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ROCK ART OF THE DESPOBLADO

Vivid pictographs found along the river canyons of southwest Texas reflect the indifference, distrust and eventual hostility with which native Indians viewed early Spanish and Anglo-American intruders.

by Solveig Turpin

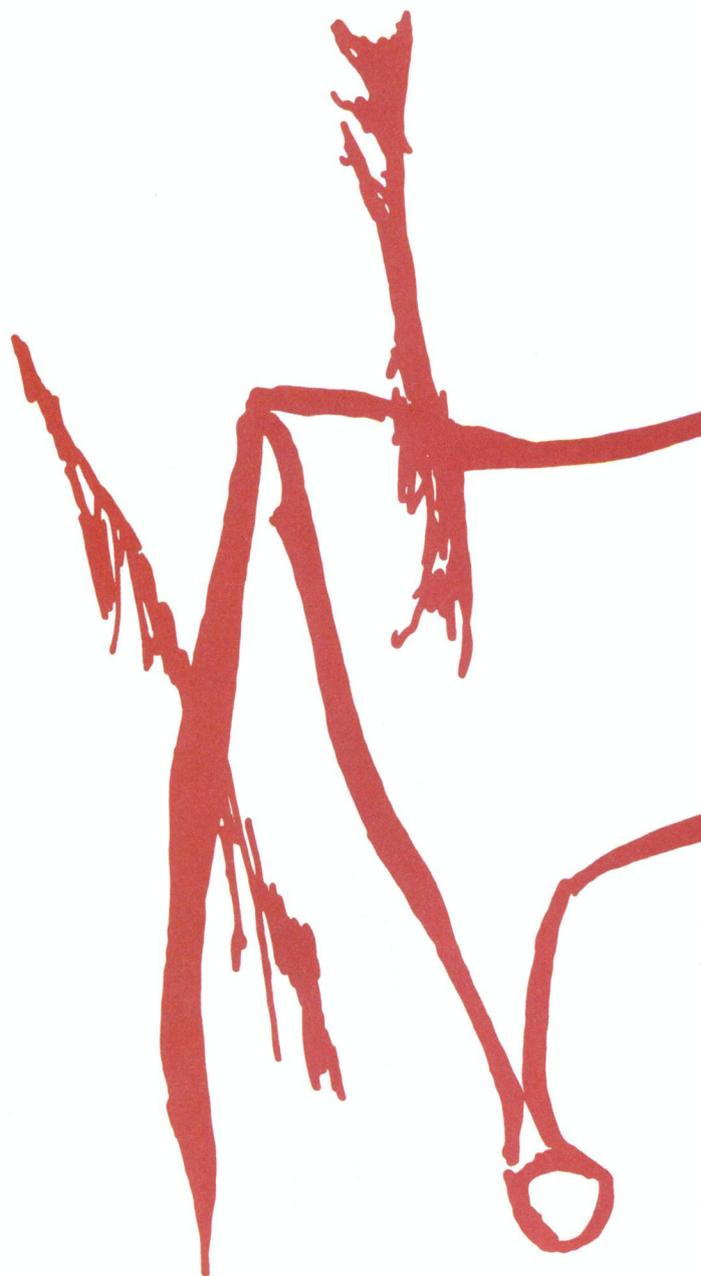
Few artifacts tell such a vivid, poignant story as the pictographs found in a vast, desolate region along the border between Texas and Mexico. Inscribed on cliff and river canyon walls, these primitive works of art reflect the shifting fortunes of the region's inhabitants, first prehistoric hunter-gatherers and later a succession of tribes—Cibola and Jumano, Apache, Comanche and Kiowa, and Kickapoo. Perhaps most interesting are those pictographs which document changes in the relations between native Indian populations and the early Spanish and Anglo-American settlers.

