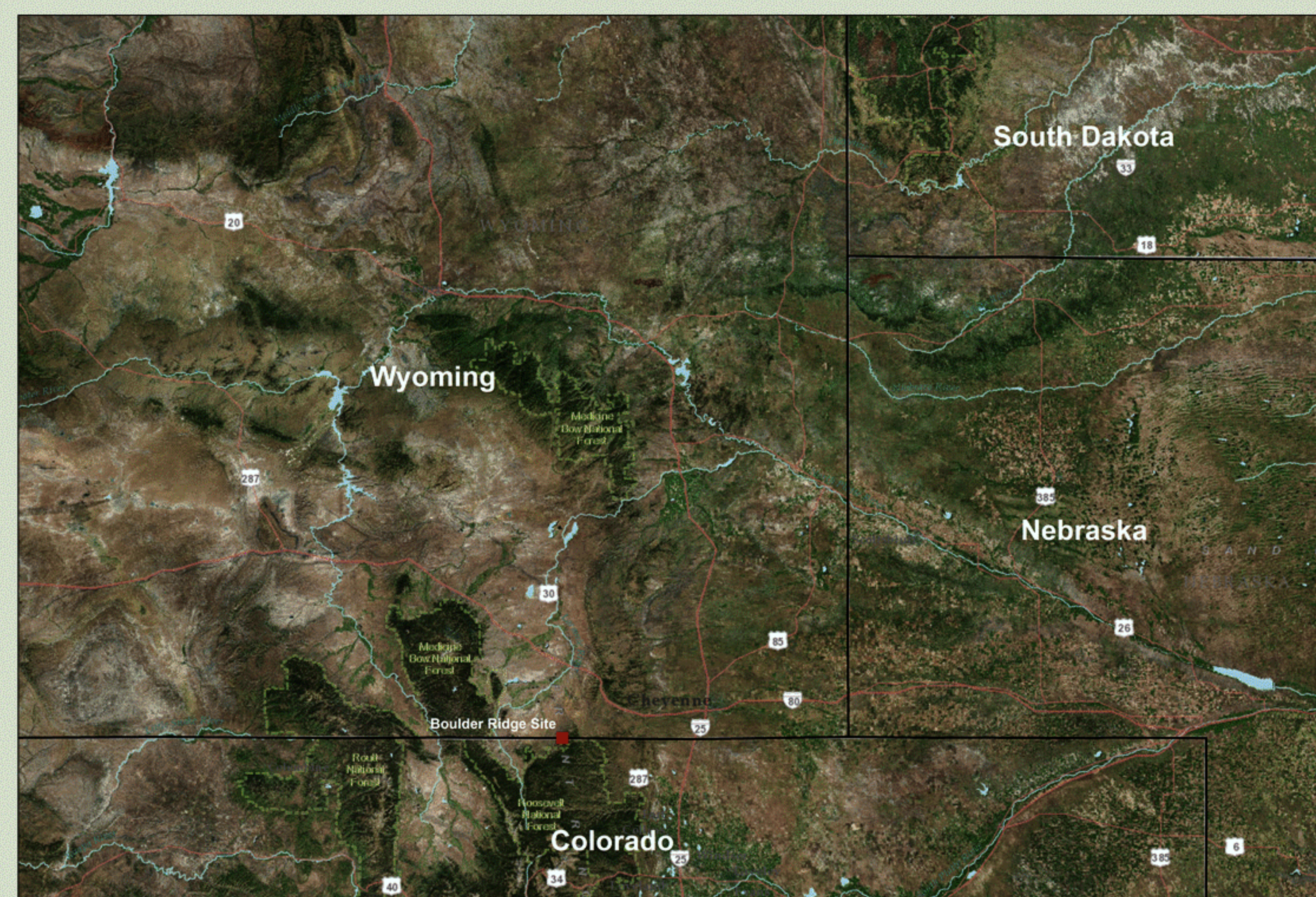


Public Archaeology at the Gipson Site

By Greg Pierce

The Office of the Wyoming State Archaeologist (OWSA) recently conducted a project which successfully integrated public outreach, academic research, and archaeological education. In the fall of 2015 we took twelve students and volunteers ranging in age from 10 to 60 into the field to conduct archaeological investigations at the Gipson site at the behest of a local property owner. Investigations at this historic camp consisted of survey, metal detecting, and test excavations. This was the first systematic investigation of the site and the results have helped to give clarity to the nature of the 19th century occupation and will add to the understanding of railroad building activities in the West.



