

## Giant Pictographs & Mystic Maze National Monuments

Recently, I heard individuals are proposing the Blythe Intaglios and Topock Maze be set aside as new national monuments. This idea was looked at about sixty years ago.

The Blythe Intaglios are a group of figures on the ground created by scraping away the darker surface layer exposing the lighter colored soil beneath. They were first observed by modern man in 1932. George Palmer, a flying business man, discovered them while searching for an emergency landing place. Later, Army Air Corps provided photographs to scientists.<sup>1</sup> I've read there are an estimated sixty intaglio sites in the Colorado Desert including Blythe, Fort Mojave, Ripley, and Ha-ak which depict human, animal, and geometric figures. The Blythe Intaglio's human figures are between 94 and 170 feet from head to foot and 67 to 158 feet between outstretched hands. The animal figure is 53 feet long and 43 feet tall while the "dance ring" is 296 feet.

Frank Setzler, Head Curator, Department of Anthropology, U.S. National Museum, believed the intaglios "were made by Yuman-speaking Indians; that they served in some fashion as shrines to the memory of Ha-ak and her destroyer, Elder Brother (a Pima Indian legend); and that they were fashioned sometime between 1540 and the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>2</sup>



Blythe Intaglio Site No. 1<sup>3</sup>

The intaglios were visited by Yellowstone National Park Superintendent Roger Toll, on February 1, 1933. Superintendent Toll was the National Park Service's principle investigator of proposed areas to the park system. He was responsible for the subsequent firsthand investigations and reports to establish our own Joshua Tree and

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<sup>1</sup> "Desert Figures Mystify," Unidentified Newspaper, 5 October 1932; Correspondence and Reports Relating to Surveys of Historic Sites and Buildings, California Reports, General Records of the National Park Service, Record Group 79; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>2</sup> Frank M. Setzler, "Seeking the Secret of the Giants," *The National Geographic Magazine*, September 1952, 404.

<sup>3</sup> Blythe Intaglio digital image, 10 February 1992; privately held by Jeff Ohlfs, [ADDRESS FOR PRIVATE USE,] Twenty-nine Palms, California. 2010.

neighboring Death Valley as park units. Superintendent Toll reported the following: "...these pictographs have great archeological value. It seems highly desirable that these pictographs should be protected and preserved from injury by visitors. If not protected, they may easily be damaged by thoughtless persons and much of their value be lost." His recommendation was "these pictographs should become the property of the State of California rather than to be made a national monument" because "they are not sufficiently spectacular to be of outstanding interest to the average visitor, and it is therefore doubtful if they can be said to have general national interest."<sup>4</sup>

Despite Superintendent Toll's report, the intaglios were originally temporarily withdrawn for possible classification as a national monument by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on July 25, 1933 in Executive Order No. 6212.<sup>5</sup> The sections which the intaglios are located have never been revoked.<sup>6</sup> Currently, they are listed as California State Historic Landmark No. 101 and on the National Register of Historic Places. The land is currently owned and protected by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

The Topock or Mystic Maze (also known as Indian, Rock, or Mohave Maze) covers about 18 acres and consists of groves and mounds that are located about five feet apart. These windrows were apparently made by scraping rocks and dirt from the grooves into the mounds to create windrows. The design of the intaglio is not actually a maze, rather it is a geometric pattern. The earliest recorded observation of the Maze by white settlers was in 1888 by Needles resident Jerome Booth. The site was subsequently impacted in 1891 during the building of the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad's Red Rock Bridge over the Colorado River;<sup>7</sup> in particular, two human geoglyphs were destroyed.

