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Caddo County Geological Surprises

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I. Dead Woman Mound and Neighbors

Four years ago I came to Weatherford, Oklahoma, for a job interview. Winter had the state in the grip of a nasty ice storm, so I slowly made my way west on I-40. Near Hydro I could see on my left strange knob-like formations rising from the flatland, curious geological phenomena. Every time I have driven east of town since, I have wondered vaguely about the Hydro Mounds, as some folks call them. These northwestern-most Caddo County Buttes, Dead Woman Mound and the group called Six Mounds, are clearly visible from the interstate, but their unique properties are more apparent when one stands quite near them.

Around dinnertime on July 1, 1994, with gusts of searing wind whipping us, a photographer friend and I struck out for a closer view of the mounds. We took the Bethel Rd. exit from I-40, turning south, and then west, passing flat expanses of wheat fields after harvest, and pasturage where sheep and cattle grazed; when the road dipped and willow trees grew thick, we crossed an old plank bridge appropriately posted with a five-ton limit. From the bridge a canyon-like sandstone cut is visible with a slow-moving creek full of frogs and dragonflies, bordered with small animal burrows. Young cottontail rabbits, motionless, startled by our dust and noise, posed by the edge of the road.

We went up a rise and around a bend in the road; on our left loomed the stark skeleton of the old Mound School, just north of Dead Woman Mound. Its storm cellar has no door anymore, and the aggregate mix which once covered the red building blocks has cracked off randomly. One can see more sky through the roof than wood, and chimney bricks lie in broken fragments on the north side of the building. Only the wind whistles through the one-room schoolhouse now, where once there were shrieks of laughter and hesitant responses to teachers' questions. What a view those schoolchildren had at recess, with Dead Woman Mound beside them!

We drove up the road to the mound, and, thanks to Dr. Mel Fiegel of Southwestern Oklahoma State University, I was armed with photos of Dead Woman Mound and Two Babies Mound just to the southwest to help me identify what we were seeing. The picture of Dead Woman Mound, published in the *1966 Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Science,* was taken from the south face, and we were approaching from the north. Just the same, the distinctive character of the top of the mound is visible from either side—the mound has a peak-type crest as opposed to the mesa or sugarloaf types. On the north face was a cave or tunnel opening, which my friend investigated; he reported that with its flat ceiling the cave was clearly manmade, and that graffiti writers had been there recently, also that there was a small pool of water in the rock. While he took pictures, I walked through the dry grass at the foot of the mound, where lizards and grasshoppers rustled and flicked themselves about. There was a windmill lying on its side near a large galvanized watering trough. Just past it I approached an unusual outcropping of rock which could serve as a natural pen or protection for a few head of livestock, or a place for weary travelers to rest from their trek. We skirted around the base of the mound to the south face and were startled to see that a small cedar in the 1960's picture had grown tremen-

dously over these three decades. A more singular change shows at the top of the butte, which now has the name "Jesus" in huge white letters with the "J" reversed.

The imposing Dead Woman Mound was a natural landmark of note on the old stage road between Ft. Reno and Colony, as were Lone Mound and Ghost Mound, which are located farther to the south. The mound nearest Dead Woman Mound is Two Babies just to the southwest, no different today that it was in the 1960's, and probably not much different from the way it appeared to tired pioneers and adventurers making their way to the Gold Rush or to a new life farther west. The observer can stand beside the mounds today and imagine how welcome was the sight of a landmark like Dead Woman Mound to people completely out of their element in the wild Southwestern Oklahoma terrain.

The buttes still surprise the tourist lulled by the unvarying flat fields or slightly undulating farmland viewed from I-40, but they are familiar friends on my left when I am driving west. They tell me, as they did the people of the 1800's, that I am on the right path.

Author's Note: The Caddo County Buttes are also referred to as the Whitehorse Buttes or Natural Mounds, and they are erosional remnants. All of the Caddo County Buttes lie in the drainage basin of the Washita River and its tributaries with the exception of Dead Woman Mound, which lies in the drainage basin of Dead Woman Creek, a tributary of the South Canadian River. Most of Caddo County lies in the geomorphic province called the Western Sandstone Hills.

