



Drawing with Vision: Harold J. Cundy's Pioneering Investigations into the Rock Art of North Central Washington

Columbia Magazine, Spring 1998: Vol. 12, No. 1

By William D. Layman

WHILE THE LATE 1920s through the next decade may not have been good years for the American economy, they certainly were beneficial to rock art studies. Julian Steward's 1929 *Petroglyphs of California and Adjoining States* extended Gerrick Mallery's 1893 landmark work, *Picture Writing of the American Indian*, by identifying new sites and providing illustrations, photographs and distribution analyses of motifs found within this vast study area. A number of other publications soon followed that documented the extensive nature of pictograph and petroglyph sites found in Utah, Idaho, Oregon and Texas.

Apart from descriptions of pictographs and petroglyphs found near The Dalles in 1925 and 1930, little was known about Washington's rock art until 1950 when Thomas Cain's *Petroglyphs of Central Washington* was published. Cain acknowledged unidentified individuals including farmers, cattlemen and teachers who had helped him. In addition, he gave particular mention to Harold J. Cundy of Wenatchee who had shared his extensive collection of site records and photographs with the young researcher. The acknowledgment was well deserved, if not vastly understated. A full 32 out of the 40 sites Cain visited had been carefully documented years earlier by Cundy. In fact, in 1939 Harold Cundy had presented a handsomely bound manuscript, *Petrographs of North Central Washington*, to the Washington State Historical Society in Tacoma. Cundy used the term petrographs to describe both painted designs (pictographs) and images that were carved, pecked or scratched on the surface of the rocks (petroglyphs). The more generic term, rock art, had not yet come into vogue.

Within the manuscript's covers were 161 pages of beautifully rendered pen and ink drawings of the 62 sites Cundy recorded between the years 1927 and 1938. His goal, described in the volume's introduction, was to locate, describe and accurately reproduce the area's petrographs, as well as to learn and share information about them from Indians and others. A second manuscript of additional drawings, related legends and writings was given to the Society in later years. Photographs of many of the sites he visited accompanied each donation.

Cundy's reactions to Cain's book are not known, but one can guess he was disappointed. Not only did Cain draw heavily upon the site records Cundy had so painstakingly compiled, Cain's presentation was lacking on several accounts. While his research conformed to accepted academic and archaeological standards of the day there were no photographs and the illustrations were extremely crude. Further they exhibited little if any contextual relationship, questionable accuracy, and no indication of scale. Distances describing site locations were consistently off the mark, and in one instance figures of one site, Spanish Castle, were attributed to another, Crescent Bar.

Cundy's approach to these sites was altogether different. A flour salesman for Wenatchee Milling Company and its successor, Centennial Flour Mills, he had neither academic affiliation nor formal education in art or archaeology. Yet, his keen eye, meticulous nature and homespun artistic talent were all that he needed to advance his singular passion the recording of pictographs and petroglyphs. Stopping at small-town grocery stores along his central Washington sales route, he would fill his orders. "That'll be four sacks of Peach Blossom, and, by the way, did you get a chance to talk with your friend about those Indian picture writings? I'd sure like to see them." Upon learning of one, he drove his Model T Ford along the rutted back roads of Washington to a specific boulder, rock shelter or outcrop. There, he set to work making pencil sketches and notations, often on the back of company stationery. Back home, using inks and watercolors, Cundy enhanced these sketches, bringing yet another level of attention to the day's work.

We know little of Harold Cundy's childhood. A book he wrote for his two daughters, *The Deep Creek Pioneers*, shows an early love of exploration. Written as a chronicle of his youth, it is a sketch of three city boys who decided to become pioneers in spite of the vanishing frontier. No mention is made of pictographs, but near his childhood home in Spokane were sites he recorded in later years. One wonders if he knew them as a boy.

