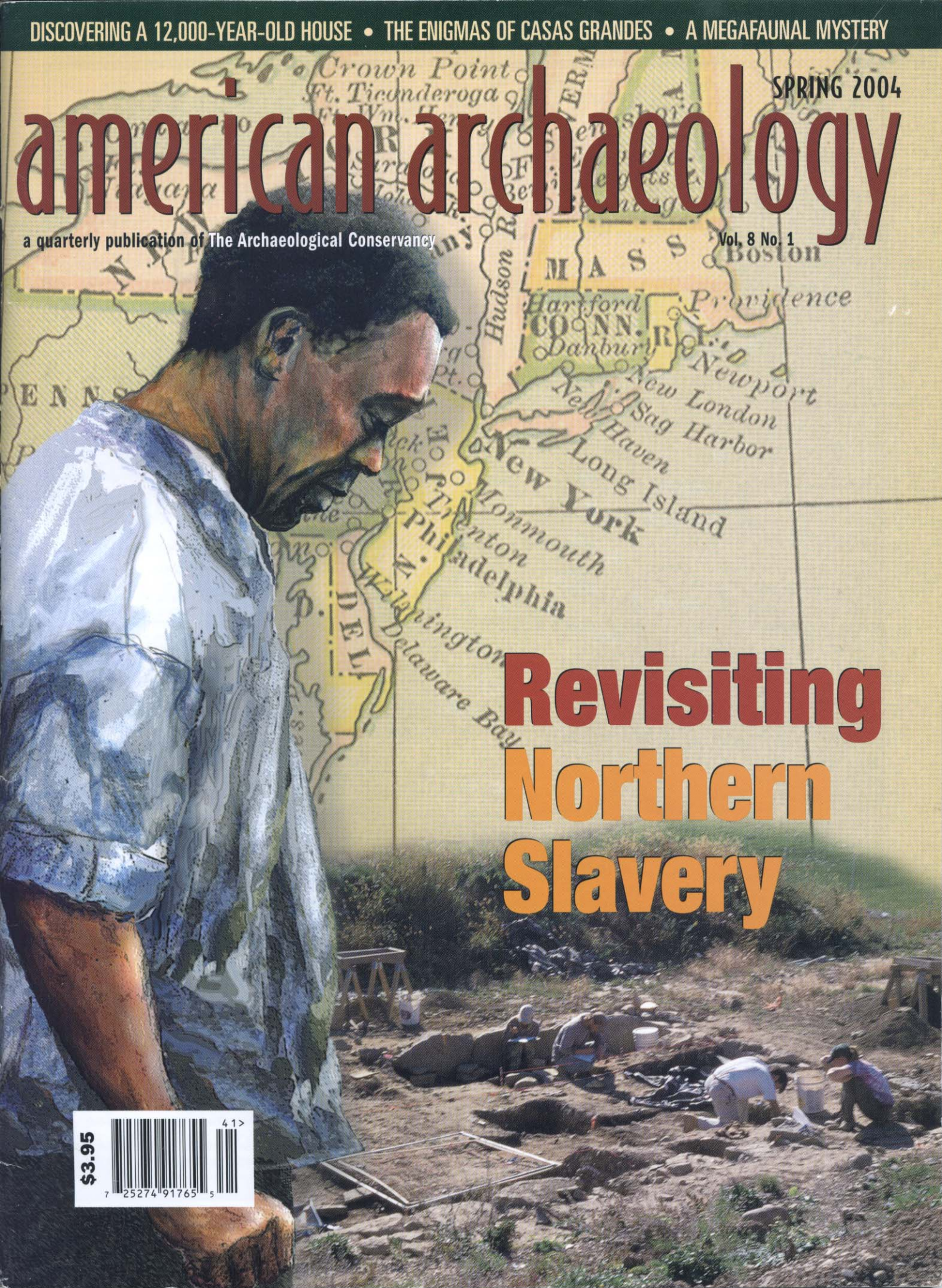
american archaeology

a quarterly publication of The Archaeological Conservancy

Vol. 8 No. 1

Revisiting Northern Slavery

\$3.95



This Very Old House

The Folsom people were believed to be mobile hunter-gatherers who roamed the Great Plains. But the discovery of an ancient Folsom house in southwestern Colorado challenges that notion.

By Catherine Dold

Standing on top of Tenderfoot Mountain, a flat-topped mesa in southwestern Colorado, it's easy to guess why ancient peoples might have frequented this site. The 360-degree view of the river valley below and the distant snow-capped peaks allows for easy spotting of game and people, a definite survival benefit. It's also a great vantage point for keeping an eye on the weather; thunderheads rolling toward the valley can be spotted from 40 miles away. And due to the oddities of local weather patterns, in winter the exposed mesa top is actually warmer than the valley below.