II. Rock Mary

Perhaps the most distinctive Caddo County Butte is Rock Mary, so significant, in fact, that it was routinely shown on early maps of the territory as a landmark to guide travelers on the California Road. Located slightly west and south of Hinton, Oklahoma, it lies in the drainage basin of the Washita River near the source of its tributary, Sugar Creek. This most eastern of the Caddo County Buttes, as one report describes it, is "almost globular, almost skull-shaped," not easy to confuse with any of the other Caddo County group. Additionally, "...the Rush Springs Sandstone at the top is different from any other exposure of the Whitehorse Sandstone in the Caddo Buttes" (*1966 Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Science*, 174).

What is more interesting than its physical characteristics is the tale of Rock Mary's naming. In the book *Marcy & the Gold Seekers* by Grant Foreman, Capt. R. B. Marcy in his journal recounts the Gold Rush over the southern route. When the travelers reached the area around Rock Mary on Wednesday, May 23, 1849, Lt. Simpson, a part of the military escort with Marcy's party, reports sighting some "'hills of a singular shape.'" He then narrated the event: "'Nearing the first of these singularly formed hills, and it appearing more oddly shaped than any of the others, I started off alone to ascend it...'" (214). After startling a wild turkey, Simpson moved upward toward the summit.

"The novel character of the hill; its contorted appearance; its sudden emergence from the plain around it; my having reached its pinnacle; it being an object of interest to beholders in the distance; all this had its complex influence upon me and I felt correspondingly elated."(214)

Capt. Marcy saw Simpson near the top of the butte and suggested that he "'unfurl...a flag to the breeze.'" Another traveler, possibly Lieutenant Harrison, a suitor of Mary Conway, suggested that the prominence be named after her. And so it was.

Mary Conway, a young woman from Arkansas, had

commanded the respect and admiration of all the members of the party—soldiers and pioneers—from the outset of their journey. Foreman reports in a footnote that Lt. Harrison and Lt. Burford, both only a year or two out of West Point, were both ardent suitors of Mary, and she finally made her choice of Harrison. The young couple confided their decision to her parents enroute and asked for their blessing. Harrison argued for an immediate wedding; the parents felt that Mary was too young and asked him "to secure leave from his regiment and come to California," so that they "might be wed in Los Angeles, the destination of the Conways" (215).

Certainly Mary was a stunner. A picture of her in Foreman's book reveals a seventeen-year-old with pale, perfect skin, raven hair, and dark, direct, intelligent eyes. The set of her mouth shows great determination and spirit.

Foreman also reports Lt. Cave Couts' reaction to Mary in the fall of 1849 in Couts' journal. The lieutenant stated:

"Dr. Conway (with his family and ten children) came up on the 24th, and on the 25th, 26th, and 27th I had a delightful time with interesting Miss Mary, for whom I have been saving a bottle of molasses and a lump of sugar since three weeks. I found more than I anticipated, though she had been so highly spoken of by all who passed." (306)

He marveled at her as an "'angel in such wilds.'"

Mary and Lt. Harrison were never to marry. Lt. Montgomery P. Harrison was killed by Indians, and Mary married a sea captain, Robert S. Haley, several months after her arrival in California. Her granddaughter later reported that the loss of Harrison grieved Mary, particularly because the young couple had begged her parents to let them wed before they were separated along the route to California, but to no avail. A niece of Mary's said that Mary had four sons, two daughters, and "retained her charm and sweetness all through her life" (338).

Rock Mary stands steadfastly in Caddo County, a memorial to a young Arkansas woman of uncommon grace and beauty, and a tribute to the courage and faith of westward-bound settlers like the Conways, who lost most of their oxen from lack of water and grass, and who had to discard most of their possessions on the six-and-a-half-month trek from Ft. Smith to California. But the Conways were fortunate. The account of pioneers taking the Gila River route at that time, for example, is a sobering chronicle; after crossing the Colorado river into California, the travelers faced ninety miles of the Great Desert. One journal-keeper counted 300 dead horses and mules in one valley alone, twenty-seven miles into the desert. Skeletons and shriveled bodies lay everywhere, "scorched by the extreme heat" (report of New York artist James Spencer in Foreman, 310). The emigrants could not safely take the time nor expend the energy to bury the corpses of their less fortunate brothers who had died on the trail. Those people showed a degree of fortitude and hardiness to be wondered at in our time, the very qualities that settled Southwestern Oklahoma. It is well that a unique and startling rock remains to signify their strength, and Mary Conway's grace.

