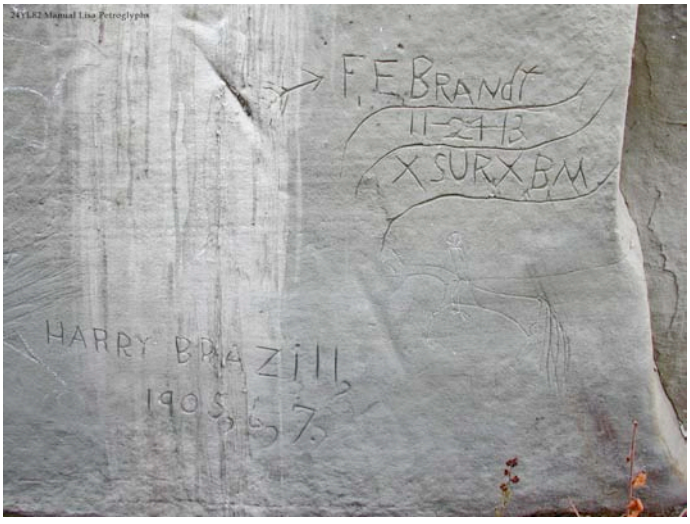
The Weeksville Pictograph site is one of only 108 rock art sites recorded within the Rocky Mountain region of Montana, accounting for only 15% of the known pictographs and petroglyphs in the state. The relatively few rock art sites in this region is not due to a lack of rock outcroppings, nor is it because preservation is poorer than elsewhere in the state, but apparently because messages were left at only select locations. Location has been integral to analysis since the beginning of rock art study and primarily has been used to suggest function, especially when combined with contents. However, here we are interested in why areas were selected not only by Indians prior to European contact but also why later people were attracted to the same locations. This reuse, of course, resulted in superpositioning of rock art by periods, with the most recent layers now considered undesirable graffiti, usually defined as any modern writing on rocks, buildings, and other non-approved areas. In the past few years rock art researchers and managers have accelerated their quest to remove graffiti, but there is no agreement on exactly what *undesirable graffiti* is. The perception that "*you know it when you see it*" does not work for



managers, researchers, or the public, who often find names, dates, and drawings, of historic interest (see photo on page 1, lower right). Ways to define or quantify graffiti are varied, such as inscriptions less than 50 years old, or less than a hundred years old, those appearing after initial recording, or for the National Park Service any additions after the government purchased the property, whatever decade that may have been. There presently are no standard guidelines for the date from which modern inscriptions should be removed, but too often the approach is to remove first and justify later, the topic we consider here. The Weeksville Pictographs in western Montana (see photo below) provide an example where conservation cleaning may not be in the best interest of site research and historic preservation.

The site is in the mountains north of the Clark Fork River, on a bench above the valley bottom where low prominent outcroppings border an open area that today is an old roadway. The present east-west two-track is the route of the old highway, which according to local informants follows an old Indian trail. All prehistoric and historic paintings here are on the northern outcropping, which is the more impressive of the two, extending to about 25 feet tall. Most of the paintings, including the modern signs, extend from ground level to about five feet high, with one red prehistoric abstract figure up about 14 feet on the bluff. The location is in a forested area above the river valley, but it is not secluded. Because it borders an old established route, the location was well known and consistently viewed by travelers. In the case of historic use, we know that the paintings — essentially advertising signs — were placed here because of its public exposure.

Today the overall condition of the site is only fair. The bluff is being invaded by at least two different kinds of lichen, and there is recent calcium carbonate deposition (see photo above). Several pieces of wall have exfoliated, but the process has been on-going for many years, and red aboriginal paintings occur on both old and new exposures. Although some red figures are washing and fading, prehistoric pictographs overall have weathered better than the later modern white paint, which has been partially removed by rain and melting snow. Regardless of the natural deterioration, the location still has much to offer on how it was used through the years.

