

PIUTE BUTTE: A PRESERVATION PLANNING STUDY

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Antelope Valley Indian Museum State Historic Park occupies a considerable portion of a rocky butte known as “Piute Butte” in the western Mojave Desert. A variety of cultural markings scattered among the butte’s unique rock features implies visitation and special use of the butte and its resources by human populations over millennia. In 2003/2004, a Cultural Stewardship Grant from the California State Department of Parks and Recreation made possible a comprehensive multidisciplinary study of Piute Butte. Discussions of 1) research results from a geologist, geographer, three archaeologists, an ethnologist, an historian, several rock art research specialists, and a radiocarbon dating specialist, and 2) the ultimate goal of the project are the subjects of this presentation.

This paper is a brief descriptive summary of a research project undertaken in 2003 in Antelope Valley in the western Mojave Desert. The project was funded by a Cultural Stewardship Grant awarded by the Cultural Resources Division of California’s Department of Parks and Recreation. Since the goals of the project could best be served by a multidisciplinary approach, eight other researchers were asked to participate. This presentation reviews the purposes and results of the study.

Piute Butte is one of the less imposing of a cluster of buttes rising from the desert floor in the eastern portion of Antelope Valley. Nevertheless, it calls attention to itself, and has, perhaps, over millennia, because of its unique characteristics: it is situated on a major four-directional prehistoric trade corridor, lies in close proximity to an important archaeological complex (CA-LAN-192), is roughly symmetrical and circular in shape, and, unlike most of its bleak neighbors, is composed primarily of massive rock formations with dramatic shapes, huge monoliths, natural amphitheatres, and rock shelters.

In 1928, a homesteading claim of 160 acres was staked on the lower south-facing slope of Piute Butte by Howard Arden Edwards. Edwards was a self-taught artist and a collector of American Indian cultural materials. He built a structure, in alpine chalet style, over an entire rock formation, and decorated it, inside and out, with American Indian motifs and murals. It served as the family’s part-time home as well as what Edwards called his “Indian Research Museum.” He also wrote “Indian Pageants,” which he produced, directed, and staged in a natural amphitheatre in the rock outcroppings north of the museum that he had named “Theatre of the Standing Rocks.” It provided perfect acoustics for these elaborate productions.

Half a century later, in 1979, the Edwards’ property on Piute Butte was purchased, through a politically forced acquisition, by the State of California. In the late 1980s, because of its geographic location, it was designated by the Department of Parks and Recreation as its museum representing Great Basin Cultures for its new Regional Indian Museum Program. It was not until 2002 that the unit was officially classified and named as Antelope Valley Indian Museum State Historic Park.

In 1989, I became the Department’s first official employee for this museum. During the 17 years of serving as Curator, I found unlimited opportunities to appreciate and research the diverse resources represented, not only by the museum and its collections, but by Piute Butte itself. Near the base of the butte, a few archaeological sites, such as flake scatters and ground stone features, have been recorded. In the upper rocky areas, a pictograph panel (associated with Edwards’ amphitheater site) was known during the early twentieth century, but first recorded during the 1950s. During the past two decades, however, numerous additional features have been identified, including petroglyphs, cairns, rockshelters, culturally modified boulders, and some flaked and groundstone “effigy-like” artifacts. Some of these features were formally recorded by State Parks archaeologists during the 1990s. By 2000, the body of evidence that had been accumulating seemed to support the hypothesis that the upper rocky slopes and crest of the butte

may have been reserved for ritual and ceremonial purposes during prehistoric times. Some current local American Indian residents have long perceived the Butte as having spiritual significance. In 2003, Piute Butte was placed on the Native American Heritage Commission's Register of Sacred Sites.

Negotiations were initiated for transfer of BLM acreage on Piute Butte to State Parks control, since many of the cultural features were located in the BLM-controlled area. At the same time, another unforeseen development would influence the need for preservation measures for Piute Butte. Illegal intrusions on the Butte by off-road vehicle and motorcycle enthusiasts had been a continuing problem. However, the sport of "bouldering" had more recently become popular, and local aficionados had discovered that Piute Butte was a perfect area. One locally based group had mapped and rated numerous boulders and rock outcrops on State Parks property, many of which had important cultural features, and distributed the maps via the internet and sports shop flyers. When the group's activities were discovered, the issue became a highly charged political one for the next two years.

These combined factors inspired consideration of possible Cultural Preserve status for Piute Butte, which in turn led to the award of the Cultural Stewardship Grant for the study conducted from fall of 2003 through summer of 2004.

The multidisciplinary approach for the study seemed essential for several reasons. A formal geological profile and assessment for Piute Butte did not exist. Geologist Alvin Burch of the BLM Regional Office in Phoenix, Arizona, generated a comprehensive analysis of the butte's geological origins, composition, evolution, and features, as well as detailed geological maps. He noted that Piute Butte's landscape features make it "remarkably unique" in its particular environment. He provided valuable assistance in verifying some of the cultural modifications made to rock surfaces, and lent geological insight regarding universally recognized human responses to unusual natural rock landscapes.

It was important to get input regarding the varied and anomalous cultural evidence on Piute Butte both from other archaeologists and from rock art research specialists, since archaeological research and rock art research approaches often differ from one another, in method as well as perspective.

