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# Texas Highways

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# PANTHER CAVE

## Rock Art *in Danger*

An advanced laser-technology documentary project captures every detail of this essential rock art shelter, one of the most prominent among hundreds in Southwest Texas.





# PANTHER CAVE

Text by CHARLES LOHRMANN Photographs by MICHAEL AMADOR



**I**N THE DRAMATICALLY SCENIC canyon of the Lower Pecos River, where ancient limestone cliffs rise steeply above from the water's surface, and prehistoric rock art awaits in hundreds of shelters eroded over eons from the sheer rock face, it seems odd that a single year would be the topic of conversation. After all, the surrounding desert landscape appears almost eternal, and on the waters of Lake Amistad, the craggy

shoreline environment suggests that time should be considered in a sweep much more vast than just one number on the calendar of history: 1954.

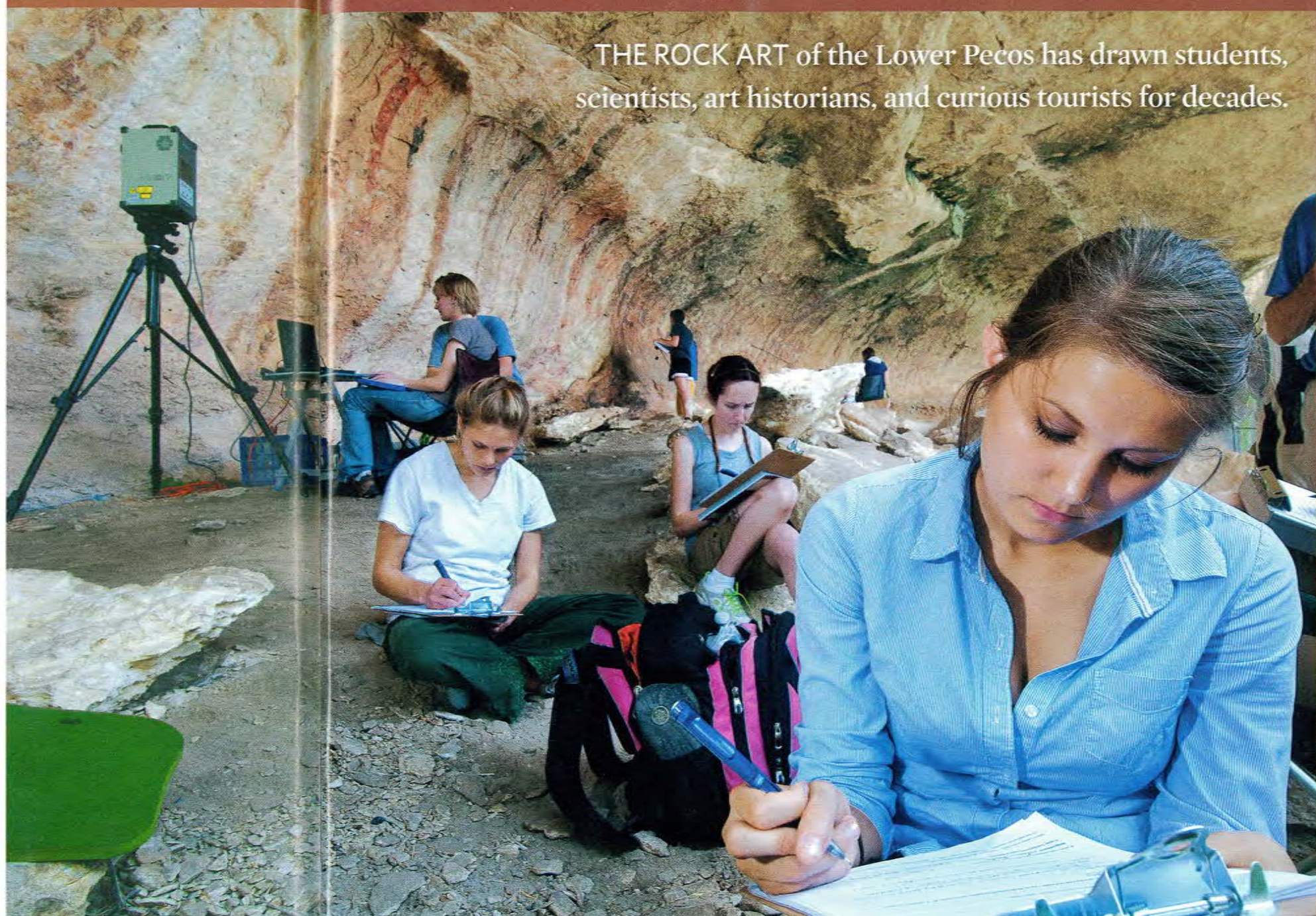
But 1954 is the year we're discussing as our group of four floats in a National Park Service jet boat on Lake Amistad. The boat sits mid-channel, at the point where the Pecos joins the Rio Grande, not far from the US 90 high bridge, west of Comstock.

