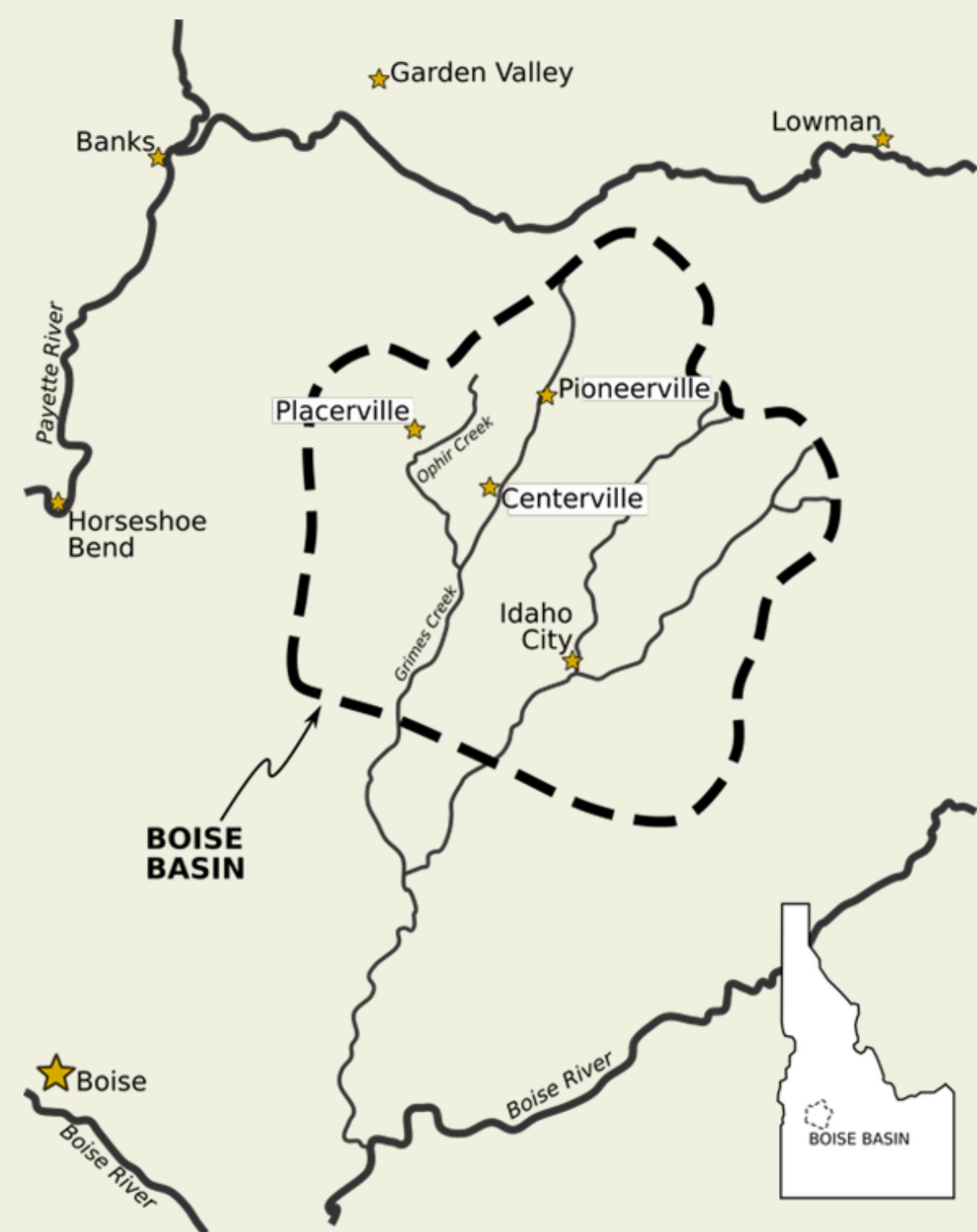


Chinese Festival in Idaho City and the cooking of a whole hog

From Bones to Behavior: Zooarchaeology and Chinese Foodways of a Boise Basin Mining Camp

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Map of Idaho and the Boise Basin mining sites

History

Gold was first discovered in the Boise Basin by George Grimes and his company in 1862 at what is now known as Grimes Creek. Chinese miners began arriving in the Boise Basin a few years later. Between 1870 and 1890, mining camps in places like Idaho City, Placerville, Centerville, and Pioneerville were home to nearly 2,000 Chinese.

