

Nine Mile Canyon—Past and Present

Layne Miller (Presentation by Layne Miller and Clifford Rayl)

Few places offer researchers more opportunity to study rock art than Nine Mile Canyon. No one really knows exactly how many rock art panels are located in its 40-mile length; however, we can get a mouth-watering glimpse. One archaeologist estimated the number of cultural resource sites in the canyon at over 10,000. A 10-year survey being conducted by Carbon County has surveyed about four miles of the canyon and has recorded nearly 1,000 sites. The annual 10-day survey involves crews of up to 40 people and uses professional archaeologists and dedicated amateurs.

Those who know the canyon well indicate rock art styles can be found there from the Desert Archaic, Basketmaker, Fremont, and modern Ute cultures. Additionally, many freighters stopped alongside the road and wrote their name using the black, sticky, axle grease that lubricated their wagon's wheels. I believe it can be safely said that the rock art in Nine Mile Canyon covers a period of at least 2,000 years. Some experts say Nine Mile Canyon represents an intricate record of 10,000 years of man on the land.

If you consider the enormous number of sites found in Nine Mile Canyon, then add to the equation the numerous cultures represented there, and add in the fact that all this information is concentrated within just a few miles, then Nine Mile Canyon is a fabulously valuable outdoor classroom.

There is, however, one important factor I have failed to mention. Some of the panels in Nine Mile Canyon were photographed in 1930, and those photographs are still available. If these are compared to the present conditions of the panels, what can we learn?

Before I get into the research conducted by Clifford Rayl and I, let me tell you a little bit about the man who took these photographs. Leo Thorne (Figure 1) grew up in Dry Fork Canyon near Vernal, where his mother was a schoolteacher in a small school. As a young boy he became fascinated with the pictographs and petroglyphs that he found adorning the nearby canyon walls. That fascination sparked a general interest in the Indians who lived in the Uintah Basin, which prompted him to begin collecting arrowheads and other artifacts and thus begin his lifelong research into their culture. His life took a permanent turn when he took up photography and eventually opened the Thorne Studio in Vernal.

“My dad loved everything about the out-of-doors,” Leo’s daughter Rhoda DeVed told me as we talked about her father recently. Rhoda and her husband, Lawrence, are dedicated members of the Utah Rock Art Research Association.

Leo became a trusted friend to the Indians. He helped them by giving them food during hard times, and he assisted them every other way he could. That trust and friendship, and his interest in their history and culture, led him to doc-

ument, as best he could, their customs, lifestyle and especially the rock art he found on the walls of the Uintah Basin and Nine Mile Canyon.

Thorne was born on February 11, 1883 and died at the age of 83 in July of 1969. During his life, he played an important part in documenting the rock art of Utah and the lives and culture of the Ute Indians. The purpose of this information is to promote the important part Thorne played in documenting the rock art in Nine Mile Canyon and the Uintah Basin. He saw, photographed and recorded many hundreds of panels before most of them were vandalized in one form or another.

Thorne made at least two field trips into Nine Mile Canyon with Brigham Young University professor, Albert Regan (Figure 2). The two probably met when Reagan came into the Thorne Studio looking for a photographer to help him document the rock art. Their work resulted in several hundred early professional quality photographs of the rock art of the canyon. After seeing some of the photographs and realizing how important they are to rock art researchers today, I was forced to examine who this man was and to find how he became interested in the prehistoric and historic Indians of Utah.

Thorne's family came into Utah when he was just four and a half years old. He played with nearby Indian children and grew up believing they were just like him. He realized that they possessed a culture that was disappearing and was little known to whites.

Quoting Rhoda again, "Dad was riding a horse when he was 18, and the horse

stepped in a hole and fell on him. The accident injured his back and made it so he could not do any physical work. That's why he took up photography." After that, Thorne never went anywhere without his trusty camera.

The Thornes have an interesting history of their own. Leo's grandfather disappeared after his wife died of tuberculosis. He fled into the gold and silver fields of California. His family did not know of his whereabouts for years, but Leo heard one day that there was a Thorne (with an "e" on the end) living in the Ashley Valley. He took his family and went there to see if it was his father. Lo and behold, to his surprise, it was.

Rhoda's mother was instrumental in starting a Protestant church in Vernal, which still exists today. Furthermore, she helped organize a literary society that also is still functioning. In addition, her high standards prevented the cowboys from smoking in their home, only allowing it in the bunkhouse.

