

SJBAS Field Trip Report

Champagne Springs Archaeological Excavation

Near Dove Creek, Colorado
Spring 2026

Six members of the San Juan Basin Archaeological Society — Thomas Polich (Trip Leader), Art Rieke, Mary Rieke, Dianne Palz, and Elena Piazissi — participated in a three-day archaeological excavation at a site known as *Champagne Springs*, located approximately seven miles west of Dove Creek, Colorado. Despite its name, no obvious spring is visible today, and the origin of the name remains something of a mystery.

This Pueblo I period site, dating from approximately A.D. 770 to 920, reflects a community with a strong hunting emphasis. The excavation was organized and directed by Dave Dove, who has owned and stewarded the property for nearly twenty years. In total, more than thirty participants took part in the dig, making for a productive and collaborative effort.

Setting and Accommodations

Participants either camped near the site or stayed at the Dove Creek Inn, which proved to be both comfortable and economical at \$60 per night. In a delightful show of community interest, the Innkeeper himself came out to the excavation and tried his hand at sifting, gaining a firsthand appreciation for the patience and care required in archaeological work.

Each morning, the group gathered early, reviewed assignments, and dispersed to their designated excavation units under the guidance of team leaders and Mr. Dove.

Excavation Work

Over the course of three days, the team opened four surface rooms and one kiva. Excavation proceeded carefully, layer by layer, with meticulous screening of soil and detailed recording of provenience. As is often the case in Pueblo I sites, the stratigraphy revealed subtle but meaningful changes in soil color, texture, and composition, each marking episodes of occupation, use, abandonment, and rebuilding.

The four rooms yielded an impressive array of artifacts, including:

- Extensive redware pottery
- Corrugated and smooth grayware sherds
- A well-worn metate
- Numerous small arrow points
- Bone beads

These finds reinforce the interpretation of the site as one with a significant hunting component, supported by both tool assemblage and faunal evidence. The presence of domestic grinding implements such as the metate also points to food processing activities within these rooms.

The kiva excavation offered insight into the ceremonial and communal aspects of life at Champagne Springs. As architectural features and floor surfaces were gradually exposed, the team leaders and Mr. Dove frequently paused to examine emerging details. Discussions at the trench edge became impromptu seminars, with speculation about room function, seasonal occupation, and the broader lifestyle of the inhabitants who lived here between A.D. 770 and 920.

The Educational Experience

One of the most valuable aspects of the excavation was the opportunity to observe how interpretation develops in real time. As each new surface or feature was revealed, careful consultation followed. Soil layers, hearth remnants, artifact concentrations, and floor treatments all contributed pieces to the larger story.

This is demanding physical work. Hours of troweling, shoveling, screening, and hauling buckets of earth can be exhausting. Yet it is also deeply rewarding. To uncover, inch by inch, the material traces of people who lived more than a millennium ago is both humbling and exhilarating. The combination of physical labor and intellectual discovery made the experience intensely educational.

For many of us, the most memorable moments came not from a single artifact, but from standing together around a newly exposed floor, imagining daily life in this high desert landscape — hunters returning with game, families grinding maize, beadwork in progress, and ceremonies conducted in the kiva.

Conclusion

The Champagne Springs excavation exemplified hands-on archaeology at its best: collaborative, educational, and grounded in careful stewardship of cultural resources. Our sincere thanks go to Dave Dove for his long-term dedication to preserving the site and for generously organizing and leading this effort.

For the six SJBAS members who participated, the three days were physically demanding but immensely worthwhile. Experiences such as this strengthen our understanding of the Pueblo I period and reinforce SJBAS's mission to learn, preserve, and share the archaeological heritage of the Four Corners region.

Submitted by

Thomas Polich, Trip Leader

San Juan Basin Archaeological Society (SJBAS)