Breck Parkman, Senior State Archaeologist, reviewed previously documented archaeological, rock art, and cupule sites, and observed and noted additional evidence as well. His report also offers recommendations for further research and discusses qualities of visibility, linearity, and liminality as they pertain to such geological and geographic phenomena striking enough to attract human attention.

Dr. Georgia Lee, Archaeologist and Rock Art Specialist, teamed with her colleague, William Hyder of the University of California, Santa Cruz, to investigate the variations of rock art occurring on Piute Butte. Their thorough study concludes that the rock art types existing in the complex (petroglyphs, pictographs, cupules, and rocks culturally enhanced to resemble symbols associated with fertility), in combination with natural outcrops, boulders, and monoliths resembling human or animal shapes, represent a regional significance. The researchers' report states that the Piute Butte pattern reflects "a general religious pattern found throughout (pre-contact) southern California," and that Piute Butte is "a *Cultural Landscape* worthy of recognition and protection."

Rock Art Specialist John Rafter compared these same features to similar examples and patterns found elsewhere in southern California and the Great Basin, in the context of ritual practices related to cosmological concerns shared by human groups in prehistory—possibly fertility, weather monitoring, seasonal renewal, and/or other astronomical associations.

Dr. Gregory Hodgins, of the AMS Laboratory at the University of Arizona, conducted tests for radiocarbon dating on pigment samples from the pictograph panel at the amphitheatre. Samples from the now-virtually-obliterated paintings (most believed to have been associated with the Late period Southern Sierra Painted Style) proved too contaminated to provide reliable readings. However, scrapings from the apparently older and more protected circular pictograph yielded an uncalibrated date of 1,899 radiocarbon years before present, or a calibrated calendar age range of between 150 B.C. and A.D. 400.

State Historian Alex Bevil discussed Piute Butte as an “Historical Landscape” and provided important historical information and perspective.

The most inclusive paper for this study was submitted by David Earle, authority on archaeological investigation and ethnological/ethnographic considerations in southern California and the Mojave Desert. His paper addresses subjects ranging from prehistoric archaeological chronologies for the Mojave and adjacent deserts, to specific archaeological resources in the study area, to a comparison of general California rock art styles to those found in Antelope Valley, to a comprehensive discussion of social organization of linguistic, cultural, and political groupings in the Antelope Valley region at the time of the Spanish conquest of coastal California.

The total body of research data represented by the contributions of all researchers involved in this project not only provides a substantial foundation for ongoing and future efforts toward responsible preservation and resource management for Piute Butte, but hopefully enriches the archaeological and ethnographic database for the Antelope Valley and western Mojave Desert region as well. An extension of the grant funding was awarded for the year following the completion of this initial study. During and since that time, State Archaeologist Barbara Tejada has continued archaeological investigation on Piute Butte and adjacent areas in Antelope Valley.

The complete study described in this paper was submitted October 1, 2004 by Edra Moore, Project Manager, to, and is on file with, the Cultural Resources Division, California State Department of Parks and Recreation, Sacramento, California (Cultural Stewardship Project Number CSP082-03). Its official title is *Preservation Planning: Toward Cultural Preserve Status of Piute Butte, Antelope Valley Indian Museum State Historic Park*:

- Moore, Edra (Project Manager): Study summary (significance, history, research design, research results, recommendations; 43 pages), references (9 pages), photographic plates, (80 pages), maps by Robert Shanaberger, State DPR Geographer (4 pages).
- Bevil, Alex (State DPR Historian): Appendix D: “Piute Butte as a Historic Landscape.” (Includes bibliography, map, and historic photographic plates; 21 pages.)
- Burch, Alvin L. (BLM Geologist): Appendix A: “Descriptive Geology of the Landforms at Piute Butte.” (Includes detailed maps, photographic plates, and bibliography; 63 pages.)
- Earle, David D. (Ethnologist/Archaeologist): Appendix C: “Archaeological and Ethnographic Overview of Antelope Valley and the Piute Butte Region.” (Addresses local archaeological chronologies and resources, social, cultural, political, and linguistic groupings of inhabitants of the greater Antelope Valley at the time of Spanish Conquest, and local and regional rock art; includes bibliography; 74 pages.)
- Hodgins, Gregory (NSF-Arizona AMS Laboratory, University of Arizona): Appendix G. (Summary report of methodology and results of radiocarbon dating on pigment samples from Piute Butte pictographs; includes bibliography and photographic plates; 6 pages.)
- Hyder, William D. (Rock Art Research Specialist) and Georgia Lee (Archaeologist/Rock Art Research Specialist): Appendix E: “Piute Butte.” (Includes rock feature identification, research results, maps, photographic plates, and bibliography; 23 pages.)
- Parkman, Breck (State DPR Archaeologist): Appendix B: “An Archeological Assessment of the Antelope Valley Indian Museum State Historic Park, Los Angeles County, California.” (Includes discussion of identified sites and features in the context of possible significance to prehistoric and protohistoric inhabitants, recommendations for preservation, photographic plates, and bibliography; 14 pages.)
- Rafter, John (Rock Art Research Specialist): Appendix F: “The Piute Butte Report.” (Includes

comparative data from other southern California rock art sites, discussion of possible significance of identified features, bibliography, and photographs, many enhanced by infrared technology to emphasize painted figures almost obliterated by fading; 30 pages.)