Early rock art recorders like Thorne and Reagan were at a real disadvantage when photographing Utah's rock art. They initially used sheet film that was nitrate based. Not only was it unstable to begin with, it gradually degraded and became potentially dangerous.

Regan's route through Nine Mile Canyon became obvious as we followed the numbered photographs and retraced their footsteps. Thorne and Reagan ventured down Gate Canyon, turned east in Nine Mile Canyon, then eventually backtracked and followed the main canyon west to just below Harmon Canyon.

Leo did not talk much about his trips into Nine Mile Canyon with Reagan. He did not even mention it to Lawrence when the two of them spent time in Nine Mile Canyon, and Rhoda does not remember her father talking about it with the family. "I do remember going into the canyon with my father on one trip," said Rhoda. "I remember Mrs. Nutter give me a peacock feather from one of the many peacocks."

Thorne did more than simply photograph rock art. He also documented the activities around him. His historically valuable photographs show daily life in the Uintah Basin and many photographs of the Ute Indians fascinated visitors to his Main Street studio for years.

His first photographs were taken in black and white, the only kind available at the time. He took painstaking efforts to hand-color them. One of his prized photographs shows a large eagle painted on rocks near a firepit and Indians dressed in typical Native-American, buckskin clothing gathered around. "We took the photograph from inside the tent," said Rhoda. "They, the Indians, told him to pray first, then take the photograph. He felt it was a privilege to take it and he never did sell a copy of it to anyone because he thought it was something very special."

Lawrence eventually met Leo and took over the Thorne Studio. Needless to say, he met and married Rhoda, and took her over too.

Thorne deserves the same respect and consideration afforded other early rock art researchers and documentors. He left a valuable legacy that most do not know about and few appreciate. It has been interesting for me to note that wherever

Reagan went, he left behind a legacy of chalked panels. The Emery County residents who spearheaded the cleanup of the Buckhorn pictograph panel were told the chalking of that fabulous panel was performed by a Brigham Young University geology student by the name of Lee Stokes under the direction of professor Albert Reagan. Stokes went on to become a famous geologist who wrote the definitive work on the geology of Utah.

Some of the sites documented by Reagan still bear the recording number he assigned to them. I know of at least three sites in Nine Mile Canyon with his "NP" numbers clearly visible on their face.

After visiting all but a couple of the sites for which we have photographs, Clifford and I discovered that nearly all show some kind of vandalism. Many have names and dates scrawled on them, natural decay has taken its toll on a few, and we found that in two places individual petroglyphs have been chiseled from the cliff and are no longer there.

In one case, a mystery was solved. Located in the mouth of Sheep Canyon is a date that appears to be either 1818 or 1878 (Figure 3). Nearby are the initials "FR." Many debates have raged over the date and even the initials. An early history of the area uses it as "proof" that visitors have used Nine Mile Canyon since very early times, and some even pointed out that (either accurately or inaccurately) the French trapper Antoine Robidioux had a brother whose first name began with "F". They suggested that maybe the brother of the famous trapper traveled through Nine Mile Canyon and carved his name in the mouth of Sheep Canyon.

We were totally surprised, therefore, when we visited the site and noticed that not only does the famous pictograph found nearby carry the scars of some natural defacement not visible in 1930, but the controversial date began life as 1918, and has been changed to 1818 (Figure 4). Debate resolved!

Many sites show that even though chalking the figures was necessary to bring the panels to life on the early low contrast films, the chalkers did not accurately record what was on the cliff. By comparing the old photographs to what is actually there, it becomes obvious that some panel portions were not chalked and other areas were chalked inaccurately.

Some differences in geology were also noticed. In one case, a large rock, located at the base of a panel, has only a tiny crack in the early photograph, but now it is entirely split in two and the two halves are separated by several inches. At the same site, one large rock has slipped several feet farther away from the panel.

Another panel that was very distinct in the 1930 photographs now has a large portion of the right-hand side covered with algae. It is now difficult to discern the figures.

The most interesting discovery, however, centers on a large petroglyph panel located about a mile below the Nutter Ranch. The panel (Figure 5) contains a hump-backed anthropomorph, with a bow and arrow in its hand, that is sneaking up on a couple of bighorn sheep. High up in the panel is a large spiral, and below the panel is a large net. At present, lines and dots surround many of the figures.