Site Background

10BO357 (BS-780), which was recorded by the Boise National Forest (BNF) personnel in 1984 during a land exchange survey. Because of the diversity of surface material and the evidence of ongoing looting, the site was excavated in 1985 (Geer 1985:1–3). In a letter report on the 1985 excavations, Geer and his colleagues note a depression that may have been a cellar or foundation. Most artifacts appear to have been recovered from this feature and from a refuse scatter that may have been used to backfill a placer ditch. The authors describe recovering a variety of Chinese manufactured goods from the site, as well as a relatively large faunal collection.

Pigs Feet and Chinese Foodways

- Chinese traditional cultural beliefs include a theory of opposing natural forces in the world, which are called yin and yang. This balance is incorporated into most aspects of their lives to create harmony -- including aspects such as architecture, colors, health, and of course food. Many Chinese believe that food is more than merely sustenance; it can also help prevent and treat diseases caused by the imbalance of either yin or yang.
- Yang foods include soups made with meat from pig heads and feet

Acknowledgements

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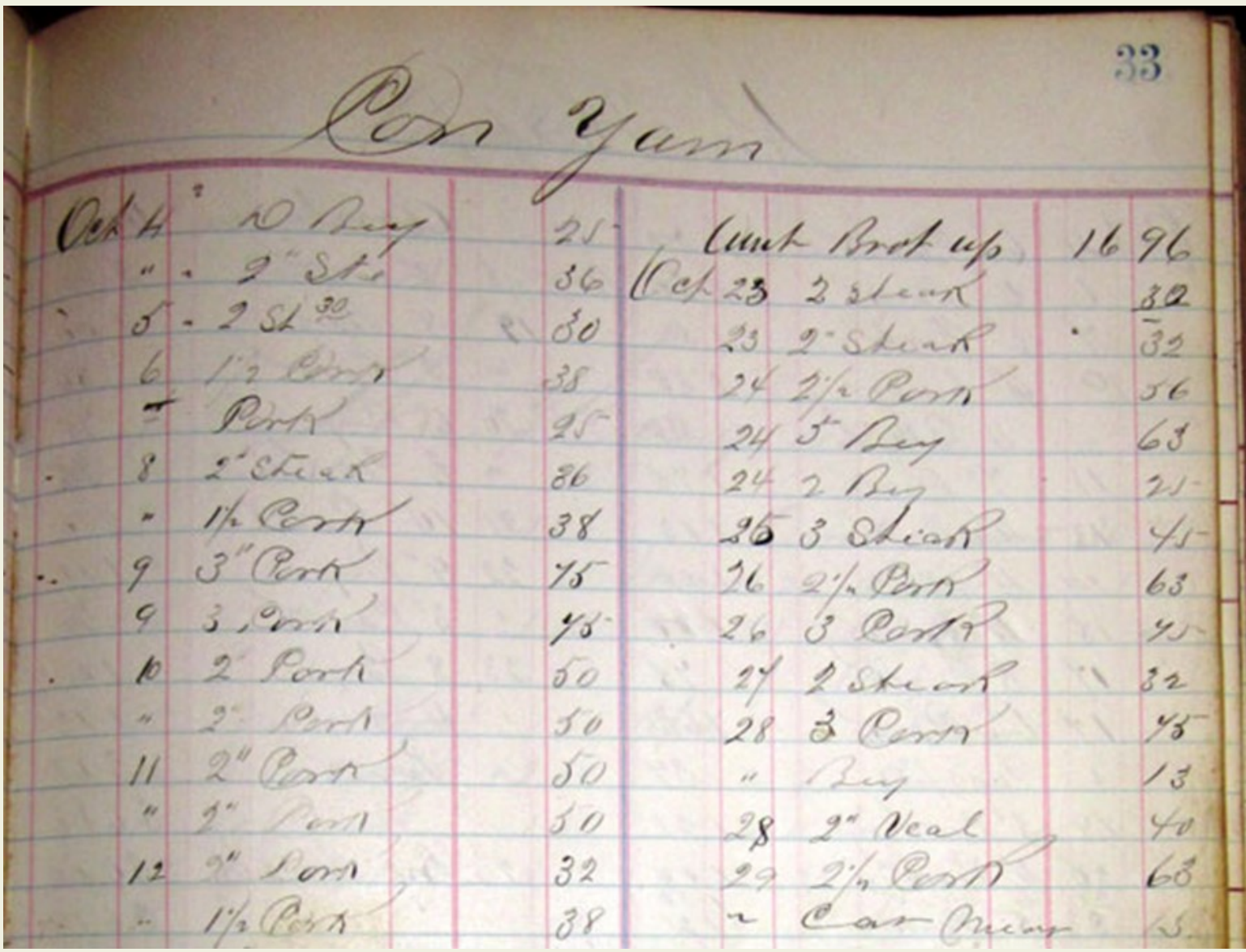
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McDevitt Meat Market Ledgers

