

# Late Archaic Pithouses of the Upper Colorado River Drainage



D A R G

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- This presentation discusses two pithouse structures found in the benchland area south of the Colorado River in the vicinity of Battlement Mesa Community and the town of De Beque. Both pit-structures exhibit similar morphology and are associated with the same type of distinctive artifacts.

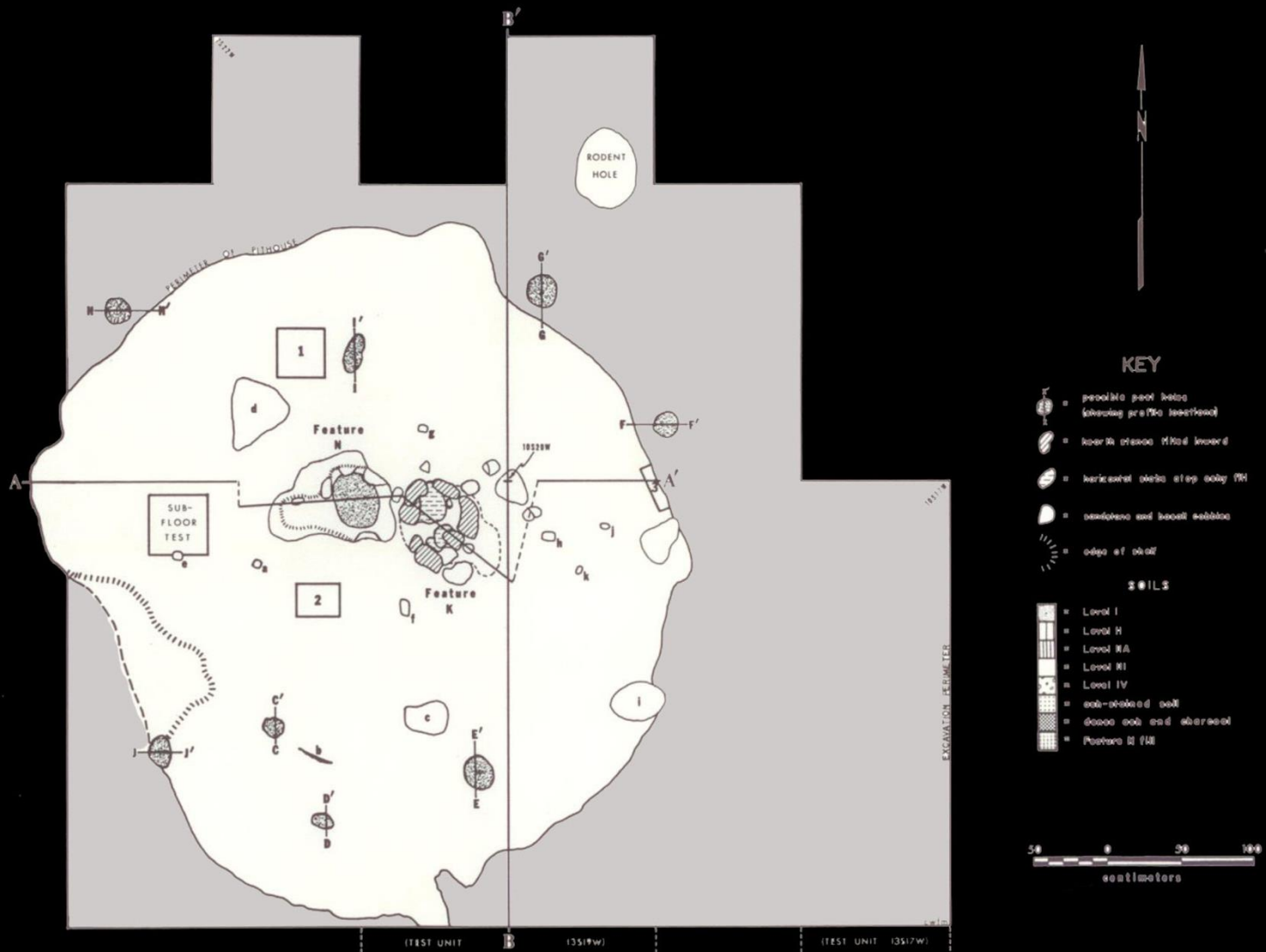