Members of a crew that documented the large and complex panel during the survey sponsored by Carbon County debated the meaning of the marks and wondered if they were meant to indicate that the figures were standing in a snowstorm. After examining Leo Thorne's 1930 photograph, it became obvious that the "snowstorm" was created after 1930 (Figure 6).

That led to additional speculation. Was the panel intentionally defaced? Is it a case of ritual defacement, or simply a case of someone taking out their frustration on the lovely panel? Careful observation reveals that not only was the "snowstorm" added to the area surrounding the defaced figures, but also all the figures were repecked, and they now appear fresher than their surrounding counterparts.

The conclusions about these features of the panel, however, are not so simply made. It is true the "snowstorm" marks are not found on the 1930 photographs of the large panel, however, they are obvious now. A small panel located just east around a corner complicates the entire issue. The figures are often called, "Ducks in a Corral," or some other similar comedic name. They do appear to be ducks, and they are surrounded by an enclosure—that I do not dispute. However, the problem is that the small panel does show the "snowstorm" marks in the 1930 photograph, and the photograph is so plain the recorders did not have to chalk it to make it show up on film (Figure 7).

Not only does this small panel muddy the waters; it also creates several other problems and inspires a whole new set of questions. Why does one panel show the defacement while the other does not?

Did the vandalism to the small panel occur some time around 1930? Had the vandal altered the “Ducks in the Corral” panel, but not the “Rabbit-Net Panel” when the photograph was taken, or was the small panel created originally with the “snowstorm” marks, then did the vandal simply copy the marks onto the “Rabbit-Net Panel?” “Research” as they say, “is continuing.”

The large spider web or group of concentric circles, shown on the left of Figure 5, is now marred by over two-dozen bullet holes that are not found in the early photograph (Figure 6). It appears, from my observations, that bullets fired from the guns of unthinking “hunters” are now the most common form of vandalism taking place in the canyon.

Some additional comments about the panel are appropriate here. I believe the large net figure found at the bottom of the panel is just that—a rabbit net.

Ethnographic evidence reveals that rabbit hunts were community affairs. Many families would gather at the rabbit drive site, combine their family-owned net sections so they stretched all the way across the chosen location in the canyon. Large numbers of rabbits would then be driven into the nets. The reports also indicate that the families wove their nets according to family tradition, and the designs often varied. A close examination of the net shows it also bears several different types of weaves. The panel is also located at a narrow neck in the canyon where there is an excellent site for a rabbit drive.

Nine Mile Canyon continues to be one of the best places to conduct rock art research. Not only are the sites easy to find and close to the road, there are several different styles present. Now you can add to that, the early photographs that document how the panels appeared nearly 70 years ago.



FIGURES



Figure 1. Leo Thorne.



Figure 2. Albert Regan chalking panels from the shoulders of Leo Thorne.



Figure 3. Recent photograph of vandalism with historic date “1818” or “1878”.



Figure 4. Early Leo Thorne photograph showing the date as 1918.



Figure 5. Recent photograph of the “Rabbit Net” panel.

