

PEOPLE OF NOTE | EMBREE HALE

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PETROGLYPH HUNTER

by Cheri Pearson • photography by Embree Hale



HE SCALES THE ROCKY LEDGES, NIMBLE AND SURE-FOOTED. HE STOPS MIDWAY UP THE MOUNTAIN AND SQUINTS, SHADING HIS EYES AS HE SCANS THE DESERT TERRAIN. IT IS QUIET OUT HERE. THE SOLITARY LAND STRETCHES FOR MILES, ENDLESS AND VAST LIKE THE OCEAN IT ONCE WAS. A RAW, UNPOLISHED GOLD NUGGET DANGLES FROM THE RED KERCHIEF AROUND HIS NECK, AND THE WIND GENTLY CATCHES THE STRANDS OF HIS SNOW WHITE HAIR WHILE HE ADJUSTS HIS HAT. ELATED, HE GESTURES TOWARD WHAT HE HAS BEEN SEARCHING FOR—A LARGE, REDDISH BOULDER THAT DISPLAYS A STORY THAT MAN CARVED OUT OF IT THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO, WHERE A SINGLE, SMALL CACTUS HAS STUBBORNLY CHOSEN TO GROW. PETROGLYPH HUNTER EMBREE HALE STUDIES THE ANCIENT DEPICTIONS, LIFTS HIS CAMERA AND ENDEAVORS TO CAPTURE AND PRESERVE THE SPIRIT OF A SHAMAN'S MESSAGE IMMORTALIZED IN STONE.

Anthropologists have tried to decipher what these timeless carvings whisper. They depict arrows, snakes, animals, concentric circles, symbols, ceremonies, shaman, hunters and constellations, and they span the globe, with the highest concentrations in Africa, Scandinavia, Siberia, Australia and southwestern North America. It is believed that some petroglyphs, depending on the continent and location, could date back more than 10,000 years.

David Carmichael, chair of sociology and anthropology at UTEP, has been working on archeological excavation at Three Rivers, a petroglyph site outside of Las Cruces. At this site, home to more than 20,000 petroglyphs, Carmichael has found evidence of people dating as far back as 900 A.D. His findings suggest that the area was occupied by many small groups over a period of time and that some may have been caretakers of the rock art. "Petroglyphs are sophisticated and similar to Chinese characters in that they are very efficient and embody a lot of meaning in one symbol," he says.

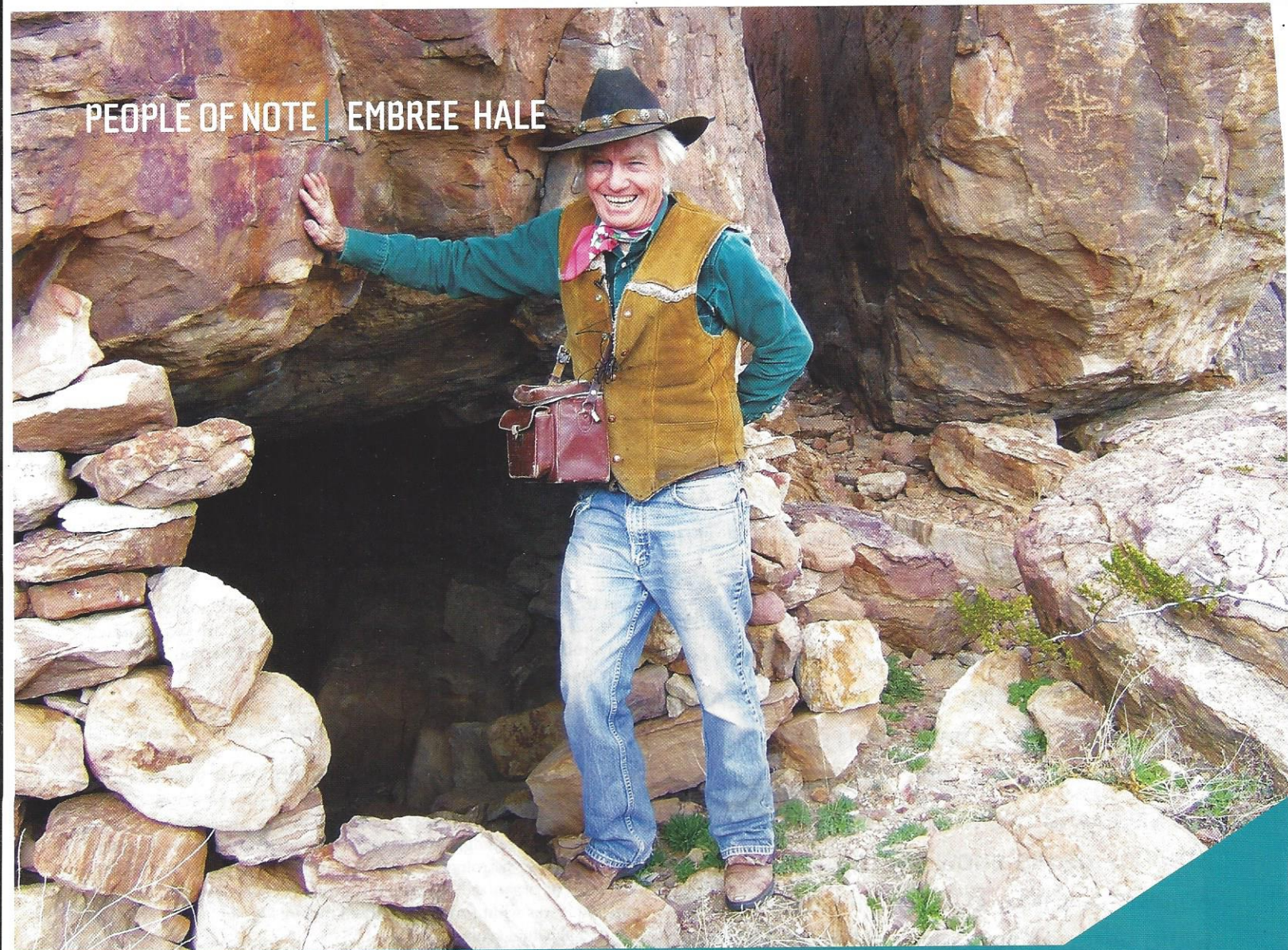
The boulders are conveying messages, bearing a glimpse into an ancient people whose shaman chipped diligently away for hours and days with hammer stones. "Rock art is not graffiti," says Carmichael. "It is first and foremost ceremonial activity. They are commemorative of transformation experiences by shaman in altered states." Other possibilities are for diagnosis and illness, prayer, obtainment of ritual power, record keeping, hunting magic, storytelling of pilgrimages and the tracking of astrological movements. Petroglyphs are not usually arranged or organized; therefore, Carmichael believes that the act of making it was what fundamentally mattered. "It was a journey, a giving in a spiritual sense," he says.