All aboriginal images at Weeksville are liquid paint, mostly red but with a few in orange, yellow, and black. The prehistoric pictographs are dominated by short lines, mostly red. These are typically referred to as *tally marks* or *day counts* in Columbia Plateau style rock art, which characterizes the paintings of western Montana, and this figure type is often concentrated at sites along travel routes, such as here. In the far northwestern part of the state, tallys are abundant in sites along old Indian trails, such as the modern highway west of Kalispell, and one site with these images is shown here. In the Bitterroot valley south of

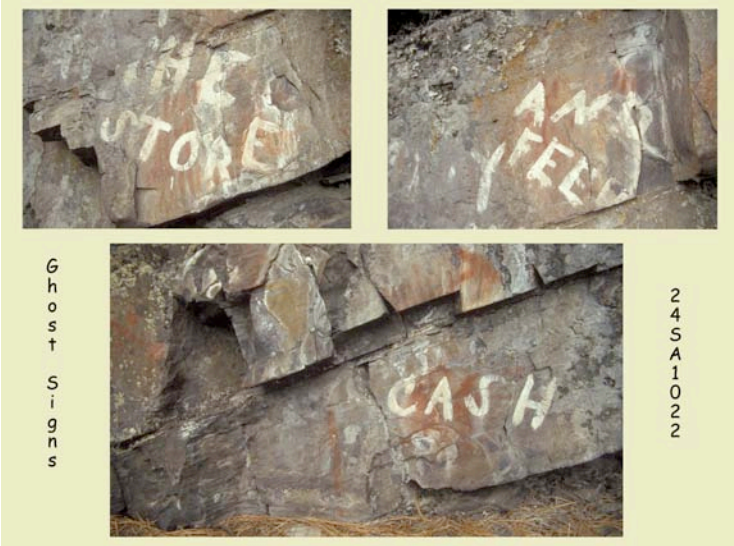
Missoula a large standing rock outcropping at the mouth of a narrow tributary canyon is almost completely covered with tally marks, and some of them are shown in this slide. Jim Keyser suggested that tally marks represent counts of objects or perhaps a mnemonic device to assist in remembering rituals (Keyser 1992:71), but their location along trails suggests they may have functioned instead much like rock piles in areas without bluffs. One mark may have been left for good luck as one traveled past the cliff, just as stones were placed on rock piles along regional trails for safe passage.

No obvious identifiable animals are at Weeksville, although there is one possible quadruped, and there is one definite human, and at least one other possible anthropomorph. All other figures are dots, abstract designs, or are too smeared, either intentionally or not, to be identifiable.

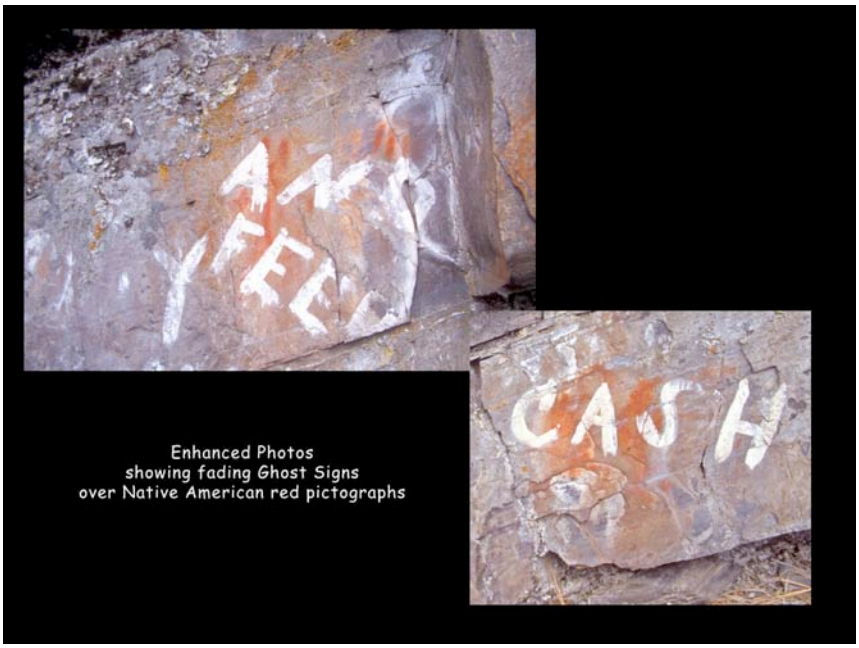
The upper portion of the human has abbreviated arms, no details on the head, and nine associated dots (photo to left). The figure is about eye-level for the average adult viewer. Although Keyser (1992:45) previously considered this human an example of vision quest imagery because of its association with abstract designs, its location does not conform with details set forth by Keyser and Knight who state that western Montana vision quest pictographs occur in relatively inaccessible,

