

PAINTED ROCKS

Yakima County probably has no more interesting prehistoric and historical landmark than Painted Rocks, place of aboriginal pictographs, facing the Chinook pass highway, just west of Yakima.

The basaltic columns, buttressing a hill, stretch for some 400 feet from a point near and west of Cowiche creek to the vicinity of the Naches river, and tower, roughly 70 feet, above a county road skirting the base of the cliff.

The Yakima Indians call Painted Rocks "Pe-tuh-num" also pronounced by some "Pa-tuh-nan" and by others "Pe-tu-nun" meaning painted or marked, and for the paintings themselves they have the designation "Puht-keese". Pe-tuh-num (or its variants) is their name for Cowiche creek, also where it breaks past the cliff and enters the Naches river.

The Painted Rocks proposed historical park site covers 18.80 acres, all south of the Chinook pass highway, and consists of an irregular tract of the southeast quarter of the northwest quarter of section 9, 1318. Yakima County, in 1924, received title to 17.6 acres of the tract, through the good offices of the late A.E. Larson, from the Northern Pacific Railroad Co. Mr. Larson, who appreciated the historical and geological value of the Painted Rocks, envisioned the development of a park there.

That the paintings, which extend for about 400 feet along the lower face of the cliff are in a good state of preservation is indeed remarkable, considering the punishment to which they have been subjected by the elements and the heedless hand of man. For some years, in the early development of irrigation in the Yakima Valley, water leaking from a wooden flume built next to the cliff kept some of the pictographs almost continuously wet. When that flume was replaced by the present Yakima Valley Canal Co. flume on top of the cliff, rocky fragments blasted away in the process of construction formed a talus slope which covered some of the pictographs. Those remaining in view extend up for a distance of

about five feet from the top of the slope. Clearing away of the talus would reveal an unestimated number of paintings, perhaps half as many as now are visible.

The display of pictographs also took a beating in the early years of North Yakima when merchants of the town painted advertisements on the columns. But only traces of those signs are left and the pictographs are still intact, evidence of the superiority of the ancient aboriginal pigments.

Some of the pictographs are in red and some are in white and some have alternate radiating lines of red or white. Some are realistic, as those with faces and headdresses, and others are conventional and somewhat geometric in character. It has been suggested that the latter represent guardian spirits or are symbols of dreams. That any of the paintings were designed to convey thoughts or messages is purely conjectural. It is possible that they were not intended for general understanding and that they were the work of priests or holy men in communion with the mysteries - a theory that is as good as any advanced in attempt at explanation. They were there when the first white persons came to the Yakima Valley, and there were no Indians then who knew or admitted knowing their origin. That they were made a long time ago and possibly could be attributed to supernatural forces are all that the older Indians could offer.

The paved county road traversing the park site is laid out on a stretch of an emigrant trace of the 1860's and 1870's, and that in turn was developed from an old Indian trail. The trail extended south over hills, plains and mountains to the Columbia river, at the Celilo fishery, and northward to the Kittitas country and beyond to the Fraser River country.

John B. Nelson, first settler in the Naches Valley, operated a cable ferry on the Naches river, just below the bridge that is named after him. Nelson, who settled on the Naches in the spring of 1865, had his home a short distance north of that stream and not far from Painted Rocks, past which freighters hauling supplies from The Dalles to Ellensburg, and passenger stages traveled. By the time the freighters were doing business, Nelson had replaced his ferry with

a bridge of cottonwood logs, the first bridge over the turbulent Naches. At Nelson's two-story house, distinguished by a porch all the way around the upper story, travelers refreshed themselves. His place also became a stage station in 1877, when service was started between The Dalles and Ellensburg. Horses had to be changed every dozen or so miles on the 154-mile run. Ten miles north of the Nelson ranch, over in the Wenatchee Valley, James H. Purdin, father of the Yakima member of the Advisory Board on Historical Sites, also kept relays of teams for the coaches.

So it can be seen that the Painted Rocks site has historical associations as well as prehistoric. And, it should be added, on the authority of the local committee's chairman, Francis H. Fassett, that the basaltic upthrust, Painted Rocks, is of no little geological interest and importance. It is older than Mount Rainier and other volcanic cones of the Cascade area and is one of Nature's rarer phenomena in these parts.