Another item of analysis along with the faunal assemblage, was the James McDevitt meat market ledger from the McDevitt butcher shop in Placerville. This ledger recorded meat purchases by the Chinese from 1875 to about 1879. Each page of the ledger recorded the individual's name, what they purchased and how much they paid for it. I used both the faunal assemblage and the ledgers jointly to help shed light on meat economics and availability and how these factors influenced the food preferences of the Chinese miners in the Boise Basin.



Pig Feet and Hog Head

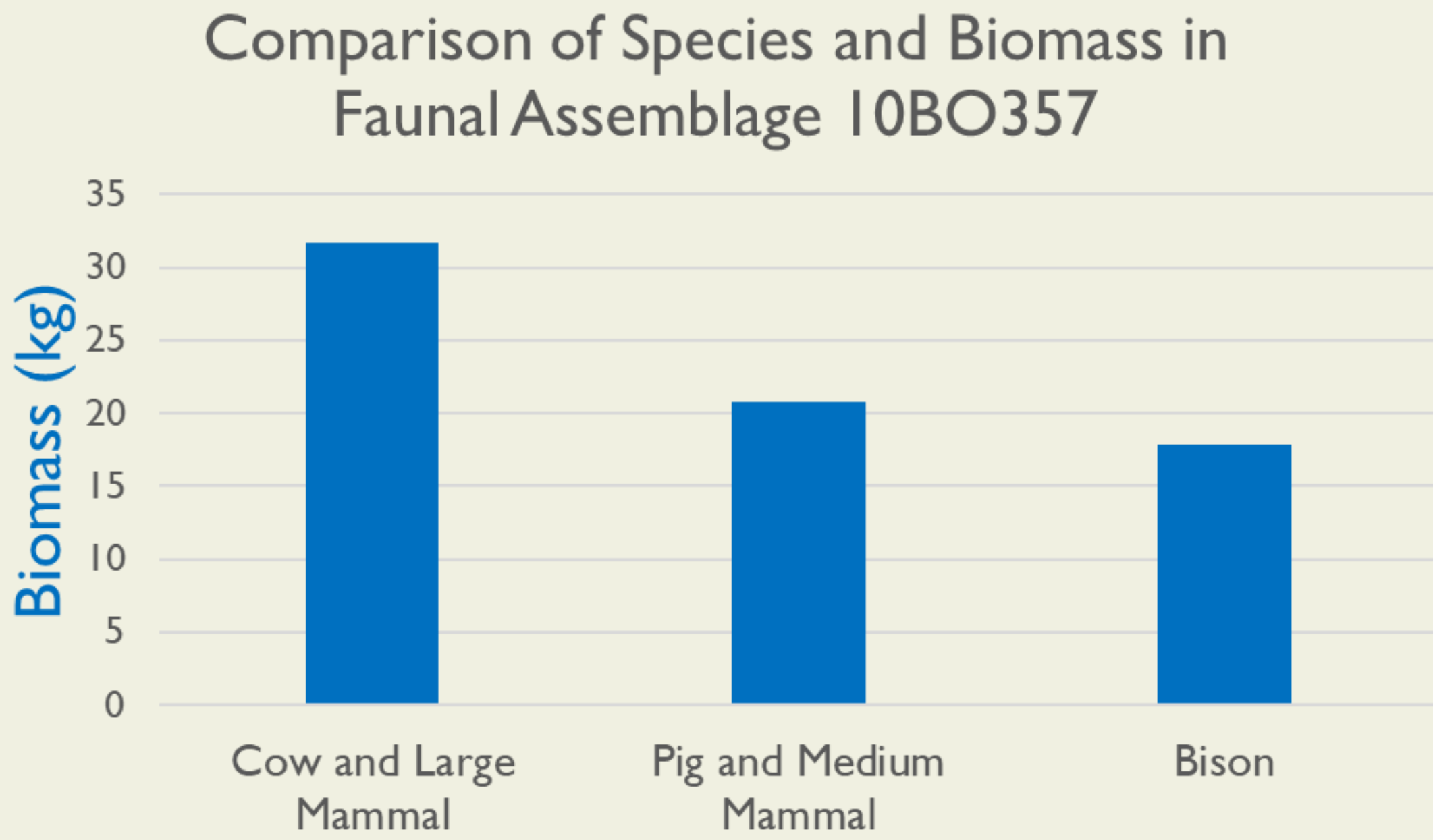
- Both the assemblage and the ledgers showed evidence of consumption of both heads and feet of a pig
- These cuts only cost \$0.13 compared to \$0.25 for other pork cuts

