

Short Story

Blue-White chert arrow point

Casper, Wyoming

Wyoming 900-1200 years ago

Young brave of 15 or so, on his first hunt with a point he knapped himself

A long stalk of a Pronghorn

Shot missed and arrow skipped off a rock and the point broke

OR

Shot hits and after animal is gutted and meat taken, bone lays for scavenging; point breaks

Arrow and point lay on the ground for decades' slowly the shaft decomposes and the point is left on the ground.

As I walked across the rolling prairie and through the rocky outcroppings of Cretaceous sandstone, I searched my memory for clues as to where we had left the mule deer antler shed yesterday. We thought that it was illegal to take them without permission from the landowner; last night Kirsten told us that they were fair game. So now I am looking at every southwest facing outcrop, about half way to the top. Somewhere amid a litter of broken dinosaur bones, there lies half of a nice 4-point mule deer rack.

The dinosaur dig was now hidden behind the ridge 2 miles to the north, although the distance I have walked is probably closer to 5 miles. Someone is standing on top of the ridge; maybe the air is cooler up there than it is in the growing excavation. I made a large circle, remembering that we kept west of the line of wind turbines and north of the second-to-last turbine. Beyond that, the land belongs to someone else. The rack has to be here somewhere, but every outcrop looks about the same and it will be a stroke of luck to find it. I turn to the

southeast, and catch a reflection of sunlight off something two ridges away; maybe that is it. I descend from the ridge on which I stand and follow the shallow valley through sage, mountain mahogany and bunch grass.

By some strange coincidence, I walk along this line and not some other; I happen to be looking at the ground rather than ahead of me or at the horizon. A lighter colored and oddly shaped rock catches my eye. And there it lies: a human-fashioned arrow head, blue-white against the brown soil. It sits atop a pedestal of soil that was protected from erosion by the storm yesterday by the arrow head itself. About 2/3 of the point is there; the end has broken off.

I have no idea how long it has lain here exposed; maybe it first came to the surface this season. Before that, for hundreds of years, it lay buried as the shaft to which it was attached slowly decomposed. I pick it up and wonder at my luck; I have spent considerable time in my life collecting things; fossils, important rocks; even an arrow point from Glass Mountain in south-central Oregon (perhaps knapped by a recent visitor to the place where obsidian is abundant). This one, however, it most certainly an artifact of an earlier culture. It is what is left of the story of a hunt long ago, by an indian brave who learned by trial and error how to make and mount chert points on dry willow shafts. The place where I found it is near the intersection of the ancient and artificial boundaries of the Shoshone, Cheyenne and Ute Indian tribes. Maybe there was some cultural interchange between the three.

The soft grass and sage-covered hills stretched to the edge of sight and memory. Grey, brown and yellow rippled in the constant wind; there was not a tree in sight. Dry washes cut abruptly through the landscape; only rarely did they contain any water, and when water was present, it was deep, fast and brief. Distant clouds dropped moisture which quickly ran off the rocky surface and into the low rills, concentrating its energy into a sinuous ribbon of roiling turbulence. Banks caved and added to the sediment load; bones of animals long-dead became part of the flood. Rocks were rolled short distances with each flood, then left stranded in the stream bed until the next storm.

As quickly as it began, it ended. Thunder and lightning moved eastward on the wind. The stream bed, just minutes ago filled to bank-top, is now still, empty

and quiet. Pools and puddles of standing water slowly disappear. The sediment acts as a sponge, taking up water until the pore spaces are filled. By tomorrow, the bed will be dry again, waiting patiently for the next storm.

The dry hills and valleys respond. Plants need to take quick advantage of this opportunity. Roots begin to absorb water from the sediment. The plains begin to change. Slight and nearly imperceptible at first, over the next few days the hills are transformed from brown to green. Speckled here and there are purples, reds and yellows in patches, mostly in the clefts between hills. The opportunity to spread seed may not come again this year and the plants must act fast. Seeds must mature and drop, and hopefully make use of what little moisture is left to germinate and establish a new colony. Most will die, but a few lucky ones will survive into the next season.

Mountain Mahogany is scattered across the hillsides in the sandy soil, its trunk and branches grey, gnarled and twisted by the constant wind, and its roots fine, long and spreading just below the surface. To look at them, one would think that they were dead, but the sudden storm has given them new hope. Tiny leaf tips show at odd and unlikely places on the branches. Slowly the leaves spring forth, bright green and edged with red, suspended on the end of a tender red stem. The growing season will last only a few weeks. Leaves are small and leathery; tiny white flowers will give way to round red fruits.

Breaking up the smooth profile of rolling hills, rocky outcroppings of tan and grey sandstone are visible. The layered and tilted beds provide cover for small burrowing mammals and lizards; rattlesnakes hunt the cliffs after warming up on the flat sandstone surfaces in the morning sun. Life of any sort has to struggle to survive in this harsh and unforgiving place.

