

THE GIANT CREATURES THAT ROAMED ARIZONA 25,000 YEARS AGO

# ARIZONA HIGHWAYS

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WHOA! On a dirt road above Nogales, Jim Walker thinks better of urging his rented sedan to ford the Santa Cruz River, unexpectedly swollen by rains across the border in Mexico.

# The Man Who Loves Ruins

"We're hard on rental cars," says Mark Michel, founder and director of the Archaeological Conservancy, an association that purchases archeological sites threatened by looting, development, or indifference.

"But we've never lost one," adds Walker, the conservancy's Southwest regional director.

He wishes he could say the same about archeological sites, which are disappearing like runoff in a Sonoran arroyo. Spurred by international art markets in which well-patinaed pots fetch up to \$75,000, treasure hunters have interfered with or outright plundered most of the Southwest's once bountiful endowment of prehistoric and historic places.

"We're losing the indigenous cultural patrimony of the United States," Michel laments.

Across the frisky Santa Cruz is one site that stands a better chance of survival, thanks to efforts of the Santa Fe, New Mexico-based conservancy.

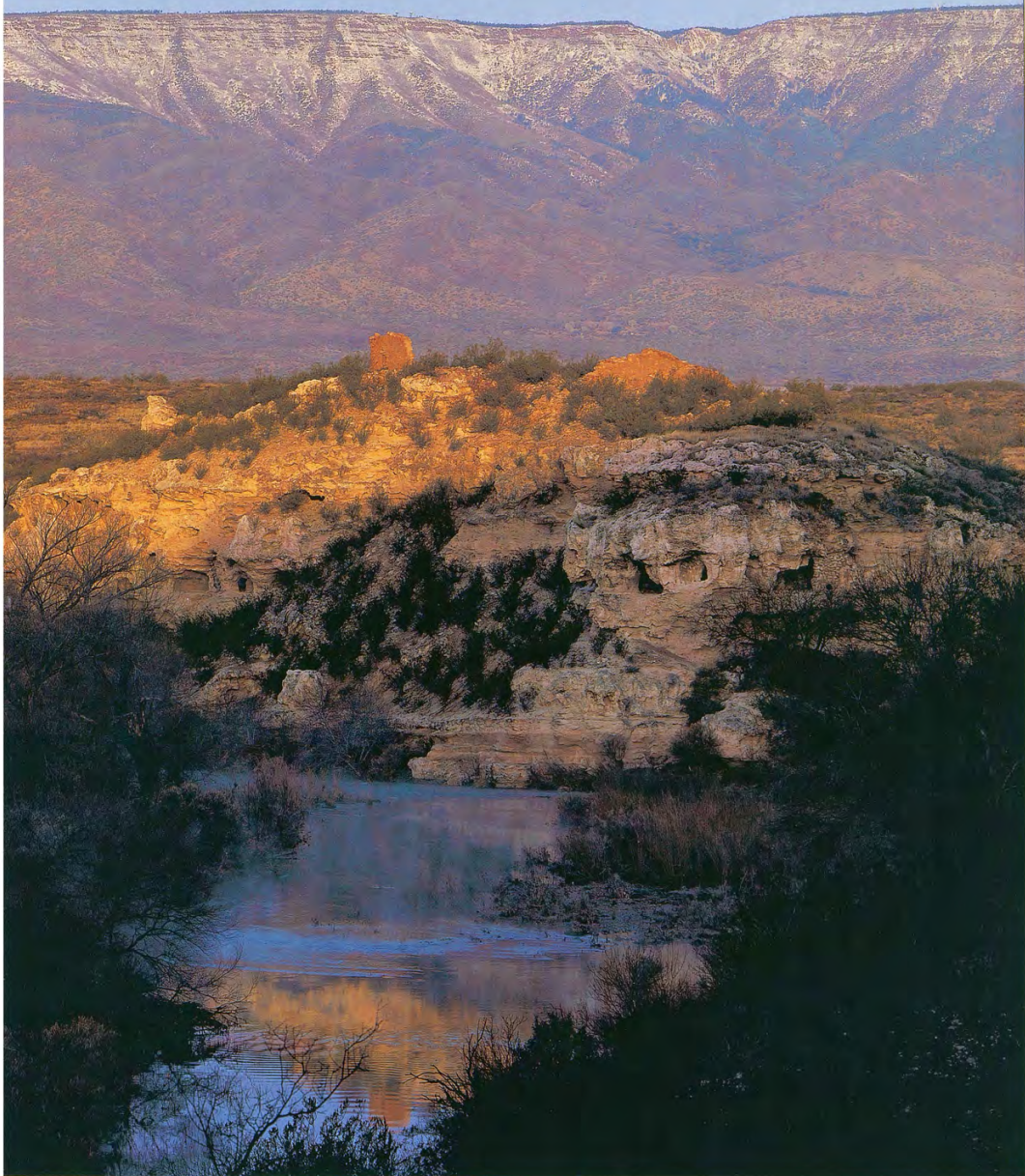
It's the remains of Mission Guevavi, Father Eusebio Francisco Kino's first parish church in Arizona, established about 1701 on the Jesuit's epic journey to push northward the "rim of Christendom." (See *Arizona Highways*, December '90)

