

Report on the October 2013 Paleoamerican Odyssey Conference in Santa Fe

by Frank Oatman

The recent Paleoamerican Odyssey Conference that ran from Thursday, Oct. 17, to Saturday evening, Oct. 19, in Santa Fe's Convention Center was amazing. It was organized and sponsored by the Center for the Study of the First Americans, operating out of Texas A&M University. I'll offer a few personal highlights in hopes of giving TAS members who didn't attend some sense of the event. I encountered only 9 persons at the Conference from the Taos/Dixon area, and that included speaker Tom Dillehay, a true star in this field of the peopling of the Americas. Over 1,300 persons registered for the event; and there were, I believe, 244 poster or speaking presentations by professionals in the fields of archaeology, anthropology, geology, hydrology, genetics . . . Presenters of talks, of posters, or of both that I can recall came from Japan, Russia, Australia, France, England, Denmark, Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica, Peru, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and from all over the U.S. Each of the 3 days there were speakers from 8 AM to 6 PM, with a half hour break in the morning and a similar one in the afternoon and a 1 to 1.5 hour break for lunch. Then talks resumed at 7 PM (with several sessions simultaneously in the evening) and usually ran to 9 PM. If one listened to all the daytime speakers, as I did, it was impossible to view all the posters, which were changed several times a day in two large rooms.

A truly stunning highlight (for me and for everyone I spoke with) was the large artifact room, with literally thousands of lithic and other (especially mammoth and mastodon bone) items on display in locked glass cases, an armed security guard always posted at the room's entrance. I lost count of how many Clovis caches were on display; but some (especially the famous Fenn and Simon caches) contained lithics of such brilliant workmanship and exquisite stone materials that they staggered me. Ditto many incredibly thin and finely-worked Folsom points. I happened to be looking at the Fenn cache when Forrest Fenn (for decades owner of the cache and the source of its name, whom I'd met socially) walked up. In the course of our conversation I asked: "Are you willing to say, Mr. Fenn, what you paid for the cache?" "No problem," he replied, "it's on record. I bought the cache many years ago from an artifact dealer for \$5,000." I didn't quite have the nerve to ask what he got when he sold the cache several years ago, but it's widely reported to have been well over a million dollars. During one lunch break I returned to tour again the New Mexico Museum of Art exhibit entitled "it's about time: 14,000 years of art in New Mexico," which (very correctly I think) starts with beautiful New Mexican Clovis and Folsom points. These are works of art -- were for their creators, I and others feel sure, as they remain for us. Also staggering were the sizes of some finished bifaces on display, with some Spanish and French Solutrean laurel leafs as long as my forearm and some Clovis preforms as wide as an outstretched hand. Professionals who'd brought artifact displays were often there to discuss them and, gulp, to let one handle original pieces they brought out of their cases. I got to talk at length with Bruce Bradley and

lovingly handle some of the recently found beautiful bifaces emerging from the mid-Atlantic region.

I'd said in an E-mail to Tom Dillehay and others shortly before the conference: "If a bombshell is dropped at this conference, something the press picks up and runs with, I bet that bomb will be dropped by Bruce Bradley or Dennis Stanford," the team whose excellent book "Across Atlantic Ice: The Origins of America's Clovis Culture" we'll be discussing soon at a TAS book club event. I was right. For many, the single most exciting discovery announced at the Conference (there were several) were the finds "in the last 45 days," Dennis Stanford said, of large, beautifully worked bifaces found in situ in eroding banks of a shoreline and well and repeatedly dated to over 20,000 years before present (BP)! This was in Dr. Stanford's talk entitled "The Chesapeake bifaces: evidence for an LGM occupation of the mid-Atlantic region of North America." We heard about – and **saw** in the large artifact room -- **many** pre-Clovis lithics and other materials now attested in sites in both North and South America with dates of up to 24,000 years BP.