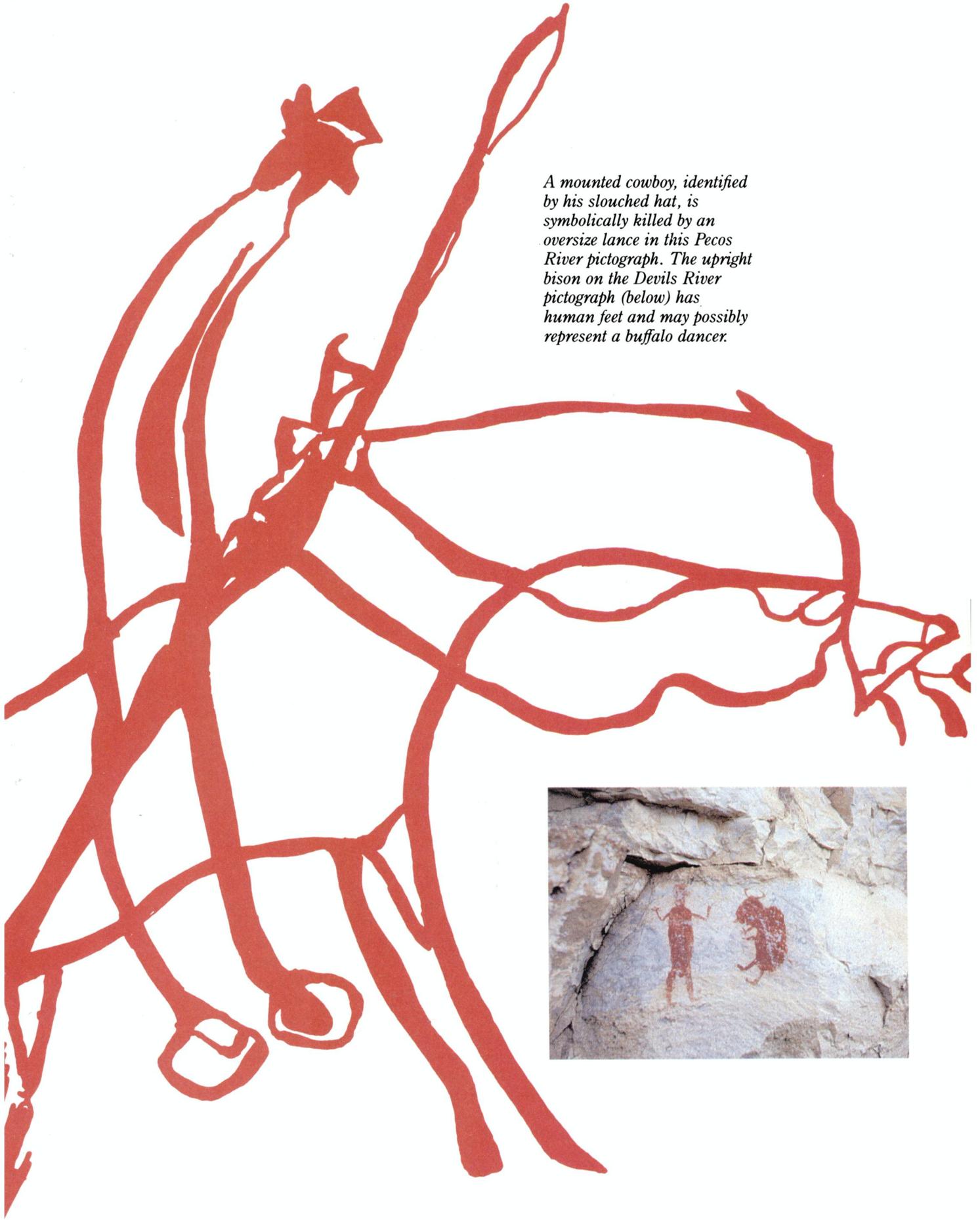
The theater in which much of this drama was played out is a grim, barren region known to the early colonial Spaniards as the *despoblado*—"the unpopulated zone." But it was a no-man's-land only in the eyes of the Spaniards. To its native peoples it was home, a place of refuge, a sanctuary. For 10,000 years hunter-gatherers subsisted here on small game and desert succulents.

For millennia, they had also created rock art on cliff walls and in shelters along the steep river canyons. They continued to do so after the coming of the Europeans; but the art that they created during the subsequent three centuries tells a melancholy tale of initial openness and trust that gradually gave way to distrust and aggression.

I first became interested in the rock art of this region a decade ago, when Seminole Canyon State Historical Park was created in Val Verde County, Texas, to preserve some of the region's finer pictographs. These fragile artworks once abounded in the area of the Lower Pecos, Rio Grande and Devils rivers. But they have been tragically mistreated over the past hundred years, and today are continuously threatened by natural forces, the damming of rivers and destruction by human hands.