Guevavi is one of the premier historic sites in the state, a jumping-off point for the whole Europeanization — for better or worse — of the West. And yet, until very recently, it remained, incredibly, in private hands, grazed by cattle and scoured by men with metal detectors, its future uncertain.



Inspired by the vulnerability of ancient ruins on private land, Mark Michel (ABOVE) formed an organization to rescue the sites without challenging property rights. Among those protected are Father Kino's 18th-century Mission Guevavi, site of the only surviving Spanish Colonial adobe walls (LEFT) built by Jesuits in the United States, and Oak Creek Pueblo (OPPOSITE PAGE), a 14-century Sinagua settlement in the Verde Valley.

T E X T B Y J O H N G W Y N N



P H O T O G R A P H S   B Y   J E R R Y   J A C K A



This was the sort of situation Michel had in mind when he set up the conservancy in 1980. A trained historian and seasoned political activist, Michel had been lobbying successfully for archeological-protection bills when it struck him that nothing was being done to preserve sites on privately held land. Property owners could dig them, or lease them to a looter, or pave them for parking.

The best way to save a ruin from ruin, Michel realized, was to own it.

"In most countries, the state lays claim to antiquities, period," he says. "But the idea behind the conservancy is a uniquely American answer to the problem. We don't challenge or restrict property rights. We use them. The same right that allows a property owner to say yes to a looter, allows us to say no."

The tricky part is getting people who may have, say, a Sinagua pueblo or Hohokam ball court on their back 40 to say yes to the conservancy.

"It's a challenging idea to put across," admits Walker, who packs an MBA and conventional real-estate experience on top of his anthropology degree. "Basically, we say sell or donate your archeological site to the conservancy, and we'll fence it, watch it, and administer it with a 100-year management plan. In other words, you'll never have to worry about the future of your ruin again."

Adds Michel, "Sometimes, people are looking for us as hard as we're looking for them. There's a sense of relief."

Ten years after its founding and with 10,000 contributing members, the Archaeological Conservancy has established 82 archeological preserves from Ohio to California, including eight properties in Arizona.

In the case of Mission Guevavi, a long trust-building courtship of the Wingfield Cattle Company led to a donation of the eight-acre parcel to the conservancy. This in turn cleared the way for a 1990 Act of Congress that added Guevavi to the Tumacacori Missions National Historical Park, ensuring its preservation.

Here stand the only surviving Spanish Colonial adobe walls built by the Jesuits in the United States. The largest wall segment is some 12 feet high, three feet thick at the waist, but noticeably undercut by erosion where it meets the ground. An old mud soldier that soon may join its fellows in Nature's easiest death: adobe to dust.

"There's still a lot of undisturbed site here at Guevavi," Michel says, his eyes reading the past through veils of mesquite and agave.

"There's the *convento* over there, and the Christian cemeteries, the 1701 church, perhaps even something from Kino's 1691 church, which was probably no more than a ramada . . . It's rare to have a Spanish mission abandoned so early, which makes it archeologically pure and especially valuable."

What gets Michel and Walker archeologically excited is not rebuilt walls or even original standing walls ("a maintenance headache"), but a concept they refer to as "preserving the data bank."

Heading north from Guevavi, they stop to rejuvenate their spirits at one such "bank," a state-owned site whose location they prefer remain unidentified.

It's an uncharismatic grayish-white mound, face scarred by dirt-bike trails. But to Michel and Walker the site is a thing of beauty: a sealed ark gliding through time to some future archeological Ararat.

At the top of the whale-size protuberance, Walker points out the ghostly wall prints of structures built by the Hohokam, the ancestral people of southern Arizona, who engineered fabulous canal systems and then mysteriously faded away sometime around A.D. 1425.

"There's an incredible wealth of information in here," says Michel.