isolated areas such as those chosen for the vision itself. Instead, the Weeksville figure is low on an easily accessible outcropping beside a trail probably publically traveled throughout the year (see photo below). When viewed relative to the other red figures on the panel, an association with travel and public viewing seems more plausible than a private vision experience.

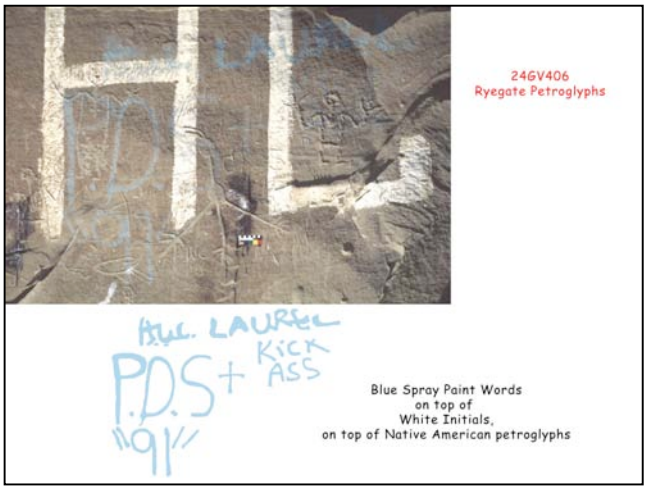
The modern paintings at Weeksville are sign remnants of roadside advertising for a store at the nearby town of Plains to the southeast or Weeksville to the west (see photo in lower left). Such signs, with painted block letters, have been common on roadside rocks and bluffs across North America since at least the mid 1800s. Although parts of the original writing here have washed off the wall, the remaining words of the sign, which are shown on this slide, indicate the message was intended to attract customers to a store selling feed and other items, and that cash was the accepted payment. The white paint appears to be the same lead-based mixture used on buildings throughout the United States from about 1890 through the 1930s and known as "*Ghost Signs*". They are defined by the Western Heritage Center as "hand painted advertisements lingering on the sides of historic buildings and rock



faces". They are now considered historically significant and are recognized as an important part of American history. There are, however, relatively few left today, and even fewer remaining on rock faces, such as these. The Western Heritage Center considers these signs significant because they reveal different periods of occupancy, provide a sense of continuity to public spaces, and are part of a community's memory — the same attributes that define significance of pre-contact rock art.

