Stalking Elephants in Nevada

THOMAS N. LAYTON

Elephants in Nevada? Preposterous! At least not since the demise of the final Columbian Mammoth at the end of the last Ice Age. Such is the wisdom of specialists in Nevada prehistory. Thus the Reno Gem and Mineral Society’s 1968 discovery of a panel of four petroglyphs featuring the representation of an elephant with a spear in its side was received by professionals with more than a little suspicion.

The petroglyphs were discovered in Yellow Rock Canyon near its confluence with High Rock Canyon in the rugged High Rock country of northern Washoe county, Nevada. The “Yellow Rock elephant” and associated glyphs soon became the topic of spirited informal discussion among members of Nevada’s close-knit community of professional and amateur archaeologists. As a result, the site was visited by Donald R. Tuohy of the Nevada State Museum, and he published a description and interpretation.1

The petroglyphs reported by Tuohy were pecked into the flat top surface of a rectangular boulder of the local rhyolite. Three of the four designs produced no surprises. These included a tailed circle, concentric circles, and a complex glyph including bisected and tailed circles attached to a tail-like curvilinear meander. Tuohy recognized these three glyphs to be comprised of authentic design elements of the Great Basin Curvilinear Abstract Petroglyph

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Style.\textsuperscript{2} However, the fourth glyph clearly depicting an elephant, presented a number of problems. The elephant glyph, 25 cm. long and 12 cm. high, displayed a well proportioned and realistic side view with both tusks, the trunk, an ear, an eye and the tail accurately represented (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: the Yellow Rock Canyon elephant petroglyph. Length is 25 cm. from tusk to tail.](image)

Tuohy outlined a number of arguments to support his conclusion that the elephant glyph was a modern hoax. He argued, first, that the elephant was drawn in a representational style that does not have an antiquity exceeding 1000 B.C. in the Great Basin and, second, that the Columbian Mammoth, the only possible local candidate, had been extinct in the New World since 8000 B.C. Third, the elephant glyph appeared to portray a modern and conventional circus type elephant and not a prehistoric mammoth.

At the same time Tuohy felt constrained to present two bits of evidence that seemed to refute his conclusion. He noted that all the glyphs, including the elephant glyph seemed to be weathered; and all were partially covered with lichen which could take upwards of 60 years to grow. Tuohy concluded:

Clearly we must choose between either an aboriginal artist whose quadrupedal creation bears remarkable resemblance to an Indian elephant, or a latter day hoaxer whose acquaintance with elephant-

\textsuperscript{2} The Great Basin Curvilinear Abstract Petroglyph Style was originally defined by Robert F. Heizer and Martin A. Baumhoff in \textit{Prehistoric Rock Art of Nevada and Eastern California} (Berkeley, 1962).
tine configurations included the circus variety Indian elephant, but not prehistoric North American models. In short the wounded elephant petroglyph located on a flat-topped rock in Yellow Rock Canyon, Washoe County, Nevada, is probably the artistic achievement of a Twentieth Century wag, and not a magico-religious doodle of a prehistoric hunter. The three other petroglyphs are executed in a style which makes them indistinguishable from aboriginal petrography, and indeed, these may very well be the work of indigenes.

Tuohy is to be commended for his logical and systematic treatment of a difficult problem. However, he does not satisfactorily explain away the evidence of slow-growing lichens which as he admits, seems to refute his argument that the elephant glyph is a 20th century hoax. As the elephant of Yellow Rock Canyon is our only evidence for joint occupation of the northern Great Basin by man and elephants, we should look at it more closely to determine the nature of the man-pachyderm relationship. I agree that we can forget about Pleistocene mammoths in the present circumstance; however, there is abundant evidence from a more recent period when thousands of men stalked elephants through the High Rock Country of northwestern Nevada. I turn now to this evidence.

The history of the modern elephant in the New World is a brief one. The first was brought to the United States for display in 1796, and the second arrived in 1815. By the 1830s, the elephant had become an essential part of the circus menagerie. It was during the 1830s that American circuses began to travel, and 1837 saw the first of the soon traditional circus parades. This parade included two elephants. In a related development the elephant became a figure in the folklore of the times. Those who read the journals and letters of the California-bound 49ers frequently come upon the expression "seeing the elephant." Although 49ers used the term, they generally did not feel it necessary to explain themselves. This has resulted in some confusion to modern readers. The probable origin of the expression is described by William Weber Johnson.

It was said to originate in an old story about a farmer who had heard of elephants but had never seen one, and longed to do so.