# 5GF126

- This site was the first prehistoric pit structure found north of the Four Corners Area. It was excavated by a crew headed up by Curtis Martin. The pithouse turned out to be about 3000 years old. The excavations at the site revealed a roughly circular, basin-shaped depression measuring approximately 4.5m in diameter and up to 65cm in depth.



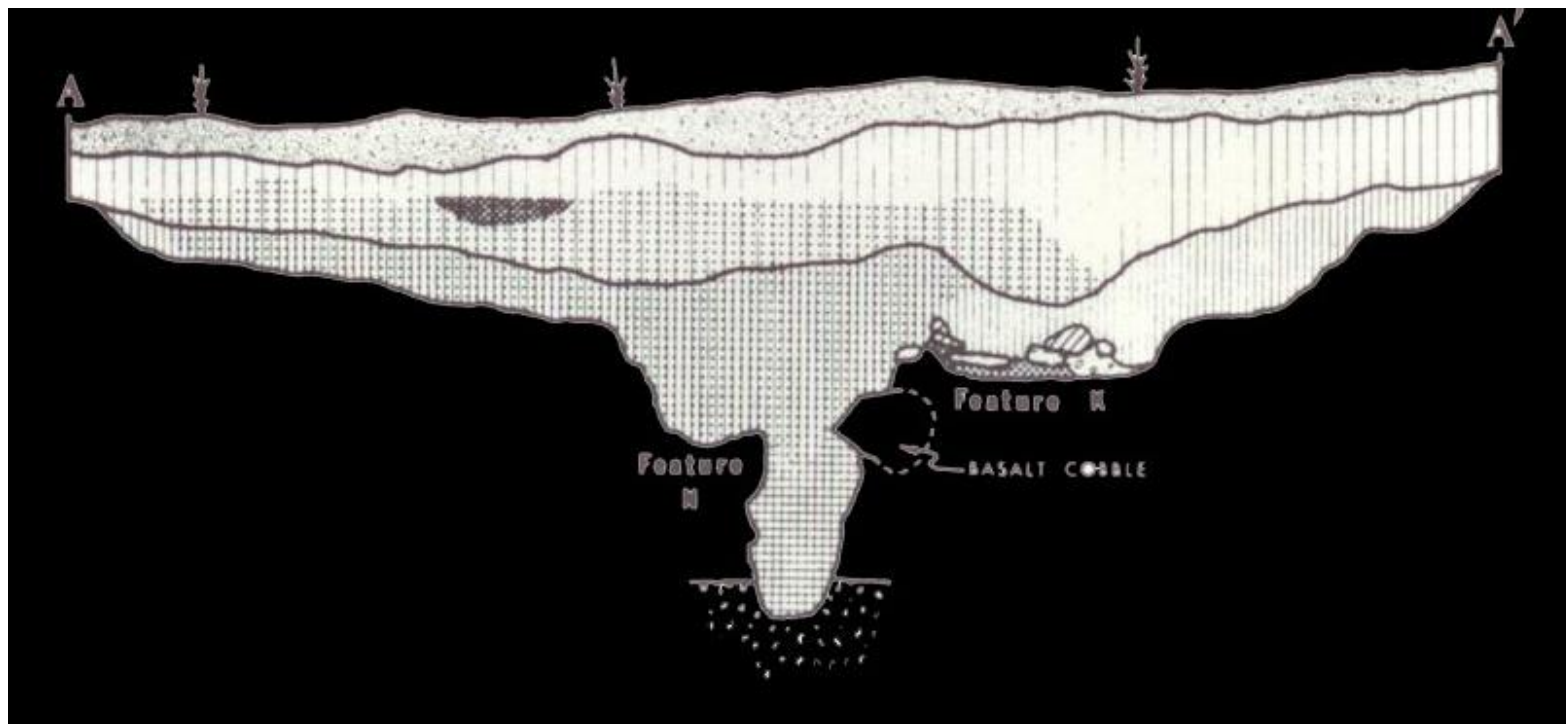
## **Excavation of Battlement Mesa Pithouse, 5GF126**