By the time Cundy moved from Spokane to Wenatchee in 1927, the Columbia River Archaeological Society had been meeting regularly for seven years. To its members' excitement, a belief was growing among the ranks that the mid Columbia River was not only the apple capital of the world but also the cradle of civilization. Things got particularly exhilarating when noted explorer Roy Chapman Andrews visited town, looked at the society's artifact collections, and openly speculated that human presence on the Columbia River may stretch back 50,000 years toward the end of the Paleolithic Age.

Composed of bankers, doctors and businessmen, the Columbia River Archaeological Society had, in 1925, erected signs to protect the petroglyphs at Rock Island from vandalism. Several years later, when the long-held rumor of building a dam across the island became a certainty, society members went to work securing from Puget Sound Power and Light a commitment to pay for photographing the island's rock art and to remove a number of petroglyphs giving birth to the state's first salvage archaeological project.

Cundy, a member of the society, had by this time already tried his hand at drawing rock art panels. Sensing the great changes ahead for the Columbia, he started taking trips to the northeastern end of Rock Island with sketch book in hand. According to his estimate, the petroglyphs there numbered as many as 600 panels, each containing up to 30 individual design elements. By the time the coffer dams were built, Cundy had 36 drawings of Rock Island's petroglyphs in his notebook. In an accompanying description he wrote, "It is hoped that they (the inundated petroglyphs not destroyed by construction) will be left for a more appreciative race to ponder upon."

Columbia River Archaeological Society members, anxious to build their prized collections of Columbia River gem points, headed regularly to other river sites with buckets and screens in hand, lifting thousands of artifacts from the sands of ancient campsites. Cundy went as well, but with simpler tools-pencils and pens. He returned home with only drawings on paper; the images themselves remained undisturbed and unchalked.

His many observations about the region's petroglyphs are instructive. He reported finding sites near springs, trails and watercourses, and rock art panels in caves and shelters, on faces of basalt columns, large boulders and glacial erratics. He noted examples of superimposition among both pictographs and petroglyphs, and observed that many pictographs of the region showed evidence of repainting.

Cundy believed rock art was, at times, created to mark events holding special significance. From the local Indians he learned that, images were made to leave specific messages at trail junctions. Still others, he heard, were idle markings to pass time. One of his informants, the Okanogan-Colville writer Humishuma (Mourning Dove) shared with him that elders had told her the writings were made to record the finding of one's shoomesh or power. Mostly, though, the Indians with whom he spoke either denied knowledge of their existence or stated that the petroglyphs were made by their ancestors a long time ago.

Cundy noticed that some of the images appeared to be very old and wondered if perhaps they were made by the first people who had passed through the area. At the same time he noted that anything depicting horses had to be more recent because "horses were rarely seen before 1800." After inspecting many painted sites, he concluded that certain of the images were done within the last century, due to the rapid exfoliation of the fragile rock surfaces upon which the figures were painted.

The main body of Cundy's 1939 manuscript consists of site descriptions and drawings. His documentation includes an impressive 62 of the 235 sites placed in the Washington state registry by Richard McClure in 1979. Cundy recorded an additional four sites in British Columbia. Many of these sites are now gone from our view. Nineteen have been inundated by five mid Columbia River dams; one was flooded by a rise in the water levels of Lake Chelan and another by Banks Lake. Four have been taken out by road construction and one partially destroyed by a railway line. Among those not inundated or destroyed are panels that have lost their clarity through natural weathering processes. Others have been vandalized to varying degrees. Cundy's work constitutes the best and often the only good record of many of these sites.

The site recordings documented within Petroglyphs of Central Washington begin at Buffalo Eddy along the Snake River. From there Cundy moved his attention to petroglyph and pictograph panels along the mid Columbia above Priest Rapids. At Sentinel Bluff he drew a particularly striking panel visited and photographed by archaeologist Harlan Smith in 1903, rephotographed by Harold Simmer in 1930, and blasted apart later that year. The primary image is an armless human with four toes on each foot. Thirteen rays surround its head. Positioned down each side of its body are two columns of ten dots. Figures surrounding the image show another human, sheep, faces, rayed arcs and a number of incised lines that appear randomly distributed.