It's also easy to understand why archaeologists never explored the site very thoroughly in the past. Strong seasonal winds have scoured the surface of the mesa for centuries, leaving behind only a thin crust of dirt and dust on top of the 25 million-year-old volcanic rock. At first glance, there would seem to be few places with soil deep enough to hide ancient tools or other evidence of past lives.

The addition of some very modern tools to the mesa top recently turned that notion on its head, however. Four years ago, yet another communications tower was scheduled to be built on top of the mesa, joining the cluster of cell phone, radio, and police towers that now serve the town of Gunnison below. Mark Stiger, an archaeologist at Western State College, which sits just below the mesa and owns the land, decided to come up for a look before the area was disturbed any further by construction.

"All of a sudden I saw a Folsom point on the ground," Stiger recalls of his walk across the mesa in 2000. "I thought, Oh, my God. Then, within 10 days I'd found 20 more Folsom points on the surface. I figured I was dead and this was what heaven was like."

Stiger christened the mesa the Mountaineer site, after Western's grizzled mountain man mascot, and with the help of students and volunteers from the Colorado Archaeological Society he began to explore the area. What they found

Archaeologists have discovered the remains of a Folsom house that is thought to be approximately 12,000 years old. This illustration, based on archaeological knowledge of that time, shows what the house may have looked like.



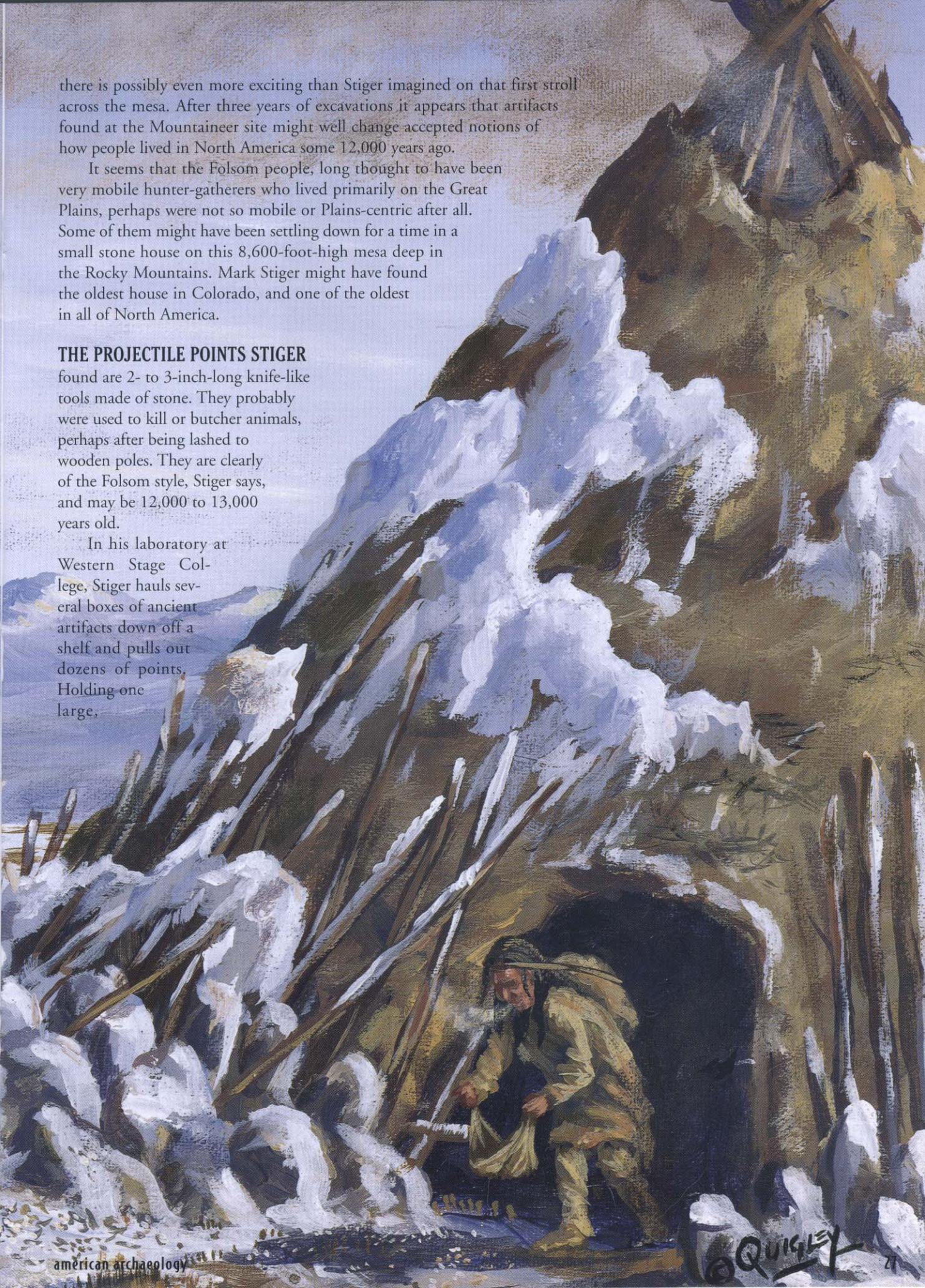
there is possibly even more exciting than Stiger imagined on that first stroll across the mesa. After three years of excavations it appears that artifacts found at the Mountaineer site might well change accepted notions of how people lived in North America some 12,000 years ago.

