

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.



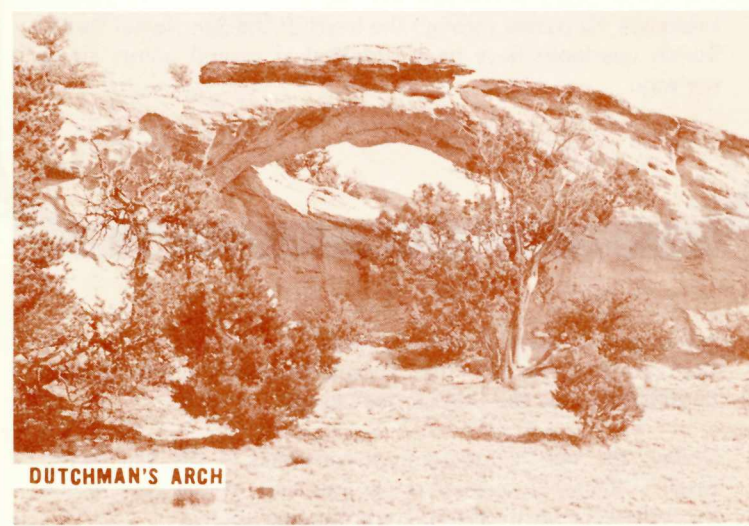
U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Moab District
P.O. Box 970
125 West 2nd South
Moab, Utah 84532