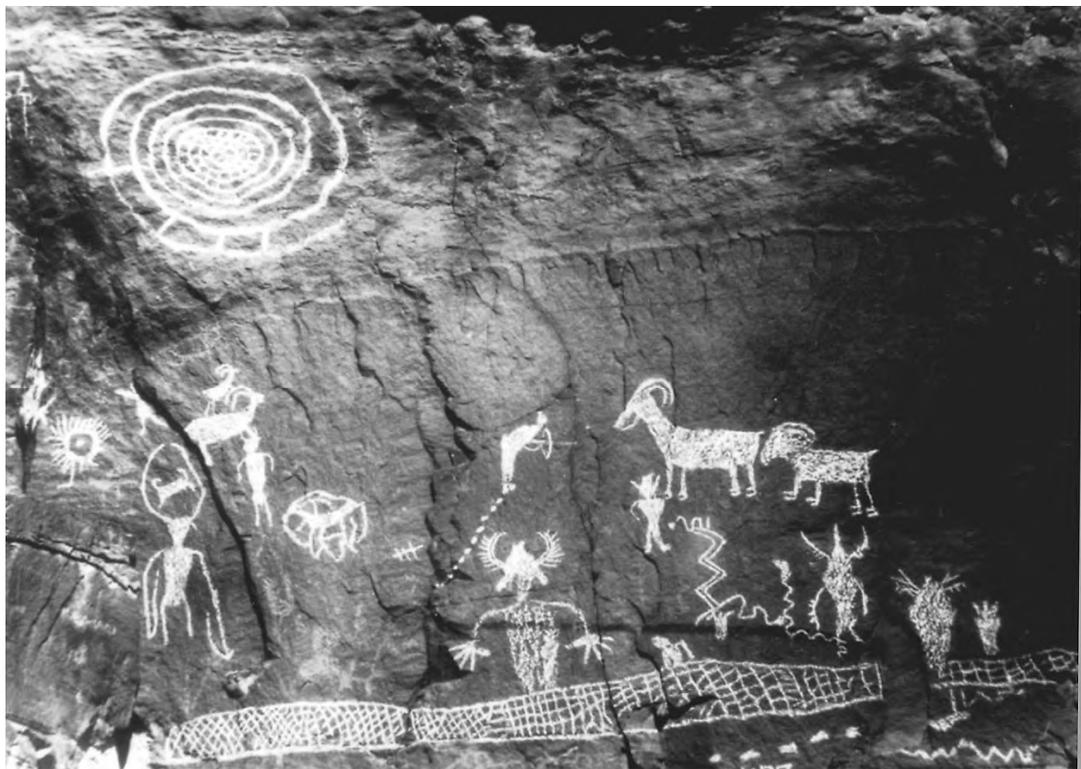


Figure 6. 1930 photograph by Leo Thorne. Note absence of bullet holes on spiral.

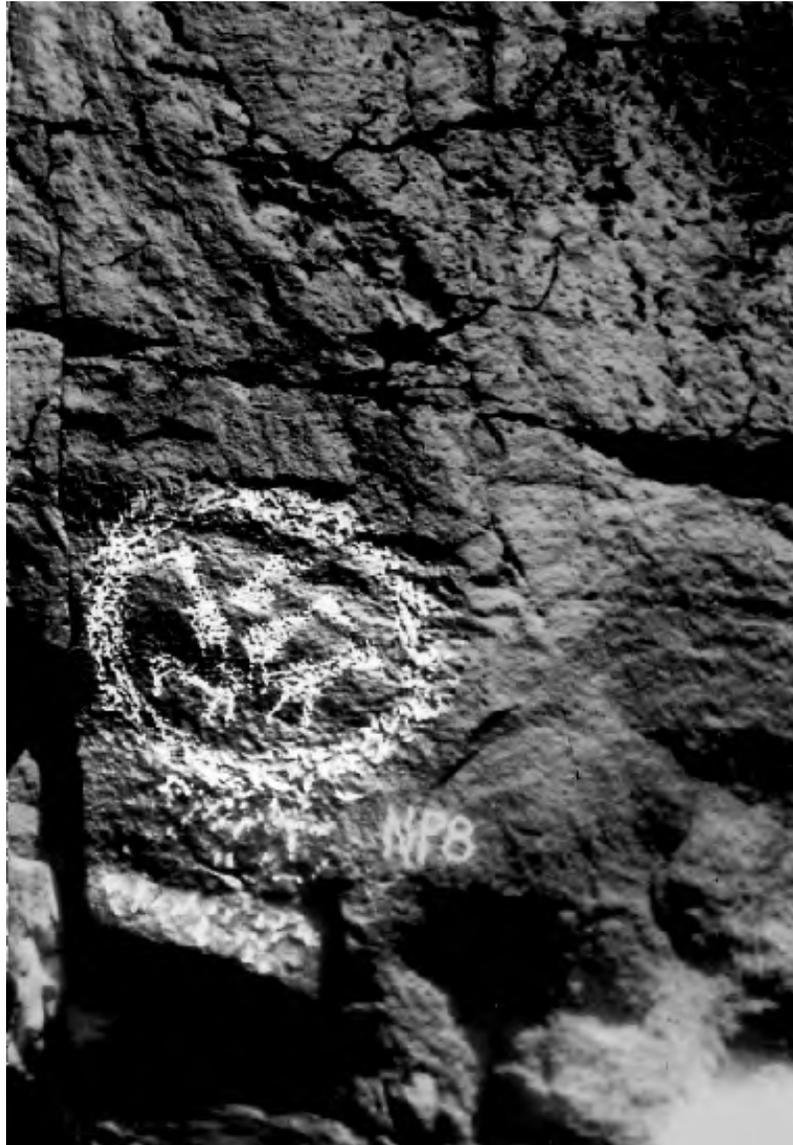


Figure7. “Ducks-in-a-Corral” panel, Leo Thorne photograph, 1930.