

High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

What the Ice Age West predicts about our future

An American creation story.

Craig Childs | June 11, 2018 | *From the print edition*

On a dry lake basin in northwest Nevada is a series of rock art panels dated to 14,800 years ago, the oldest petroglyphs in North America. A carbon-bearing mineral formed every time Lake Lahontan rose and inundated the rock art, leaving a patina that could be dated. The layers of patina span from 14,800 to about 10,500 years ago, glyphs added consecutively every time the lake dropped. Between 14,800 to 13,100 years ago, the boulders were exposed to air, and people worked on them. Lake levels rose and submerged the boulders for a couple thousand years, and exposed them again from 11,300 to 10,500 years ago, when people picked up the task as if they'd never stopped. This is continuity, a remembered place over the final 5,000 years of the Ice Age.

I traveled to this ancient rock art with my family, one of the last road trips we took together, my lap strewn with maps as my wife drove across empty basins and ranges along a Nevada highway. The rock art was not a marked locality. Finding it took some triangulation, reading between the lines of archaeological reports. We had it narrowed down to a sub-basin within Lahontan, an arm of an arm. A winding dirt road led us to a barbed-wire cattle gate, the sign saying to close it behind us. Out of a clutter of empty juice boxes and camping gear, we spilled into the Nevada desert.

A spring came out of the mountainside, its source roughly fenced with barbed wire. A clear stream issued from the ground, watercress waving in the current as the spring flowed out of its luscious, vegetated enclosure down to the cattle-smashed slope below. A squared fence was all that kept the spring from becoming a trampled, muddy crater. It was an emerald on the hill, a point of life and yarrow flowers. As we walked by, we stopped for the bumblebees and birds inhabiting this gushing well, this emergence. In

the Ice Age, it must have roared.



Dire wolf skull.

Sarah Gilman

As kids glided ahead through the dry grass of midsummer, we found signs of occupation. Some of the bulbous tufa formations had eroded open and were hollow inside, their floors buried in wood-rat droppings, rough ceilings blackened with smoke. At night, these must have looked like a hive, lights flickering atop each other at the edge of a lake, people living as if in a clutch of grapes. Paisley, in Oregon, would have looked similar, the caves lit along the edge of their own lake at about the same time, give or take a few hundred centuries.

The tufa is like pumice, easy to etch or scratch. We found a flat-faced boulder of this rock that had been deeply crosshatched by human tools. Well-worn, the geometric grooves were lightly coated with minerals from the rise and fall of the lake behind it, now dried to a salty crisp. Both kids were mildly impressed but more interested in tearing off, playing tag and racing across the slope. Here, people had been making the first banners of themselves, the original drive-in theaters. They had stood in this same place, their feet beneath ours. Jado, with a 16-stitch Alaskan scar on his forehead, looked at the rock art and said, “I don’t know what’s the big deal about a bunch of X’s,” and ran away.

I felt as if I’d been going from landmark to landmark, asking, *Are you my mother?* Like a lost child on a lost continent, I searched to root myself and find solid ground. I visited the oldest sites as if on a pilgrimage, stopping to recognize those who came before, lineages upon lineages, arrivals upon arrivals leading back to the first flicker of a campfire, a panel of figures etched onto clusters of tufa boulders in Nevada, one of the

earliest human lights on the continent.

Another stop I wanted to make was the Black Rock Desert, up an arm of Lake Lahontan an hour or two away from this panel. Our task as a family was filling in maps, following back roads, unfamiliar turns, high on D4, the dopamine receptor that fires our species' yearning for adventure, or perhaps on whatever mythology of childhood we told ourselves. The next day, we hit the Black Rock playa on a road that became no road, a dusty pan with nothing on it, no reason to drive in one place or another, the ground too hard to take a tire track. Construction had yet to begin on the annular city that would rise here. The lake bottom of Lahontan was still empty.

We triangulated on last year's city the same way we had on the rock art, and I asked to be let off. I wanted a few minutes alone on the playa, breathing on this lake bottom.