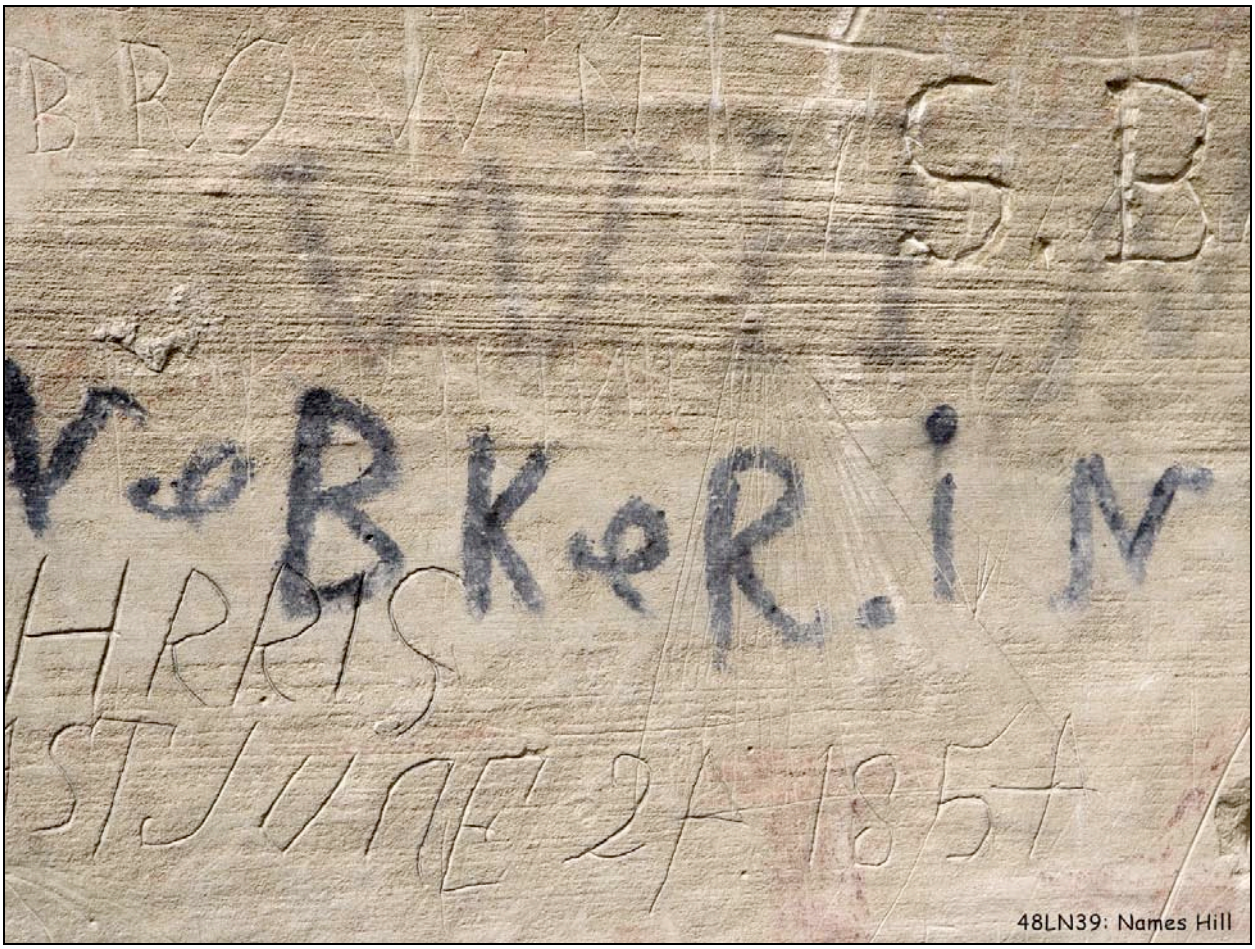


Ghost signs obtained their name because the white paint typically weathers and fades to the point where it is beyond recognition. Such signs in Butte, Montana, perhaps studied more than most, were painted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries on readily available canvasses on the sides of buildings, above doors and windows, and on rooftops, barns, and boulders along the national highway network. The rock paintings at Weeksville are the only roadside Ghost signs known to remain in this part of the state, and because they are directly on top of earlier Native American pictographs, they identify the importance of the location for capturing travelers' attention along the established route, historically as well as prehistorically. Obviously, both Indian and Euro-American painters found these rocks to be best for presenting their public messages. They painted on the smoothest of the exposed surfaces, at the best location for adult eye contact, and on optimal surfaces for protection from rain and snow.



When the national preoccupation for removal of graffiti started, the rationalization was that messily scrawled names and dates, profanities, and rudely placed drawings, such as at this site in central Montana, were disrespectful to the earlier Native American graphics, associated religious context, and the natural location in general. There was also an unsupported belief that the very existence of modern graffiti attracted additional names, dates, and other scribbles to that same location. There are certainly many cases where superpositioning of modern writing is vandalism, such as the spray paint at Ryegate (shown to the right), and should be removed, but to lump all modern paintings and inscriptions as vandalism is an oversimplification. People who have studied modern writing that has been drawn on rocks, buildings, and trains, have found that it often helps explain early and modern use of an area, provides information on where people came from and when, how the area was settled and

utilized, and how regional use patterns have persisted and changed through time.