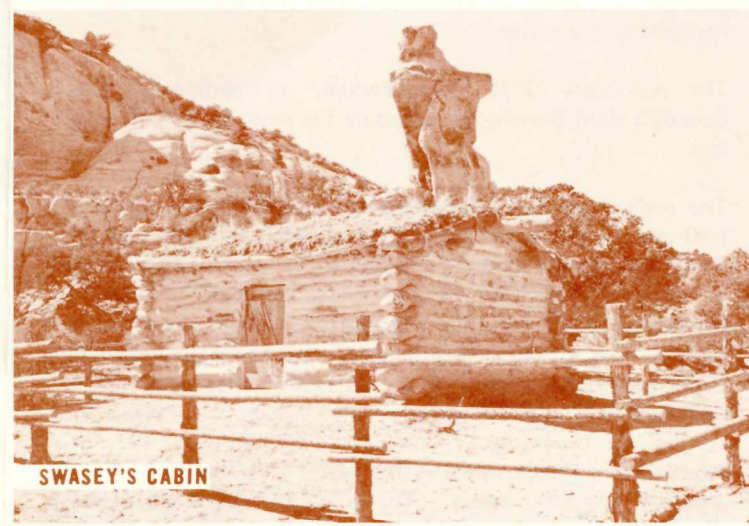
SAN RAFAEL REEF



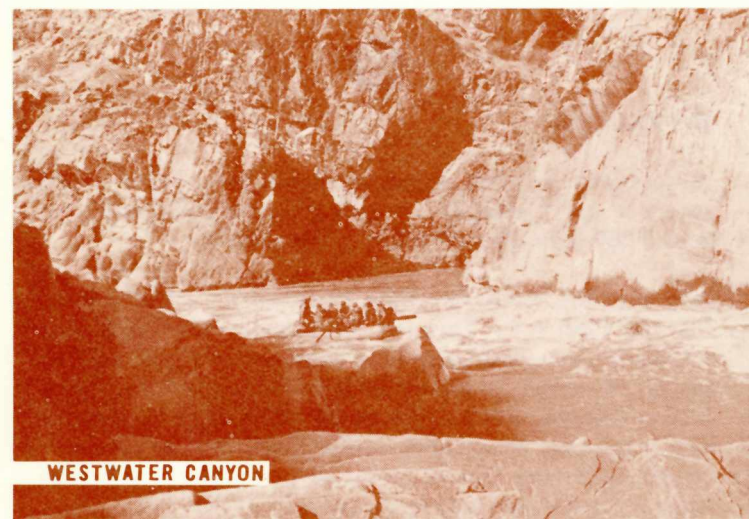
SWASEY'S LEAP



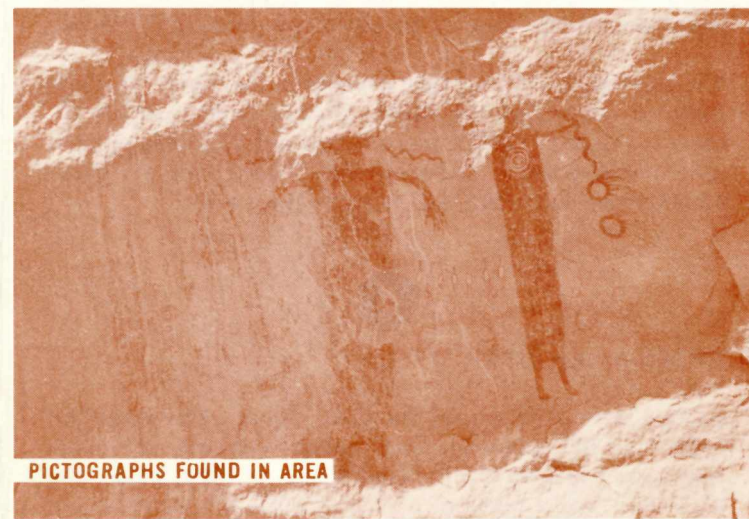
DUTCHMAN'S ARCH



SWASEY'S CABIN



WESTWATER CANYON



PICTOGRAPHS FOUND IN AREA

INTERSTATE
points of
interest



MOAB
DISTRICT



SPOTTED WOLF CANYON



U. S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

THE LAND NOBODY WANTS

The “lands nobody wants” or “vacant” lands have been terms used in the past to describe much of the vast, undeveloped land found in the West. Most road maps show boundaries of national forests and parks, but what about the land in between? Whom does it belong to? Does it have any value? Does anything interesting ever happen in these “empty” regions? This brochure will try to answer these questions for such lands along Interstate 70.

These public lands belong to all U.S. citizens. They are managed for your benefit and enjoyment by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Moab District, U.S. Department of the Interior. As you travel Interstate 70 between the Colorado-Utah state line and Fremont Junction, east of Salina, Utah, you will pass many points of interest. There are many examples of the increasing importance of the lands that “nobody wanted” years ago.

Paragraph numbers in this brochure are keyed to the map. Mileages are approximate.

To some travelers this area seems to be one of the most desolate sections of I-70. True, there isn’t much tall or green vegetation, but this salt desert shrub ecosystem is alive with plants and animals. In May, the prickly pear cactus, Spanish dagger, and Indian paintbrush are in bloom.

The Bookcliff Mountains host a sizeable population of mountain lions, bobcats, elk, mule deer, and black bear. One “critter” which always adds a comical interlude is the common whitetail prairie dog. Living in large colonies along I-70, these animals feed on the desert grasses and in turn supply coyotes and golden eagles with many a meal. Keep an eye open, for here on the desert, golden eagles, coyote and antelope are a common sight.

1

WESTWATER

The Colorado River cuts its way to the south of I-70, and access is available from the Westwater freeway exit for recreational whitewater raft trips through Westwater Canyon. The 11 rapids in Westwater Canyon vary in difficulty from one to nine on a scale where the most dangerous rapids have a ten rating. Only experienced boatmen should attempt to pilot rafts through the 17-mile canyon; it should not be tried by the novice. The Bureau of Land Management administers the Westwater portion of the Colorado from the Westwater Ranger Station and launch point. Because of the heavy recreation use, permits and reservations are required for this section of the river between April and October.

2

CISCO DESERT

For 12 miles to the east of the Utah Highway 128 intersection, I-70 passes through the Cisco oil and gas field. There are 20 producing oil and gas wells in this vicinity. Adjacent to the westbound lane, a producing oil well can be seen. This field is rather unique in that most of the gas wells are quite shallow

(1,000 to 1,400 feet deep) with the gas found in the Morrison formation.