Outline of pithouse is clearly visible. Archaeologist is working on removing contents of hearth feature. Small post holes are visible on perimeter and large central posthole is located to right of figure's head.



5GF126 Pithouse Plan View

- Eight small shallow holes around and within the perimeter of the pithouse and the single large hole at the center of the floor implied the presence of a superstructure presumably constructed of wooden poles. The center post occupied a large irregular depression that was dug to 36cm below the floor level. Taken together, the post holes suggest there was probably a conical-shaped roof with a center support pole.
- Just east of the central post hole was a an oblong, basin- shaped, thermal feature dug into the pithouse floor. The basin measured 80 x 55 cm and was a maximum of 18 cm deep. Seated about 7 cm above the bottom of the feature and atop a gray brown ashy fill were several basalt slabs, which presumably comprised a cooking surface. Directly atop the slabs was a circle of basalt pieces sloping toward the center. A carbon date of  $2770 \pm 60$  BP was obtained from the charcoal of this thermal feature.



Profile of pithouse at 5GF126



Diagnostic artifacts recovered from the pithouse fill included three complete corner-notched projectile points. In addition, a distinctive mano type found on the pithouse floor may be the primary diagnostic of these Late Archaic period people. The mano is best characterized as a loaf-shaped type, which was made from a quartzite river cobble that had been pecked and ground on all sides to exhibit a sub-rectangular (nearly cubic) form. This mano type suggests craft specialization among the Late Archaic group or band which inhabited the area.





Loaf-shaped manos recovered from 5GF126: Top found on surface, bottom located on pithouse floor.

- Pollen samples were obtained from the pithouse floor, as ground stone washes, and from the hearth. Analysis of the samples indicated that the floral food resources most relied upon were the seed producing plants. Predominant was pollen from goose foot and other pig weeds, which are forbes that produce a pound or more of seeds from a few plants during late summer (for use or storage) and edible greens from early spring to late fall.
- Indian rice grass, nightshade, Hackberry, and cactus were washed from the metate found upside down on the pithouse floor. Interestingly, the ricegrass pollen was notably large, suggestive of possible human manipulation. In fact, ricegrass is well suited for such manipulation as are goosefoot and pigweed, because they all grow well in poor or disturbed ground and their large grains are easily harvested.
- Identifiable faunal remains from the pithouse included two species of rabbits, mule deer, and a marmot, all of which are common to the area on a year round basis. Deer were probably more prevalent during the late fall and early spring months, although the river corridor would have provided ample forage and cover throughout the year as it does today.

