



By Frank X. Mullen

GRIMES POINT, Nev. – Death came for the Spirit Cave Man 10,630 years ago amid waves of pain.

His body rested in a shallow grave in a cave near Fallon, but not for eternity. Two Nevada archeologists found his partially-mummified body in 1940, but his antiquity was not known until tests were done in 1994.

Spirit Cave Man’s remains are now the focus of worldwide excitement and a national controversy. The man does not resemble American Indians, anthropologists say, and he may represent a population already established in North America when ancestors of the Indians arrived.

Some anthropologists want to study him further. Nevada Indian leaders want his remains reburied without further testing.

Both sides have presented evidence in the tug-of-war for the ancient remains. The Bureau of Land Management, steward of the federal land near Grimes Point where the remains were found, may make the decision on the future of the remains this summer.

Once Spirit Cave Man’s age was known, scientists studied the remains with X-rays and computer scans, built models of his head, analyzed his dried excrement, and studied the pollen and other materials found with the burial.

In a way, the researchers have partially recreated a Nevada lost to time. “This was a period when people all over the planet were adapting to the end of the Ice Age,” said Amy Dansie, an anthropologist who did some of the first work on the Spirit Cave remains.

“The mega-fauna (mammoths and other giant animals) died out 1,000 years before this culture existed,” Dansie said in a lecture at the museum last year.

“All over the world people were at the same stage of technology and civilization. Everyone was trying to adapt to a much different world.”

From what scientists have learned so far, the first Nevadans adapted to change as well as any people, at any time, anywhere on Earth.

The Spirit Cave Man opens a doorway into a time and a people formerly lost to history. That doorway will be closed forever if ancient remains like those found at Spirit Cave are reburied without study, some anthropologists argue.

Here's a look through that doorway in time, based on museum reports, lectures and interviews with scientists who have studied the Spirit Cave Man mummy:

The cave man's world

He was about 45 years old and was probably an elder of his people. His name never will be known, but what scientists have learned about him indicates a hard life and a painful death among people who cared for him.

Spirit Cave man and his clan lived in a marsh at the edges of a receding lake – later to be known as Lake Lahontan. The lake once stretched across what was to become northwest Nevada. Cattails and bulrushes reached overhead. The water was alive with fish and insects.

The people made use of all the things in their world. They caught fish in nets, harvested edible plants and used stone points to hunt animals. Like most ancient people, they probably believed spirits were all around them, but their beliefs have been lost to time.

They lived in a snapshot of time before written history. The great lake left after the last Ice Age was shrinking. The Great Basin was turning into a desert. Sagebrush mingled with Indian hemp near the people's camp. The clan lived near a marsh that was moving steadily northward as water evaporated and the climate became warmer and dryer.

This the last era when most of the people of the world were on an equal footing. It was a time before widespread farming and cities and writing. The first step-pyramids of Egypt were 6,000 years in the future. The massive stone monuments of Europe would not be raised for another 4,000 years.

These first Nevadans were Stone Age people, but their weaving was as functional and beautiful as any ever made. They knew each plant and animal in a way modern people can never experience. Yet, for some, it was not a peaceful life.

Spirit Cave Man had a skull fracture from a blow to the head. The break stretched from the left front of his skull to behind his left ear. Two fractures spread out from a circular indentation in his skull, as though he had been hit with a blunt object, like a club or a rounded stone. The head fractures, more than a year old, had partially healed, but he had other medical problems.

His right hand had been broken in two places but had healed. His spine was malformed since birth, leading to conditions and injuries that probably gave him considerable lower back pain. He suffered from frequent dental abscesses, which left jagged edges on his jawbones.

Shortly before he died, three teeth were badly infected. The abscesses drained through an open sore in his cheek. The infection surged through his bloodstream. Fever raged through him. He was dying.

His people cared for him. Shortly before his death they fed him small chub and sucker fish, probably boiled and mashed. It was his last meal. The day he ate it, Spirit Cave Man's life ended.

His clan members carried his body up an incline from their camp in the marsh. They went to a hillside where shallow caves – most no more than rock shelters – dotted the face of the hillsides. The hollows were dug by the wave action of the giant lake thousands of years before. Then, as now, the roofs and sides of the caves were coated in white tufa, calcium carbonate from the lake's water.

The people dug a shallow grave and placed their clan member within it. He was laid on his right side with his hand resting beneath his chin. The people wrapped the dead man's body in a rabbit fur blanket and covered his head with a diamond-plaited mat. It was not a special new mat for a funeral. It showed signs of wear where people – perhaps the dead man himself – had sat and reclined upon it. It, like the other artifacts buried with the man, was a thing of daily use.

The dead man's moccasins, with tough leather soles and marmot hide tops, remained on his feet. One moccasin had been patched, heel and toe, with antelope hide after long use. Tule reeds inside the moccasins served as socks.

The people covered him with sand and rocks and left him for the ages in a cave where other human remains also would be found. It is not known if the people believed his spirit would go on to an afterlife, but they could not have imagined the kind of resurrection in store for him more than ten millennia after his death. The Discovery

Spirit Cave Man's clan enjoyed their moist, green world for a brief snapshot in time. The marsh shrank year by year and desert took its place. Many generations later, the Great Basin would become even more inhospitable. About 7,000 to 4,500 years ago a great drought held the basin in its parched grasp.

Yet, people still lived in what was to be called Nevada. By the time the first non-Indian invaders crossed the Great Basin in the early 1800s, the people who wandered the desert and lived around the lakes, marshes and the rivers were well established.

The Numu, as the Paiute people called themselves, lived in the western, southern and central parts of Nevada. The Wa-she-shu, or Washoe people lived in the Sierra Nevada

and the valleys to the east of the mountains. The Newe, or Western Shoshone people, lived in what would become western Nevada.

Throughout the basin were the remnants of cultures long vanished. In the caves and other hidden places were artifacts of the ancient ones. The modern Indians said these things were the traces of their ancestors. Scientists began to gather evidence of these Nevadans of so long ago.

Continued, Page 6A