



*Students excavate and screen for artifacts on the site's primary mound.*

# Investigating The Fremont

Archaeologist Mari Pritchard Parker resorted to unusual measures to save an endangered Fremont site.

Now she's trying to understand what took place there hundreds of years ago.

*By Kurt Repanshek*



KURT REPANSHEK

About 10 years ago Mari Pritchard Parker got a call from a real estate agent informing her that a tract of land near the city of Milford, in southwest Utah, was for sale. The spent-looking farmland was covered by cheat grass, and an occasional clump of sagebrush or rice grass, but a colleague had recognized that its gentle rises were three disintegrated adobe mounds, the remnants of structures that had housed people hundreds of years ago. Worried that farmers might buy the land and level it to plant crops, she did something rather unusual for an archaeologist: she bought the site.

Mormon pioneers in the 1800s, as well as subsequent generations, leveled much of the land for farming, making it difficult to identify ancient settlements. The remnants of adobe structures that were undisturbed by agriculture have been absorbed into the landscape. “When they melt they make these mounds,” Pritchard Parker said, referring to the subtle rise we’re standing on. “When you know what you’re looking for, you can recognize them.”

Pritchard Parker used a small inheritance to purchase 31 acres along the Beaver River in the Milford Valley, though the mound area covers a tiny fraction of this tract. “I didn’t even know what else I had, I just wanted this,” she said, referring to the site. She was born in Milford, and as a youngster she scoured the area for prehistoric arrow heads while helping her grandfather, who was a prospector and miner, check his

claim stakes for gold, silver, and copper in the surrounding mountains.

In 2000 Pritchard Parker, an adjunct faculty member at Pasadena City College in Pasadena, California, created the Milford Archaeological Research Institute to underwrite her research at her site, which she calls Mariville, and to provide a field school for community college students.

She started excavating the site six summers ago with the goal of determining what took place there. Having recovered thousands of artifacts, Pritchard Parker estimates that the site was occupied during the 1200s. Her conclusion is based on the styles of the artifacts as well as the fact that many Fremont sites in Utah have been dated to this general time period. But she can’t be more precise than that. “We just don’t have any dates,” she said, adding that she operates on a shoestring budget and can’t afford the expense of radiocarbon testing her finds. “I have limited funds and the priority remains the ability to help students with field expenses.

Over the years, Pritchard Parker and her crews have excavated different areas of the mounds. “Right now we’ve been finding a lot of projectile points, beads, and ceramics,” said student Omar Rice. The researchers also recently uncovered what are thought to be a few walls. They’ve been concentrating on those features because, by exposing walls and floors, Pritchard Parker can estimate how many structures once stood on the site, and that in turn can give her



*Mari Pritchard Parker (left) discusses aspects of lithic analysis.*

a rough population count based on the number and sizes of the structures. But it's a rough count at best. "It's hard to do population densities" based on this evidence, because some of the rooms in the Fremont dwellings were used for storage, not living, she said, and if no associated diagnostic artifacts are found it's hard to know what purpose the rooms served.

Among Pritchard Parker's most intriguing finds are a few black-on-white sherds that, she theorizes, point to Fremont interactions with the better-known Anasazi culture. "The Fremont have not been known to make black-on-white ceramics; they mostly produce plain grey wares and some black-on-gray ceramics," said Pritchard Parker. "We know they had connections" with the Anasazi. But interaction between the two peoples was "unusual in this specific area," said Gardiner Dalley, a retired BLM archaeologist who excavated numerous Fremont and Anasazi sites in southern Utah. He guessed that the sherds are the result of "limited interaction, limited trade" between the two peoples.

Very little research has been done on Anasazi-Fremont contact, according to Pritchard Parker, and she wonders if this interaction occurred in the Milford Valley or farther south and east where the Anasazi resided, in which case the

Fremont brought the pottery north with them. "You don't know if it's these folks were moving there, coming back, or trading," Pritchard Parker said, pushing a wisp of graying hair out of her sun-baked face. "We don't have enough samples to identify where (the pottery) was made."

As a result of her research, Pritchard Parker has also concluded that the Fremont occupation of the area is much larger than she previously thought. "I now believe there are sites all along the Beaver River, occupation sites," she said. "I think there were Fremont farmsteads all over here, up and down the river." Her statement is based in part on last summer's field school, during which her students conducted surface surveys with Bureau of Land Management archaeologists on federal land along the river. They found artifacts that suggest a number of Fremont sites in the area. But confirming the extent of that occupation is proving challenging because most of the land in the Milford Valley is privately owned, and consequently archaeologists haven't had a chance to examine it. However, her neighbors have told her about Fremont artifacts they've found on their properties. "Actually, all of these farmers have (artifacts on their land)," Pritchard Parker said, waving her arm to the surrounding fields under irrigation.