3. Tuohy, 10.
When a circus, complete with elephant, came to a nearby town, he loaded his wagon with eggs and vegetables and started for the market there. En route he met the circus parade led by the elephant. The farmer was enchanted but his horses were terrified. They bucked, pitched, overturned the wagon and ran away, scattering broken eggs and bruised vegetables over the countryside. "I don't give a hang," said the farmer. "I have seen the elephant."

While seeing a live elephant may have been a literal goal for many a prospective circus goer, the expression came to have another meaning in the vernacular. "Seeing the elephant" became synonymous with the formulation, pursuit, and achievement of a major personal goal. From this, the expression evolved to refer more specifically to the slowly revealed, and painfully endured, trials and tribulations inherent in any major undertaking. The expression had already assumed this meaning by 1841. With the discovery of gold in California in 1848, and the rush of immigrants in 1849, "seeing the elephant" came to have an even more specific meaning. It came to describe the complete experience of gold seeking. The "elephant" symbolized the early dreams of easy riches, the long trek to California over deserts and mountains, the backbreaking toil of the mines, and finally the return home. The "elephant" revealed himself slowly, a little bit at a time, until the 49er became satiated with the experience and returned to his senses, having seen the entire animal. Not only did "seeing the elephant" become the universal vernacular expression of the Gold Rush, but the "elephant’s" likeness became its emblem. The elephant came to be drawn as the central vignette of decorative broadsides illustrating idealized scenes from miners' lives. (Figure 2). His depiction graced posters listing the Miners' Ten Commandments, the preamble of an 1853 version of which reads:

A man spake these words and said: I am a miner, who wandered "from away down east," and came to sojourn in a strange land, and "see the elephant." And behold I saw him, and bear witness, that from the key of his trunk to the end of his tail, his whole body has passed before me; and I followed him until his huge feet stood still before a clapboard shanty; then with his trunk extended, he pointed to a candle-card tacked upon a shingle, as though he

6. Hammond, 6–7. Also see George W. Kendall, A Narrative of the Texan Santa Fé Expedition (New York, 1844).
would say "Read," and I read the MINERS TEN COMMANDMENTS.  

The elephant’s portrait even appeared as the letterhead of printed stationery available for sale throughout the gold country. The Huntington Library manuscript collection includes one such sheet of decorated letterhead (Figure 3), upon which is written a personal letter. The letter writer discussed the meaning of “the elephant” for the edification of his less adventurous friend who remained in the East.

Big Bar Middle fork of the American river Cal. May the 25th 51

My old Friend

I have concluded to while away a few moments pleasantly in writing you a few lines. If you have never seen the Elephant take a peep at the above or else amuse with a trip across the desert wilds that lay between the rocky and sierra mountains. Travel in the midst of an epidemic that is slaying its hundreds. Stand guard all night when all the elements seem to be at war while it not only rains but pours down. And you will be better able to realize what seeing the “Elephant” means.

It seems that the average 49er came to experience the elephant as an omnipresent yet elusive beast, able to warp men’s minds simply by its lurking presence in the evening shadows.

The major route of California-bound gold seekers in 1849 led west from Independence, Missouri, via Scotts Bluff and Fort Hall, thence across present day Nevada along the Humboldt River, and finally over the Sierras by one of the several routes near present day Reno. Due to the heavy traffic on the Humboldt River route, the meager stands of grass near the river were soon exhausted, resulting in major losses of the emigrants’ already weakened draft animals. The major killer along this route was the Forty Mile Desert comprising the waterless passage from the Humboldt Sink to the Carson River.

As the reputation of the Forty Mile Desert spread, emigrants sought alternative routes to by-pass this dangerous crossing. One

7. This 1853 version of the Miners’ Ten Commandments is held by the Huntington Library, San Marino, California. It is designated No. 48134-78A.
FIGURE 2: A view of “the elephant” c. 1850. The broadside illustrated in Fig. 2 is one of many variants of the type. This variant is Huntington Library Manuscript HM4187. Permission to copy it is gratefully acknowledged.
Figure 3: A Forty-Niner “seeing the elephant” c. 1851. Permission to illustrate Huntington Library manuscript HM36346 in Figure 3 and to quote from it are gratefully acknowledged.
such alternate route was the trail blazed by Jesse Applegate in 1846. The Applegate route led from the Great Bend of the Humboldt River to the northeastern corner of California. Applegate's intent had been to provide an escape route for Americans in Oregon should war break out with the British over possession of the Oregon territory. The Applegate route was extended by Peter Lassen southward into central California via the Pitt River to the Sacramento Valley. Lassen established a trading post along this route and actively encouraged emigrants to take what came to be known as the Lassen Cutoff. Lassen's Cutoff proceeded from the Great Bend of the Humboldt, northeast across the Black Rock Desert to Soldiers Meadows, thence via High Rock Canyon to 49 Pass and into Surprise Valley, California. Lassen's Cutoff by-passed the Forty Mile Desert in favor of the equally desolate and killing Black Rock Desert. Many emigrants who took Lassen's route came to believe that they had been deliberately tricked. Of his passage across the Black Rock Desert in 1849, Alonzo Delano wrote:

