

Range Creek, Present and Future

Rock art has been my passion for 25 years. I first became interested in it after moving to Price, Utah 25 years ago and learning that I lived in the middle of thousands of wonderful petroglyph and pictograph panels. Using Dr. J. Eldon Dorman's guidance and tutoring, I began a quest to locate as many panels as I could find. Buried deep in my consciousness was the idea that one day I would view a panel for the first time in a thousand years, knowing the possibility was shrinking as I grew older and rock art gained in popularity. My quest to be the first is over!

Before I explain how my fantasy was fulfilled, let me digress and refer back to the August issue of *Vestiges*, to my note about getting ready to visit Range Creek, and an explanation of how we only had a few days to put together a recording crew to work for nine days on what has been private land for over 100 years.

The Federal Government recently purchased the Wilcox Ranch, which is one of several private ranches in Range Creek. Range Creek is located east of Price, Utah in the Book Cliffs. What its future will be is still up in the air, but more on that later. Before the Bureau of Land Management can manage the resources on the ranch, officials need to learn what those resources are. That is where URARA comes in. A hand-selected crew of nine people volunteered 50 person-days recording 77 cultural resource sites, including approximately 35 petroglyph and pictograph sites.

The organization also donated \$500 (\$10 per person per day) to help with supplies and food. Those attending the field event unanimously agreed it was the opportunity of a lifetime.

However, I am very torn at this point in my report. Do I rave about the experience and the

wonderful sites we uncovered, risking an onslaught of visitors to this pristine area, or do I simply give a few details and keep the canyon hidden from public view? The future of the Wilcox Ranch property is still undecided, and at some point in the near future URARA members will be asked to step up to the political plate and help ensure that its future includes protecting its cultural resources.

The Wilcox Ranch contains rock art sites from Archaic to Classic Fremont to Barrier Canyon Style. That in itself is not unique. Many other places have similar rock art. What is unique however about the Wilcox Ranch property is that almost no sites are vandalized, and the artifacts that the prehistoric people used when they created the panels are nearly all still there. The sites are pristine – untouched. Many are painted, a large number in yellow ocher and red. We found at least one source for this golden yellow color located in the back of a large alcove in the upper end of the canyon. The rock art and ruins run the entire gamut of the canyon from the upper end at about 7,000 feet elevation to its lower end near Turtle Canyon at approximately 4,500 feet. It is a wonderful place!

The habitation sites are just as wonderful as the rock art. The survey crews found pithouse villages, granaries and other sites, the uses of which are not currently explained. Most appear to be undisturbed. After only two days of recording, University of Utah professor Duncan Metcalf said he saw more pristine sites in two days than he has previously in his entire career – quite a statement. But here's the kicker, the reason I've decided to try to impress you with the value of the cultural resources: there will be legislation introduced in Congress, perhaps some time in October, to transfer ownership of the property to the State of Utah. Utah Con-

gressman Jim Hansen helped push through the initial legislation to fund the purchase of the ranch, about \$3.5 million for about 4,000 acres. Hansen intends it to end up in state ownership, and I am told the target department is the Division of State Lands and Forestry. Most Utah residents are not aware of this little-known department. Preliminarily I have several concerns.

- The word “forestry” indicates that timber harvesting and the tree resources in Range Creek are tremendous. I am not an expert on healthy forest, but it appears to me that the forest there is overgrown and needs to be thinned. This is always difficult politically because of opposition by extreme environmentalists – though perhaps after the disastrous, weeks-long fire this summer in the Book Cliffs, which consumed a large amount of acreage, they will see it differently.
- A wildlife conservation easement will be included in the transfer legislation, which indicates big game hunting will be a major part of the canyon’s future. We did not see many deer, and I saw no elk, nor signs of elk. The Tavaputs Plateau does hold huge herds of elk, and I saw large herds of trophy-sized elk as I flew with the Division of Wildlife Resources several years ago while they were conducting an aerial survey of the elk herds. Big game permits on the Tavaputs are currently selling for \$10,000 and more.
- The Department of Agriculture (U.S. Forest Service I assume) will also hold a conservation easement for the canyon.

Opening the Wilcox Ranch property to complete public access would mean a quick end to what makes the area special and in my opinion it would ruin a national treasure. After spending several days on the phone learning about the politics of Wilcox Ranch property’s future, here is what I can report.