Mule deer and Pronghorn can be found individually and during the rutting season, in small groups. The deer prefer the denser cover near the intermittent streams; Pronghorn range across the more open country of hills. Plains Bison migrate seasonally across the region as prairie grasses grow and die. Hawks of a variety of types hunt rodents and other small mammals; buzzards circle high on rising thermals, their sharp senses of smell and sight alerting them to the presence of a rotting carcass and a potential meal.

The Spring has been a camping place for as long as anyone can remember; it had been seasonally occupied for a few thousand years, as tribes followed the buffalo herds across the high desert. Water seeped nearly constantly from a low spot, and was an oasis of trees and shrubs that could not grow elsewhere. In wet years, or after a severe winter, a shallow lake formed and persisted until early Summer. In high Summer, the Spring was the only place where there was any shade at all. Animals migrated to the Spring during the dry season to feed and water; most game trails in the area crossed the valley in which the spring sat. After humans arrived, they too used the Spring, and it became a dangerous place for other animals to congregate.

The boy knew no other home; his and a few other families had been there his entire life. The Spring was his world. With the other boys, he learned how to make and shoot green willow bows and crooked arrows. He learned how to identify the night visitors to the spring by the tracks they left. He learned how to hide from and stalk game animals that approached the Spring. His bow and arrows were ineffective in the mock hunts he and his friends conducted, but the lessons they learned were essential to growing up. Mule deer and rabbits were the primary game visiting the Spring and could be approached closely with care. Pronghorn posed a different challenge. They prefer the open rolling hills and valleys, where sharp eyes and speed gave them an advantage. Ever alert and seldom coming to the Spring, the Pronghorn required refined skills to approach closely; the animals seemed to have a sixth sense and would often disappear in the blink of an eye.

The young hunters learned to use the topography to help them in their mock hunts. Hills could break up a human silhouette; valleys provided covert routes to make close approaches to small bands of deer or pronghorn. The final approach was often made by slithering, snake-like, through the tall grass and sage, only moving when the animals had their heads down feeding. It was far easier to sit in ambush, hoping that a band or an individual would walk by within arrow range. The ever-shifting winds often betrayed the hunters and the most careful and quiet approach was often foiled by a slight shift in the breeze, which took the telltale human scent straight to the waiting animals. By the time the boys got to the valley where they had first seen the Pronghorn, all that was left was fresh tracks. With each failed hunt, their experience grew.

In recent years, the young boy had been invited, along with other promising young hunters, to accompany adult hunting parties. Their role was to sit quietly in the shadow of a sandstone ledge and watch as the adults used both stealth and numbers to ambush unwary Pronghorn or deer. Individual success was rare, but game was plentiful and as a group the band camped at the Spring was well-supplied with meat, hides and bone.

Several times each year, a party of adult men would take longer trips to the south and southwest of the Spring. Often they would be gone for many days and upon their return would be carrying not Pronghorn or deer, but bags of rock that could not be found near the Spring. The rocks were whitish-blue and grey, and were very hard and fine grained. It seemed to the young men an odd thing to hunt; rocks could not be eaten nor could they be used to make shelters. However, the unusual rocks could be fashioned into spear and arrow points for hunting, and scrapers and choppers for butchering game.

Eventually the boys were invited to accompany the men to the far away place where the strange blue-white rocks were found. They memorized the trails and tracks used to get there, marking the landmarks in the cliffs and hills. They were instructed in selection of the best nodules; those that could be flaked into uniform-sized pieces and would break on a keen edge. Not all of the rock was suitable; some of the cliffs consisted of soft grey stone that did not break uniformly. The good rock was usually found at the base of the high grey cliffs and in dry washes.

Over the years the young boys watched in fascination as the adults repeatedly struck two of the bluish-white rocks together, breaking small pieces off of the larger nodules. The small pieces were then broken yet again to produce flat, pointed pieces with sharp edges that they mounted on carefully selected straight wooden shafts. Other pieces, less carefully made and larger, were used by the women to scrape hides or to butcher animals brought back from the hunts. The boys had no idea where this knowledge came from; but over the years, through watching the adults and experimenting with the discarded flakes, they learned to make their own points. The boys learned to take great care in breaking the rocks and making arrow points; much energy was expended in travelling to the grey

cliffs and gathering the blue-white rock, and in flaking and shaping the pieces, and every piece was precious.

This year marked an important point in the life of the young boy; he was to make the transition to manhood. He would be expected to take part in the hunting and to help supply the band with meat, bone and hides that were essential to their survival. He would also be eligible to take a wife from among the young women of the band, or perhaps from another band living nearby. But before he could do that, he needed to demonstrate his skill in fashioning arrowpoints, selecting the right wood for a strong bow and straight arrows, and stalking and killing game. His father had taught him well, but now he needed to demonstrate his knowledge and skill alone. Only by doing so could he show the other members of the band that he had indeed reached adulthood.