It seems that the Folsom people, long thought to have been very mobile hunter-gatherers who lived primarily on the Great Plains, perhaps were not so mobile or Plains-centric after all. Some of them might have been settling down for a time in a small stone house on this 8,600-foot-high mesa deep in the Rocky Mountains. Mark Stiger might have found the oldest house in Colorado, and one of the oldest in all of North America.

THE PROJECTILE POINTS STIGER

found are 2- to 3-inch-long knife-like tools made of stone. They probably were used to kill or butcher animals, perhaps after being lashed to wooden poles. They are clearly of the Folsom style, Stiger says, and may be 12,000 to 13,000 years old.

In his laboratory at Western State College, Stiger hauls several boxes of ancient artifacts down off a shelf and pulls out dozens of points. Holding one large,





This complete Folsom point was recovered from the site. The archaeologists have found 50 complete and partial Folsom points at the Mountaineer site.

DAN PEHA

intact point, he notes the characteristic channel, or flute, that runs down its center and the delicate pattern of flaking that graces the edges. The purpose of the groove is unknown. One theory is it makes a point lighter so it can be thrown farther; others say it's a blood-letting groove. "We just don't know," says Stiger. The flaking pattern along the edges is the result of chipping off scores of small pieces, presumably to sharpen the edges. Both steps in the manufacturing process result in many discarded flakes, which are often found at excavation sites. By comparison, Stiger explains, tools made by earlier people, the Clovis, are not as finely crafted as those of the Folsom.

Like this perfect sample, many of the points on the Mountaineer site were found intact. Many more were found broken into two or more pieces. Others were failed attempts known as "preforms" that were apparently discarded. Stiger and his researchers, in fact, have found on this single site representatives of every step in the Folsom point-making process, from the earliest preforms to the final product.

To date, Stiger and his colleagues have found no fewer than 50 complete and partial Folsom points on the mesa, an extraordinary number for one small site. According to the archaeological literature, only two well-documented Folsom points had been found in all of southwestern Colorado prior to this discovery. Stiger's discovery of so many points so far west of the Plains is in itself enough to trigger a significant change in thinking about the Folsom. "Most archaeologists see the Folsom people as living on the Plains and the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains," he says. "No one thought they were over here on the Western Slope of the Rockies very much."

"The stereotypical view of the Folsom is they were out on the high plains hunting down bison," agrees David Meltzer, an archaeologist with Southern Methodist University, who, at Stiger's invitation, is excavating another spot on the Mountaineer site. "We never thought of them as having much of a presence in the mountains. Now we

need to expand beyond that Plains-centric view and try to figure out what they were doing in the mountains."

AFTER STIGER FOUND THE FIRST FEW POINTS BACK

in 2000, he did a more systematic survey of the mesa top. Walking across the mesa, he found no fewer than 15 separate spots with distinct signs of Folsom occupation—primarily clusters of artifacts on the ground surface. In the summer of 2001, he and his colleagues began excavating the first of those 15 areas.

"It seemed to be a good spot," he recalls, standing next to that first site where his two assistants are finishing up the last day of the current field season. "There were some flakes and tools on the ground surface." When Stiger and the others opened up the site, they found much more than a few flakes. They found hundreds of pieces of evidence of human occupation, mostly the remains of tool manufacture. And many of the pieces they found were clearly of the Folsom era, and at least 12,000 years old.