That spirit touched Embree Hale, whose passion to photograph petroglyphs stems from a simple fascination born at the age of 9. Later, in his 60s, his interest intensified when he discovered his favorite petroglyph had been stolen. Somebody had chipped it right off the rock—perhaps as a passing fancy or a desire to display it in his or her home. Whatever the reason, it ignited a fury in Hale, and he vowed to photograph as many petroglyphs as he could in order to preserve their images.

"These are holy sites," says Carmichael, who feels just as intensely as Hale when it comes to the preservation of petroglyphs. "It is enormously disrespectful to vandalize or remove them. It is like going into someone's church and pulling things off the shelves."

Hale carefully photographs the petroglyphs that feel special to him without disturbing the site, often focusing on remote areas instead of parks. Sometimes he returns to the same petroglyph time and time again until the light falls just right. "I try to catch it—the magic, what I see, what I feel, what I experience," he says. He does not pretend to understand every bit of rock art he sees. He only senses a deep historical connection and purpose to his work. "These people that did this," he says somberly, "they had feelings, hopes, dreams, aspirations and fears. Now, this is purely made up in my mind, but maybe they felt their culture would last forever. But for some, their time did come to pass with the arrival of the Europeans. I believe they are getting a message

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PETROGLYPH SITES OPEN TO THE PUBLIC:

- Hueco Tanks
- Albuquerque Petroglyph National Monument
- Three Rivers, outside of Las Cruces

to us today. We may live different from the way they lived but not much different from the way they felt deep down in their hearts.”

Hale has always been a treasure hunter, but it was the currency of man he once sought. He was “a little miner with a dream,” who accomplished his goal by having a silver mine pay for itself successfully in Hillsboro, N.M. To this day, he may pan for the occasional flake of gold, but his hard rock mine lays quiet now. Sometimes, he travels the road he blasted himself to reflect on time spent in the rich darkness of the earth. His daughter, Bobbie Olster, believes her father is now drawn to petroglyph hunting because finding them is as unpredictable as mining.

Hale first began shooting with an Instamatic camera and encouragement from fellow photographer Jan Haley. “A lot of people have the most expensive cameras and take perfect technical photographs, but there is something about seeing a photograph with somebody’s soul reflected in it,” she says. “Embree is one of the best men I’ve ever known, and he really attracts people. His photographs sell when he is involved because he gives them meaning. He has sold more photographs than

any photographer I have known, and he has trained himself.”

Hale enjoys his wandering, solitary work. Sometimes, he will stay until dark just so he can watch the setting sun splash vibrant colors across the sky. Others, he will head back to his land, where he lives simply. He has no running water, only a well. He has no electricity and cooks over an open fire. As the fire crackles outside his little travel trailer, he sits on a yellow wooden bench or falls asleep in his chair gazing at the stars and contemplating how small he is in relation to the world. In the morning, he surveys the sweeping hills on his three acres of land and feels the day awaken. “He lives very simply,” says Jan Haley. “The treasures in his life are people.”

It is his philosophies, his stories, his bits of wisdom and his photography that have drawn people to him. Erin Hudson, an independent filmmaker, was captivated by Hale and decided to make a documentary about him. “There is something basic, pure and beautiful in how he lives,” Hudson says. In our frantic, disconnected generation, he has a lot to teach us. “He doesn’t set out to do that,” she says. “He is just living it.” 