3

THOMPSON, UTAH

In the early years of this century, Thompson was a major railhead for livestockmen of eastern Utah. From the Uinta Basin on the north, cattle were driven from the Bookcliffs to Thompson. The huge Scorup-Somerville ranch in the 1890’s trailed cattle from as far as the San Juan River, 130 miles to the south. Today the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad still operates a station at Thompson, but the legendary days of the cattle era are over.

The notorious “Flat Nose George,” a member of Butch Cassidy’s Wild Bunch, was killed on the main street of Thompson.

The major land forms observed while traveling this stretch of I-70 are the Bookcliff Mountains to the north, and the relatively flat Mancos Desert to the south. The Bookcliffs contain in excess of one billion tons of low sulfur coal. This national resource is becoming very important as fuel for power generating plants, as well as thousands of commonly used products. Large pale red splotches on the cliffs are where coal near the surface is naturally oxidizing.

At the turn of the century this desert was a primary grazing area for domestic sheep. The town of Cisco was a major sheep shearing center and in the spring, upwards of 100,000 sheep were driven here to be shorn and shipped to market.

The vast bands of sheep soon overgrazed the desert. In 1934, Congress established the Taylor Grazing Service (which became the BLM in 1946) under which scientific grazing systems were implemented. Today Grand County supports about 40,000 sheep and 4,000 head of cattle every winter.

4

GREEN RIVER, UTAH

At this town, I-70 crosses the Green River. This largest tributary of the Colorado River system was the last major river to be explored in the United States. In 1869, Major John W. Powell and a party of nine men made a historic voyage of exploration from Green River, Wyoming to the “settlement” of Las Vegas, Nevada. The journey took 100 days, and the party ran the rapids of Ladore, Desolation, Cataract and the Grand Canyon. Today, river running is a multi-million dollar recreation industry and the canyons Powell explored are now protected by BLM and the National Park Service for everyone’s present and future enjoyment.

No travel services are available from Green River to Salina, a distance of 105 miles.

5

SAN RAFAEL REEF

The sawtooth ridge of giant flatirons rising up to the west forms the San Rafael Reef. These flatirons, composed of sandstone belonging to the Carmel formation resting on beds of Navajo sandstone, were tilted into their present position by the geological uplift which created the San Rafael Swell.

Reefs such as this one are often good places to search for mineral deposits. The San Rafael Reef is no exception; several deposits of uranium have been located along its length. Joe Swasey, early-day rancher, once mined uranium from Temple Mountain near the south end of the Reef and used the

SAN RAFAEL SWELL

West of Green River, an area of geologic uplift 80 miles long (north to south) by 30 miles wide rises out of the desert. This feature, known as the San Rafael Swell, was formed about 70 million years ago when forces deep in the earth lifted the surface to an elevation of almost 13,000 feet. Wind and water have reduced the surface level to less than 8,000 feet, carving spectacular canyons and fantastic sandstone monuments.

The eastern edge of the swell is formed by huge upturned sandstone flatirons of the San Rafael Reef. The western extent of the swell is indefinite, since the gentle westward slope of the swell continues unbroken into the Muddy Creek drainage. The nearly flat center of the swell contains natural open “pastures” bordered by pinyon-juniper woodlands and by massive sandstone “castles.”

Interstate 70 passes through the heart of the San Rafael Swell. Scenic overlooks have been provided at several points along the way.

ore as an ingredient in pottery glaze. He did not realize then that one day uranium from Temple Mountain would be used in making one of the first atomic bombs.

Today, the search for uranium continues in the San Rafael Swell. Recently opened mines just east of the Reef and a short distance north of I-70 are producing ore.

6

ANTIQUITIES

The canyons and cliffs of the San Rafael Swell record a long history of man’s presence. A stone projectile point, estimated to be 6,000 years old, was found in this vicinity.