"We condemn looting, but we don't promote excavation, either," he adds. "This site should be fenced and then left intact for future archeologists."

This abnegation of the human instinct to gouge away and find out what's down there is part of a relatively new philosophy known as "conservation archeology."

The idea is that archeology is an improving science, and that future technology

(ABOVE, LEFT)

At Guevavi, Jeff Jones, left, sifts excavated dirt looking for artifacts, while Jeff Burton digs along an exterior wall in search of the mission's foundation.

(BELOW) Archeologists from the National Park Service Western Archaeology and Conservation Center join the Guevavi dig.



will be able to tell us much more about the past than today's can.

If, that is, there are sites left to apply it to.

"In the glory days of archeology, they wanted to excavate every room of every ruin," says Walker. "But the problem is that they didn't always recognize what they were throwing out.

"So you have archeologists in the teens and twenties burning prehistoric beams for firewood because tree-ring dating hadn't been invented yet. A lot of information was lost. The point is, we don't know what's going to be important in the future."

To avoid this rueful hindsight, conservation archeology favors "land-banking" of sites, says Michel, with excavation samplings of 20 percent or less being carried out with current techniques.

Standing on a hillside in the Marana area north of Tucson, it's easy to see the second-biggest threat to archeological preservation: development. A tidal wave of new houses, frozen temporarily by the economic chill, crests in the valley below.

Directly in its path is the outline of a 50-meter oval ball court at the heart of the Hohokam settlement called "Los Morteros," which translates loosely as the place of mortars. Fortunately, that part of the site is owned and protected by the University of Arizona.

In addition, developer Gary Lovelace has donated to the conservancy 36 acres of land too steep to build on. Beneath sentinel-like 150-year-old saguaros is a network of "trincheras," Hohokam terrace structures used for defense and as foundations for houses.

"This is working out very well," says Dr. Paul Fish of the Arizona State Museum in Tucson. "Together we've saved over 150 acres of one of the few well-preserved Hohokam sites in the area. This will make a great park and a great laboratory," he says.

"The lesson here is that development and preservation are compatible," says Walker. "We look for the compromise that will allow both to occur."

Near Cottonwood, overlooking Oak Creek, Margaret Thede lives with her four boisterous dogs on a homestead "as far away from code as you can get." Her father bought the 40-acre property in 1951 from a cowboy named Slim for \$100 an acre. The price included the "Indian ruin" on the bluff nearby.

With 35 rooms and 18 cave dwellings in the cliff below, Oak Creek Pueblo is one of only 35 still extant large pueblos dating from the penultimate 14th-century Tuzigoot phase of Sinagua civilization in the Verde Valley.

Archeologists such as Peter Pilles of the

Coconino National Forest are especially interested in one unusual feature at Oak Creek: a large depression that may have served as a kiva, a reservoir, or a ceremonial room.

"And Oak Creek's location would seem to make it a critical control point for the whole chain of Tuzigoot pueblos. Maybe the key to their organization lies there," Pilles says.

After her father died, Thede became increasingly concerned about the ruins and her sole responsibility to care for them. At the suggestion of Pilles, she made contact with the conservancy, and a purchase of the two-acre site was agreed upon.

"Because of my personal attachment, it was a hard decision to give up the ruins," she says. "But it was the best thing in a lot of respects. Now I have an organization to call on if something goes wrong. This area is growing really fast, but

they can protect the site in perpetuity."

Thede still serves as the principal site guard, however, an arrangement the conservancy tries to foster among a ruin's neighbors.

Looters and archeologists. Walker says you can tell the difference by the kind of holes each digs: the looters', jagged and random; the archeologists', small and precise, though they often use trenching equipment, as well.

"Archeologists dig like cats; looters, like dogs," he says.

In some ways the distinction is as clear

(BELOW) Remnants of a "trinchera" can be seen at Los Morteros, north of Tucson.

The stone walls served the Hohokam as defense fortifications and foundations for houses.



as the sky: the looter is after treasure for today's market, the archeologist is after information about the past.

And yet clouds persist in the public imagination. After all, which one was Indiana Jones?

The truth is that archeology in its early days was impure. Adolph Bandelier and Richard Wetherill, archeologists of the last century, stooped to collecting artifacts. And almost any archeologist you talk to today will tell of getting started as a child picking up arrow points or potshards. But none, as a professional, would keep a private collection of artifacts.

Perhaps it has something to do with the difference between two archetypes in our history: Francisco Vasquez de Coronado and Father Eusebio Francisco Kino. They crossed into Arizona some 40 miles and 150 years apart, but their intentions were light years separate. Conquest and gold versus communion and souls.

