

The May speaker for the Dixie Archeology Society was Grant Carlos Smith, a professional archeologist, who works for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Even as a child, Grant knew what he wanted to do with his life. He was always fascinated with the Indian artifacts he found and wanted to know the story behind them and the people who created the pottery or other objects he found. In 1991, Joel Janetski, BYU anthropology professor, became Grant Smith's mentor. Professor Janetski assigned Grant to analyze the pottery they found in the Promontory Caves which are located on a peninsula that juts out on the north end of the Great Salt Lake. The land where the caves are located is owned by the Chournos family. The family is very protective of the land, especially George Chournos, who keeps people out of the caves and feels strongly that the caves must be preserved.

Before Grant Smith began his study of the caves and the pottery in the caves; an earlier archeologist, Julian Stewart, studied the Promontory Caves way back in 1931. Stewart interviewed the oldest people he could find belonging to the Navajo, the Ute, and the Goshute groups. Through their stories and anecdotes; he discovered the type of dress, the design of the pottery, and the way they lived.

When Smith began his study of the caves, he found that nothing much had changed since Stewart had excavated sixty years earlier. Smith explained that the layers were like baklava: cedar bark, then twine, different elements such as buffalo hair remains, scraps of leather, scraps of fringe, buffalo horns, arrow heads, arrow shafts, pottery, and moccasins. The excavation revealed an incredible amount of residue. They hauled it back to the laboratories to evaluate the artifacts.

One of the questions that was asked was, "What is the relationship between the Fremont and the Promontory people? Are they the same or different?" The Fremont are the northern cousins of the Anasazi. Smith maintains that there are three possibilities of what happened to the Fremont people and how the Promontory people came about. First, was there a cultural adaptation? When farming became difficult, did the Fremont people revert back to hunting and gathering? The second possibility is that there was a cultural replacement. The Fremont abandoned the region, and another cultural group replaced them. This could have been the Promontory people. Lastly, there could have been culture mixing. Genetic mixing and cultural blending may have happened through interaction.

Smith's thesis is that the pottery of the Fremont and the Promontory people is significantly different. His analysis shows that the Promontory type of pottery is larger than the Fremont pottery. The Promontory pottery has thickened and incised rims. They are globular vessels and were probably used for cooking huge amounts of fish for feasts. The Fremont pottery varies in size and shape, unlike the huge, globular pots that define the Promontory pottery.

Grant Smith is passionate about the “Promontory Gray” pottery and enthusiastically shared his findings and speculations with the club. Smith and the other researchers’ findings are also exciting as they discovered DNA on the moccasins and the results will be published in the near future.