An example of a pictograph located in the John Day Basin. Henderson, who renovates pictographs, with a polarizing light and digital enhancement, says there's years of work left, in order to document all the remaining pictographs in the Columbia River Plateau.

Unique method protects rock art

One of 125 in his profession in the U.S., a simple twist of fate gives Jim Henderson a new direction. The results land at the Museum of Warm Springs.

Story by Shannon Keaveny

Jim Henderson, a medical photographer by trade, claims he ended up where he is by a dare and a prayer.

Henderson's father-in-law first told him of the pictographs at Horse Thief State Park and suggested he take a photo.

He did.

The photo was of the famous pictograph, She Who Watches, and was shot with an infrared light. The image stood out just beautifully, said Henderson.

The photo was given to a friend, who hung it in his office.

Years later an archaeologist in Hell's Canyon saw that photo and exclaimed, "Damn that's the best picture of She Who Watches I've seen."

By 1988 Henderson was in Hell's Canyon trying out his luck with another photo shoot.

"I failed miserably," said Henderson of his first pictograph shoot. "My photos captured the images no more than other people's photos."

But, it sparked his interest, and after much trial and error, and $7,000 of his own money, in 1992, he came to a basic understanding.

"I came to understand it's not the photo but the interaction of light with the surface. It's like understanding that you can't boat upstream with a sail."

Henderson compares a pictograph to an amber stone with an encased and preserved bug. Silica, he says, runs over the pictograph and preserves it. It's basically like a sheet of glass.

There are two reasons, according to Henderson, the rock images often can't be seen with the naked eye and don't photograph well with conventional methods. First, weathered rock scatters light.

"It's like looking at a piece of sandpaper." he explains.

The other reason is the silica deposit. Like the surface glare of a river, to see through the silica encasing, a polarized light or lens is used to remove surface reflections.

Henderson's method utilizes his understanding by using a polarizing light. He also uses digital imaging that increases the color saturation to createbrighter and more contrasting images. He shoots in the dark of night.

"You can't polarize the sun." he muses.

Henderson's results are works of art. Bright hues of reds, oranges and yellows exude from the rock walls clarifying images unable to be seen otherwise.

"I do not add color, I take away the scattered reflection and concentrate on the 10 percent of color that is absorbed into the surface and then bounces off."

Henderson's first official pictograph shoot was funded by grants for approximately $3,500 plus film from Kodak. Unable to get adequate time off, he quit his job as a medical photographer. He embarked on his first photo shoot using this method and set up camp at Horse Thief State Park. Photographing all the pictographs took a month.

"It's the largest congregation of pictographs that remain," says Henderson about his choice to photograph Horse Thief State Park. "Consequently, they have endured a lot of vandalism."

> "My kick is making the images available to the tribes. As far as I'm concerned they should stay with the people who made them."
>
> Jim Henderson
> Pictograph photographer

The photo images can be used for research, evidence (in case of vandalism), and as a non-damaging form of recording a dwindling history as nature runs its natural course.

Henderson's main objective is the preservation of the cultural heritage for river tribes especially in lands they don't control.

"My kick is making the images available to the tribes. As far as I'm concerned they should stay with the people who made them."

Henderson hopes to document all the pictographs in the ceded lands for the Columbia River tribes in the next 7 to 8 years. He estimates there are an additional 40 percent to record in the ceded lands but, that, more pictographs are constantly being discovered.

"This area was crawling with people. In every river drainage, I find pictographs."

Henderson has ventured with his photograph technique to other domains. To date, he has photographed ancient writings from Israel and immigrant names sketched into rocks on the Oregon Trail.

This method, he says, unlike others, has no destructive effect.

Images find a home

Recently, Henderson's photographic depictions of pictographs in ceded lands were handed over to The Museum at Warm Springs.

A comprehensive database containing Henderson's work is one of the final objectives of the project he's been contracted out to do since 1996.

In 1996, the National Park Service awarded The Museum at Warm Springs a $50,000 grant. In 1998, the Meyer Memorial Trust awarded the museum an additional $52,000.

As a private contractor, Henderson is obligated to return the photos to the museum.

Henderson, who wrote the grant, is happy to turn his work over to the tribes.

"I'd like to finish this work in the ceded lands and what should be done with my work is up to the tribes, whether that's to bury it, make t-shirts, or use it as an education tool. I hope a respectful awareness of what this is comes out of this."

Henderson's grant also included an internship program that supported the idea that some day tribes would document their own pictographs. Three tribal members have introductory training at this procedure.These efforts are often blocked by a lack of time.

"A young person typically needs a full-time job and this isn't that. I think a retired person who wants to preserve this part of the tribes' heritage would be perfect."

Henderson says once you get the hang of it, a person will get good quick.

"But this technique isn't light. It's a complicated procedure where experience is involved." he explains.

Henderson hopes that this procedure will eventually provide money for the tribe and an inside job.

Currently, The Museum at Warm Springs Archivist Alberta Comedown-Libby houses the images at their library.

In the future they will be available to view by the public.

The database contains the images and the approximate location. A viewer can flip through them and enlarge images for a closer view. Exact locations will not be given to the general public to protect them from damage.

"I think that archaeologists and anthropologists will be interested in using these images for research." said Eveline Patt. At this time, the images are not available for research use.

Comedown-Libby envisions them being used for educational purposes.

"I would like to see education that a simple rubbing can cause harm. For instance with chalk markings, the oil sticks and causes damage to the pictographs." she said.

Henderson thinks younger generations could be educated about the value of the pictographs through dance or storytelling.

Another idea mulling around is a traveling slideshow.. Ideas are contigent upon the museum's board of directors and the tribal council's approval and subsequent funding.

Meanwhile, before the rocks crumble and crack and return to the earth, the images remain protected at The Museum at Warm Springs for the tribes to decide their fate.