My wife stopped to let me out. Kids climbed through their windows, out onto the running boards, and banged car metal with their hands when they were ready. The SUV rolled away like an amusement park ride, their mother at the wheel, leaving me standing on the open, white plain. The vehicle became smaller, shouts of glee fading to a pinprick, almost silence. The ground was cracked and featureless. I thought there had to be something, an artifact, a spray of glitter, or charcoal from the giant wooden man they would build and burn to the ground, but I saw nothing. The site had been thoroughly cleaned, the city erased, maddening for future archaeologists.

I looked for the throngs in my imagination, conjuring people, dust, and fire. Half-naked crowds rose from the ground. It was the center of the city and a giant wooden man, effigy of ourselves, burned with ferocity, showering the stars with plumes of sparks. I walked through the apparition of this city, aware of what happened as if we'd been here before, playing out this story like we play out all our stories, coming back and pounding the earth with our feet.

I listened for them, but heard only my steps across playa dust. For all we do, we vanish this easily, opening a space at the end of one age to send our children into the beginning of the next. The dot of the SUV swung around a couple miles out. It became larger and I began to hear the engine and the whoops of two boys coming back to me. They hopped off before a full stop, testing their bravery as their feet hit the ground running. Given the extra momentum, they sprinted like fawns across the expanse, leaping and shouting, the sounds of their joy fading into desert air.

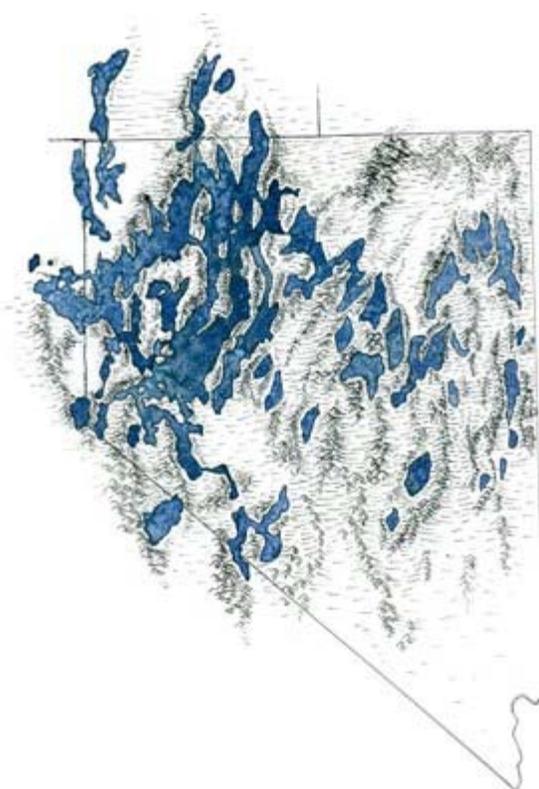
The picture that came across Alexander Rose's cellphone looked like a blackness within blackness, a hole within a hole. Rose has been leading a team through the Long Now Foundation in the construction of an enormous clock designed to run for 10,000 years. He said that excavators in West Texas had been blasting a tunnel into solid limestone where the clock would be installed when they came across a cavern never before opened to outside air, a secret space within the earth. They'd taken a picture of their find and sent it to him.

Rose said this new void could hold up progress on the clock's placement, or at least make the project more interesting. The clock was being built and it would be placed inside the chamber they were excavating, where it would tick-tock gently for the next 10,000 years. He said they didn't know how deep this new cave went, but workers told him when they shouted into it, it made their voices echo.

I think of the trickster god Raven, of course, and the first crack of light that entered the clamshell at the beginning of time. Raven opened the darkness and out we poured.

Rose was the project manager for this mechanism being built of titanium, ceramic, and stone, materials chosen so that they would not rust or fuse together over time. He said it was not a time capsule per se. It was a clock, a message to the future and a way for us now to understand the larger time frames we're involved with, responsibilities that last beyond lifetimes. It would run off pressure bellows rising and falling with the sun, turning an array of gears, some large enough they could be running Big Ben. Its counterweights were 5 tons each and the size of cars.