Why this year instead of all others?

That's the year of the greatest, most devastating flood ever recorded on the Pecos. One summer day, in the midst of a drought, the remnants of a hurricane named Alice deluged the Pecos watershed with more than 20 inches of rain in a 24-hour period, sending a 95-foot wall of water down the canyon and into the Rio Grande. The existing highway bridge across the river was ripped from its moorings not far from where we now sit.

Such weather-borne savagery seems a distant possibility on this warm autumn morning, as the members of our group discuss the environment of the Lower Pecos. In the boat is rock art expert Carolyn Boyd, Executive Director of the nearby SHUMLA School; archeologist Jack Johnson, a program manager with the National Park Service; and Randy Rosales, Superintendent of Seminole Canyon State Park. The three organizations these people represent: The National Park Service, SHUMLA School, and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, are collaborating on a project to document Panther Cave, site of one of the area's most well-known—and most threatened—ancient rock art panels.

Before we proceed to Panther Cave, we're taking a few minutes to watch the screen of the boat's depth finder, noting the numbers that indicate how many feet of the lake's water lie beneath us here at the canyon's mouth: 12 feet here, 18 feet there, 21 feet in another place. The reality is that, even though this canyon is more than 80 feet deep, flood waters would not scour out the more than 60 feet of sediment that has settled during the 40-plus years since Lake Amistad was created. Instead of scouring out the sediment, surging flood waters would be expected to rise above the current lake level. That means that Panther Cave, seven miles downstream, would be completely inundated,



THE ROCK ART of the Lower Pecos has drawn students, scientists, art historians, and curious tourists for decades.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Carolyn Boyd, Executive Director of the SHUMLA School, and noted expert on the rock art of the Lower Pecos, offers new interpretations of the region's rock art based on the extensive research by the SHUMLA-led team.

ABOVE LEFT: One of the painted figures in Panther Cave.

and probably destroyed. In fact, all the rock art panels in the region are, to at least some degree, subject to the damaging effects of erosion and vandalism, but Panther Cave is more precarious because the lake's water laps at the shoreline only yards below the shelter. Even the mud daubers seem to be conspiring against this fragile cultural site, building their thumb-sized adobe homes atop centuries-old painted surfaces.

After we've made note of water depths, Johnson gestures for the rest of us to slip on the headphones that will protect our ears from the boat noise, and he steers the boat out onto the main lake, where the craft's hull will slap loudly over the surface at 40 miles per hour for the 15 minutes

it takes to cover the distance to Panther Cave.

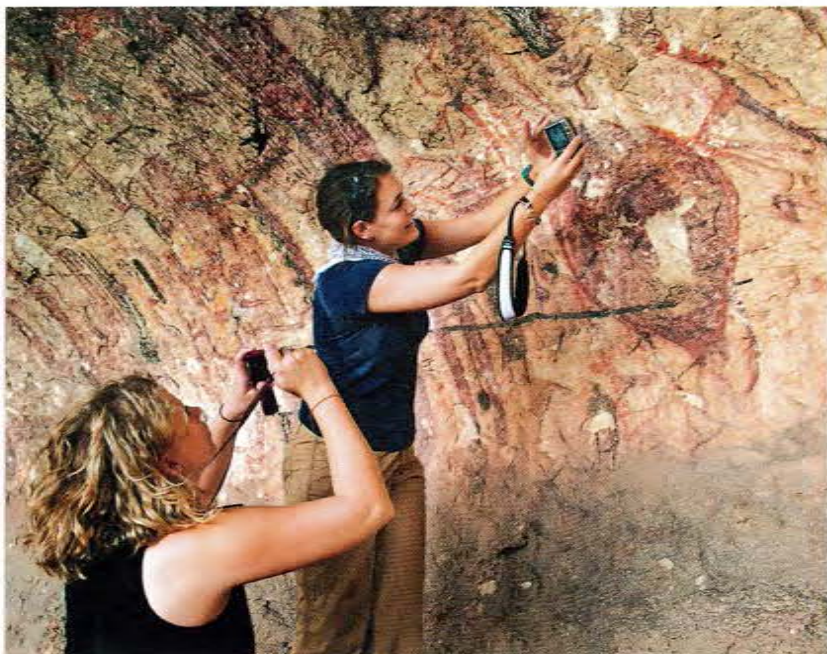
With all sound blocked out, I imagine how the country looked before the damming of the Rio Grande inundated thousands of acres—and hundreds of rock art sites—back in the 1960s. I've made this same trip in the spring, when dozens of great blue herons nest on small crags jutting out of the cliff face, amidst the red flowers of ocotillo. Today, a pair of osprey criss-cross the sky.

