

Preserving the Heritage of the Chalk Creek Hieroglyphs

The Chalk Creek Hieroglyphs are one of the most visited and intriguing recreational sites on the Fillmore Ranger District of the Fishlake National Forest.

In 1939, prospectors Clifford Purcell and Rube Melville were in Chalk Creek attempting to locate iron ore when they came upon the Hieroglyphs, which consist of four lines of 24 symbols etched into the stone face above a small cave opening. Purcell recalled "...there was four rows kinda like picture writing...full of lichen full of green stuff...the sun was shining on it like a spot light."

Since the discovery, the etchings have been interpreted in several ways. Some believe the symbols point to the location of gold tablets, which has led to many attempts to locate the fabled tablets, to no avail. Another interpretation is the inscriptions are from Spanish miners looking for gold in Chalk Creek.

Archaeologists and fire personnel created a protection plan for the Chalk Creek Hieroglyphs after the ignition of the Halfway Hill Fire. If the fire approached the site, crews would be directed to remove the heavy vegetation on top of the site and cover the rock etchings and interpretive signage with fire protection fabric, if the actions could be conducted safely. The plan also included the potential to light a backburn ahead of the main fire to keep fire intensity near the site minimal. Alteration to the area was not desired by the Forest Service if it could be avoided, so fire personnel waited as long as possible before taking any action.

On Tuesday, July 12 around 6:30 PM, winds in excess of 30 mph pushed the fire across the containment line and over Chalk Creek Road, and erratic fire behavior was within one mile of the site. Bureau of Land Management archaeologist Hannah Robinson and a fire engine crew went to the site and began to remove trees and brush immediately next to the Hieroglyphs. Crews wrapped the Hieroglyphs and interpretative signs with the fire protection fabric and used tools to dig fireline around the wooden barricade in the parking area. Within 30 minutes, the site was in a much better position to survive the fire if winds and erratic fire behavior continued.

Fortunately, the Halfway Hill Fire did not burn over the Chalk Creek Hieroglyphics that day. The protection measures remain in place in the event the fire becomes active in that area again. The firefighting efforts have preserved the area as an amazing recreational location and a wonderful part of the local history.