While there is no concrete data on the purpose of the Maze, several documents mention the Mohave Indians have no tribal history concerning the Maze, as it existed prior to their arrival in the area. There is also discussion about the possibility that the railroad built the Maze to gather rocks for the bridge's construction but that theory was discounted by many noted archaeologists of the time. Noted photographer Edward Curtis wrote in 1908 that, "the Mojave Indians ... utilized the area ... as a maze into which to lure and escape evil spirits for it is believed that by running in and out through

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<sup>4</sup>Letter on Giant Pictographs National Monument, Roger W. Toll to Director, National Park Service, 21 April 1933; *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Executive Order No. 6212, Withdrawal of Public Lands for Classification, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 25 July 1933; *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>Government Printing Office, "Public Land Order 902: Partially Revoking Executive Order No. 6212 of July 25, 1933," *Federal Register* 18 (1953 July 3): 3801.

<sup>7</sup>Letter on Mystic Maze, E.Q. Sullivan to Phil Townsend (Editor, AAA Touring Topics), 27 January 1933; Records of Roger W. Toll, Record Group 79; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

one of these immense labyrinths one haunted with a dread may bewilder the spirits occasioning it, and thus elude them.”<sup>8</sup>

The first government records I found calling for the Maze to be a National Monument were from C.F. Hauke, Chief Clerk of the Office of Indian Affairs, on February 28, 1916.<sup>9</sup> A subsequent inspection by the General Land Office’s Mineral Inspector, H.W. MacFerren, stated “there is nothing more than the most fleeting interest connected with the Mystic Maze. There is far more of interest to be seen on a circus lot the day after the circus has gone away.”<sup>10</sup> At the time, the Maze was reported to be located on railroad land and therefore could not be established as a National Monument by Presidential Proclamation.

In 1920, Fred Harvey, of the railroad and restaurant hotel fame, was interested in the Maze. For display at the Needles Harvey House and sale of post cards, “Mr. Betts made this painting while he was at Needles, having made it from personal observation of the same. We did not like the composition of the background of Mr. Betts’ painting and we had Mr. (Oscar E.) Berninghaus make it over. Mr. Berninghaus has changed the maze somewhat (Berninghaus never saw the Maze). It is possible that his conception of the maze is not correct.”<sup>11</sup>



Mr. Betts’ painting<sup>12</sup>



Oscar E. Berninghaus’ painting<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian: Being A Series of Volumes Picturing and Describing the Indians of the United States and Alaska*, 20 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The University Press, 1908), 2:54-55.

<sup>9</sup> Letter on Mystic Maze, C.F. Hauke to the Secretary of the Interior, 28 February 1916; General Records of the National Park Service, Record Group 79; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>10</sup> Letter on Mystic Maze, H.W. MacFerren to Commissioner, General Land Office, 10 July 1916; General Records of the National Park Service, Record Group 79; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>11</sup> Letter on Mystic Maze, M.J. Williams to J.F. Huckel (Vice-President, Fred Harvey Company), 22 November 1920; *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Fifteen years later, Superintendent Toll visited Mystic Maze on December 18, 1932. While he stated the site is of “considerable archaeological importance,” his recommendation was as “a feature of importance to the State, but it does not seem to be of national interest sufficient to warrant its consideration as a national monument.”<sup>14</sup>

Currently, the Maze is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is owned and protected by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service as part of the Havasu National Wildlife Refuge.



Mystic Maze<sup>15</sup>

I'll be interested to see what happens to these two unique features of our California desert in the next sixty years.

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<sup>14</sup> Letter on Mystic Maze National Monument, Roger W. Toll to Director, National Park Service, 20 April 1933; General Records of the National Park Service, Record Group 79; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>15</sup> Mystic Maze digital image, 4 October 2010; privately held by Jeff Ohlfs, [ADDRESS FOR PRIVATE USE,] Twenty-nine Palms, California. 2010.

Source List:

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Blythe Intaglio. Digital image. 10 February 1992. Privately held by Jeff Ohlfs, [ADDRESS FOR PRIVATE USE,] Twenty-nine Palms, California. 2010.

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Topack Maze. Digital image. 24 October 1995. Privately held by Jeff Ohlfs, [ADDRESS FOR PRIVATE USE,] Twenty-nine Palms, California. 2010.