ADOLPH BANDELIER WAS HERE

Graffiti Project Protects Ancient Dwellings from Modern Scrawl

BY KATE NELSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELIZA WELLS SMITH

From the parking lot at Bandelier National Monument, a series of caves beckons from the base of a steep cliff. Just a short walk away on an abandoned trail, the cliff calls to a primal urge, whispering of lost civilizations and forgotten treasures.

The act of clambering into caves and, sometimes, drawing on their walls marks the earliest—and the latest—traces of humanity. From the ancient cave paintings of Lascaux, France, to Bandelier's cave dwellings, to Nancy Drew's *Secret of the Forgotten Cave*, history now arrives at a guy named "Mike"—who just *had* to carve his name on a Bandelier cave wall.

Mike's exercise in graffiti not only threatens the longevity of the cave, it scars the memory of Larry Humetewa's ancestors. A native of Kewa Pueblo (formerly known as Santo Domingo Pueblo) and a conservator at the Museum of New Mexico Conservation Department, Humetewa has spent a decade blotting out the scars, one micro-spatula of mud at a time.

As part of the National Park Service's Vanishing Treasures Program, which aims to preserve Southwestern ruins, Humetewa and other Museum of New Mexico conservators are dedicated to graffiti mitigation at Bandelier, where ancient Puebloans left few, if any, drawings on the walls. The monument, which is congressionally mandated to preserve and interpret the ancient Pueblo story, uses the program's annual allocation of $200,000 to $400,000 to remove graffiti, hold back erosion, and rebuild structures that housed a once-vibrant population in 1200–1400 CE. One day a week during the summer, Humetewa and conservator Conor McMahon, who until recently was employed by the Conservation Department, lead a mitigation mission to restore the caves as closely as possible to how they would appear if guys like Mike had never dropped by.

Humetewa takes the task personally. "I'm amazed at what makes folks visiting the area want to carve their names," he said. "When I see that, it's disturbing. And it also makes me think, would they do that now if they came onto a modern pueblo?"

Geologically speaking, the hundreds of caves in the monument are a tempting target. Formed by lava flows more than one million years ago, their surface is comprised of a deep ash material called tuff. Early inhabitants carved natural holes in the tuff into larger openings called "cavates" (*CAY-vates*) as well as support beams for structures that jutted from the mesa face. Meanwhile, centuries of smoke blackened some of the cave interiors, creating opportunity for modern-day graffiti artists to scratch their marks onto the surface. Beyond its jarring appearance, the graffiti sets in motion a process of decay.

"The rock develops what they call at the park 'case-hardening,'" McMahon said. "They're still investigating what causes that phenomenon, but it's essentially a crust, like a scab on the rock. Once you puncture through, it exposes softer rock, which erodes, undermining the case-hardening."

Above and Opposite: Larry Humetewa, a conservator with the Museum of New Mexico Conservation Department and native of Kewa Pueblo (formerly Santo Domingo Pueblo), prepares to mitigate "Mike" from the walls of a cave at Bandelier National Monument.

Whose Graffiti Is It Anyway?

An ancient Pueblo petroglyph versus a Spanish conquistador's cross. A Civilian Conservation Corps member's autograph versus the scrawl of a 1960s hippie. What makes one person's mark on a rock a historical record and another a destructive blight?

"That's a good question," said Barbara Judy, chief of resources at Bandelier National Monument. "Bandelier was occupied by the Manhattan Project for about three years in the 1940s. If we ever found graffiti and it said, 'Edward Teller was here,' we would have to stop and ask ourselves, 'Gee, y'know?'"

Abandoned in the 1400s by Native peoples who established nearby pueblos, Bandelier today is devoted to telling their ancient story. But what about the Spanish explorers who carved emblems of their seventeenth-century passage through the area? What about the Civilian Conservation Corps members who built the Visitors Center in the 1930s and carved a memory of their stay into cave walls? What about the twenty-first-century kid who carves his name in a cave and grows up to be president?

According to Museum of New Mexico conservator Larry Humetewa, the answer is simple: Get rid of any defacement to Bandelier's walls done since his Pueblo ancestors departed.

"I wish I could get rid of all graffiti that's there, including the Spanish crosses," said Humetewa, who is charged with removing graffiti at the site. "But when I think about it, stuff that's 300 years old, it's kind of cool that it's there. And the Spanish crosses tell part of the story of the Pueblo people."

