

The Thieves of Archeological Treasures
by Tom Kollenborn (c) 2000

The preservation of prehistoric ruins and the protection of artifacts are becoming a major problem for law enforcement agencies in the United States. Various agencies are understaffed and it is often difficult to get a conviction. The unlawful practice of removing Pre-Columbian artifacts from public lands has become so rampant during the past decade that officials believe hundreds of ancient sites have been seriously damaged or destroyed. This plunder of public lands for profit by unscrupulous individuals destroys the opportunity for professionals to study and preserve these sites for future generations of Americans.

Thousands of Pre-Columbian artifacts have been excavated from public lands throughout the American Southwest and sold on the international black market for huge profits. The market for illegally obtained artifacts is immense and continues to grow daily. Some experts surmise this activity involves some one hundred million dollars annually in the United States alone.

The public lands of Arizona have become one of the most common sources of illegally obtained artifacts appearing on the world market. Artifacts crafted by early Salado, Hohokam and Anasazi cultures appear in homes and businesses around the world. Europeans and Orientals will pay enormous prices for authentic artifacts from the Southwest. The people who steal from public lands steal from all of us while destroying the archaeological history of the Southwest.

The profit is so great in the illegal artifact trade that many people become involved, believing it is a good way to supplement their income. These same individuals know detection by law enforcement officials is a low risk. They also know the removal of artifacts from public lands can result in heavy fines and/or time in prison, but this knowledge does not prevent them from breaking the law.

The illegal market involving the recovery, transportation, distribution and sale of Pre-Columbian artifacts is so large and lucrative that modern pot hunters have become very sophisticated in the use of modern communications equipment. This knowledge and equipment helps them safely remove valuable artifacts from numerous regions in the Southwest. The pot diggers are so bold they even use heavy equipment for excavation.

Many illegal artifact digs were done on lands easily accessible to trucks and digging equipment (backhoes) until recently. The accessible premium sites have been exhausted in many areas and now even the most inaccessible sites have become prime targets for the "thieves of time" because of the escalating values of artifacts. Certain single pots can be worth ten to thirty thousand dollars on the black market in Europe or the Orient.

Artifact hunters now use ATVs and motorcycles to access extremely remote areas. A solo excavator works alone in extremely remote regions that require several hours of walking to reach. These thieves preserve the secret of their work site like a prospector protects his mine. One pot could bring them enough money to cover three months of hard work in town.

Desert pot digging is done at night in the summer months usually under extreme conditions. ATVs, good detection equipment, surplus military night scopes and sophisticated communications equipment usually prevents detection by law enforcement officials, so law enforcement agencies often resort to undercover operations to arrest and indict such individuals.

All law enforcement officials have the power to enforce the antiquity act, however it is almost impossible to patrol the remote area archeological thieves work in.

The Superstition Wilderness Area, say some archaeologist, is a treasure trove of Pre-Columbian artifacts. The wilderness status in one way protects the many Pre-Columbian archaeological sites in the area, but on the other hand the status limits the type of protection needed in some cases.

One classic case for the need of protection is the cliff dwellings at Roger's Canyon. I first observed the ruin in 1948 with my father and the entire roof of the ruin was intact except for the smoke hole on our first visit. Today one-third of the roof has caved in because of visitors climbing on the ruin. This cliff dwelling is one of the finest Salado sites in Arizona that has never been reconstructed by contemporary man. The Wilderness Act of 1964 prevents the placement of a steel grate over the entrance of this ruin to prevent people from entering it. This ruin will probably not survive another hundred years without some kind of intervention on our behalf. It is ironic that this ruin has survived a thousand years until we arrived on the landscape.

Many parts of the Superstition Wilderness fringe area has been damaged by those who do not respect or understand the importance of preserving or protecting artifacts, petroglyphs and ruins. Once a site has been damaged it is irreversibly destroyed. It is tragic to see the amount of graffiti left behind by visitors on many of the sites where petroglyphs can be found. Thieves have blasted away petroglyphs trying to remove them for resale or placement in their own yards.

The international market is the true focal point of most illegal Pre-Columbian artifact sales. There would be no market for this illegal practice if the general public did not ignore the problem. It is so tragic much of our prehistory in the Southwest is being lost to the numerous illegal artifact dealers worldwide.

The federal, state, and county governments have neither the resources nor manpower to enforce the antiquity laws that protect our public lands from desecration. The only hope we have of protecting our public lands from these modern day vandals is education. This education must encourage the public to report any suspicious activity in remote areas known to have Pre-Columbian sites.

The Pre-Columbian artifacts we save today may someday unlock the secrets of our past and explain what life was like in the desert Southwest a thousand years ago. These archaeological secrets have survived thousands of years, but in one century modern man has destroyed an enormous amount of our heritage. The heritage of this region found beneath the ground is rapidly disappearing, not through erosion, but by the greed of modern man.

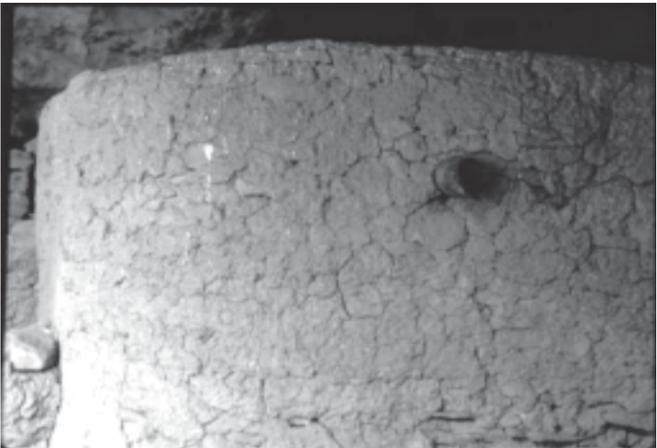
Note: It is a violation of federal law to remove artifacts from public lands.



Grinding holes southeast of Superstition Mtn.



Petroglyphs in Hieroglyphic Canyon.



Cliff Dwelling at Rogers Canyon.



Circa 1988. The Blackwater Arc dig at GC prior to construction of the many homes that now occupy the site. This was an authorized dig supervised by Arc Mary Martin.



This cave in the Superstition Wilderness has been used by human beings for approximately the past 2000 years.