- State officials are aware of the special cultural resources found on the property and are promising to protect them.
- The transfer from public land to state land has not yet happened and we must ensure that protection language is included in the transfer legislation, which is critical.
- The Department of State Lands and Forestry does not have a mandate to maximize revenues the way the department of State and Institutional Trust Lands Administration does. The department can protect lands and keep them intact for the future.

Utah politicians and state leaders respond well to public opinion, so here is what I propose. I spent parts of two days making phone calls to people in influential positions in Salt Lake City and in Emery County, telling them about my experience, and impressing them with the importance of protecting the cultural resources of the Wilcox Ranch property. It is imperative we keep pressure on those who are responsible for its future. We must remain vigilant and not become complacent. I will do my best to keep informed on the canyon’s future, and will inform you in return. Most of those notices will go out via email, so if you have an email address and want to keep informed (unless you’re on the *Vestiges* email list and so will receive them automatically) send me your email address.

After walking the cliffs of Range Creek for five days, I can truly say, I have been the first to see a beautiful rock art panel since it was created by the Fremont culture a thousand years ago. Wow!

So, what is the future of the Waldo Wilcox Ranch? That seems to be the million-dollar question. No one has an easy answer. Some folks think they know. For instance, the Division of Wildlife Resources is taking the lead on what it thinks is the future of the property. Officials erected numerous signs to direct hunters to places open for hunting and to keep them out

of places that are closed. Many hunters have the false impression the Wilcox Ranch is a great savannah teeming with big game, and they are especially interested in the trophy deer and elk that are said to inhabit the ranch property.

Here are the facts as I have been able to uncover them. The Bureau of Land Management either has or will soon have an agreement to allow hunting on the ranch property. It was hunting interests with strong political ties that pushed through legislation allowing the purchase of the ranch. Current access into the canyon bottom is controlled by a locked gate, which restricts access to foot or horse. That in itself is a good limiting factor.

There is talk of placing a caretaker at the ranch house to help police the property and to limit the natural deterioration the now taking place. The BLM has at least one possibility – a volunteer who spends his summers at Mineral Bottom on the Green River – and the DWR is quietly recruiting someone. I firmly believe the only way to way to preserve old buildings is to use them. So getting a caretaker for the property is wise and timely.

Utah officials believe they will eventually end up with the ranch. BLM officials, however, do not see that happening, and they are proceeding with plans to protect the ranch's cultural resources. Protecting the ranch itself is another matter. Upon their first to the ranch, some BLM officials said that the first thing that needed to be done is to bulldoze all of the ranch buildings and get rid of all signs of occupation altogether. That proposal was met with protests from some individuals. I am well aware that federal funding is way short and staffing is even shorter, so just how much protection can be afforded is questionable. However, the same thing can be said about the state.

Therefore, no matter where it ends up, protecting the cultural resources, in my opinion, will

be a fight. The BLM plans to have the ranch property designated an Area of Critical Environment Concern (ACEC). That would afford it some special protection status and, hopefully, bring additional funding. An ACEC plan will probably propose a couple of different protection options, and public comment should open in December or January.

One official told me that, currently, there is no way of protecting the valuable resource if the locks are taken off the gates. Impacts are already starting to occur. Following the survey, we noticed that someone had built a large campfire next to the road and next to a large field of dry grass. Apparently, people had hiked onto the ranch property and camped in this spot.

One way of protecting the resources, and benefiting from them, is being advanced by a group of archaeologists. Their idea is to designate the Wilcox Ranch property a research park, and have some institution, like the Museum of Natural History at the University of Utah, manage it. I believe a research park offers the highest scientific value for the property. If this were done, rock art research should be one of the values included in the park.

Right now, the best way to protect cultural resources is to keep the gates locked. Pothunters and vandals are basically lazy. If they cannot drive there, they usually stay away. There are exceptions to that, of course, but locks deter the casual vandal.

Waldo Wilcox sold the property because he wanted it preserved and not developed, and the cultural resources were the driving force behind the protection sought. Access to most of the nearly 4,000 acres located on top of the Tavaputs Plateau, and to the 900 acres in Range Creek, is prevented by a series of locked gates, and they should stay locked until a rock-solid protection plan is developed.



Layne Miller photographing rock art in Range Creek. Photograph by Steven Manning.



Range Creek looking south.