A short distance upriver Cundy began visiting and recording a complex of four sites on the west side of the river above Vantage in 1930. One of these sites contained over 100 pictographs and petroglyphs, and was situated on a large basalt formation reachable only by canoe or when the water was low. Cain's only drawing of its petroglyphs does little to convey the site's significance, particularly when compared to Cundy's 15 drawings. Cundy's work reveals a place of vitality, the depictions ranging from an illustration of an animal with rays and dots above its head to drawings of naturalistic deer or elk. Cundy also sketched three sets of human figures, identified by archaeologists as "paired anthropomorphs," one of which can be viewed at the Ginkgo State Park Visitor Center. Next to it was an unusual figure holding objects in its hands.

A mile farther upriver was Picture Rocks Bay, a site that was formally recorded by Susan Barrow working under Dr. Robert Greengo of the University of Washington in 1957. With over 300 elements, it contained some of the clearest and most dramatic petroglyphs found along the river. Returning many times, Cundy created over 20 separate drawings at Picture Rocks Bay. They show a host of figures and abstract elements. One of the drawings contains 17 different animals. Another shows a basalt column; at its base is a triangular design surrounded on two sides by three curved lines at its base. Above are clearly incised petroglyphs of five mountain sheep. On another panel a native painter placed a white double rayed arc directly on top of another separate painting of two human figures; Cundy's drawing of this remarkable superimposition creates a statement of both beauty and power.

In 1964 Picture Rocks Bay was flooded by the backwaters of Wanapum Dam. Those who once walked the mile of hazardous trail leading down to the site's large hexagonal basalt columns still talk of it with feeling. The many finely detailed petroglyphs and pictographs, along with the remarkable nature of the site itself, produced an unforgettable experience. Harold Cundy's care in recording these figures makes possible a measure of appreciation for the site we could not otherwise know.

Above Vantage Cundy recorded large numbers of finely executed petroglyphs along both sides of the river. Many of the sites he visited, such as Crescent Bar, West Bar, Spanish Castle, Columbia River Siding and Cabinet Rapids, were not formally documented before the rising backwaters of Wanapum Dam flooded them. Cundy's drawings and a few precious photographs are all that remain to help us remember these sacred river places.

North of Wenatchee Cundy noticed a change in the character of the petroglyphs. Sites were smaller, composed mostly of pictographs painted in red on granites and quartzite's. He drew a number of sites alongside tributaries of the Columbia such as one in a rock shelter along the Wenatchee River and another on a lone boulder by the Methow. Seven sites were recorded along the Okanogan River, one showing a large quadruped with a flat tail resembling a beaver and, a few yards away, a striking human figure with a bird near its right hand.

Cundy observed that the petroglyphs of central Washington tended to be near trails that later became roads. It was clear to him that, because of their accessibility, the sites were rapidly being destroyed through vandalism, a practice that continues to this day. A site he recorded along the Okanogan is an example. Many years ago an Indian had, with careful intent, dipped his finger in a bowl and placed several figures on a rock surface just north of Omak. Now, next to the figures, a large black asterisk and the letters HBWC have been painted, this time applied by a person using a can of spray paint, without regard to beauty, ritual or tradition.

Another site Cundy recorded, along Bonapart Creek, was defaced in 1970 by members of a high school graduating class who painted their graduation date in large white letters across several finely detailed pictograph figures. While the youthful offenders were court-ordered to remove their work, the class numbers have since reemerged from within the rock, a phenomena that, unfortunately, has also occurred at a Lake Chelan site. Found on a large granite outcrop across from Stehekin, this site already had been vandalized when Cundy photographed it in 1934. Some 50 years later the National Park Service hired an art conservator to remove the graffiti, but these more recent markings, too, have reappeared from deep within the rock.

