

Carved in Stone

by Aaron Emmel



The bones of an ancient village lie stripped on a ridge of stone, its grid of walls overlooking the vast sweep of sage-dotted plain to the east. A rattler, sated from a recently devoured lizard, stretches out from its coils, bares its fangs and moist pink mouth in a yawn, and retracts back into itself. Storm clouds mass in the distance. The Zuni named this place *Ats'ina*, or *Atsinna*, the "place of writings on the rock." The Spanish called it *El Morro*, "the headland." To American settlers and their troops, it was *Inscription Rock*.

The Anasazi ancestors of the Zuni settled the pueblo of *Atsinna* to bring their crops to an area of greater rainfall during the Great Drought of 1250-1300. A second village is still buried near this one, its unexcavated walls visible only as humps in the earth. These ruins occupy the southern mesa that forms one of two sides of a box canyon, originally a deep fissure in the rock that was carved out by water and wind. The two mesas intersect at the canyon's northeast corner and form a single jutting limb of rock, long and narrow, and it is this formation that has given the site each of its three names.

El Morro is itself a fossil of geologic his-

tory. It contains within itself the beds of Jurassic streams and desert dunes, and above them the deposits of a wide and shallow sea. Time and pressure have compressed these layers, respectively, into Zuni and Dakota sandstone.

The Anasazi collected rainwater in cisterns at *El Morro's* summit, but also climbed down past juniper and ribbed alligator pine to the pool at its base. By chipping away rock with hammer-stones and scratching lines into *El Morro's* uneven face, they immortalized their thoughts in petroglyphs. Four sheep in a row, a human figure and stylized bear prints have been preserved beside other symbols for seven hundred years.

The cultures that succeeded them were drawn by the same needs, searching first for water in an arid region and then permanence in a transient world. Travelers were attracted by the depression that collects rainfall and melting snow beneath eight hundred feet of looming stone. *Diego Pérez de Luxán*, chronicler of a 1583 expedition led by *Antonio de Espejo* to find two friars, provided the conquistadors' first record of the site when he called it "the pool at the great rock." It could attain a volume of two

hundred thousand gallons of water and a depth of twelve feet.

Don Juan de Oñate became the first Spaniard to immortalize himself in the rock. He initially passed the site in 1598 on his way to colonize New Mexico with 400 settlers, ten Franciscan friars and 7,000 head of livestock. In 1604 he journeyed south to the Gulf of Mexico with thirty companions, and on the way back returned to *El Morro* and left these words:

"Passed by here the Governor *Don Juan de Oñate*, from the discovery of the Sea of the South on the 16th of April, 1605."

Numerous governors, soldiers and priests made carvings after him, history etched in stone by the explorers who lived it. In almost every case, passing travelers left intact the notes of the people who came before them, preserving the continuity of expression. The exception belongs to the inscription by Governor *Eulate*:

"I am the captain General of the Providence of New Mexico for the King our Lord, passed by here on the return from the pueblos of Zuni on the 29th of July the year 1620, and put them at peace at their humble petition, they asking favor as vassals of his Majesty and

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promising anew their obedience, all of which he did, with clemency, zeal, and prudence, as a most Christian-like gentleman extraordinary and gallant soldier of enduring and praised memory.”

Apparently this was too much for one reader, who scratched out the word “gentleman.”

General Don Diego de Vargas, who retook New Mexico for Spain in 1692 following the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, left this note:

“Here was the General Don Diego de Vargas, who conquered for our Holy Faith, and for the Holy Crown, all of New Mexico at his own expense, year of 1692.”

The Mexican-American War, ending in 1848, transferred control over New Mexico to the United States, and the next year El Morro was reached by Lt. James H. Simpson of the Army’s Topographical Engineers and artist Richard Kern. They spent two days creating close facsimiles of the inscriptions (in which the word “gentleman” was already marked out) and left one of their own:

“Lt. JH. Simpson USA & R.H. Kern Artist, visited and copied these inscriptions, September 17th 1849.”

So began the American records. Three names, Williamson, Holland and John Udall, each dated 1858, belong to members of the first emigrant train using this route to reach California. In the 1850s, the U.S. Army started a camel corps in the hopes that the animals would be able to withstand the Southwest’s dry and rugged conditions better than horses and mules. The first camels were bought in Egypt and Turkey and trained with the help of three Arabic handlers in Texas. In 1857, P. Gilmer Breckinridge led 25 camels past El Morro and left his name.

Some carvings made in 1868 are followed by the letters “U. P. R.,” and were left by surveyors for the Union Pacific Railroad. But the Santa Fe Railroad

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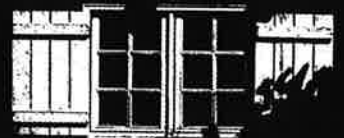
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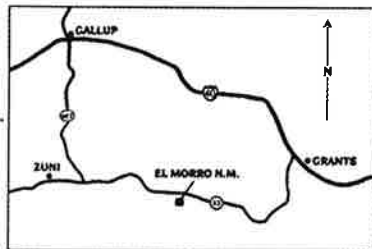


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ended up going through Campbell's Pass instead, 25 miles to the north. Although Acoma, Zuni, Navajo and Mormon travelers continued to pass through the area, the site's significance as a thoroughfare, and El Morro's as a watering stop, were never regained. In 1906 El Morro was made a National Monument. It remains a history book, signed by the subjects, written in sedimentary rock.

For more information call (505) 783-4226. 



THE LAVA TUBES OF EL MALPAIS

Almost fifteen miles to the east of El Morro on Highway 53 are El Malpais, "the badlands", where lava flows from McCarty's Crater invaded a land of khaki mesas and sky-supporting hills.

Near one lava tube the ground is level and shaded by Douglas fir. Walking forward reveals a large, rock-strewn hole invisible from just a few yards away. At its base a cavern entrance leads into darkness.

Tunnels twist beneath the ground, some high enough to walk upright in, others so tight the visitor has to wriggle forward on his or her stomach. The ceiling is wet from moisture seeping down from the surface. Echoes are muffled by the rough walls. Exits are easy to miss, camouflaged against walls or behind fallen rock.

The National Park Service's visitor center is 23 miles south of I-40 on N. Mex. 53, the Bureau of Land Management's visitor center nine miles south of I-40 on N. Mex. 117. More information can be obtained by calling 505-783-4774; or email Leslie_DeLong@nps.gov; or visiting www.nps.gov/elma.

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