We pass Parida Cave, another painted shelter realistically accessible only by water and managed by the National Park Service. Within minutes, Johnson guides the boat on a wide arc into the mouth of Seminole Canyon, where we tie up at the dock that allows access to Panther Cave.

As part of the Panther Cave project, researchers document every painted figure in painstaking detail. The documentary and preservation project is a collaboration among the SHUMLA School, the National Park Service, and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.



# PANTHER CAVE



Project Archeologist Amanda Castaneda (above, on the right) and Research Assistant Angel Johnson (both SHUMLA staff) document details of one of Panther Cave's larger painted figures.

The front of the shelter is protected by a screen of chain link fence, but Johnson has ferried members of Boyd's staff from SHUMLA a half hour ahead of us and they are already at work, documenting details of the painted panel with their respective tools.

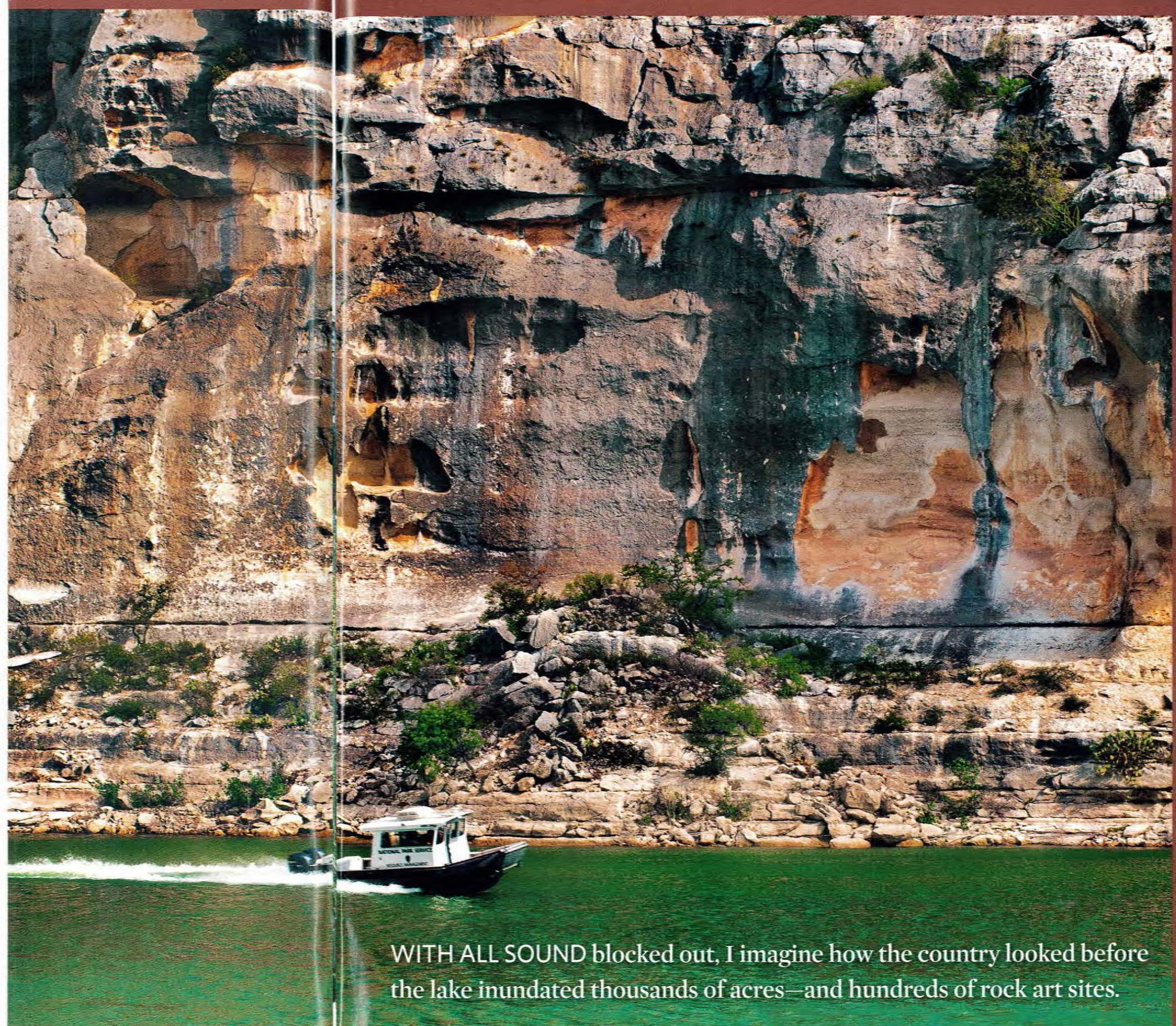
At this point, I'm remembering a conversation with Carolyn Boyd about the significance of the rock art of the Lower Pecos region. She explained, "These paintings can be understood as the oldest books in North America. These images are not just of shamans painting pictures of themselves, but rather of ancestor spirits that have been deified."