Archaeologists aren't certain why the Fremont vanished around A.D. 1300, but a number of them, including Pritchard Parker, think it could have been due to drought. She is more certain as to why the Fremont settled here in the first place: the fertile land around the



*Students excavate one of the habitation areas damaged by roadwork.*

KURT REPANISHEK

STEVE STACEY



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**Barbara Frank, curator of Southern Utah University's archaeology repository, holds a black-on-grey bowl. Pritchard Parker's students visited the repository during a field school.**

Beaver River likely made for good farming then as it does now. Much of the river's water is used to irrigate the region's farms, so the Beaver is now a thin, meandering stream that weaves through the Milford Valley. But some 800 years ago Pritchard Parker believes it was a healthier river that gave the Fremont a reason to settle the valley that's bounded by the Mineral Mountains to the north and the Black Mountains to the south. That flow has been stilted since 1914 when the Minersville Reservoir was built.

Dalley, who excavated larger Fremont sites nearby, suspects there are perhaps 25 to 30 sites in an area stretching for roughly five miles along the river between Milford and the neighboring town of Minersville. "The Fremont were practicing a mixed economy" of agriculture combined with hunting and gathering, he said. Agriculture provided much of their sustenance, as well as a primarily sedentary lifestyle. Given that, he believes that Pritchard Parker's site, and the sites in the surrounding area, were permanent residences. "They are in an excellent position along the old Beaver River, which was a good, permanent, mature stream," he added. "And the land along the river through the Milford bottoms and the Minersville area is arable, certainly. So, they should have been able to be there full-time."



DANA SHEW

**The students also saw a demonstration of experimental flintknapping techniques by archaeologist Jeanne Benning. Experimental flintknapping is important to understanding dibiage in the archaeological record.**

# Changing Archaeology's Demographics



*As the day begins, Parker (center) discusses work assignments with the students.*

STEVE STACEY

Omar Rice has participated in all six of Mari Pritchard Parker's field schools. Rice, a tall, barrel-chested, 36-year-old, recently graduated from Pasadena City College. He found himself in one of Pritchard Parker's archaeology classes after a broken leg sustained in a gang fight ended his hopes of becoming a firefighter or joining the military.

"As soon as I took her class I was hooked. And she offered the opportunity to come out here," he said. "So I came out here and fell in love with Utah, the whole archaeology thing. It changed my life. I didn't know which direction to go and this basically changed it." Now he is intent on earning a bachelor's degree in archaeology, and eventually a doctorate, with a focus on lithic analysis.

Every summer there are dozens of field schools that take place across the country. Pritchard Parker's differs from most in that she focuses on training community college students in hopes of giving them a chance to establish a career in archaeology. Many of the students at Pasadena City College or Fresno City College, the two schools from which she recruits, are from lower income families. "Even though community college is really cheap" some of her students have a hard time affording it, she said, and most of them have to work while in school.

In order to attract these students, Pritchard Parker charges a pittance to attend her field schools. While it's not unusual for other field schools to charge \$1,000 or

more for tuition, hers costs only \$62. Pritchard Parker's field schools, which attract a dozen or so students for each of two sessions held each summer, offer two credits towards a field technician certification through Pasadena City College. She said the field of archaeology is populated primarily by members of the upper and middle classes and, by keeping her costs so low and favoring community college students, she hopes to change that.

Pritchard Parker, who had to work to put herself through college, thinks she is making some progress toward that end. "Quite a few" of her students have gone on to study archaeology at four-year institutions, she said. Though she takes pride in that fact, it does, to some extent, hinder her own work. "I don't get to keep them very long and get them started on research projects." Because of the incredibly inexpensive tuition, there's "barely" enough money to conduct the field schools and there's very little funding to analyze the thousands of artifacts that have been recovered. She and her students also spend time raising money for modest scholarships—usually \$100—to cover some of the other expenses, such as food and gas, that the students incur.

Nonetheless, she's happy to see Omar Rice and others come and go. This experience changed his life, and perhaps it will change others'. —Kurt Repanshek



*These are a few of the thousands of artifacts recovered from the site. In addition to the two projectile points at each end, the top row consists of a ceramic spindle wheel, a drill, and a figurine base. The next two rows feature a variety of projectile points, and beneath them is a bone awl.*



*Several students conduct salvage archaeology at one of the habitation areas disturbed by roadwork.*

In addition to the three mounds she's been excavating, Pritchard Parker has identified four other habitation areas on her property. She wants to preserve these areas, but she's concerned that they're "being eaten alive by the  
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animals and my neighbors." Pritchard Parker explained that ground squirrels and badgers are digging in the mounds, and her neighbor's son used a skip-loader to scratch out a route across a second parcel she purchased in 2005 to reach the county road, damaging two of the habitation areas in the process. "He thought it'd be nice to have a direct road on what he thought was his property," she said. Pritchard Parker informed him of their property boundaries, and then did salvage work on the sites.

In the coming years she hopes to expand her excavations "and to continue working with the BLM to get an overall picture of the valley." Compared to the Anasazi and some other ancient cultures, the Fremont have received little attention from researchers, and this serves as an incentive for Parker. She said the larger questions about these people—"Where did they come from? Where did they go?"—remain unanswered. She may not be able to answer those questions, but she's in a good position to contribute to our knowledge of this ancient people. After all, how many archaeologists have their own Fremont site?

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