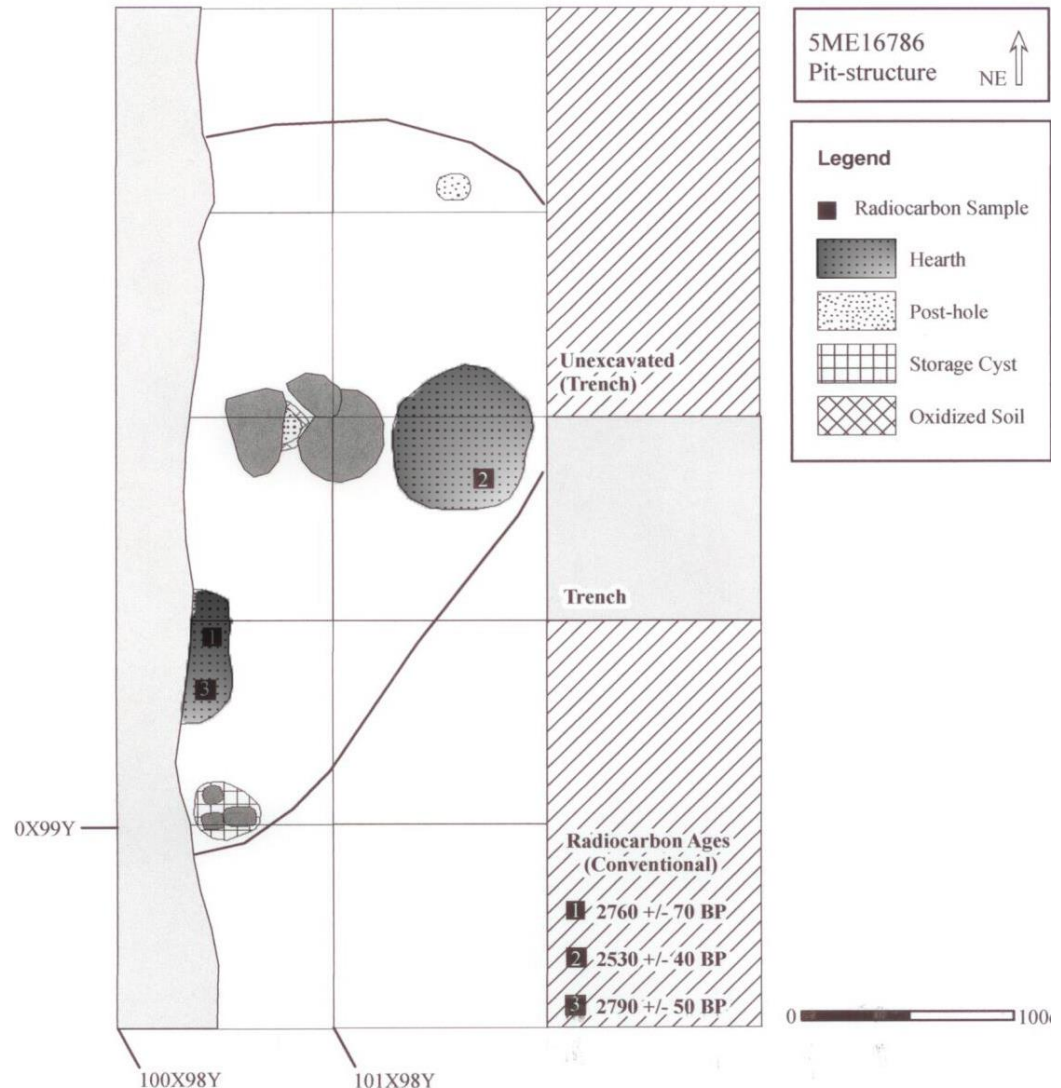
# 5ME16786

- In 2009, Grand River Institute conducted an archaeological monitor for the Collbran Pipeline Project. Fortunately for the archaeological community, the entire pipeline route was required to be monitored by the BLM Glenwood and Grand Junction Field Offices. That monitoring resulted in the identification of three pit structures – one of which at site 5ME16786 turned out to be the same type and yielded essentially the same date as that found at Battlement Mesa Community. Unfortunately, the newly found structure had been damaged by trenching for two pipelines, but the archaeological excavation of what remained of the pithouse proved to be very fortuitous.

- Site 5ME16786 discovered during monitoring exhibited no surface cultural manifestations. The lowest component at the site was a pit-structure identified approximately 1.5m below surface. At the time of discovery, it consisted of a faint, lenticular ash stain that measured roughly 3.8m in diameter and up to 40cm in depth. The possibility of interior features was evinced by a faint, basin-shaped anomaly along the floor of the structure. This anomaly was suspected to be the central hearth, and a charcoal sample collected during the monitor was sent to Beta Analytic in Miami, Florida, for processing. The sample yielded a conventional radiocarbon date of 2760 +/- 70BP (Beta No. 263484).