Location of the Gipson site (ESRI 2016)

The Gipson Site

The Gipson site is located in the Laramie Mountains southwest of Tie Siding, WY. The site sits atop a small hill overlooking the Laramie Valley to the northwest. In 2009 the property owners discovered a scatter of historic material. Interested in recording and investigating the site, they contacted OWSA and the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). Individuals from these agencies worked with the property owners to complete and submit a site form to the Wyoming SHPO (Gipson 2012).

The landowners wanted to investigate the site further. Unfortunately OWSA and SHPO staff were already committed to other projects at the time and were unable to assist in field investigations. However, individuals from these agencies were able to help develop a collection methodology for the site. Using this methodology a datum was established near the center of the site and the locations of visible artifacts were recorded in relation to this datum using compass direction and distance. This work resulted in a sitemap documenting the spatial distribution of the visible surface artifacts.

This initial recordation of the site provided a basic site boundary, inventory, and site history. However, the property owners were intent on doing more and approached OWSA about conducting more intensive investigations. The proximity of the site to Laramie allowed for easy day trips to conduct fieldwork and the relatively small size and shallow depths of the sediment were ideal for brief, focused investigations featuring avocationalists and students with little field training. As such, the decision was made to integrate field investigations at the site into the curriculum of a fall Public Archaeology course taught by the author at the University of Wyoming.



2015 field crew conducting survey at the Gipson site

The Class

Anthropology 4190/5190, Public Archaeology, is a regular course listing in the department of Anthropology at the University of Wyoming. The purpose of the class is to introduce students to a wide range of topics related to conducting archaeology with the public in mind. Students are asked to tackle issues faced by archaeologists when working with and presenting information to the public.

The class also seeks to illustrate how public archaeology works in practice. Over the course of the semester students are asked to participate in public archaeology events such as the annual Wyoming Archaeology Fair and in field investigations conducted alongside local property owners.



2015 field crew metal detecting at the Gipson site

The Project

As part of the Fall 2015 Public Archaeology course everyone enrolled was required to participate in a weekend field excursion to the Gipson site. The purposes of the visit were threefold; to develop a relationship with the local property owners in the area, to investigate the nature of the occupation at the Gipson site, and to introduce the class to the process of conducting archaeological investigations alongside avocationalists and property owners. The field crew consisted of myself, the property owners, and twelve students and volunteers.

The project design defined three major objectives; to identify the extent of the site, complete an inventory of visible archaeological resources, and test for subsurface deposits should time and circumstances allow.

The Fieldwork

Fieldwork began with a surface survey of the entire site. After the survey was completed and each artifact was collected, bagged, and recorded students broke into groups. Group A identified, photographed, and recorded attribute and locational data for all the cut trees onsite. Groups B and C conducted a metal detecting survey of the site. Following the metal detecting survey, students photographed and mapped a surface rock alignment and placed two test units.



Rock alignment from the Gipson site

Throughout the day a number of local property owners stopped by to see the site and talk with us about the work being conducted. These site visits provided the students with the opportunity to interact with members of the public during an ongoing field project. Students showed visitors around the site, talked with them about the history of the area, and explained the work they were doing. This experience was invaluable to those that visited the site as well as the students. Visitors were able to experience active fieldwork and talk with archaeologists about the process and the site and members of the class were able to engage with interested members of the public and serve as “experts” discussing and explaining archaeology.



Artifacts from the Gipson site

Results

All of the objectives put forth in the project design were completed. Thirty positive metal detector hits and twelve cut trees were recorded, one rock alignment feature was mapped, two test units were excavated, and over 200 artifacts were collected. Artifacts included metal and glass fragments, shell casings, various nails and fasteners, horse tack, buttons, and buckles. An analysis of firearm hardware, ammunition, and bottle fragments revealed that the site dates to the late 1860s. This date range, as well as the geographic location of the site, suggests that the Gipson site is likely related to surveying or hunting activities associated with the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad in the Laramie Valley.



2015 field crew

Conclusion

The Gipson project proved to be a resounding success. It brought together outreach, research, and educational components. Quality data was collected which when analyzed will have the ability to add to our knowledge of activities associated with transcontinental railroad construction in Wyoming during the 1860s and 1870s. Interested individuals from the area as well as the owners of the property were successfully integrated into the investigation of the site through onsite tours and direct participation in fieldwork. Students also benefitted from the work, gaining valuable insight into the actual process of conducting public outreach efforts. The Gipson site serves as an example of the positive achievements that can be attained through the incorporation of public outreach and education into research and fieldwork and serves as a reminder that while balancing various professional responsibilities can be difficult, there are significant benefits to be gained when multiple goals can be addressed through a single project.

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