These pictographs are so important because they are the only expression we have of the native Indians' attitudes toward their historical experience. There is literally no other legacy of their tenure in this harsh land. The motifs we see in this artwork—missionizing Spaniards and the churches they built, different styles of dress, warfare and personal valor, the vital horse and buffalo—give eloquent testimony to the nomadic lives of these peoples, who left behind no architecture and no written record. Ironically, the prehistoric pictographs of the *despoblado* have received kinder treatment than the artworks of the historical period. For more than 50 years, archaeologists and art historians had concentrated on





A mounted cowboy, identified by his slouched hat, is symbolically killed by an oversize lance in this Pecos River pictograph. The upright bison on the Devils River pictograph (below) has human feet and may possibly represent a buffalo dancer.





Scene from Vaquero shelter (above) depicts cowboys and a grandee flanking a mission. An arrow piercing a composite priest and mission reflects mounting hostility.

polychrome pictographs preserved in the dry rock-shelter homes of the Archaic peoples (about 4,000 to 3,000 years ago), to the neglect of the later periods.

This began to change, however, in 1980, when the University of Texas at Austin was given the task of documenting the archaeological and historical sites in the park in Seminole Canyon. This work was headed by one of my mentors, David S. Dibble, director of the Texas Archaeological Survey. Dibble had noted during 20 years of field experience that the later, historical material was being neglected. As we recorded late site types—teepee rings and cairn burials—and studied new pictographs, it became obvious to us that entire epochs in Lower Pecos life still awaited discovery.

Our certain knowledge that the pictographs were rapidly disappearing prompted the ensuing decade of exploration. Staff archaeologists Lee Bement, Dave Robinson and Herb Eling have participated in this effort with me. We have surveyed thousands of acres of privately owned ranch land in search of unrecorded rock art. Often we have worked with more enthusiasm than money; our main supporters have been ranchers who opened their lands and homes to us, providing us with food and shelter on many occasions. We have spent weekends and vacations trudging through bitter cold and extreme heat, up desolate canyons and across vacant alkali flats. Often our sole compensation has been the thrill of making discoveries, and of understanding long-forgotten episodes in Lower Pecos prehistory and history.

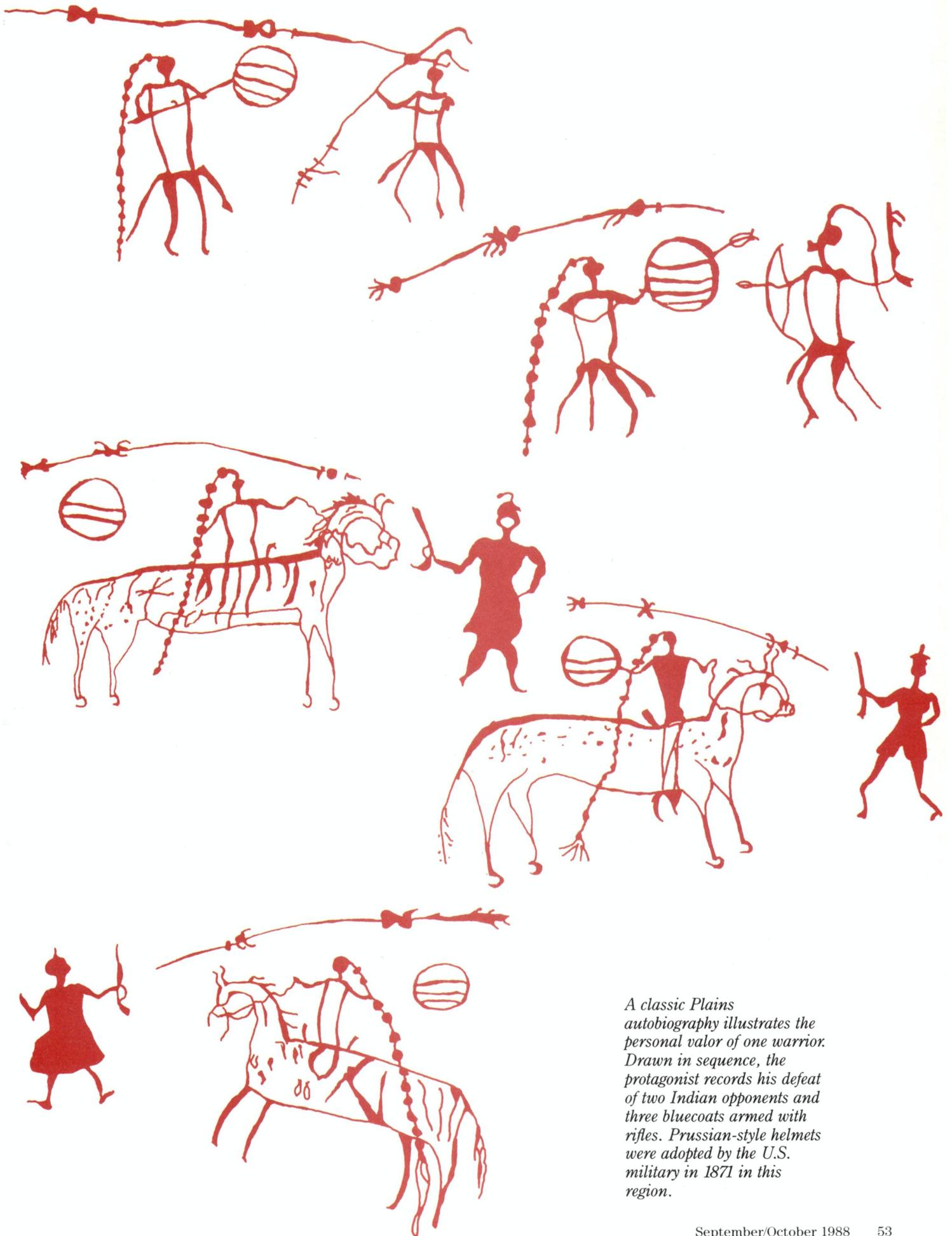
The despoblado was not always as barren as it is now. At the end of the last Ice Age, it was largely grassy parkland capable of supporting herds of elephant, camel, horse, and giant bison, all of which vanished some 10,000 years ago. The following generations of hunter-gatherers adapted to in-