By far the most disturbing defacement of Washington's pictographs occurred on a boulder above Sinlahekin Creek. In the early 1980s a person, believing the inscriptions to give coded access to another dimension reality, felt that if others entered this dimension through the rock, then upon returning they would not be able to shut the door behind them and great harm would befall the world. Over time this man decided the rock paintings must be destroyed. Despite attempts by authorities to dissuade him, soon all but two elements on the boulder were uniformly covered with red paint. Fortunately, Cundy's detailed field notes, sketches and drawings, as well as photographs from a state survey in 1979, help us to know this extraordinary pictograph panel. Perhaps they may someday be used for the site's restoration.

Sometimes Cundy arrived too late to know what had been painted on the rocks. A pioneer he interviewed told him that in 1913 the Great Northern Railroad had blasted a rail line through a cliff of granite bearing red pictographs. After the dust had settled, only three panels remained.

Following his documentation of the Columbia's tributaries, Cundy's site recordings resume from above Wenatchee up the Columbia River. The images he found include a nine-headed serpent with 26 marks rising from its spine in an Orondo rock shelter, a man leading a horse with a lariat above Chelan, and a painting farther upriver of a man riding a horse. At Steamboat Rock, above Grand Coulee Dam, he documented a panel of figures that Billie Curlew, a Columbia Sinkiuse, described as being cattle brands strong evidence that rock art traditions continued after Euro-Americans settled into the area.

Below Dry Falls Cundy discovered a small rock shelter by Blue Lake in which there appeared to be a painting of a "mastodon." It is the only instance where a pictograph in the Pacific Northwest has been linked to the great ice age mammals. When Thomas Cain visited the site he agreed that it was some kind of "pachyderm," but he concluded that it must be an elephant, possibly one seen by a modern Indian at a circus. Rick McClure, a regional archaeologist who recorded the site in 1979, was not inclined to venture any elephantine interpretations at all he considered the pictograph too badly damaged to make out any definite image. With newly established dating techniques using very small traces of pigments taken from the pictograph, a future archaeologist might well resolve the question, even though an unsettled interpretation of the site may in the end prove more interesting.

If seeing a mastodon at Blue Lake carried with it an inclination toward psychological projection on Cundy's part, this tendency took a quantum leap some years later when he happened upon a book, *The Lost Continent of Mu*, by Colonel James Churchward. In it Churchward announced the discovery of the existence of three large former continents in the Pacific that he believed once had a population of 64 million people. Through examination of ancient tabloids, Churchward maintained that the people of "Mu" divided into ten tribes and set out to establish colonies throughout the world. This "discovery" of a universal language of symbols made it possible for him to understand the secret wisdom and history of Mu.

That Muvian symbols showed up in north central Washington's rock art was astonishing to Cundy. For example, when he came across the Colonel's references to images of snakes with more than one head, Cundy could not help but recognize such snakes appearing at three sites he had documented. Following his exposure to Churchward, Cundy wrote a paper supporting the hypothesis that the region's Indians had descended from one of the early exploring Muvian tribes. Suddenly the unusual figure holding objects in its hand at Vantage made sense it was none other than Queen Moo of Mayax, the famed princess who traveled to Egypt where she built the Sphinx as a tribute to her lately vanquished husband. A petroglyph at Rock Island that Indians had said was a blue jay was perhaps, to Cundy's new way of thinking, much older and no jay bird at all, but rather a macaw, the oval above its head signifying the bird's royalty! These speculations seem preposterous to us now, at best an entertaining footnote to what was otherwise a solid contribution.

