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Ancient petroglyphs rest among suburban sprawl

By Brandon Loomis
The Salt Lake Tribune

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ST. GEORGE - An ancient 40-ton jungle gym of sorts, the massive burnt umber boulder anchors a neighborhood park and beckons suburban kids to clamber over its mysterious Anasazi etchings.

And climb aboard they do, sometimes even attempting to scratch their own marks before the adults run them off, neighbors say. Archaeologists typically warn against even smudging natural skin oils on the chiseled drawings or the rock's natural mineral glaze so they won't slowly melt away.

"I've climbed on it," acknowledged Melissa Cornwall, whose in-laws live next to backyard-sized Petroglyph Park in the city's Bloomington subdivision, near the meeting place of southern Utah's Great Basin and the Mojave Desert. "It's just kind of cool to see something from the old, ancient people who used to live here, and to think what it used to look like before all the houses were here."

Odd as it sounds to don't-touch-the-art purists, in much of archaeology-rich Utah such a park is about the best that pre-Columbian buffs can hope for. The state's fastest-growing cities are gobbling up millennium-old rock art.

"This is our past. It's like our library," said Dorena Martineau, cultural resources director for the Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah. Homebuilders long have surrounded or even dynamited the desert boulders that tell the old tales. Martineau's late father photographed and interpreted countless rocks before two Washington County dams flooded the area. "It's really upsetting to us, but what can we do?"

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George is really rapidly growing. If they can at least make an attempt to preserve what they can, I guess it's the best they can do."

Having sprawled under 137 percent population growth since 1990, St. George has Utah's most endangered rock art. But Anasazi and Fremont Indian petroglyphs and pigment-brushed pictographs are sprinkled generously across even northern Utah's sage-studded hills.

So generously, Utah State Archaeologist Kevin Jones said, that there's no good way of knowing how many have been destroyed or chipped off for

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St. George homes surround petroglyphs in a neighborhood... (Brandon Loomis/The Salt Lake Tribune)

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living-room collections during the state's continuing population boom.

"It would be a depressing number," he said.

Nonetheless, Jones sees hope in the new vogue of ancient neighborhood lawn ornaments. When landowners cut trails around these boulders and erect signs demanding the respect they deserve, people respond.

"They realize there is a deeper history to their neighborhood than they might have thought," Jones said.

It's a conspicuously cross-generational connection, where a 6-inch humanoid appears to be climbing a rope across a sun-baked sandstone edifice that is ringed by a St. George cul-de-sac where residents park Chevy Suburbans and minivans. Beyond the pavement, tiled roofs stairstep across the horizon.

Jones is especially excited about a Kanab developer's plans, which incorporate not just rock art but an excavated pithouse, clay pots and other relics from more than 1,000 years of Anasazi occupation of what has been a cattle ranch since Euro-American settlement.

Doug McFadden is a retired U.S. Bureau of Land Management archaeologist who long has dug backhoe trenches through the red soils that surround the town, but he said this chance to excavate on private land is unique. The planned subdivision is on the west bank of Kanab Creek, and was claimed as private land more than a century ago for the same reason that the Anasazis lived and farmed there for so long: water.

The result is an exceptionally rich window into Anasazi life. McFadden is working for developer Milo McCowan, who has directed him to find the least-disturbing sites for roads and homes. Ultimately he plans to dedicate a museum exhibiting the culture that abruptly fizzled from the state around A.D. 1200.

McFadden crouched in his 3-foot-deep trench this month and flipped over a pocked grindstone, revealing just one of the site's countless clues.

"These guys ground enough corn to put a 4-inch depression in this rock. That's a lot of grinding," he said.

"When I arrived here in 1976, there was so much looting going on [around Kanab] that I didn't think there would be anything left in 20 years," McFadden said. But the riches buried in McCowan's soil were waiting for someone to dig up and learn from, and public education from then on has alleviated the looting wave.

"The real problem now is increasing development in southern Utah, especially in St. George and now in Kanab," he said.

The neighborhood preservation trend is creeping northward. Salt Lake County, with its 1 million residents, long ago paved over most of its ancient curios, State Archaeologist Jones said. But the west side of Utah Lake, which is the Wasatch Front's new growth monster, has a chance to keep history alive.

There, where Eagle Mountain officials estimate their population has gone from virtually zero to 20,000 in a decade, landowner Scott Kirkland is working with the city to build a park and trails around dozens of petroglyphs. Among them is a unique Fremont Indian etching of three figures holding hands.

"I look at it as a real special amenity that not many places have," he said. "Whether or not that sells more houses, I'm not sure."

The Utah Rock Art Research Association, a band of amateur researchers, hopes the preservation movement spreads down a 20-mile stretch of petroglyphs along the hayfields west of the lake.

"It just seems like they're running roughshod over everything," association archivist Nina Bowen said.

The state frequently sells off archaeologically important school trust lands to developers, she said. State trust officials have a mandate to earn money for the schools, but should encourage developers to save what's there, she said.

That's starting to happen, trust archaeologist Kenny Wintch said. A planned tony subdivision on state land south of Moab, called Cloudrock, will include trails around petroglyph panels, at the state's request.

"Developers are starting to realize that quality of life matters," Wintch said.

Petroglyph National Monument interpretation chief Diane Sowder said Utahns will add value - both intrinsically and in property assessments - by preserving their neighborhood heritage. But even setting aside thousands of acres, as Congress and Albuquerque did at her New Mexico park in 1990,



has its trade-offs. It draws people.

"A tribal leader said, 'You've ruined it for us,' " Sowder said of the monument's creation. "Of course, we think we're protecting resources. But he meant he's less likely to use it as a sacred place.

"On the other hand, he wouldn't want it bulldozed."

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