Last year, he had gone alone to the grey cliffs and found the perfect piece of blue-white rock. He carried it back to the Spring and began to fashion points from it. Many broke and were only suitable for scraping hides or cutting meat, but one was perfect. It was sharply pointed and had a keen edge; he had cut his hand while making it. He mounted it carefully on the end of a nearly perfectly straight shaft of dry willow, lashing it to the wood with fresh sinew which, upon drying, had firmly fixed the point in place. He had saved the feathers from a hawk he had killed with a rock, and fixed the feathers on the willow shaft; this arrow would fly straight and true.

Early one morning he set off alone, walking to the south for five ridges to a place where he knew there would be Pronghorn. He kept a sharp eye out for tracks. He used the cliffs to break his silhouette and provide a high vantage point from which to spot game. It was a little bit unsettling for the young man; he was all alone in a vast and empty plain. Wolves and coyotes were a common sight; bears occasionally roamed the hills. His success would be determined by how well he had learned from his father, and his future as a respected member of the band, even possibly becoming chief someday, depended upon his success.

As the young man walked, he was ever alert to the sounds and sights of the high plains. Clouds were building in the evening sky and he knew that this meant that rain was coming; he should find shelter for the night. But rain also meant that

any tracks he found tomorrow would be fresh tracks. He found an overhanging ledge in which to shelter; when he swept the floor of the shallow overhang with a sage branch to get rid of ticks, a snake buzzed in warning. Best not to share a cave with a rattlesnake. This one was content to make its presence known and move away. He sat facing the setting sun and listened to thunder rolling across the prairie; the rain began and pounded the rocks for a brief time, and then moved toward the dark horizon behind him.

In the morning the young man faced the rising sun and quietly asked for its blessing on his hunt today. He stood and scanned the surrounding hills; two ridges away he saw a small band of pronghorn feeding on the sage and getting a drink of water from moisture sticking to the sage from last night's storm. One of the animals was limping; it may have stepped in a prairie dog hole or on a rock in a moment of panic at last night's thunder. Whatever the reason for the bad leg, this animal would make an easier target. The wind was gentle and blowing toward the rising sun. He would make his approach with the rising sun at his back and the breeze in his face.

Keeping the hills at his back and moving only when the lead pronghorn was feeding, the young man walked down into the shallow valley in front of him. If he followed this valley toward the setting sun he could cross the next ridge at a spot that had a cliff and a low saddle, from which he could scan the valley where he saw the animals and keep his silhouette hidden. He could then make his way across the hidden side of the ridge and get to a rocky ledge at the head of the valley, where he could wait for the animals to come to him. If the wind did not shift and if the animals keep feeding in the same direction, they would walk right into his range.

Quickly but quietly, he walked along the ridge toward the rising sun. He stayed below the ridge line, so couldn't see the animals; he hoped that they kept going in the same direction. He took up a position with a ledge behind him and overlooking the saddle through which the pronghorn would walk. He notched his arrow. He could feel his blood racing and hear his own heartbeat.

The saddle was no more than twice his arrow range in width; with luck the animals would walk by close enough for a shot. The wind continued to blow gently

into his face as he scanned the valley bottom. He could not see the band of pronghorn from his vantage point, but if they continued on their previous track, he should see them soon. Suddenly, he heard a snort; the lead animal had walked into the saddle, alert for any unusual sights or sounds. The young man remained still; hopefully the remainder of the band would appear in a few moments. If they were too far behind, the wind would carry the young man's scent to the leader before the rest came into range and he would sound the alarm.

The lame pronghorn came into his view not more than a few steps away and unaware of the young man's presence. He waited until she had her head down feeding, and slowly raised his bow and carefully drew his arrow. She still was not aware of his presence. He released the arrow; it flew straight and true. It hit her right behind the shoulder; she jumped and ran as well as she could with a broken leg. The rest of the band scattered and disappeared over the ridge. He stood and watched as the wounded doe made her way back down the valley and onto the flat. She fell and was struggling. The young man's heart was racing as he approached the dying pronghorn. By the time he reached her, she was still.

He said a prayer of thanks to the animal for giving her life for the tribe. Slowly he tried to withdraw the arrow. When the shaft came free, the tip had broken off. He rolled the animal over and there it was: the arrow point he so carefully made, with a finger-length of the willow shaft still attached; the tip of the arrow point had broken. It was no good to him any longer, but had served its purpose well. He left the broken arrow point where it lay and hoisted the pronghorn to his shoulders. He began the triumphant walk back to camp; today he had become a man.