creasingly arid conditions. At least twice, however, the trend toward aridity was broken by increased rainfall; the grassland communities were recolonized, and the bison herds expanded to the south of the Rio Grande. The first of these climatic trends occurred about 3,000 years ago; the second took place much more recently, around the beginning of the historic period. Even to the Spanish, the despoblado was in part a rolling grassland capable of sustaining life—migratory herds of bison and their attendant hunters from the southern plains.

The earliest historic pictographs that concern us here represent the late sixteenth-century contacts between the Spanish and indigenous peoples, who over the next three centuries would be displaced by a succession of tribes—Apache, Kiowa, Comanche, and Kickapoo—who would leave their own pictographs. In 1590 the Spanish had set out across the Rio Grande in search of the Pecos River. Although this expedition failed, it was followed by the missionizing efforts of Father Juan Larios, who established short-lived missions for the natives of northern Coahuila, one of the border provinces of Mexico.

And indeed, the earliest historic pictographs depict Spanish churches—but not the small, impoverished missions that were built on the periphery of the despoblado. Evincing a fascination with permanent architecture, the first native artists of the historic period depicted a wide variety of churches at several locations. But these were larger churches, perhaps painted by refugees from colonial Spanish rule who had moved north across the Rio Grande to elude slavery, disease and warfare.

Christianity was the emblem of power for these early artists, and is represented by churches, crosses and habited friars. Among the classic mission scenes are one in Vaquero Shelter, now in Seminole Canyon State Historical Park, and one in Caballero Shelter, high on the Devils River in southern Texas. In the Vaquero mission scene, a domed church is flanked by a Spanish grandee and two cowboys lassoing a longhorn cow with calf. In the Caballero pictograph, the



A classic Plains autobiography illustrates the personal valor of one warrior. Drawn in sequence, the protagonist records his defeat of two Indian opponents and three bluecoats armed with rifles. Prussian-style helmets were adopted by the U.S. military in 1871 in this region.



Horned headdresses, favored by the Comanche, are worn by combatants in this war-party scene at Meyers Springs. Mounted Indians (right) pursue a buffalo.

figures are dominated by a two-towered church and a horseman swinging a curved saber from atop his rearing steed. The geometrical design can be interpreted as the prow of a ship or as pennants such as those carried in religious and state processions.

