

## Washington State History

### Mr. Aitken - Marmes Rockshelter

*What does the Marmes Rockshelter tell us about the earliest people to live in the Pacific Northwest?*

### Marmes Rockshelter

The Marmes Rockshelter was one of the most significant archaeological sites in the Pacific Northwest, yielding thousands of Stone Age artifacts before the site was flooded by water.

As a dam nearby on the Snake River was under construction in the fall of 1968, a horseshoe-shaped enclosure was built around the Marmes Rockshelter, hoping it would keep the area dry enough for archaeologists to continue their work. Unfortunately, the enclosure, built on a porous gravel base, failed to hold back the water when the dam was finished. A team of scientists from Washington State University hurriedly covered what they could with plastic and sand and then watched helplessly as the site disappeared beneath 40' of water in February 1969.

Evidence collected before the site had to be abandoned showed that it had been used for shelter, storage, and burials for more than 11,000 years. Among the most compelling finds was a 10,000-year-old cremation hearth. The remains of at least 38 individuals were identified. Most had been cremated and then buried, with grave goods that included shell beads, bear teeth, and, in one case, the hoop from an infant's cradleboard. The oldest of the human bones came from a man who died about 11,000 years ago. The excavators also found a wealth of tools, weapons, ornaments, and other evidence of life at the end of the last Ice Age.

The rockshelter was basically an alcove, 40 feet wide and 25 feet deep, beneath an overhanging ledge of basalt. Researchers theorized that humans first discovered it while foraging for food, beginning not long after the end of the last Ice Age. Evidence of human use over thousands of years suggested that the rockshelter was a "tethered" site: a regional base that people returned to regularly.

Beginning in 1962, researchers found numerous storage pits in the shelter, some lined with fragments of mats made from grasses or reeds. Cool temperatures and consistent humidity made the shelter useful as a place to store food. Numerous traces of plant foods and animal bones suggested that the site offered access to abundant food sources.

Researchers also found the partial skeletons of 11 individuals, including three (two adults and an infant) that were located in a strata of earth that had been covered by a layer of ash produced by the eruption and collapse of prehistoric



Mount Mazama in southern Oregon more than 6,500 years ago. Radiocarbon dating of shells and other organic material found next to these remains indicated that they were about 8,000 years old.

In April of 1968 researchers discovered more bones, clearly undisturbed, and later dated to being more than 11,000 years old: the oldest found up to that point anywhere in North America. (More recent discoveries in several states predate the "Marmes Man.")

The major discovery inside the rockshelter was the cremation hearth, found at a deep level that hadn't been excavated earlier. The hearth consisted of a series of small rings of rock and rock piles, peppered with shards of bone, and rock chips. Virtually all of the bone fragments were extensively burned, making it difficult to determine if it was human or animal.

Later analysis indicated that the hearth was used primarily for human cremation, in accordance with ritualistic burial practices that were common among Stone Age people. Most of the bones and bone fragments in the hearth area had been burned and then broken into smaller pieces and reburied.

The Marmes Rockshelter remains submerged under 40' of water today. If the dam is ever removed in the future and the water level lowered, excavation could begin again. Researchers are certain that many more bones and tools are still buried there, yet to be discovered.



*[Excerpt from HistoryLink.org, edited by Mr. Aitken for school use.]*



Skeleton of a large elk found in the Marmes Rockshelter.