Indians of the Fremont culture inhabited the Swell between 700 and 1250 A.D. They left considerable evidence of their occupation, including camp sites, stone granaries, and writings painted or carved on canyon or rock formation walls. Black Dragon Canyon, about a mile to the north, is named for one such pictograph which some people claim depicts a creature resembling a large winged reptile or pterodactyl. A nearby figure is a quadruped with hands on its front feet.

Other pictographs showing men on horseback were apparently carved by Ute Indians sometime after the Spanish brought horses into this region.

7

LIVESTOCK GRAZING

This area of open flats or pastures, has been used for grazing livestock since the 1880’s. Some of the most colorful stories of the San Rafael Swell concern early-day rancher Joe Swasey and his two sons, Sid and Charley. One such story tells how Sid once bet with Charley that he could jump his best saddle horse across the San Rafael River Canyon a few miles north-east where the canyon is 150 feet deep and 25 feet wide.

A bet for 12 steers was agreed upon, and Sid made the leap. He even offered to jump back across for another 12 steers. But when his brother declined the offer, Sid decided that he would spend a few hours riding around the canyon rather than risk his neck a second time.

Livestock raising in the area was not normally so glamorous. At times during the early part of the century, livestock operators found themselves with more animals than they could sell.

Herds built up to the point that the range became overgrazed and began to deteriorate. During recent years range management efforts have halted the downward trend in range conditions and some improvement is beginning to be seen. Today, about 2,000 cattle and 3,700 sheep graze the Swell during parts of each year. They share the range with a resident herd of mule deer and with small bands of wild horses and burros.

8

GHOST ROCKS AND COAL WASH

An early-day rancher gave the rock formation located just south of the highway the name “Ghost Rock” one day when fog obscured the base and gave the crown the appearance of a ghost floating in the air. Rock castles along the interstate east of here reminded someone of the “Arabian Nights” and earned the area the name, Sinbad Country.

The Bureau of Land Management is seeking to protect the interesting sites and scenic beauty of the entire San Rafael Swell by adopting management plans which limit or control resource uses that could destroy the scenic quality of this region. (You can help this effort by not littering.)

Much of the rugged canyon country north of the interstate is particularly beautiful and is in almost the same wild condition as it was when man first visited the Swell. Some of this land is being preserved so present and future generations may enjoy it in its natural, primitive state.

9

THE HIDING PLACE

The maze of canyons, rock monuments, and wooded tablelands in the San Rafael Swell made it an excellent hiding place for those “on the dodge” from the law. Most who came here for that reason simply were avoiding the authorities after some minor infraction, but others have become famous in outlaw history. In 1897, Butch Cassidy and Elsa Lay stole the mine payroll at Castle Gate, Utah, making off with \$10,000 in loot. They eluded two sheriffs’ posses in the canyons of the Swell.

Other outlaws used the Swell as a hiding place for stolen livestock. The canyon-cut tableland north of the highway was used so frequently for this purpose that it was given the name of “Secret Mesa.”

10

STORIES OF THE SWELL

Man’s doings in the San Rafael Swell have taken strange and sometimes violent turns. Here, as in many parts of the West, cattlemen and sheepmen battled over choice grazing grounds. One incident resulted in bloodshed and a monument in one of the nearby canyons tells of a shepherd’s end: “Henry H. Jensen of Hayfield, Utah, was found dead December 16, 1890. Blood and trails in the snow showed he had walked and crawled a mile after he was shot. He still held his rifle.”

Another story of the Swell concerns a man named Pike, who in the early 1900’s found traces of copper in rock formations south of here. His Copper Globe mine never produced ore, but a 600-foot mine shaft and a 135-cord woodpile still exist as reminders of Pike’s efforts.

We hope you have enjoyed your trip across Interstate 70. The BLM Moab District encourages you to make any comments or suggestions on the management of your national resource lands. Stop at or write to the BLM District Office in Moab.

