ACCESS

DENIED

How politicians and courts are erasing Texas' open records law and keeping citizens in the dark

By Chris Collins
The Time-Traveler’s Guide to the Lower Pecos

Hidden away on private land in Southwest Texas is some of the oldest and best-preserved prehistoric rock art in the world. The Rock Art Rendezvous offers a rare glimpse.

by Rose Cahalan

“I’m standing on a cliff more than 300 feet above the Devils River, walking slowly across a very narrow ledge, when my foot slips. This sends a pebble skittering down, bouncing off a clump of prickly pear before launching into the void. After I regain my balance, it’s hard to look anywhere but at the impossibly turquoise water far below, and to think of anything other than how easily I could fall that pebble. Almost there,” says Ute Hall, who is perched on the other side of the ledge, “One step at a time.” A volunteer guide with the Witte Museum in San Antonio, Hall is originally from Germany, and I find her clipped accent oddly reassuring in this moment. Less comforting is the fact that a few minutes earlier, while rigging up a climbing rope for my fellow clump to clamber while shimming across the precipice, she’d asked cheerfully, “Does anyone here know how to tie knots?”

But it’s too late to worry about that. A few more steps and I’m in the rock shelter on the other side, blinking as my eyes adjust to the shade. I look up and immediately forget about the terrifying passage. Before me is a huge red panther, at least 7 feet long. He stands in a powerful crouch, every detail on his body clearly visible—the claws on his feet, the brittles on his tail, the large rounded ears on his head. To his right is a humanlike figure with arms outstretched. The undulating vertical lines running alongside the man’s body make me wonder if he is flying, or maybe dancing. I ask Hall what they might mean, and she shakes her head. “We don’t know.” Every minute or so, another member of our 20-person group arrives in the shelter to gape open-mouthed at the creatures painted on the rock.” Wow, wow, wow.” “Holy shit!”

“Will you look at that?” One man is so riveted that he barely seems to notice when a yellow jacket—there’s a nest of them on the cliff overhang—stings him in the armpit. “I’m fine,” he says, waving away the bees as he kneels to look up at the panther.

All of us have traveled to this remote stretch of Southwest Texas—a dry, empty, scrubby region that researchers call the Lower Pecos Canyonslands—to see prehistoric rock art as old as 6,000 years. Most Texans don’t know that this place is home to one of the world’s best and largest collections of ancient pictographs, or what archaeologists refer to as “the oldest manuscripts in North America.” In limestone shelters above the Pecos and Devils rivers, complex artworks composed by hunter-gatherers have quietly endured for millennia. Scholars are just beginning to understand them, and have recently embarked on an ambitious quest to exhaustively document all 350 known sites and counting—a new one was discovered less than a month before my visit—by 2020. Though the region’s arid climate and limetone geology are a recipe for good preservation, threats as diverse as flooding, erosion, insatiable goats and the ceaseless march of time add to the urgency.

Unlike most American rock art, the majority of these works are tucked away on gated ranches—no surprise in Texas, where 96 percent of land is privately owned. That means the pictographs are protected from graffiti and other damage visitors can cause; it has also contributed to their obscurity among both scholars and the public. Few will ever get the chance to see these incredible places. But for one weekend each of the past 24 years, landowners have opened their property to visitors from across the state. A little-known event called the Rock Art Rendezvous, hosted by the Witte Museum, offers three days of guided tours at a rotating lineup of the best pictograph sites. Visitors drive on dirt roads, hike across sunbaked ranchland and scramble down cliffs, all for the chance to stand in front of ancient murals and wonder: Who made these? What do they mean? And can we save them before it’s too late?

The term “ghost town” is overused to describe tiny Texas towns, but in Comstock it doesn’t feel like hyperbole. Highway 90 stretches past a long-abandoned cafe restaurant, chairs and tables still visible through the grimy windows; a sign advertising “DEER-STORAGE”; and what was once the Seminole Inn Cafe. There’s a rusty water tower, and a train sitting sedately on the tracks. The one restaurant in town, the J&P, is the kind of place where everybody turns in unison to look when the door swings open. Every other vehicle seems to be a green-and-white Border Patrol pickup, and my phone buzzing with a text from Verizon: “Welcome to Mexico!”