This means: Archaeological and historical data demonstrate a persistence of tradition Chinese foodways in a new country. Despite having the financial resources for more costly meats individuals occasionally selected meat cuts that also held symbolic and medicinal meanings.

Faunal Assemblage Results

- 424 bones/bone fragments
- 208 pig and medium mammal bones
- 102 cow and large mammal bones
- 13 kg pork biomass
- 32 kg beef biomass
- 17 kg bison biomass

This means: greater prevalence of beef overall despite more pig and medium mammal bones



Bison

- Butchered bison bones are not normally present at Chinese mining sites, telling a unique story at this particular site
- 8 bones in the assemblage were identified as bison
- 24% of the total assemblage biomass
- All from one individual bison

This means: The presence of bison and the way in which the bones were butchered indicates some meat acquisition and preparation through non-commercial channels such as through hunting



Sawn pig mandible



Sawn pig calcaneus



Chopped bison radius



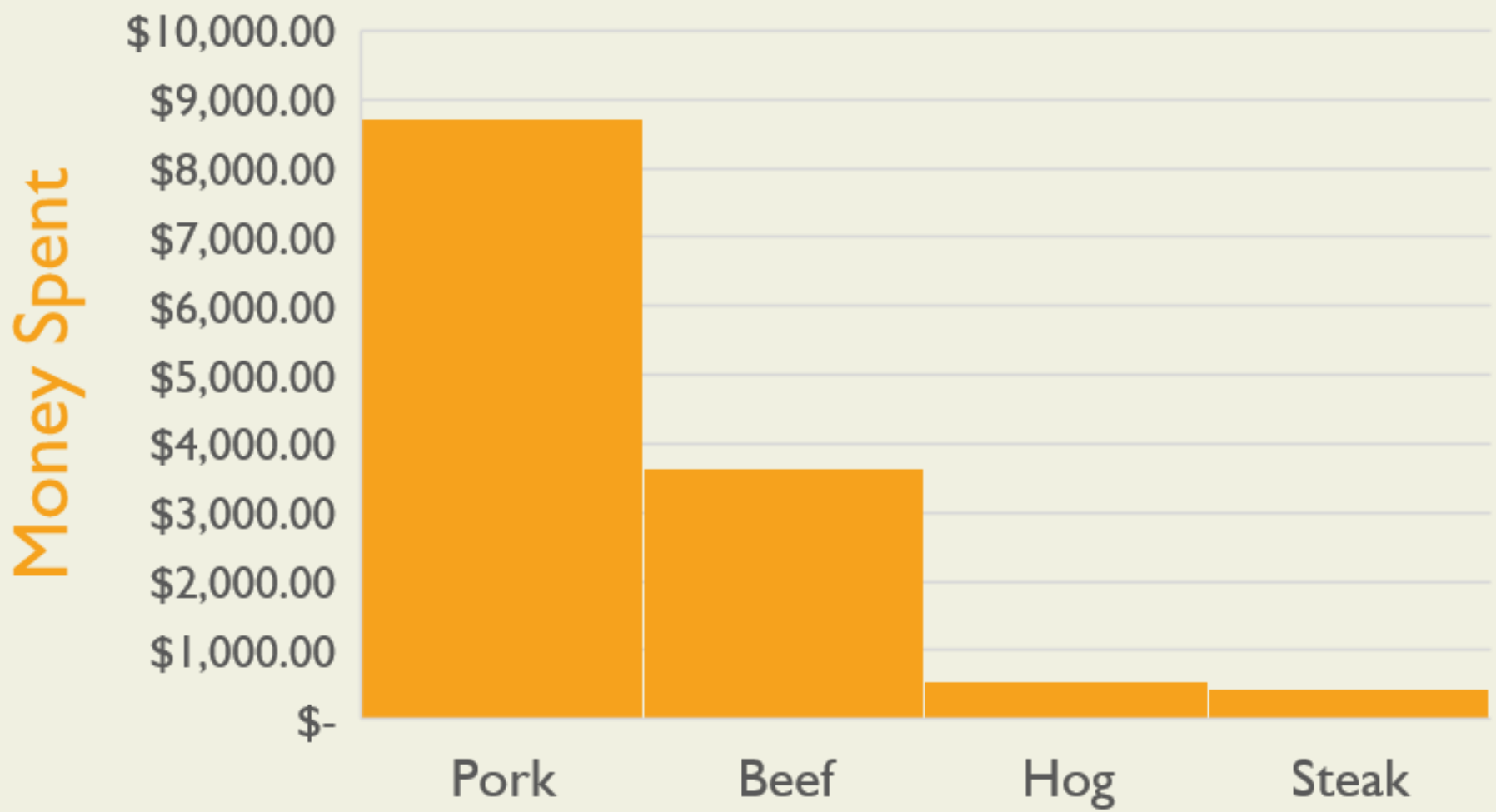
Articulating Bison tibia and astragalus with evidence of disarticulation

Ledger Results

- 25% of the meat purchased was beef
- Price: \$0.13 per pound
- 60% of the meat purchased was pork
- Price: \$0.25 per pound

This means: the Chinese were willing to invest double the money to eat the meat of their choice.

Comparison of Major Items Purchased from McDevitt Meat Market



Conclusion: This means...

The faunal assemblage and the ledgers suggest that these miners were purchasing meat cuts according to their preferences rather than price as shown in larger amounts of higher quality meat cuts of both pork and beef. At the same time, there was a surprisingly high percentage of pig heads and feet represented in both the assemblage and the ledgers, but this is likely a preference for traditional Chinese foodways, providing further evidence that their purchases were more preference-driven.

The bison bones say that either the Chinese or others in the area were hunting for their own wild game rather than purchasing all their meat from a local meat market; there was no bison meat exchange in the ledgers. Although, there was only one bison individual identified indicating that it was not a regular occurrence.

Beef and pork were the most important sources of meat to the Chinese in Idaho. Chinese miners maintained many of their traditional food practices such as their preference for pork. Evidence shown in this study also suggests that there was an element of dietary complexity that is not always visible in historical sources.