

2018

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Recommended Citation

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My Journal Entries About Seshukwa on San Juan Mesa
by Michael Mauldin

Before Bonnie and I were married, we belonged to a “college and career” group of young singles. The leader organized a campout for the group in the Jemez Mountains. An older gentleman familiar with the area came along. He was an “armchair” anthropologist who invited any of us who were interested to ride with him in his jeep to hunt for petroglyphs at a nearby unexcavated Anasazi ruin. A UNM anthropology professor had given him directions. We found the ruin, just past the rockiest part of the road—where the mesa narrows to little more than a road with drop-offs into canyons on either side—but we found only a few glyphs. He was hunting for a “supernova” glyph.

He explained that the Anasazi generally just “doodled” with their glyphs, sometimes going so far as to make maps showing where they found water or game. But there was an event for about a week in July of 1054 AD which might have been so dramatic that they might have wanted to record it—the explosion of the supernova that created the Crab Nebula. It was visible day and night for about a week. In going through charts of the cycles of the moon, archaeo-astronomers found that during that week, when viewed from the Southwestern US, the new bright light would have been next to the path of a crescent moon. Throughout the region, there are many crescent-moon glyphs with a “blob” just above and to the side of it.

We found only a crescent-moon glyph that day, but without the “blob,” so everyone seemed let down (it was years later that I found more panels of glyphs over the cliff to the southeast of the city and even some “map” or “story panels” at the second city, a few miles east). But I was smitten that day. My seeing and touching the glyph just below the plaza of the ancient city was a continuation of the “time-machine magic” that I first felt at Enchanted Mesa, near Acoma Pueblo.

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The next Christmas, Bonnie’s brother, Kurt, visited us. An avid outdoorsman, he wanted to see something striking in the area. It was a warm, dry year, so I drove him (in my “city car”) to see the ruin. He was enchanted with the place, and we would have stayed longer, but a snowstorm started to blow in. I didn’t know (yet) how treacherous that road could be, but I sensed it, so we left, reluctantly but quickly.

That visit was the inspiration for my PETROGLYPH FOR STRINGS. The opening wave of scales (using the half-whole-half tetrachord) was my attempt to preserve the memory of the approach of the winds and snow, and with them, spirits, not all of them gentle or benevolent. The haunting second theme reflects the reverence the writer of the glyph had for the place and his people—and that I felt for them and their home.

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Then I brought Bonnie camping there, in the first plaza of the ruin, our campfire making dancing shapes on what was left of the city walls. After we had children, I brought them there, like the time mentioned in the notes for DAWN AT SAN JUAN MESA on the “Enchanted Land” CD:

Within view of Sandia Peak in the distance (where KHFM Radio has its broadcasting tower), I brought young Kendall here once when PETROGLYPH FOR STRINGS was on the air. I mused at the irony. Before his birth, that piece had begun in my mind at that very place. But now I heard the music—fleshed out—and the laughter of a child in a plaza that once rang with the laughter of many children. Since then, it seems as if the spirits there welcome me and the children I bring to see the petroglyphs and pot-fragments. I often go away with a new fragment of insight, usually into the needs of children. So, years later, when I was commissioned by the AYS program, the magic of the mesa and its people seemed an appropriate inspiration for a piece to be performed by children.”

I guess if I had known it was a well-known ruin, with a name, I might have called the piece DAWN AT SESHUKWA. Because of Cerro Pino, the tall mountain on the other side of the deep canyon to the east, the sunrise on the mesa is a memorable experience. The sun rises rather high before clearing the mountain. When it does, the golden light bursts across the dark chasm, shining first on

the tops of the mesa's trees, then climbing down them to the grasses and the city. The sunset can be even more dramatic, as the wide shadow-line of the city's mesa gradually ascends the opposite mesa, wrapping Cerro Pino in golden light and then swallowing it in darkness.

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We purchased a cab-over camper for our pick-up truck. The boys were little, but it was hard for all four of us and a dog to fit comfortably in the tent. And Bonnie had had enough of cold, wet sleeping bags from afternoon mountain downpours. It was March, and we had been having unusually warm weather, so I decided to take the camper on a trial, weekend jaunt in the Jemez by myself, to get acquainted with it before taking the family someplace in it.

I headed for the mesa. It was late afternoon, almost evening, so I was hurrying to get set up before dark. I forgot how shaded some of the deep canyons are on that road. As I drove (too fast) around a bend in the road, I suddenly found myself in deep snow, with no clear patches on the road ahead of me up the hill. The tires of the pick-up were big, and the weight of the cabover camper gave them better traction, but the truck had no four-wheel-drive. I tried the things I had learned to do—rocking forward and backward, putting tree boughs under the wheels, digging the wheels out. I didn't have snow chains. I hadn't even dressed warmly, and I had only tennis shoes with me. It had been so warm for so long in town that I forgot to "be prepared." The more I tried to move the truck, the closer it inched to a drop-off.

It was getting dark, so I went inside and cooked (at a slightly tilted angle) the first meal in the camper. I would tackle the situation again in the morning light. That night was clear, and there was a bright moon, which highlighted outlines of snow on the rocky fraction-lines of the canyon sides. I went to bed feeling frustrated, but not frightened.