At the time of excavation, the pithouse of 5ME16786 had already been disturbed by two pipeline trenches (left and right of the illustrated floor remains). Despite the damage, what remained was an arrangement of interior features including two hearths, a storage cyst, and two postholes.

A second thermal feature measuring approximately 50cm in diameter and 10cm in depth was excavated near the southeast perimeter of the pit structure and may represent a later occupation because a conventional radiocarbon age of 2620 +/- 40BP (Beta No. 282180) was obtained.







Pipeline trench cut on the northwest side of pithouse, 5ME16786.



Two postholes were identified during the excavation. A large one was found near the center of the structure consisted of a semi-circular charcoal stain distinguished by a vibrant perimeter of oxidized sediment. Profile view of central posthole at 5ME16786. Notable is the evidence of intensive burning of the structure.

- Only a few chipped stone artifacts were found *in-situ* on the floor. These included three flakes and one composite tool consisting of a burin and spokeshave. Numerous chipped stone artifacts, including a corner-notched projectile point, were recovered at variable depths above the floor of the structure. The level of recovery for the projectile point appears to be coincident with the hearth feature dating 2620 +/- 40 BP (Beta No. 282180). Similar points were recovered from 5GF126 and also the Koch site (5ME635), which is located on the benchland south of DeBeque above the Colorado River. There five projectile points were collected from the surface, and were associated with a conventional radiocarbon age of 2717 +/- 82 BP (Alexander and Martin 1980: 39).



## Projectile Points from 5GF126

Projectile Point  
from 5ME16786



- The majority of the ground stone collected from the interior of the structure was fragmented. Many evinced sharp, jagged fractures indicating exposure to fire. But three very distinctive, complete manos were recovered from a storage cist discovered near the southwest perimeter of the structure. It measured approximately 30cm in diameter and 15cm in depth. The manos are were pecked and ground on all four surfaces to produce a sub-rectangular (nearly cubic) form. Opposite of these distinctive manos an extremely well made, very thin (2cm) metate was recovered from the floor. The edges were pecked to produce an ovoid shape (50x40cm) and the surface was ground as well as pecked to form a thin, slab metate. It exhibits a slightly ground area that corresponds to one of the manos found in the cache. The metate also exhibits notching in the center of each side for attaching carrying straps. Because of its thin nature and limited evidence of surface grinding, it was likely broken shortly after the first use and then used as a utility surface or as a comal.



Manos in storage cist, 5ME16786.



Manos from pithouse floor cache, 5ME16786.





Slab metate found on pithouse floor of 5ME16786. Broken when found with only slight abrasions from use, it may have served as a comal. Notable are the notches on all four sides indicating that it was a portable artifact.



Distinctive loaf-shaped mano and portable slab metate recovered from  
5ME16786

# Conclusion

- The pit-structure excavated at 5ME16786 and its contemporary at 5GF126 exhibit similar morphology and are also associated with similar distinctive, diagnostic artifacts – the loaf-shaped manos and the large, portable, slab and shallow basin metates.
- It is apparent that the two sites functioned as base camps and were likely occupied from fall to spring months. They are located in the most productive of the three environmental zones in the catchment area. Diverse biotopes surround the pithouses – including riparian (along the Colorado River), sagebrush grasslands, pinon-juniper, and dense berry-producing shrubs in nearby upland locations. These would have provided a wide range of seasonal and year-round resources and reduced the necessity for gathering forays outside the catchment area. This ecological niche likely allowed territorial permanence about 3000 years ago. That niche, at a minimum, occurs along a 25 mile stretch, roughly between De Beque and Newcastle, along the Colorado River, where nearly identical environmental conditions prevail. Similar environmental opportunities likely occurred along the Eagle and Gunnison Rivers in the region.