



Jerry Oser at the Bishop WMP site. August 2021.

The Bay Area Rock Art Research Association (BARARA) has been active in the pursuit and study of the enigmatic, historic Western Message Petroglyph (WMP) sites from the earliest days of our founding in 1983. Charter BARARA member, UC Berkeley archaeologist Al Elsasser, first published on the topic in 1958 after following the reports of these odd sites that trickled into the Anthropology Department at UCB beginning in 1946. The early reports, numbering seven in all, originated from informants in Dunsuir, Rockville, Berkeley (3 sites), Fremont CA, and Genoa NV.

When Paul Freeman and Leigh Marymor formed BARARA in 1983, Al quickly signed on, and it wasn't long before Al guided Leigh up onto a high ridge overlooking the Berkeley flats and SF Bay to show him a few secluded WMP panels. It was all oddly exciting. News of additional WMP sites continued to accumulate over the years and by the early 1990s there were independent researchers located in Utah, Nevada, and here in Berkeley pursuing leads and trying to make sense of these curious panels. Bill Sonin, another BARARA member and avid avocational researcher, published a tongue-in-cheek summary of WMP lore in our own Bay Area Rock Art News (1993)². Bill's archival research and his network of WMP hounds that included Alvin McLane and Judy Hilbish (Reno), Andy Pate (Santa Clara), Clyde Low (Cordelia), Robert Fisher (Fremont), and others allowed Bill to publish an expanded WMP roster of 20 sites - although his designation of a site in Bisbee AZ was more rumor than fact. No one had verified a Bisbee site until Leigh and Amy Marymor tracked it down

in 2015 with the help of local rock art researcher, Jane Kolber, and her informant, Nancy Potenza.

By 2004, Terry Carter (Provo) and Shawn Davies (Salt Lake City) had posted a web site that promoted awareness of the rock engraving phenomena that they referred to as "Mystery Glyphs." The presence of their website, the power of the internet to reach hitherto unknown audiences, and Terry's driving passion added several more sites to the roster, including the Provo site that Terry discovered in the early 1990s while pursuing other leads up on the west front of the Wasatch Mountains. By 2014 all of the current WMP researchers were well networked together - including Leigh and Amy Marymor, Terry Carter, Judy Hilbish, and John and Mavis Greer (Casper) who had now joined the chase. Indeed, it was archaeologist John Greer who threw down the challenge to



The WMP Network gathers at Bishop

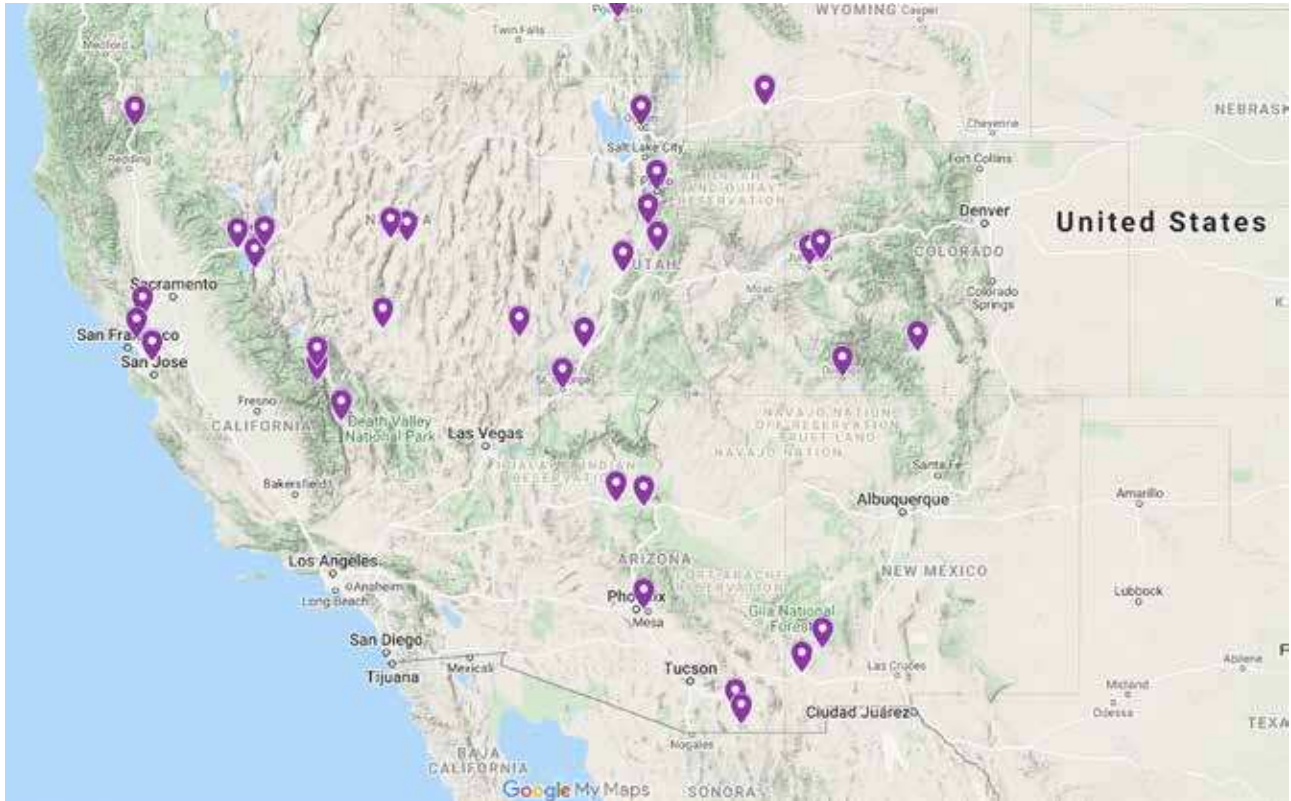
Leigh to take up a serious study of the WMP phenomena which by then numbered some 30 sites - that research is ongoing and has produced several publications. Awareness has been raised among rock art researchers and regional archaeologists as members of the WMP group began publishing and presenting on the topic at professional conferences.