Eventually I reach a blow-up gas station, its twisted canopy rusting at a dramatic 45-degree angle. Just across the highway is the gate to the White Shaman Preserve, wide open and decorated with colorful streamers. A handwritten sign reads, “Welcome to Rendezvous Drive Slow.” Owned by the Witte Museum, the preserve includes the White Shaman mural, one of the best-studied and most complex rock art sites in the area. It’s also home base for the Rendezvous, offering guests dry camping, coffee and...
sweet rolls for breakfast, a generously sized fire pit and a covered shelter from the wind. Most of the 100 attendees seem to be upper-middle-class and upper-middle-age, with a smattering of younger folks. They come from across the state and include an architect, several retired teachers, a corporate attorney, a physics professor, engineers and geologists. I spot at least two Subarus with Sierra Club stickers.

It’s here that I meet Bryan Bales, a White Museum curator and director of the preserve. Bales has shaggy red hair, a tiny silver earring and a coffee mug with the cartoon characters of South Park and the slogan “Life is Only Pain.” Trained as a medical anthropologist, he did his graduate fieldwork with indigenous women in Chiapas. He also plays the drums in a punk band called Muscle Car and is relentlessly upbeat. “There are very, very few spots on the planet like this,” Bales says. “Lower Pecos rock art is up there with the cave paintings of France and the rock art of South Africa and Australia. And so few people know it’s in our backyard! So raising awareness of this place and the importance of documenting it is really vital.”

Though Bales has led dozens of tours to the White Shaman mural and other sites, he sees something new each time: “A couple weeks ago I was here, and something happens when it’s foggy and humid and the air is the right temp,” he says. “There are these little white figures I’ve never seen, and the weather made them pop out. Didn’t know they were there!” He shakes his head. “There’s still so much we don’t know,” he says, “though Carolyn Boyd has made an incredible advance, of course.”

Boyd, an assistant professor of anthropology and curator of Lower Pecos rock art and especially the White Shaman, speaks of her research, which includes studying the region’s rock art in general — was merely decorative, an inscrutable sketch. “Nothing about the White Shaman mural was random,” Boyd writes in her award-winning 2016 book on the subject. “Every image was intentionally placed. ... It is a creation story detailing the birth of the sun and the dawn of time.”

After the random doodle idea was debunked, some believed that the rock art was the product of shamans — religious experiences recorded after tripping on peyote and datura. While it’s true the prehistoric people of the Pecos used hallucinogens for sacred purposes, scholars now know that view is far too simplistic. “I encourage people to think of the rock art as holding multiple layers of meaning, like literature,” Bayles says. Researchers are also finding patterns that hold true across cultures, such as the use of a serpent to represent the boundary between the underworld and our world. “We’re starting to learn that there’s a core set of principles and beliefs widely shared in indigenous Texas, New Mexico and Arizona down into Mexico, and these people were somehow tapped into that,” Bayles says. “We’ve barely scratched the surface.”

“Prayer is the best way to meet the Lord, but trespassing is faster,” reads a sign outside the gate to the Meyer’s Spring Ranch. After driving about an hour northwest of the White Shaman Preserve in a slow and dusty caravan of cars, I’ve arrived at this 19,000-acre ranching hunting to see one of the biggest rock art sites in the region. The spot is a testament to the power of water: A spring here has drawn people to bathe, relax and make art for thousands of years. A nearly 100-foot-long wall is covered in a staggering quantity of every known style of rock art, ranging from a 3,000-year-old lower Pecos-style pictograph to historic scenes from the mid-1800s that include Spanish missions and priests. Retired Sul Ross University archaeologist Reeda Peel, who has studied the site, says, “The area most likely painted in the early 1800s by a member of a Plains Indian tribe. ‘That probably indicates she was a captive. You need feet to run away’.”
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