If there was one central theme of the Conference it was the death knell of the long and fiercely-held Clovis-first theory -- that people of the Clovis culture were the first colonizers of the Americas following their entrance via the Bering land bridge and an ice-free corridor in the northern U.S. and Canada. That theory was not only laid to rest here, its memorial was here erected and carved in stone! There were fine presentations on older finds being reexamined, and of on-going finds, of pre-Clovis sites all over the Americas. Favorites of mine were talks on underwater archaeology being done now in caves of Florida and the Mexican Yucatan. Another major theme of the Conference were the appeals to the profession to curtail the bitter and acrimonious (at times downright evil in my opinion) tone and actions of some in the long Clovis-first debate. Both Tom Dillehay (famous for his pre-Clovis excavations at Monte Verde in Chile) and J. M. Adovasio (of famous pre-Clovis Meadowcroft rock shelter in the U.S.) spoke of both the bitterness and at times the absurdity of the positions/ criticisms of their Clovis-first opponents, including some in attendance at this conference.

I would say that the other bombshell was Tom Dillehay's announcement that he was departing immediately after the Conference for Chile, where he and associates are reopening Monte Verde I, the site where test pits decades ago found what seem to be human artifacts associated with carbon-14 dates of c. 33,000 years BP! "I can't myself believe that humans have been in the Americas that long," Tom said in his superb talk; "that's in the time of Neanderthals after all. But we're going to open the site finally, and we'll see what we find." Some of us who've gotten to know Tom in Taos, where he bought a home in 2012, had heard about this initiative; but it was big news to almost everyone else at the Conference, big especially since it was Tom's work at Monte Verde II that finally convinced most of the reasonable Clovis-first folks that humans have been in the Americas at least a thousand years before Clovis.

For me, the talk that most touched genius was that of Bruce Bradley, applying to the Clovis culture the new anthropological theories of Anthony F. C. Wallace on revitalization of cultures/societies. It's too complex a theory/process to explicate here, and it's likely

to remain heterodox indeed and hard to prove; but to me nothing I've learned better explains "this absolutely crazy Clovis culture," as Western U.S. archaeologist Bonnie Pitblado called it in the concluding remarks of the entire conference. Crazy because it's very hard indeed to make sense of a unique and very difficult lithic style that seems (the flutes of its bifacial points notably) to explode and cover North America from Canada to Mexico in a stunningly brief 250-300 years, with an apparent focus in some areas on hunting mastodons and mammoths. Then that Clovis lithic signature abruptly disappears. Like the proboscideans they sometimes hunted, the Clovis culture seems to vanish overnight at the beginning of the Younger Dryas. I suppose the real genius lies in Wallace's origination of the revitalization theory; but few know of that theory, and Bruce's application of the theory to the Clovis culture was itself a stroke of brilliance. Final conference summarizer Bonnie Pitblado also cited Bruce's talk as one of her five favorite (most exciting, suggestive) talks of the entire Conference.

The other most controversial talk, I think, was that presented by lead researcher James P. Kennett entitled "The Younger Dryas Boundary (YDB) cosmic impact hypothesis, 12.9 ka: a review." I find the evidence he presented compelling and that evidence seems to be growing ever stronger with on-going investigation -- that a comet or other extra-terrestrial impact happened at 12,800 to 12,900 BP and seems to be largely responsible for both the final extinction of most North American megafauna (34-35 genera of same) but also of the Clovis cultural signature. Friday evening I attended an announced "discussion" (really just a refutation) of this hypothesis by two of the hold-out Clovis-first archaeologists, who that evening focused their nit-picking, bitter-toned attacks not on the pre-Clovis folks anymore but now on Kennett and his associates and the impact hypothesis. It was a sad display, in my opinion, with the nastiness extending even to a few persons at their discussion who dared to ask somewhat challenging questions or tender evidence contrary to their negative critique. I was not such a questioner: disgusted by their performance and attitude, I left early. I was tempted to remark: "Aren't you a bit concerned that in the intellectual history of ideas, you've already pretty clearly lost one argument, which you turned into a bitter personal battle, and now you're risking losing another? Isn't your stand against new paradigms in archaeology rather extreme and hysterical?" I made no such comment. As the entire Conference demonstrated, such Clovis-first, nothing-new-allowed holdouts were decidedly in the minority; and as many hoped (and even pleaded) in their talks, the angry and vindictive approach is something the field badly needs to move beyond.

This was the first such conference since the famous 1999 one, also in Santa Fe. Though some who'd been at that first important but painfully confrontational conference spoke again at this Oct. event, this recent 2013 Paleoamerican Odyssey Conference was an once-in-a-lifetime event for most. I will be digesting (and glorying in) its riches for a long time to come.