Instead of avoiding the desert as we had fondly anticipated when we left the Humboldt; instead of getting rid of a forty-five-mile sand plain, we had actually crossed the desert where it was a hundred miles broad, and in comparison, we should have looked on the other route as a play spell.8

The toll of suffering and loss of life on the Black Rock Desert portion of Lassen's Cutoff is well described by J. D. Lyon:

On the last 16 miles of this desert, there were nearly 100 (abandoned) wagons; and [dead] oxen, horses and mules, were thick enough to have formed a complete line the whole distance. The road was completely lined on both sides, and the stench arising from them was almost suffocating. . . . As we passed along we could hear the groans and moanings of the dying oxen, which had been left to perish from thirst and starvation.9

Lassen's Cutoff was heavily traveled in 1849. Of 132 known diaries recording crossings of Nevada in 1849, 40 describe Lassen's

8. Alonzo Delano, Across the Plains and Among the Diggings (New York, 1936), 83.
route. The route’s reputation for adding unnecessary distance and suffering soon earned it damning nicknames such as Lassen’s Horn Route and Lassen’s Death Route. Following the exhausting passage across the Black Rock Desert, emigrants often laid over a few days allowing their animals to recover strength on the grass in either Soldiers Meadows or High Rock Canyon, one day’s march beyond. By the time the emigrants of 1849 reached the High Rock Canyon, they believed that the worst was over and that they were almost to the Gold Fields. Most felt that they had now seen a good bit of “the elephant.” They did not realize that they still faced a long trek south in California. The layover in High Rock Canyon was a time for reflection. Some emigrants carved their names, the date, and the location of their home town upon the walls of High Rock Canyon. Others painted the same information in axle grease. This practice was to continue for three or four years following 1849. J. G. Bruff gives a first person account of the names and dates he saw at High Rock Cave in High Rock Canyon on September 26, 1849:

In the face of the perpendicular wall of the side, at base, is a singular cave . . . names and dates scratched all over the outer wall around the mouth of the cave, and numbers within. I wrote the name of the company, and date of passing, signed it and pinned it up in the roof of the grotto.

We now return to the elephant petroglyph in Yellow Rock Canyon. The location of the glyph is less than three-quarters of a mile from the Lassen Cutoff wagon road through High Rock Canyon. Each evening wagon companies drove their livestock away from the road to let them graze on the nearest remaining grass. The mouth of Yellow Rock Canyon was one such grazing and camping area, and nearby is the elephant glyph. The dual evidence of the glyph’s location on the heavily traveled Lassen Cutoff to the California gold fields, and the glyph’s implied antiquity supported by lichen regrowth supports an alternative to the explanation offered by Tuohy.

Roughly 125 years ago, a wagon company of gold-seeking 49ers

10. See the chart in the rear pocket of Dale L. Morgan ed., The Overland Journey of James A. Pritchard from Kentucky to California in 1849 (Denver, 1959).
camped for the night at the confluence of Yellow Rock and High Rock Canyons. One of its members discovered a rock surface bearing three abstract curvilinear petroglyphs of American Indian authorship. These glyphs meant nothing to the 49er, but they did inspire in him the creative urge, and he added a fourth glyph. His glyph depicted the symbol which most closely expressed his own personal mission, "the elephant."

Hoax is too harsh a word to describe the mid-nineteenth-century artistic efforts of the author of the Yellow Rock Canyon elephant glyph. The Yellow Rock elephant is not dishonest; it is only the unfortunate victim of a twentieth century misinterpretation. I have information that elephants never lie—and certainly don't misrepresent themselves. Let me reiterate my position in the words of elephant scholar Dr. Seuss:

I meant what I said
And I said what I meant. . . .
An elephant's faithful
One Hundred per cent!12

California State College
Dominguet Hills, California

12. Dr. Seuss [Theodor Geisel Seuss], Horton Hatches the Egg (New York, 1940), 21.