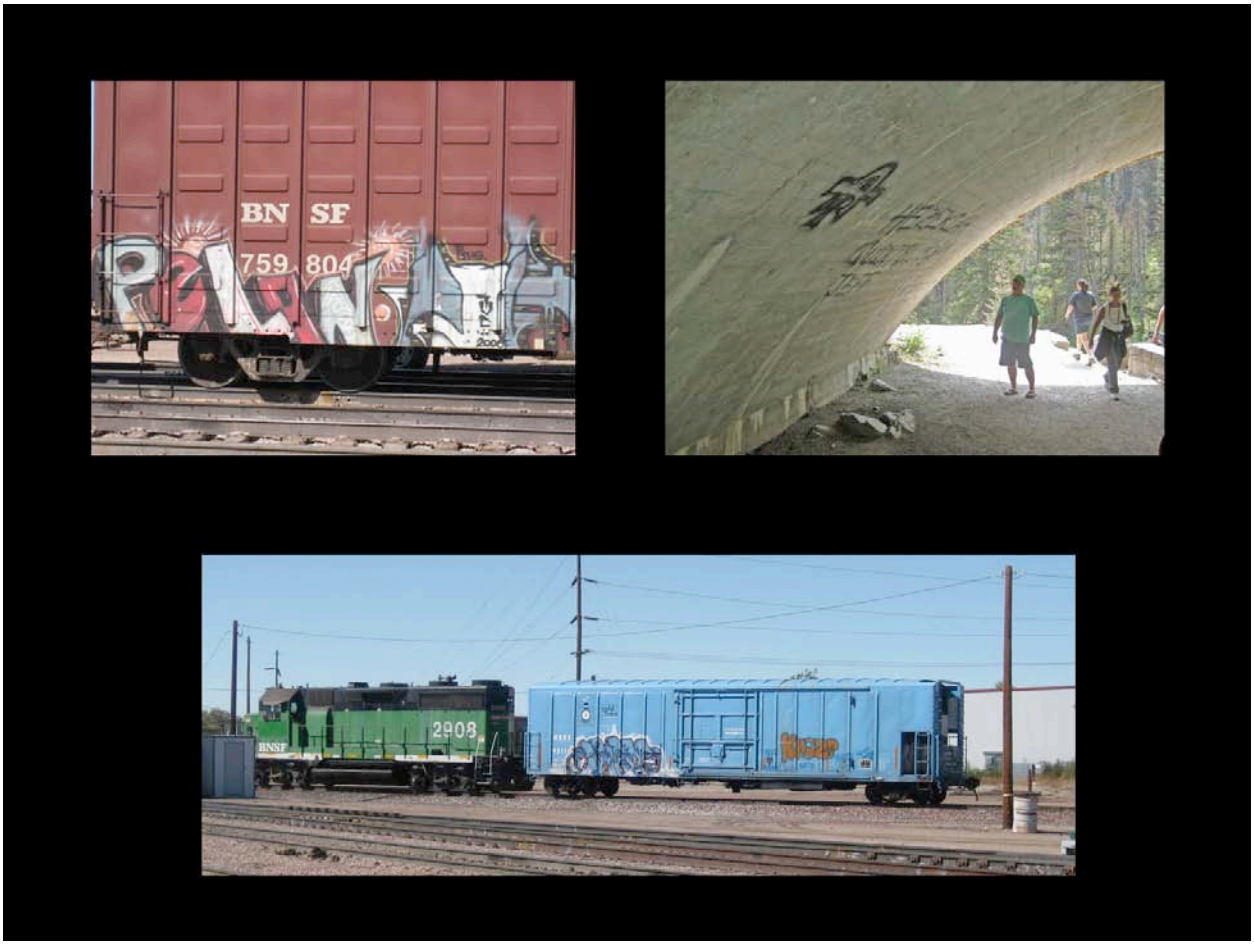


Superpositioning also offers authenticity to native drawings, such as at Names Hill in Wyoming, where an 1854 date is superimposed over an Indian-made tipi confirming its early age. Modern names, dates, and drawings may also provide historical information not otherwise available and may enhance the more traditional, standard, and available views of local history. Such could be the case with preservation of the historic signs at Weeksville.