But then things got confusing. They started to find lots of burned wood, or charcoal, that according to radiocarbon dating was at the most about 5,300 years old. The charcoal came from the exact same spot as the Folsom points, but 5,300 years ago is the Middle Archaic period, much too recent to have any association with the Folsom people. Stiger thought maybe they had found a Middle Archaic animal roasting pit, possibly one that coincidentally had been established in the same area that the Folsom used. An interesting find, but nothing earth-shaking. Stiger closed the site for the season and the next summer, 2002, he focused on other areas of the site.

But the earlier finding continued to gnaw at him. It didn't look like a roasting pit. They had also found hundreds of artifacts in the center of the area, and artifacts aren't usually found in a cooking area. Throughout 2002, Stiger continued to ponder this puzzle—until some nearby events jarred his thinking.

"We had some big forest fires in Colorado that year,



DAN PERHA

Mark Stiger illustrates mapping with an optical transit during an archaeology class on the Mountaineer site. The site, which is two miles from the Western State College campus, often serves as a classroom. The rocks from the foundation and walls of the Folsom house form the large pile in the center of the photograph.



The southern foundation of the Folsom house is a semicircle of large rocks near the center of this photograph that is difficult to discern. The northern foundation, which is at the bottom of the photograph, is unexcavated.

and I spent some time looking at the burns,” he says. “It occurred to me that maybe we just had an old dead tree in there.” Sure enough, when he returned to the Mountaineer site for the 2003 field season, everything fell into place. The 5,300-year-old charcoal was not evidence of a roasting pit. Rather, it was more likely the remains of a tree that had grown on the site and fallen long after the Folsom occupation. During a later forest fire, the fallen tree had burned in place—as indicated by the fact that the top section was burned and the bottom, which would have burned had it been in a roasting pit, was relatively unscathed—and left chunks of charcoal mixed in with the Folsom artifacts.

With the charcoal mystery solved, Stiger and his team resumed excavation of the area. They soon made an extraordinary discovery. “We opened it all the way up and found rocks piled up around the edge of a four-yard-wide basin,” he says. The rocks had clearly been moved there to form a large ring that apparently was once part of a structure. Within the ring of rocks they found a dozen more partial Folsom points, a set of distinctive channel flakes, and some large rib fragments. They also found chunks of daub, a type of wall plaster made of mud. Equally important was what they didn’t find. There was no evidence that the site was used as a roasting pit 5,300 years ago. “We found Folsom points and only Folsom points,” he says. “There were no Middle Archaic materials.”

Stiger concluded that this feature most definitely was not an Archaic roasting pit, but was a much older structure. It was quite possibly a rudimentary house that had been built of stone and plaster, and maybe tree poles and brush.

It had been occupied by the supposedly nomadic Folsom people. “This is probably the oldest house in Colorado,” says Stiger, pointing to the low-slung remains of the rock walls. At an estimated 12,000 to 13,000 years of age, it is quite possibly one of the oldest houses in North America.

THERE IS CONSIDERABLE EVIDENCE INDICATING that these rocks were once a Folsom house. First, the distinctive style of the artifacts found at the site shows that they are clearly of the Folsom culture. To confirm the age of the site, Stiger is having the bones found in it dated. The results are not in yet, but based on preliminary examinations by a faunal expert, he says, “we strongly suspect it is 12,000-year-old bison.”

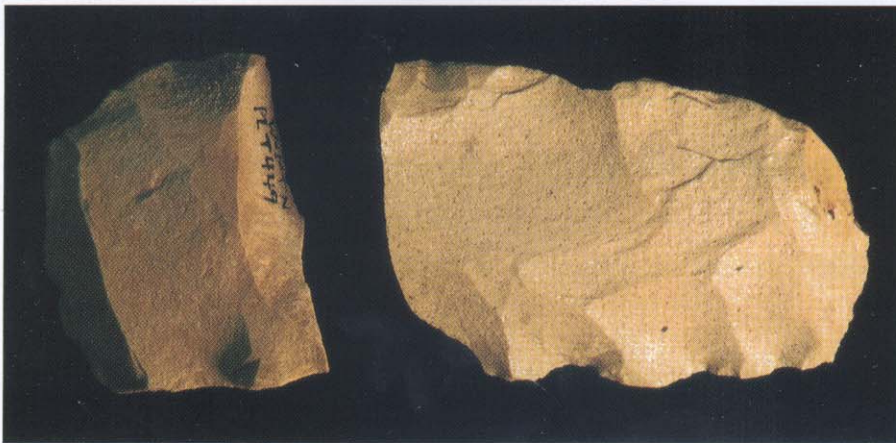
Second, to link the people who used those 12,000-plus-year-old artifacts to the ring of stones, the apparent house, Stiger focuses on the artifact distribution at the site—exactly where the preforms, flakes, points, partial points, and bones were found in relation to the rocks. He does this through computer analysis of thousands of data points.