(For more information on the Marcy party, see Grant Foreman's *Marcy & the Gold Seekers*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939. Also, there is some dispute locally as to which mound is in fact Rock Mary, but the presence of the distinctive "forked summit" referred to by Edward Beale in 1858 seems to confirm the mound pictured as Rock Mary in the *1966 Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Science.*)

III. Red Rock Canyon

The Indians called it, among other things, "Sugar Tree Valley" and "Beaver Valley," the former for the Caddo maples scattered throughout the canyon, and the latter for the beaver which dammed up its small streams. Edward F. Beale, laying out the proposed site for a railroad to Santa Fe in November, 1858, reported in his journal that he camped at the head of the canyon; he viewed "a number of fine springs breaking out on all sides," which united to form "a stream of clear, sparkling water." He envisioned the canyon as a perfect place for California-bound travelers to winter their stock before proceeding in the spring. Beale and a companion took their guns and walked through the canyon looking for game that late November day, finding fresh tracks of buffalo, deer, wild turkey, and raccoon. He added, "I decidedly prefer it to any other place we have seen for the location of a military post" (November 29, 1858 entry, published in the *Chronicles of Oklahoma*).

What we know today as Red Rock Canyon has sheltered Indians, scouts, soldiers, surveyors, and pioneers; today it offers shelter and recreation to locals and tourists alike, the California Road to the West having been replaced by Interstate 40. Poet T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* says in some very famous lines, "Come in under the shadow of this red rock"—and so people have been doing at Red Rock Canyon for centuries.

Red Rock is the best known canyon of the fifteen-square-mile canyon system and the only one designated a state park. My first memory of it dates back to autumn 1990; a friend had told me to go to the canyon early in the morning, only a twenty-minute drive from Weatherford. The wheat fields around Hinton are flat, relentlessly flat, and as I drove through Hinton I couldn't imagine where such a canyon could be hidden away. Almost missing the sign at the park entrance, I made an abrupt left turn into the park and suddenly was dropping in a wicked curve toward the canyon bottom. Memories of North Carolina and Virginia came to mind in those thick tree stands. While I listened to the burbling water washing over the stones of the creek bed, finches played and twittered their crisp little calls in the reeds near the water. What a joyous moment that was, finding a pocket of autumnal Caddo maples in their full glory, right below the flat wheat fields around me. I'll never forget the first moment I saw Red Rock Canyon's expanse.

The canyon is a refuge for locals like me and for hordes of tourists who use it as a rest stop, picnic spot, and campsite. According to an agreement executed in 1954 with the landowners, the state of Oklahoma may control the use of the surface acres of the canyon so long as it provides recreational services for the people of Oklahoma. The landowners retain the mineral rights. Currently the state owns approximately one third of the 280 acres, the rest remaining in private hands. According to Marie Main Wornstaff in *The History of Hinton*, the Kiwanis Club of Hinton started a rodeo in the canyon in 1931 as a service project. She writes that on July 27, 1939, Kiwanis bought the canyon from the Gerdes family and began using the funds from the rodeo to convert the canyon into a recreational site for the town. Thus the canyon was known as the Kiwanis Canyon Park until 1955, when it officially became Red Rock Canyon State Park. The park manager reports that prior to 1954 the canyon was also homesteaded, with farmers raising corn and running cattle on the land.

In an interview with Dave Sutton, the current park administrator, I learned much more about Red Rock's unique features and changes over time. Mr. Sutton is a laid-back, pleasant, outdoorsy sort of fellow, very easy to

talk to, and extremely knowledgeable about parks in Oklahoma. He himself came from California as a park manager trainee during the Oklahoma Oil Boom, having worked previously at Pinnacles National Monument and Yosemite National Park. He has worked at three parks and a training park here in Oklahoma.

Sutton's primary duties as a park manager are staff management and management of the users of the park, "giving everybody a fair shake," he says. Sutton points out the irony in the fact that people come to the park to get away from civilization and to enjoy nature, and they end up at campsites where they are closer to each other than they would be in the city, a situation guaranteed to create friction. A central part of his job is to impress park regulations upon park users, and to make sure that people behave toward each other with a modicum of consideration and fairness.

Sutton, his five full-time employees, and temporary seasonal help facilitate all sorts of activities in the park: weddings, family reunions, church camps and retreats, 4-H retreats and other youth meetings, gymnastics camps, and even play performances by traveling companies of actors. The staff members handle 10,000 or so campers annually, and the traffic counters in the park register 300,000 visits annually, although that number is somewhat inflated by campers going in and out of the park on errands, and locals just driving through the park.