Today, news of newly found sites spreads quickly among the diehard, and when new sites surface it becomes commonplace for some, or all, to quickly converge at the new find. Such has been the case with recently reported sites in Green River WY (2014), Tombstone AZ (2016), Berkeley CA (Tilden 3 and Tilden 4: 2016), St. George UT (2017), Ash Fork AZ (2020) and Flagstaff AZ (2020).

In August 2021 word of the latest WMP find reached the ears of the WMP network. A local Bishop CA rock climber, Charlie Harnack, had seen it around 2001, but thought it looked like modern graffiti and thought little of it. Twenty years later, in

¹Elsasser, A.B. and Contreras, E. 1958. "Modern Petrography in Central California and Western Nevada" in Reports of University of California Archaeological Survey No.41:12-18. University of California Department of Archaeology-Berkeley.

² Sonin, Bill 1993. "Western Message Petroglyphs: A Preliminary Report" in Bay Area Rock Art News. 11(2):6-8. Bay Area Rock Art Research Association, San Francisco.



The 39 Western Message Petroglyph site locations as of 2021

AZ: Ash Fork	CA: Claremont Canyon	CO: Durango	NM: Silver City
AZ: Bisbee	CA: Fremont/Mission Pass	CO: Grand Junction	UT: Cedar City
AZ: Flagstaff	CA: Fremont/Vargas Plateau	ID: Pocatello	UT: Fillmore
AZ: Tempe	CA: Rockville	NV: Austin	UT: Manti
AZ: Tombstone	CA: Truckee	NV: Genoa	UT: Nephi
CA: Castle Crag	CA: Birchim Canyon	NV: Hickison Summit	UT: Ogden
CA: Tilden 1	CA: Bishop	NV: Pioche	UT: Provo
CA: Tilden 2	CA: Lone Pine	NV: Tonopah	UT: St. George
CA: Tilden 3	CO: Cameo	NV: Virginia City	WY: Green River
CA: Tilden 4	CO: Del Norte	NM: Lordsburg	

2021, he showed it to fellow Bishop rock climber, Jerry Oser who was intrigued. Jerry began an internet search which ultimately brought him into contact with Terry Carter. A rendezvous was hurriedly organized and shortly after the discovery was announced a group assembled at the site (included were Charlie Harnack, Jerry Oser, Terry Carter, Leigh and Amy Marymor, John and Mavis Greer, David Lee (Bishop), and videographer Curtis Whitear (New York).

The Bishop WMP site, number 39 on the WMP roster, is both classically situated and classically engraved. The site is located at the base of the Sierra escarpment, on a rise that overlooks the Owens valley to the east. In the foreground is the northern

branch of the historic Midland Trail from Salt Lake City to San Francisco, now overlaid by Interstate 395. In the far view lay the old right-of-way of the Carson and Colorado narrow gauge railroad that served the mining interests at Keeler on the east edge of the valley. A number of WMP sites appear like a string of pearls along the east face of the Range of Light, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and mimic in their arrangement a similar string of WMP sites that are found facing them along the western front of the Wasatch Mountains in Utah. From south to north, the eastern Sierra sites are found at: Lone Pine, Bishop, Birchim Canyon, and Genoa. Tangential to these are sites at Virginia City and Truckee.

The Bishop WMP panel is classically arranged on the vertical face of a large granite knocker. The central text composed of 18 images laid out in two parallel horizontal lines are accompanied by three “signifier” glyphs set off to the left. The engraved images include picture-writing icons that are primarily sourced from Ojibwa, Dakota, and Puebloan traditions, with perhaps an image or two hailing from worldwide pan-cultural roots.

Ultimately, all WMP texts were meant to convey a message. The audience was closely held to those who were familiar with the “faux Indian” vocabulary assembled by the author and placed into service in the semi-remote reaches of the American West circa 1880-1926. Past attempts to translate the picture-writing texts based on meanings found in ethnographic publications appearing in the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries have met with some success. To move from the literal transliteration of the images to a plausible translation that expresses meaning requires a poetic leap in order to fill the unknown “white spaces” that cast a haze over the original author’s intent.

Work on the top line of the Bishop WMP text has made more progress than on the line below it. Decipherment of a key image

or two in the bottom line is yet to fall into place. However, as a tentative teaser, because it’s always fun to try to hear the WMP author speak, here follows a proposal for the upper line:

‘Greatness in a man is hidden. The choice between the high and low roads reveals the hidden great man.

This example of WMP picture writing is particularly intriguing because the formal structure of the line appears to add to the meaning of the individual images. The two central stacked images transliterated as a repetition of “road” divide the first and second phrases. In rhythmic balance the two phrases are mirror images of each other, but in juggled order, “great man hidden =/= man great hidden.” The decision imposed by the two roads is inferred. The Puebloan half sun-with-face is set on a ground line and is typical in its Hopi usage for “sunrise.” As in Native American sign gesture language where gestures can represent both literal and synonymous meanings, the same holds true for interpreting Native American picture-writing. The rising sun can be interpreted as dawn, first light, rise/arise, shed light, or in this case “reveal.” The ability to find meaning in WMP picture-writing involves a willingness to enter into a dialogue with the author long departed in the attempt to hear his voice.



The newly found Western Message Petroglyph at Bishop--enhanced for clarity