By 10,000 years ago, climates had turned toward a warm and rainy start of the Holocene. The Americas were fully occupied, nearly every decent rockshelter bearing toolstone and charcoal. Mammoths, sabertooth cats and dire wolves had been gone for



Nevada's Pleistocene lakes at maximum extent.

Sarah Gilman

long enough they would have been myth, turned into tales of monsters that once ruled the world. Eating smaller game in the Holocene, in some places eating more grass seed and root than meat, and painting ghostly imagery on canyon walls with red ochre, these people came from the first people, the original ancestry, birth of Native America.

Rose and I were in a Northern California warehouse where clock parts were being built in an industrial district north of the Golden Gate Bridge. Mechanisms were separated, gears in clusters suspended from rafters where engineers had been installing, then carefully aligning the components. The workspace hummed from stress tests on ball bearings sped up to match ten thousand years of rotations, seeing if they could withstand the wear. Designers were serious about the machine working that long. Once underground, the clock would have an entrance and exit for visitors to pass through. He said the idea isn't so much to have visitors anytime soon, but in the future — might be centuries from now, might be thousands of years.

Besides this new cave problem, Rose was working with artists and linguists, trying to come up with what to put on signs that would explain how the clock functions. The idea is that people would enter it, read the instructions, and calibrate the dates properly, causing the clock to chime like a giant music box.

Rose didn't think we'd be speaking English 10,000 years from now. In several hundred years, the words on the page would require translation. Definitions and spellings would change, new words brought in, altering the way sentences are spoken and ideas conveyed. The way we conceive time and space, the flow of events, is conceded into what we say, how we say it. The clock will reach beyond that. He waved his phone in the air, indicating how easy it is to become trapped in the small, digital box of now thinking this is all there is.

He told me that a spiral staircase would rise through the interior of this giant clock. The staircase would be unlit, in near-complete darkness. Rose sees people coming as a pilgrimage, torches or headlamps or whatever form of illumination might be used for winding into the well of the machine.

Rose's phone rang again, a call from the excavators. He said he had to take it; they'd be wondering if work should resume. As he walked away, I ran my fingers along the cool titanium teeth of a gear. Rose had welcomed my touching them, letting me give them a nudge. Several inches of turn had budged the whole thing. So incredibly balanced was it all that as soon as I moved one, other wheels began moving across the contraption,

action and instant reaction.

The largest assembly of gears hanging from the rafters was based on a star-shaped center known as a Geneva drive, a technology used originally in Swiss watches. This is a circle and square combined, a device that transfers continuous motion into incremental strokes. It is the effortless cruise of the sun broken down to the tick marks of seconds. You might say it's how we invented time.

The 10,000-year clock would be our artifact left in a cave. To understand who was here, you might dig it out and study its pieces. Another site in the Nevada desert was already being selected for a hypothetical second clock, as if we were seeding the land, adding our version of Clovis caches under boulders. It may be a message from an ineffable past for people in the future, their ears pressed into a can attached to a string where they listen for our lips to move.

I would tell them of the roaring overpasses around this warehouse, their stark shadows cast onto streets below, abandoned shopping carts, plastic drink cups smashed on asphalt, cars parked for so long their undercarriages are laced with spiderwebs. This is our atlas, a world that will be lost by the time this clock winds down. What kind of lost, I can't say. Whoever returns to this place might think it was a blink of the eye, or they might marvel at the ingenuity of the makers, wondering what ancient people had come this way.

I would tell them what was indelible in our time, the deeply forested hills above the city, sea crashing to mist on a rocky coast, rivers dancing through the granite of the Sierra. These will remain, I pray.

I reached in, grasped the biggest gear, and gave it a good, hard spin. Cogs bit into each other. Wheels turned. The machine woke. As smooth as breathing, time began to tick.

Father, explorer and author Craig Childs has published more than a dozen critically acclaimed books. His writing has appeared in The New York Times, Adventure Journal Quarterly, Men's Journal and The Sun. He lives in southwest Colorado.

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