Update on ASCO Funding for Cougar Mountain Cave Research

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Thanks to generous support from the Archaeological Society of Central Oregon's (ASCO) research grant program we have made significant strides in our ongoing research at Cougar Mountain Cave (35LK55), Oregon. We used funds provided by ASCO to obtain radiocarbon dates and wood taxa identifications on artifacts part of the site's legacy collection housed at the Favell Museum in Klamath Falls. With ASCO's support, and support from a variety of other funders, Cougar Mountain Cave is now the third most dated archaeological site in all of the Americas with 211 individual radiocarbon dates. This allows us, for the first time, to understand the timing and tempo of human occupations of the site over the last 12,500 years. Moreover, Cougar Mountain Cave no longer lives in infamy of "what could have been," as the new chronology allows us and other researchers to compare and contrast the chronology and cultural material of Cougar Mountain Cave to regional archaeological sites such as Paisley Caves and Connley Caves.

The new information we have obtained at the site, again, supported by ASCO, also contributes to continental and global records of perishable technologies. For example, we can now say with confidence that the oldest physical remains of sewn leather in the world come from Cougar Mountain Cave. People have been sewing and processing leather for at least 45,000 years, but the 12,500-year-old examples at Cougar Mountain Cave are the oldest surviving leather itself. This should highlight how special the site and the central Oregon archaeological record is. We have also directly dated the oldest bow in the Great Basin, and North America for that matter, to 1650 years ago. Similarly, the identifications of the types of plants and trees used to make wooden tools at Cougar Mountain Cave is providing new insights into and reaffirming the long-standing traditional knowledge of northern Great Basin Indigenous communities. We have identified an array of wood species such as maple, willow, and poplar in various items from Cougar Mountain Cave. Studies like this are few and far between in the archaeological literature and identifying the many dozens of wooden items at the site is putting our team, and Oregon archaeology, at the forefront of this emerging subset of study. As another example, we were recently able to identify willow as the wood species used in the construction of several atlatl darts from the site—indicating that riparian and wetland wood species were of particular importance, as they remain so today.

All in all, the support provided by ASCO for the Cougar Mountain Cave project has provided long-lasting and significant archaeological information and data on the history of central Oregon and the historical knowledge of Indigenous communities. Our research team is extremely grateful for ASCO's trust and support, and they are without a doubt one of the reasons for our success in this project. They provided vital funding to a very important and impactful project. Our work continues and we look forward to sharing our findings with the public, tribal, and scientific communities through presentations and peer-reviewed publications.