Additionally, removal of the outer superimposed layers at any rock art site may damage the underlying paintings. Removal plans often do not adequately consider what is below. In the case of Weeksville, it is unlikely that the historic white paint could be completely removed without damaging the underlying prehistoric red. Since the site now lies along an abandoned travel route, it probably will not attract additional writing since there are no indications of inscriptions or paintings post-dating the ghost signs, which were probably placed here in the early 1920s when vehicles were beginning to utilize the road.

This brings us to the theory that "graffiti begets graffiti", which has been a common refrain for at least the past 30 years. Without any basis of controlled studies, there is now a general opinion that if graffiti is not removed new graffiti will be left because graffiti already exists there. For many people, the argument seems like simple logic and for the most part has been accepted without question. However, it appears equally likely — or maybe more so — that the location itself is the attraction rather than the previous writing. This can be seen

on rock exposures, buildings, underpasses, trains, and even underground in caves. Attempts to clean such locations have become increasingly common in recent years, and lately there has been an increase in organized efforts to clean cave walls, which within the last year has brought a backlash from archeologists who have witnessed prehistoric rock art destroyed along with historic and modern drawings and writing. At the International Caving Conference in Texas this past summer a paper was presented by a group actively sand blasting caves across the Southwest. This abrasive procedure is effective at removing spray paint and any other markings on the wall. Although the team insisted they checked for aboriginal rock art before sand blasting, during the discussion it was learned that their superficial review of the wall was inadequate and without specialist input, but they were not deterred in their quest in what they believe to be positive cave management. Also during the discussion, they said they were returning to a cave they had previously cleaned to redo the entry wall. When questioned as to why, they said that graffiti makers had returned to the clean wall and started to cover it once again with drawings, names, and dates. Here is a case of a clean wall begetting graffiti and not graffiti begetting graffiti. Such reuse of selected locations, because of the characteristics of that location, seems to explain graffiti in other places also.



Graffiti removal from trains, bridges, overpasses, and other locations is an on-going task only to have it reappear in a short time. Thus, modern wall markings will not be stopped simply by removing what is already written there. Other ideas need to be considered by managing agencies, conservation-minded individuals, and other groups if the goal of stopping modern inscriptions is to become a reality. But, will it be possible to stop people from writing on rock? This is a historical tradition for humans that extends far back in time. The argument that other media are available on which people can leave their mark, such as pieces of paper or blogging on a computer, do not negate the desire for people to make their marks on stone. Certainly signing one's name and date on a paper sign-in sheet at Register Cliff in Wyoming is not the same as carving or painting the information on stone. Not only is paper

nonpermanent and at best a fleeting expression, it does not give the modern inscriber the same emotional connection with the hardships and personal experiences of the previous travelers as does writing on the same rock wall that those people saw and experienced. The wall, as a physical entity, seems to call the person to it to leave their mark for future generations in a way that other media do not, and this seems to extend to ghost signs on rock walls also. Where ghost signs on buildings, such as the Townsend Building in downtown Casper, could have been easily destroyed when changes come to an area, such as the renovation of this building for use as a courthouse annex, similarly painted signs on rock faces along abandoned roads will last long into the future, together with the underlying earlier paintings of prehistoric travelers, if conservationalists see it as a part of our history and not as vandalism.

Thus, the Weeksville pictographs, both pre and post contact, tell us about different periods of personal experience and use of the western Montana mountains, they provide a sense of continuity of connection to that public space, and they show that the location was attractive to people wishing to communicate with travelers along the historic Indian trail and early regional roadway. Would it have been better if the Ghost Signs were not placed over the aboriginal red paintings? Absolutely. But they were, and now — for people interested in preserving history for study, public education, and enjoyment — it is advantageous to preserve the paintings and not to destroy them as graffiti. The signs were not placed at this location as an act of vandalism, but instead they were left as a public message at an ideal location. These are the only rock outcroppings between the two small towns suitable for painting that can be seen by travelers along an established route, and thus the red paintings of the earlier culture and the white paintings of the later both appear to have been left because of the location's unique suitability as a communication media with others of their groups.

Reference Cited.

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1992 *Indian Rock Art of the Columbia Plateau*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.