While archaeologists and others may be critical of Cundy's interpretative forays, perhaps it should not be so difficult to forgive Cundy his occasional excesses. The drive to seek meaning from rock paintings runs deep, leading not only Cundy but most of the rest of us down this questionable path of inquiry. Next to the figure at Blue Lake is an incomplete circle surrounded by another circle. With its flat head, it looks to be a snake, probably a rattler curled up head to tail. Known in mythology as the uroboros, it too is an image found throughout the world. Mythologists and psychologists think of the uroboros as representing an archetype seated deeply within the unconscious of our species. To them it is a primary symbol of the return to the great round where beginning and end come together. Uroboros is seen, as well, as a symbol of the primordial womb the container of opposites; at once begetting and conceiving, devouring and giving birth, active and passive, above and below. It is curious that hearing such things from someone like Joseph Campbell works for many of us while other musings fail. Yet, present-day Native Americans have often reminded Americans that each cherished Western perspective, whether offered through archaeology, psychology or mythology, carries biases and assumptions that run the risk of violating the sacred experience of the person who brought the paint or hammer to the stone.

Local legends and stories add more interest to Cundy's investigations. The story, "A Mix-Up at Picture Rocks," told to him by Mourning Dove, is about a child who finds a petroglyph at Rock Island left by relatives as a message. When Cundy showed Peter Wapato, 90-year-old chief of the Chelans, a certain drawing of another Rock Island petroglyph, the chief became very excited and told him its associated legend, "How the Pacific Coastlands were Formed." Cundy's daughter, Carol Dennis, remembers her father as valuing his relationships with Indians. A respect for native cultures pervades his writings.

There is much to like in Cundy's work. Among the pages of his documentation one discovers that the figures have their own stories to tell. Each figure he draws, such as a zoomorph from Quilomene Rapids, or the "Elk Monster" from Chief Peter Wapato's legend, has enormous energy that speaks directly to some powerful experience its original creator might have had. Cundy's quaint maps stand out as well, placing central Washington rock art within the region, within the western United States, and even within the Western Hemisphere. But he doesn't stop there; an additional map shows north central Washington in relation to the mythical continents of Mu.

Cundy's lifetime of relationship with the material served him through important life transitions. In 1938, the culminating year of his studies, he tragically lost both a newborn daughter and, shortly thereafter, his wife. Perhaps it was with grief in his heart that the following year he gave his completed manuscript to the Washington State Historical Society. In his middle years he was fond of giving presentations about central Washington's petroglyphs to local Wenatchee audiences. Even near the end of his life Cundy was still turning these images over in his mind. His last donation, made when he was 70, was a series of 28 recently completed drawings along with his commentary.

Harold Cundy's petroglyph investigations are of great value to those interested in rock art's unique place in Native American cultural heritage. His personal way of creating relationships with sites and the stories they tell conveys a depth of feeling that is nothing less than remarkable. Knowing his work changes our understanding of landscapes of central Washington we come away with a heightened awareness of indigenous peoples' intimate relationships with place. The pictographs, petroglyphs and sites, so many now gone from our view, hold particular meaning to Columbia Plateau natives. Cundy's records serve to illuminate their history, offering an opportunity to be with ancestors honored deeply within. For their children, knowledge of former homelands as well as the sites where their elders once gained vision facilitates the development of a strong cultural identity. Cundy's extraordinary work has remained all these years unrecognized, unpublished and unknown to all but a few. Given the sensitive nature of his site recordings, access to the materials he left may be restricted. Sixty years after he completed the main body of his work, the time has come to recognize this man who dedicated himself to following his passion of recording what for the most part is now lost from our view. Having drawn and told the story of the place, Harold J. Cundy can now assume his place in the story.

A member of the North Central Washington Museum and the Washington State Historical Society and author of two previous COLUMBIA articles, William D. Layman is a recipient of the Center for Columbia River History's James B. Castle Heritage Award for contributions to a deeper understanding of Columbia River heritage.

MLA Citation

Layman, William D. "Drawing with Vision: Harold J. Cundy's Pioneering Investigations into the Rock Art of North Central Washington." *Columbia Magazine*. 12.1 (Spring 1998): 23-32. Date accessed <http://columbia.washingtonhistory.org/anthology/earliestsettlers/drawingwithvision.aspx>.