Monument administrators assess whether the graffiti threatens the surrounding rock, has a significant date, contains foul language, or contributes to telling the story of the ancestral people. Graffiti that has no redeeming quality is documented, then removed.

Humetewa said most of the damage he has repaired during the last decade was probably made in "the hippie era," before administrators controlled visitation patterns. To date, neither Humetewa nor conservator and graffiti mitigator Conor McMahon have found a Teller autograph, much less one from famed archaeologist Edgar Lee Hewett or the monument's namesake, archaeologist Adolph Bandelier. The autographs they do find don't even stir a sentimental second thought.

"Just because time passes doesn't mean an anonymous piece of graffiti becomes historically important," McMahon said. ■

Larry Humetewa points to the stain created by water along the ridge of the incised letters on "Mike's" wall.

continued from page 61

The cycle continues as more erosion exposes more of the softer rock. Worse yet, some graffiti artists fail in their first attempt; as they scratch away, a sheet of the harder rock shatters and falls. They move to another site and fail again, only to move, try, and fail again. By the time they stop moving, the cavate barely resembles itself.

Repairing the damage involves a process that Humetewa has honed, building on the earlier work of monument employees, who simply painted in the scars. It worked, but not well, and not for long.

"When I got there, we were each given a cavate," Humetewa said of the initial effort led by the University of Pennsylvania's Architectural Conservation Program. "Frank Matero [director of the university's program] was thinking of filling the areas, which is what I was thinking, too. We held up little test cakes, or 'coupons,' of plaster to match. Frank said, 'Pre-wet the loss area, get the mud mix, and fill those areas.' That was basically it. We were separated into our cavates, and, as far as I remember, my fill came out the best. After several more areas and more practice, I got the hang of it."

Humetewa and McMahon have since patiently refined the process, testing the natural rock's potential to become water-stained, a problem presented by the "Mike" wall. To cover the damage without staining the surrounding area, Humetewa uses a technique developed by the Conservation Department, heating cyclododecane, a waxlike material, over a camp stove, then painting it over the soot-coated rock.

With that protective coating in place, he wets the incised rock and applies a plaster made from nearby soils and clays. In weeks, the cyclododecane turns into gas and evaporates, leaving no trace.

The conservators have also devised ways to "in-paint" the plaster fill, fine-tuning the color with dry pigments that range from carbon black to red ocher to yellow ocher in order to match the surrounding area. "We get lucky sometimes and get the color match from the plaster," Humetewa said.

To restore the soot in one of the caves, the conservators went old-school. They closed the cavate, put on respirator masks, and fired up some wood—just as the earliest residents of Frijoles Canyon did, minus the respirators.

To date, the graffiti-mitigation effort has received enough federal funding—up to $40,000 a year—to support steady conservation work, although more work remains. Bandelier officials also try to keep future graffiti at bay, removing new marks the minute they appear. Staffers fill visitors in on the monument's story, including its fragility. Some of those visitors, Humetewa and McMahon said, seem surprised to see them.

"Everyone thinks we're archaeologists," McMahon said. "Then they seem shocked and horrified that there'd be any graffiti. Then they seem appreciative."

Despite their goal of wiping out all signs of graffiti, the conservators know their work isn't permanent. In conservation, best-practice treatments can always be undone should a better technique come along. Because the plaster the conservators use contains no synthetics or adhesive beyond the ancient sealing power of mud, it fits the bill. For now.

"It's not very durable," McMahon said. "But in most caves, they're protected enough to hold. Larry's done some that are ten years old now."

Above: **Conor McMahon**, until recently a conservator with the Museum of New Mexico, sits inside a cave where he will erase carved graffiti.

Below: **Larry Humetewa** points to small lines in the walls where original ancestral drawings remain present.

One haunting fact underlies all the work: Bandelier National Monument is disappearing, slowly eroding under the natural forces of sun, rain, snow, and wind. The Vanishing Treasures Program slows the process, but nothing can stop it.

"There are a reasonable number of photos from the 1910s, 1920s, and we've seen a lot of deterioration since then," McMahon said. "Entire walls disappear in two or three years."

The idea of returning the cavates to how his ancestors meant them to be underscores Humetewa's mission. "What I've felt, once I fill those areas in, is that the walls become complete again," he said. "Then it can go back into the erosion and decay naturally. Just let it naturally go back to the earth. Whatever happens, let it happen." ■

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