

SCREENINGS

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Rock Art Surprises at McCain Creek

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Malcolm and Louise Loring list McCain Creek as site number 235 and comment that they did not visit the site but were supplied with a photo of a rubbing from it, from which they made a drawing that is published in their monograph. The drawing shows a roughly one foot square petroglyph that might be imagined to represent a stylized butterfly.

On a RARE into the great outback of the Owyhee River drainage, one of the least inhabited areas left in the continental United States, we had the good fortune to visit the site. This was made possible through a series of rather serendipitous events. What we found there far exceeded our wildest expectations and we will attempt to share the excitement of some of our discoveries here.

In the course of research, via telephone, I had made the acquaintance of the curator of the Jordan Valley Historic Museum, long time area resident and author, Hazel Fretwell-Johnson. She had invited us to stop for a visit when we got to that part of Malheur County.

We arrived in Jordan Valley mid afternoon after several days tent camping in the field and were looking forward to the amenities of a hotel room, but decided to go to the museum first. Hazel was not there, it was her day off, but the woman who was working told us that her son was out in the parking lot giving a flint knapping demonstration. He was sitting under a shade tree with half a dozen or so people of numerous ages gathered about watching him turn obsidian into well crafted projectile points. I introduced myself and told him of our purpose. He is an affable gentleman and shared a good many anecdotes and numerous insights into the history and prehistory of the area. He mentioned a rock art site that he indicated was quite extensive, had a large variety of glyphs, and was easily accessible. With his help, I firmly fixed the location on our map. He told me that his mother lived two blocks away and that, since she was home, she wouldn't mind if we just stopped by and said hello. Such is the nature of small friendly places in Eastern Oregon.

A few minutes later we knocked on her door and she

greeted us enthusiastically and invited us in. For the next couple of hours she graciously shared with us her life-time knowledge of the area and its heritage. Among the many things she shared were the answers to some questions that only earlier that afternoon had occurred to us. A rock is a town an hour west with a few houses and a post office that, by reports, was named after a petroglyph boulder that now no one there seems to know anything about. Hazel confirmed the boulder exists and produced a photograph of her younger brothers perched on top of it. She made us a copy (Photo 1.)



Photo 1.

After visiting the Pillars of Rome, a unique and impressive geological formation the day before, we had visited the bell tower in the school yard at Arock and photographed half a dozen or so rocks with petroglyphs on them that are embedded in the base of the tower. The tower is dedicated to Hazel's father. We subsequently included the site in our guidebook, *Where to See Rock Art in Washington Oregon Idaho* and the tower photos maybe seen on our website (www.oregonrockart.com.)

After a much welcome motel rest, we struck out the next morning for the sites we had determined we would try to visit. Although, not a rock art site, there is a huge geological feature that cannot be overlooked—Jordan Craters. This twenty-seven square mile lava field is estimated to be between 4,000 and 9,000 years old, although there is an 18 acre lava flow within it that is believed to be only about a hundred years old. Since the

area was likely inhabited during those time periods, one can conjecture about the effects the emergence of the flows had on the people there. I have gone a bit out of the way to include geological features in this report to demonstrate that rock art does not exist in a vacuum. It exists everywhere in a context of landscape, which in all likelihood was very differently viewed and perhaps was held to be of much more value and importance by those who produced the images, than by we who look upon those images today. Understanding that context of landscape is a direction that rock art researchers have only relatively recently begun to consider in their deliberations. We have learned to include photos of the surrounding landscape with sites; both the landscape in which the site is located and the landscape that is visible from the site. That the geography and terrain were of much more importance in prehistoric times seems indisputably apparent.

On our way to the only part of the Craters that is accessible by road, we attempted to find two Loring sites, one of which was number 235. In spite of the fact we have copies of the Lorings' original field notes with locations quite well defined, we were unable to locate either site. There were two more sites that another researcher had reported about six miles north of our location so we set out to find those, again, unsuccessfully. Late in the afternoon though, we found ourselves looking down into a broad vista of canyons at the bottom of which was the slim silver sliver of the Owyhee River. With scenery this spectacular, we decided it would be a good place to camp so we could catch the light better on it in the morning.

By necessity, the next morning we headed back the way we had come the day before and located the place that Hazel's son had indicated there was rock art. After a short hike, we found ourselves at the west end of what turned out to be about a half mile long, south facing basalt rim several hundred yards from the creek below, ranging from about waist height at the ends to about twice our height for most of its length. And to our great surprise and delight—it was covered chock-a-block with petroglyphs! New ones were visible with nearly every step.

The first ones we observed were rather lightly abraded and in the familiar Great Basin curvilinear abstract style—circles, zig-zags, barbells and the like. As the rim increased in height we began finding more deeply pecked and well defined glyphs, many of which were representational. One of the first large panels contained a series of dots and a life sized hand print. Many of the images looked quite fresh, but, when we examined lichen growth over top of them closely, it was apparent they were quite old. The maker of one asterisk-shaped abstract had embellished a small curved bump in the surface of the rock to include it in the design. Then we

began finding anthropomorphs, including at least one that maybe a shield warrior.

This panel (Photo 2) is one of the most stunningly interesting panels we have ever visited. It is hard not to think there isn't a dramatic scene being illustrated. One wonders, is that a crab-clawed theriomorph dragging a helmeted warrior, who is shooting a lightening whip to an antler-headed anthropomorph that is holding a horned zoomorph by the tail, into the underworld? Certainly makes one wonder if maybe mind altering plants weren't an influence here.



Photo 2.

Hardly had our amazement at that panel subsided when, rounding a slight corner we found ourselves in front of a series of panels that stretched for thirty feet or so (Photo 3.)



Photo 3.

There was a pair of bear paws on an isolated area to the east and no less than seven anthropomorphs spread in various poses across the area. These glyphs of humans are unlike any we had ever seen, although I got from them a feeling that I had seen similar figures in the

southwestern states. The well developed “head gear” on several of them; well delineated toes and fingers and curiously placed circles and filled in circles near them do much to give all of this a very different feel from most of the Great Basin glyphs we've observed (Photos 4 and 5.)



Photo 4 (Please note that the fingers in the photos are for scale and are not touching rock.)



Photo 5 (Please note that the fingers in the photos are for scale and are not touching rock.)

With the exception of a couple of zoomorphs and the tiniest depiction of a hand print (Photo 6) we have ever seen, most of the representational images seemed concentrated on these more or less centrally located panels. Several of the panels at the site had scratched lines and cross hatches juxtaposed over other glyphs and there were many instances of glyphs superimposed over others that had been extensively repatinated indicating that in all likelihood the area has been populated, at least sporadically (remember the lava flow), for many years.



Photo 6.

We had been excited during the entire visit about having found another non-Loring recorded site. As we approached the east end of the rim, there on a panel near to the ground was the butterfly figure the Loring's had used to identify their site (Photo 7.)



Photo 7.

That increased our excitement even more because we had solved the mystery of the site's location and are able to bring to light in print for the first time this fascinating “new” group of “old” petroicons.

We would also like to thank each and every member of the OAS for their continued support of our research via the Malcolm and Louise Loring Grant and hope that articles such as these help express our appreciation.

Editor's Note: LeeAnn Johnston and Russel Micnhimer are OAS members and have provided all photographs for this article.