

CIRCLESTONE

by Tom Kollenborn (c) 1985

The Superstition Wilderness is filled with a variety of interesting pre-historic Native American dwellings and ruins. These primitive structures are a mute testimony to those who occupied these mountains several centuries ago. None are more compelling than Circlestone.

Since the beginning of time humans have tried to answer questions about their origin. Many of them looked to the heavens for these answers. Was a large circular ruin found in the Superstition Wilderness a religious structure of some kind, or was it a defensive structure? Only time and research will answer these questions.

Circlestone lies some fourteen miles east of Superstition Mountain and northeast of Mound Mountain, at 6,265 feet, the highest point in the Superstition Wilderness area. Blue-shirted cavalrymen under the command of Major Brown were probably the first Anglo-Americans to visit Circlestone. Elisha Marcus Reavis was probably the next visitor to Circlestone when he moved to the high mountain valley below Circlestone in 1874.

Cowboy pot hunters of the early 1920's explored Circlestone and found few artifacts worth removing from the site. The ruin remained obscured in Juniper and Pinyons for more than a hundred years. Cowboys knew of its location because it was on the Fraser cattle range. It was early in the 1960's that rumors began to circulate about a large circular ruin high on the slopes of Mound Mountain, somewhere southeast of the Cleman's Ranch (Reavis Valley). Airline pilots and general aviation pilots had been reporting a large circular ruin in the mountains northwest of Globe for years. Their stories fired the imaginations of several Apache Junction residents. Allan Blackman and Gary Huntington began searching for a horse trail to Circlestone in the early 1970's.

The early seventies had few hikers as compared to today. Few people had visited Circlestone by the time Blackman and Huntington found a horse trail to the site in 1978. Prior to this date it was almost impossible to get a horse through the brush to Circlestone. Blackman and Huntington marked and brushed a trail along the east side of the ridge where Circlestone sat. This trail made the site easily accessible from the Reavis Ranch on horseback. The trail was eventually named the Blackman Trail because Allan Blackman was the first to blaze it.

Peter "Bigfoot" of the Reavis Ranch Survival School also used this trail after it was marked and brushed.

Early historical work on Circlestone is totally missing from records and newspaper files. The only mention of Circlestone prior to 1975 is in an early archaeological report written by Neil Smith II in 1941, an archaeology student at the University of Arizona. He wrote a paper titled Cliff Dwellings of the Roger's Canyon Area. Smith mentions a large circular stock corral near Mound Mountain that he believed had no archaeological value. Smith never examined the site, and only formulated his opinion from the word of local cowboys who said the site was not Native American, but Mexican in origin.

I made my first trip to Circlestone in 1955, with Red Cowan, a scoutmaster in Phoenix. He was our troop leader. I developed a real interest for this structure. I returned to Circlestone in 1961, driving up to the old Fraser Ranch (Clemans) then owned and operated by Floyd and Alice Stone. While visiting the site at this time I became somewhat convinced that Circlestone might have been a stock corral used to gather cattle before moving them to a lower area. After several trips between 1961-1980, I began to change my mind. Other more knowledgeable people were looking at my photographs and telling me the site was not a cattle corral.

Next Week, Part II

To learn more about Circlestone, there was a book published on the topic entitled Circlestone: A Superstition Mountain Mystery by James A. Swanson and Tom Kollenborn. The book is available at the Superstition Mountain Museum and Tonto National Monument. For information call 480-983-4888.

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The site hosted few other visitors during the next 100 years.

John Hudgens, a commentator for KPNX Action News, wanted to make a thirty-minute documentary about Circlestone. The documentary became reality in March of 1981. You might say Circlestone made its public debut with this documentary.

After several years of research into the circle monument phenomenon I was totally convinced the site had religious overtones. The site may have been used by early inhabitants for ceremonial purposes. It was highly unlikely a corral would have a narrow stone threshold and no other apparent entry.

The stone work at Circlestone was crude. However, it was still comparable to some of the stone work of the Anasazi even though the ruin had suffered a severe earthquake in 1887. Several archaeologists visited the site after 1980. Each of them had a different opinion and theory. All agreed it was a prehistoric structure, but that was about all they agreed on.

Some believed the structure was less than 800 years ago while others believed it to be 2000 years old. I was told it was a marketplace, a ceremonial center, and a celestial observatory by different archaeologists who were just speculating without excavating. Wilderness management policy will never allow archaeological excavation at Circlestone, at least not in foreseeable future.

On June 20, 1982, I accompanied Mr. Sam Henderson, Superintendent of Casa Grande National Monument, to Circlestone. Henderson examined the site and was quite convinced it was ceremonial in origin. He pointed out the construction of this site required tremendous organization and control over the people who worked on it. Only the dogma of religion would have given some early shaman such dictatorial powers. Henderson preferred not to estimate the age of the site. He was totally convinced the site was pre-historic Native American and asserted the site was not a corral.

Circlestone is 144 feet in diameter. The circumference of the structure is 427.6 feet. The average width of the wall is two feet where it is standing, and the height of the wall averages about 5.5 feet. The three foot entrance over a threshold stone is oriented to S37*W.

The center of the circle has a square pit house or ceremonial area precisely 17 feet on a side. About eighty per cent of the original wall appears to have been disturbed by the Bavapsi earthquake of 1887. It might be noted three other earthquakes have occurred in the area in recent times.

Circlestone is an enigma of our past history. The site is definitely pre-historical, but what it was used for, and why, will remain unanswered for the present. I am sure archaeologists will someday thoroughly explore Circlestone. Until that day arrives we will have to live with speculation and supposition.

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