During the fieldwork, every bit of material found on the site was carefully extracted, mapped, and cataloged. To date, this painstaking work has resulted in an astonishing number of artifacts from this small site. More than 27,000 individual pieces, primarily chips and flakes from stone tool manufacturing, have been recovered. The information on each piece has been entered into a computer database and used to build a series of maps. The maps show both the location and the density of the various materials found inside and outside the ring of rocks—every

bone, chip, rock, preform, flake, point, and partial point found on the 36-foot by 33-foot area.

The distribution patterns that emerged on the maps speak volumes to Stiger. If that pattern had been random, or if the artifacts had been found in one spot, Stiger explains, it's likely that natural forces had removed them from their original contexts. But that wasn't the case. Some areas had large concentrations of bone. Others had lots of flakes. "If you've got bone in one place, chips and flakes in another, and projectile points in another, there is some reason for it," Stiger says. "People were clearly organizing their space that way." According to the maps and Stiger's interpretation of them, the Folsom were arranging their space in relation to the ring of rocks.

Walking around the rocks, Stiger outlines his theory. "The rocks were moved here to form the wall. They probably had poles butted up against the wall, and used wall plaster all around." A concentration of bone fragments found inside the house "says to me that they were processing some sort of animal remains right in here, inside the house." A large concentration of channel flakes within the ring tells him that they also worked on their tools while sitting inside. Another significant pile of debris, which contained many broken points and was found just outside the rock ring, signals to



This broken point was discovered at the site. Most of the points found at Mountaineer were broken into two or more pieces. Most of the points are two to three inches long.

him that they had a trash dump outside the house. "It looks like they broke the points, and then just chucked them right out the door," he says. "Nobody likes to sit on sharpened rocks, so you toss it out the door." He points to an area next to the dump that, according to the maps, has very low concentrations of all materials. "This is probably the doorway right here. It's off to the southeast, which is typical for around here." His remark refers to other, younger prehistoric houses found in this area that also open to the southeast.

Other experts cautiously concur with Stiger's interpretation. "The artifacts there clearly are in sync with the structure," says Meltzer. "There's no question it's a structure. It would be downright unusual if it's a house, but I can't think of what else it could be."

"He's convinced me it's a structure," agrees Steven Holen, curator of archaeology at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. "This is a great find."

Stiger expands on his theory. "I think this house is a winter occupation," he suggests. "I wouldn't be surprised if they were here for a few months, a family perhaps. My guess is they killed some bison or elk, and buried them on the north side of the house in a snow bank. When spring comes and things start to thaw, they are more mobile. They can move to camps around here all summer long, and get fresh fruit and vegetables. Then fall comes along and they're thinking let's bag ourselves some antelope or bison, enough to last through the winter. This might be one winter house. There might be others somewhere along those ridges, 30 miles away.

"These people were living in relatively substantial structures and populating one area for extended periods of time," says Stiger. "This is contrary to all we thought before about the Folsom people. They are still hunter-gatherers, but they were staying put for longer periods of time than we ever thought before. And certainly there is a more substantial occupation here on the Western slope of the Rockies than we thought."

Stiger notes, too, that his initial survey of the mesa top showed a lot of variation among the 15 areas of human occupation—different raw materials, different types of tools. "It looks like this area was used time and time again," he says. "Maybe they were different generations, maybe just a year later, maybe a hundred years later. Who knows? But it seems to have been used for different purposes and in different ways. There is a lot of variability in all these Folsom areas that we just don't know what to make of yet.

"Archaeologists tend to think that one Folsom site assemblage looks like the others; there might have been differences between camp sites and kill sites, but that one camp site probably looks like another. But what we are seeing here is, whoa, there is a lot of differentiation, and this is much more interesting. This is one of those wonderful times that point out, boy, you don't know much. It's really exciting.

"I could spend the next 50 years on this."

CATHERINE DOLD's article "The Neighborhood Bonebed" appeared in the Summer 2003 issue of *American Archaeology*. She has also written for *Discover*, *Smithsonian*, and the *New York Times*.

For more information about the Mountaineer excavation, visit the Web site www.western.edu/anthropology/folsom