About midnight, a spring storm woke me with its wind and the sound of snow and sleet hitting the roof of the camper. I knew how treacherous springtime mountain-storms could be, so I got up, dressed as warmly as I could, and renewed my efforts to get unstuck.

I was 10 miles of dirt-road away from the pavement, which itself would be hard to negotiate if the storm was big. It was a weekend, but after a spring snow, no one would be crazy enough to venture here. I realized I might be there a while, so I took stock of my provisions.

In the morning I saw that there had been only about two inches of new snow, so at least that was good news. I tried to guess how close I was to the mesa turnoff, because I knew that about three or four miles beyond that were permanent homes, where I could get help or call home (no cell phone yet). Not wanting to sit idly while the Sunday passed (Bonnie wasn't expecting me till that evening), I put plastic bags around my tennis shoes and started walking the road toward the mesa. I had misjudged the distance and, after hiking several miles, I found a sign that indicated I was still about four miles from the mesa turnoff, which was almost that far from the houses.

That would have been no problem if there hadn't been six inches of old snow and two of new snow on the road, and if I had brought my snow-boots and warm clothing. When I saw the sign and felt how wet, cold and numb my feet had gotten, I chastised myself. I had left the safety, shelter, warmth, food and water of the camper to walk in snow with tennis shoes and a light jacket—all because I didn't want to swallow my pride and wait for Bonnie to send someone after me. At least she knew where I was headed.

As I retraced my footprints back toward the camper, it occurred to me that it was a Sunday afternoon and the weather had improved. Perhaps someone in one of those huge, four-wheel-drive trucks might want to pit their "big-boy-toy" against the elements. A few moments later, just as I neared the last bend in the road and could see the camper, tilted slightly toward the drop-off, I saw and heard exactly such a vehicle coming my way. It hesitated at the camper and then proceeded around the bend toward me. I waved the two men down, explaining that I was the one with the camper, and that I was stranded. They turned around and used the winch on the front of their truck to get mine out of the deep snow. I thanked them earnestly, and they went back to tackle the road. Their plan was to go up to the mesa and down to the highway where the homes were.

I went on my way toward home, stopping after only a mile or so to catch my breath and have a snack. I heard a vehicle coming from behind me. There were no crossroads or traffic. It could only be the two gentlemen. It was. They saw me and stopped to say that they had seen my footprints for several miles and were amazed I had gotten that far in tennis shoes without frostbite. After the point where I turned around, they found that the snow got so deep that even their vehicle was having trouble, so they turned around.

Of course, I never made it to the mesa that trip, but I include the story because it taught me how wild that area could be. And something else. When I was returning to the camper, having given up getting out, I felt an interesting calm. I felt small perhaps, but when I was forced to accept that nature was more powerful than I, and that I would survive by learning to work WITH it, I began to truly appreciate the beauty of everything around me. My walk back—right up until I had the thought about my “rescuers”—was amazingly peaceful and beautiful—not in some kind of “out of it” way, but in a more “with it,” empowered way than usual. No panic. Just a recognition that I’d be fine if I paid attention to my environment and coexisted with it. Fondly, I remember taking a “mind photo” of a large fern with snow stacked up on its leaves and wondering that no breeze had blown it off.

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I took my close friend, poet Robert Seufert, to Seshukwa not long after we collaborated on a show together. Later we went to the mesa for him to read me the completed manuscript of his two-hour epic poem, THE VOYAGE, for which he wanted me to create a musical background. We enjoyed the shadow/sunset phenomenon on Cerro Pino. A few years later, when the musical background was complete, and the recording produced, we listened to it there. As the last sounds died away, a blue-green-yellow trail of fire burned across the twilight from north to south. We learned later that it was a piece of “space trash.” But, given the place and the timing, our eyes were huge and our jaws open.

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In 1995, my sons Kendall (then 17) and Kevin (13) went camping with me on the mesa one weekend. They got along well and were chatting “techno” talk and playing games in the tent-trailer, while I sat in the car jotting down thoughts on a scrap of paper. It had gotten too windy to enjoy being outside. I heard a loud pop and a “groan” and saw that a huge, dead Ponderosa Pine was beginning to fall over in the wind. A hiker’s car had been parked near it a short time before. My car was farther away, and not in the path of the tree. I shouted for the boys to come quickly. They both looked out in time to see and hear the great “creature” crash into the ground, shaking everything. Had there not been such a howling wind, I’m sure the echo would have been long-lived through both canyons, on either side of the mesa.

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In addition to my family and some of my students, I took several groups from the boy choir to the mesa over the years, usually with four or five Dad-chaperones, but a few times with four or five boys myself. The tent-trailer could accommodate that size group and even offer a modicum of privacy, with the curtains.

I went back to the mesa many times, usually alone. One time to practice conducting the Sibelius Second Symphony, one time for some solitude on the night the music students camped elsewhere when I taught at Hummingbird Music Camp.

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When I was composing Isabelle’s high-school graduation piano solo, I stumbled across the info about the ruin and its name. So her piece, SESHUKA: EAGLE DWELLING PLACE, reflects both the mystery and the top-of-the-world urge-to-flight that one feels there. Standing on “my rock,” and looking out over the expansive canyon and imposing mountain, I spoke the place’s name aloud there after that, which was for me the first (and probably the last) time to say it there. The side-of-the-cliff road from Ponderosa is now washed out, and the other approach is so deeply cross-rutted as to be almost impassable.