Yet another painting anticipates the hostility which the natives would soon feel toward Europeans. This pictograph survives only in a watercolor copy made by Forrest Kirkland in the 1930s and in photographs taken by A.T. Jackson in 1932. The original was destroyed by a massive flood in 1954. In it, a composite priest and church is impaled by a lance. Stylistically, this drawing resembles earlier prehistoric paintings dated to the period from A.D. 900 to the first contact with Europeans in the sixteenth century. The artist was trying to capture a new experience through the use of traditional methods.

The Spanish did not give up easily on trying to settle the despoblado. Undaunted by reports of rugged terrain and isolated water sources, they continued to send out expeditions in search of suitable sites for missions and *presidios*, frontier forts. They also tried to blaze a trail to the western settlements at El Paso, Santa Fe and La Junta. But by the dawn of the eighteenth century, the futility of trekking through the despoblado had become evident, and the Spanish turned eastward to face the threat of French expansion, and westward toward the settled peoples of the Pueblo country who attracted their interest. Forays into the despoblado would be limited henceforth to retaliatory pursuit of raiders encroaching on the peaceful settlements of northern Coahuila.

Such raids established a long-standing pattern that was destined to be celebrated in the historic pictographs. The early fascination with the Europeans and their ways soon yielded to distrust, and eventually to self-congratulatory aggression on the part of the natives. The enemies of the Spanish often slipped from northern Coahuila across the Rio Grande and vanished into the badlands that border the Devils River and the lower reaches of the Pecos.

The millennia of occupation by indigenous peoples was soon to end in the despoblado. Spanish colonial records, which are often terse and obtuse, chronicle their displacement by a succession of intruders. The Cibola and Jumano were first; then came the Apache, who dominated the region for less than 50 years from near the beginning to the middle of the seventeenth century. By the mid-seventeenth century, the Comanche—traditional enemies of the Apache—had swept across the southern plains, decimating the Apache and driving them to the Spanish for protection.

Weakened by wars and revolution, the Spanish and later the Mexican government abandoned their frontiers to the

marauding Comanche and their Kiowa allies. Every year these warrior tribes passed through the despoblado en route from their homes north of the Red River on the Texas-Oklahoma border to Mexico, where they replenished their ranks by capturing slaves and horses. In contrast to the Comanche, the Kickapoo—latecomers to the region—waged an unrelenting war against Texas from their bases in the mountains of northern Coahuila. Protectors of the Mexican population, the Kickapoo supplied the Mexican army with beef and horses stolen from Texas ranches, and defended Coahuila from Comanche and Kiowa raiders.

None of these highly mobile, transient groups left more than an archaeological trace in the despoblado; but the vivid paintings of their exploits help to compensate for that lack. These pictographs adorned the limestone cliffs above watering holes near the Devils and Pecos rivers, and they were noted by a whole succession of early travelers through the region. One of the most interesting series of pictures was found at Painted Caves, a watering hole near the Devils River. These paintings were variously noted by two military engineers, Major H.C. Whiting and Captain S.C. French, who saw them in 1849 and 1850; by freighters Julius Froebel in 1853 and August Santleben in 1869; by cattle drover James Bell in 1854; and by mining explorer Burr Duval in 1880. Santleben's account is the most detailed; it describes scenes of "chasing buffalo, scalping white men and stealing white children, wardances [*sic*] and many other things that were quite legible until recent years."

But many of the pictographs in the region were abused as well as noted. Succeeding generations of soldiers, railroad workers, ranch hands and, more recently, hunters, fishers and campers have left their marks on these irreplaceable artworks. In 1880, Burr Duval, musing over the damaged pictographs at Meyers Springs, spoke for art lovers everywhere: "It struck me as rather singular and suggestive that in all these 'picture-writings' and others I have seen, there nowhere appears anything obscene. Give the cultured Saxon a piece of red chalk and tell him to draw something and the chances are ten to one it will be a nasty figure or an obscene idea expressed somehow. So much for our boasted civilization! This has been a general camping place for troops for some years, and the vandals have obliterated in many places the choicest of the 'picture-writings' by inscribing their own obscure names over the face of the rock in black paint. Confound the stupid idiots [*sic*], and their stupid officers who permitted such vandalism. I noted my own name, 'Duval' in large black letters on the most prominent part of the cliff and mentally consigned the owner of it (who it seems was a 'private in Company B') to a hotter place than



I care to mention.”