I'm acting as if I understand all this, next asking Boyd how the Texas rock art fits into the global perspective. "These panels can be seen as relating to the codices of Mesoamerica, but they're older," she says, adding that "these paintings represent complex belief systems. And they're among the most compositionally complex in the world."

The rock art of the Lower Pecos has drawn students, scientists, art historians, and curious tourists for decades. When the Southern Pacific railroad came through in the late 1800s, the rock art already figured prominently in the region's lore. By the 1930s, artist Forrest Kirkland accomplished a major documentary project by painting his own scale representations of the art (see reproductions of these paintings in *The Rock Art of Texas Indians* by Forrest Kirkland, with text by W.W. Newcomb, Jr., published by the University of Texas Press, now out of print).

In recent years, Boyd has offered new interpretations of the rock art and has drawn increased international scholarly attention to the work by pointing out its global significance. In short, this significance is a major factor supporting why the new, advanced-technology scanning project has come to pass.

RIGHT: Rock art shelters appear in the limestone cliffs along the Rio Grande and Pecos. The cliffs accentuate the rugged desert environment.



WITH ALL SOUND blocked out, I imagine how the country looked before the lake inundated thousands of acres—and hundreds of rock art sites.

To order a print of this photograph, call 866/962-1191, or visit [www.texashighwaysprints.com](http://www.texashighwaysprints.com).





SHUMLA School Board Chairman Elton Prewitt, active as an archeologist in the region for decades (since well before Lake Amistad was impounded) briefs researchers on the rock art project. Note that the group sits not far from where the Pecos highway bridge washed out in 1954.

As Boyd points out, “this laser scanning will provide us with a baseline for site condition and will help us monitor spalling and accretions at the micron level.” She continues, “this laser mapping will create a 3D model, a virtual representation of the cave’s morphology. Then, stereo photography creates a 3D model of the color imagery at super-high resolution. This color photograph of the rock art is then ‘wrapped’ on the 3D model of the cave.”

It’s possible to get a sense of what this project ultimately means by visiting a representation of Panther Cave at the National Park Service Visitor’s Center, located several miles down the road toward Del Rio. There, a modest installation represents a scale model of Panther Cave, along with interpretive background about the rock art and the indigenous people who inhabited the region in centuries past.

Meanwhile, back in the cave, the SHUMLA staffers are coordinating the detailed documentation of each and every figure, no matter how faded and obscure, to be used in the analysis of the art. Project Archeologist Amanda Castaneda directs some of the documentation work with data collected in enormous binders. This data includes detailed sketches that offer minute details concerning hundreds of figures and shapes from different sites. A complete visual vocabulary has emerged. Research Assistant Angel Johnson demonstrates how a quirk in a particular Canon camera’s firmware allows the capture of a specific color range that elucidates details otherwise not visible.

FACING PAGE: A side view of a major figure in the Panther Cave shelter. You can see the panther figure on the far end of the photo.

As I’m working to assimilate all this information, I notice that Randy Rosales has taken a couple of the workers aside to observe the noisy buzzing of the Bewick’s wren, and to distinguish its call from the more melodic canyon wren, or even the cactus wren,

## TH ESSENTIALS



## Panther Cave and Lower Pecos Rock Art

The SHUMLA School, 117 Sanderson Street, Comstock, 78837, 432/292-4848; [www.shumla.org](http://www.shumla.org).

Seminole Canyon State Park and Historic Site, US 90 W. and Park Road 67, Comstock, 78837, 432/292-4464; [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/findadest/parks/seminole\\_canyon](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/findadest/parks/seminole_canyon).

Amistad/NPS Visitors’ Center, 9685 US 90 W, Del Rio, 78840, 830/775-7491; [www.nps.gov/amis](http://www.nps.gov/amis).

White Shaman Tour, Galloway White Shaman Preserve, Rock Art Foundation; [www.rockart.org](http://www.rockart.org).

which also makes an appearance. As we talk, he directs my attention across the canyon to Seminole Canyon State Park, explaining that they’re finalizing work “on a four-and-a-half mile trail that will guide state park visitors to an overlook where they can see Panther Cave.”

Our visit to the cave seems short because there is so much information to gather about the cave, the natural environment, and the rock art. These groups are gathering this surprising array of technology and scientific knowledge so they can, as Jack Johnson notes, “beat 1954.” TH

This project offered photographer MICHAEL AMADOR his first experience of Lower Pecos Rock Art. TH Editor-in-Chief CHARLES LOHRMANN suggests a Saturday tour of the White Shaman site in the Galloway White Shaman Preserve, across US 90 from Seminole Canyon State Park ([www.rockart.org](http://www.rockart.org)).