Sutton and his staff have quite a challenge; they manage and maintain five group shelters (which can be reserved by fee for reunions, etc.), five modern campsites, forty-nine semi-modern campsites, and forty unimproved campsites. There are modern comfort stations with hot showers, an RV sanitary dumping station, a swimming pool in the summer, and two nature trails. The group camp facility (which can be reserved for April 1-Oct. 31 handles up to 135 people. It has a dining hall, restrooms with hot showers for men and women, ten A-frame sleeping cabins, and a playing field.

The nature trails are wonderful experiences for visitors interested in flora, fauna, history, and geology. The Rough Horsetail Interpretive Trail is an one-eighth-mile trek into a box canyon located at the north end of the park. It has a dense growth of reed-like rough horsetail, known to Oklahoma's early settlers as "scouring-rush," a sort of natural Brillo pad used in their kitchens. The plant represents a primitive plant family; 200-300 million years ago, an ancestor of the plant grew as tall as forty feet in dense forests along rivers and swamps. Coal deposits are the fossilized remains of these giant rushes, as well as those of ferns. The trail also has what may be the third largest bur oak in the state, as well as Caddo maples, varieties of red cedar, elm, redbud, dogwood, and red mulberry. In the sand near the creek's edge hikers may spot the tracks of quail, raccoons, coyotes, or even those of the reclusive wild turkey recently reintroduced into the park. The shy red fox may even put in an appearance. Forty-five species of birds show up at the park during the course of the year; cranes and geese fly over it every migratory season. Visitors may see a great horned owl, or the more common cardinals and ravens. I inquired of the park manager about fish in the stream, and he said there is a form of darter now, and probably in the past, when the beaver dammed the water into ponds, there were catfish, as well. The water of the stream is not potable now, but there are good wells in the area, drawing on the Rush Springs Sandstone water that Custer County also shares. When one reaches the end of this interpretive trail, one finds the source of the creek, a natural spring flowing out of the bottom of the canyon wall.

The California Road Interpretive Trail is at the other end of the canyon, a one-eighth-mile trail which is a

portion of the old California Road, used primarily from 1852-1888 by pioneers seeking gold or a new life. The wagon ruts of the pioneers still remain on this interpretive trail. The steep incline of the path is a clear indication of the difficulty the pioneers had, moving their wagons upward toward flat land. Beyond the end of the interpretive trail is a cedar post buried in the sandrock, the remnant of a windlass used by the pioneers. Windlasses were barrels wrapped around a post with a roped attached and used much like a winch.

At the end of the California Road Interpretive Trail, I stood high above the canyon floor late one afternoon; suddenly the trill of a bird interrupted the silence and a flash of red caught my eye. Near me on a tree branch sat a red crossbill, unafraid, sharing its evening song. I stood absolutely still, listening to the bird warbling, thinking that from that point on, the wagon trains that passed Rock Mary and the other famous Caddo County buttes would proceed toward Santa Fe and other points west.

Some park users leave carved graffiti on the stone walls, which caused me to ask Dave Sutton if there are any historical inscriptions, say, carved names from the 1800's. The manager, who has been at the park since 1986, replied that the rock is so soft and erodes so quickly, that anything recorded by the pioneers is long gone, erased by nature. I asked him about the geological history of the canyon, so Sutton provided me with a succinct written synopsis of the process of its formation. Following the period of mountain-building in the state (the Pennsylvanian period), the mountains were largely worn down, and eroded mud and sand from the eastern half of the state moved in rivers to the shallow Permian sea covering the western half of what is now Oklahoma. The Permian sandstone formed at that time got its red color from iron oxide compounds deposited with the sand and mud. Sediments became rock, and millions of years and much erosion later, Oklahoma now has twenty-two geomorphic provinces, the one covering Caddo County being known as the Western Sandstone Hills.

Clearly the canyon is still in process, shaped by natural and manmade forces operating upon it. I have seen the erosion myself during a spring thunderstorm at the canyon, when freshets of rain became mini-waterfalls, creating small rainbows as they poured off the rock faces of the canyon. They didn't last long, but I have rarely seen anything as magical as the small cascades of water and the light playing off them. As a matter of fact, I have rarely seen anything as magical as the whole of Red Rock Canyon, another of Caddo County's geological surprises.

(**Author's Note**: I would like to express my thanks again to Dave Sutton for giving me an informative interview, along with my brochures and fact sheets about the park which made my job easier. Kudos to the Red Rock Canyon State Park staff.)