The advent of the Plains Indians (Apache) in the seventeenth century brought new motifs to prominence in the pictographic record. Bison hunts, horse theft, war dances, individual and collective combat, the scalping of white men, the stealing of white children—such aggressive motifs appeared in now-vanished scenes described by travelers in the nineteenth century. Interestingly enough, although firearms had been acquired by the Indians by the third quarter of the eighteenth century, they are depicted only occasionally; and then they are shown in the hands of hunters, soldiers and cowboys. The importance of individual valor in Plains society was reflected in an emphasis on shields, lances and other weapons used in hand-to-hand combat.

We are helped in our effort to “read” these pictographs—or at least the more Europeanized later ones, which achieved considerable fluidity of line—by the existence of “ledger books,” pictorial autobiographies executed by Plains Indians, many of whom were war prisoners at the time. Kiowa and Cheyenne artists jailed at Fort Marion reached the height of their expressive power in drawings they sold for spending money, and which are now prized as museum pieces. Their recordings of battle scenes, ceremonies and specific events constitute one key to interpreting the rock art, which also often clearly commemorates real events.

One pictograph near the Devils River strongly resembles the ledger book drawings, though it retains the stylistic conventions of earlier times. This singular example of a classic Plains combat autobiography illustrates five exploits of one warrior who is shown dispatching Indian opponents and bluecoats armed with rifles. The central character is armed with shield and lance, and has a beribboned braid that hangs to the ground. He fights both on foot and from his valiant war pony in a sequence of unparalleled style and grace. That he triumphs over superior weapons using only his traditional lance gives the picture a somewhat mythic quality and heightens the effect of his personal bravery. The soldiers’ spiked helmets, adopted from the Prussian fashion, place this scene after 1871, when this type of helmet was first used by the army in this area. The panel may commemorate a bloody clash between Kiowa and Comanche forces and the U.S. military which occurred in 1873 near the headwaters of the creek that flows past the site.

The horse was to become a dominant force in Plains culture, and the pictographic record chronicles the progression whereby the Plains Indians became the finest light cavalry in the world. But at first the horse seems to be a curiosity, one drawn from a distance. Until the Indians acquired firearms, they used the horse much like an armored vehicle, its body

protected by battle armor made of stiff buffalo hide. In the later autobiographical art, however, horse stealing and war ponies become major themes. Most often depicted are horses with the long neck and narrow head favored by Plains Indians. The paraphernalia of horsemanship—pommels and cantels, bridles, bits, and reins—is also carefully depicted. Hooves are drawn in the form of a crescent to symbolize the print. The prints, in turn, become an abstraction for trail or the direction of movement, or an ideogram signifying the animal itself.

Second only to the horse in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pictographs is the bison, life-support system of the Plains Indians. One miniature scene commemorates a bison hunt conducted from horseback. Another probably illustrates a buffalo dance: the bison has human feet, and its tongue lolls out to signify death. In later scenes the bison hunters are armed with flintlock rifles, acquired by the Indians in the 1770s.

A final group of motifs is important to these pictographs—details of clothing. Meticulous care is given to such items as epaulets, buttons and boots in the works that were probably most influenced by Spanish culture. Hour-glass figures became an ideogram for white men, probably because they wore belted garments. Spanish grandees and priests, and later soldiers and cowboys can be identified by their characteristic dress.

Native apparel was limited to a loincloth tied at the waist. But in all the historic pictographs, headgear functions as the key denominator of ethnicity. The whites wear slouch hats or helmets while the Indians are distinguished by a variety of hairstyles and headdresses, each perhaps signifying the tribe to which the artist belonged. Bison horn and feather headdresses, and the long queue favored by Plains Indians, are most common in the art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

By 1882, the year of the railroad, all of the native peoples of the despoblado had been eradicated, and the buffalo herds had been decimated. The coming of Anglo-American sovereignty, after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, had heightened interest in uniting east and west and in clearing the area of hostile people to insure the flow of settlers and goods. The Amerind of the middle Rio Grande had been exterminated by combinations of European disease, famine and both internecine and foreign wars. The survivors were shipped to reservations in Oklahoma or blended with the populations of northern Mexico. It is a grim comment on “progress” as we know it that, even now, the art of these vanished Indians is falling victim to Anglo-American civilization. □