They say Kino rode 70 miles a day on a mule establishing his network of missions. Michel and Walker, with loot-seeking Coronados in close pursuit, spend half their time on the road in mulelike rental cars, stringing a chain of archeological preserves.

We came across no looters on our journey, but at the University of Arizona we did meet the legendary Dr. Emil Haury, dean of American archeologists, excavator of Snaketown (southeast of Phoenix near Casa Grande), and pioneer of tree-ring dating.

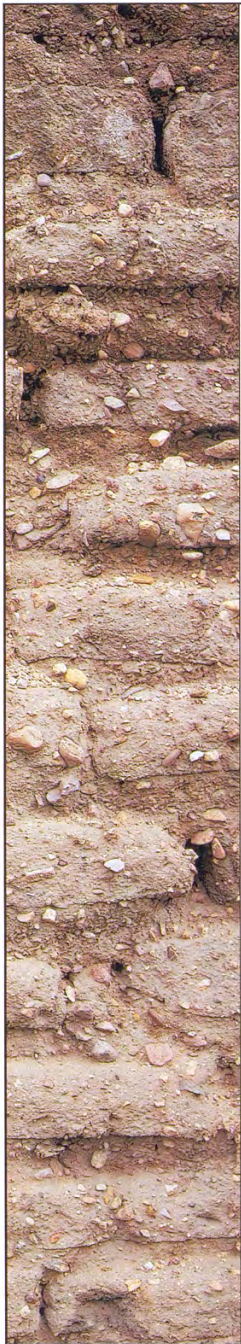
Asked why he cares about what went on so long ago and why we should care, Haury replied, "Knowledge of the past gives us points of comparison. We're proud of what our civilization has accomplished in the last few hundred years. But we forget all the cultures that have ascended the plateau ahead of us and fallen off."

"The enigma is always the same: why was Pueblo Bonito in New Mexico abandoned? Why Mesa Verde in Colorado? The closer we get to an answer, the further we can place ourselves from a similar fate."

If Michel and Walker have their way, the Archaeological Conservancy will continue to protect "the incredible wealth of information" buried at such ancient sites, waiting for the day when technology catches up with curiosity. ■

**Author's Note:** For further information on the Archaeological Conservancy's efforts to preserve America's unwritten past, contact the organization at 415 Orchard Drive, Santa Fe, NM 87501; (505) 982-3278.

*John Gwynn lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he is a feature writer for the New Mexican. Jerry Jacka also contributed photographs for the article about Indian artists in this issue.*



SUGARLOAF MOUNTAIN is the biggest thing in Cornville, a giant shepherd watching over this small Verde Valley community. The salmon-colored butte in turn is visible from every yard and porch in town.

# Rock of Ages

"To see Sugarloaf is to know you're in Cornville," said resident Kathleen Dusek.

So, back in the spring of 1990, Cornville hardly had to crane a neck to see something ugly happening on Sugarloaf: a jagged road cut clawing its way up the landmark's steep northern slope.

Robert Cristall, a Sedona developer, had bought the mountain and leased the Sinagua ruins on top to a professional pothunter.

A backhoe soon began tearing at the buried chambers of one of the last major undisturbed Tuzigoot sites in northern Arizona. Ancient bones lay scattered on the new road.

"We hate to see exploitation trampling on eternity," said Hopi Chairman Vernon Masayesva, whose people trace ancestral ties to the area. "The spirits of the living were disturbed as well," he added.

And how. Within days, several hundred deeply disturbed area residents closed ranks around the Sugarloaf ruins, waving protest placards and hunkering down for a candlelight vigil. Their activities focused the attention of the media on the plight of this settlement dating from A.D. 1300.

The "Sugarloaf incident" was the turning point in that summer's successful campaign to gain passage of the Arizona Burial Protection Act which extended legal protection to archeological sites that are on private lands.

The new law might have come too late to save Sugarloaf, however, were it not for one man's change of heart.



"When I came here, I had no idea what the significance of these ruins was," said Robert Cristall.

Archeologists and community outrage let him know. "When the universe calls, you've got to listen up and learn," he said.

Cristall called a moratorium on the digging. And he called the Archaeological Conservancy.

Almost a year to the day after the first angry protests, a very different scene unfolded at the Cornville Mercantile. To the strains of the Cornville Philharmonic Symphony's washtub base and jug, valley residents — joined by Robert and Margaret Cristall and representatives from neighboring Native American tribes — gathered to celebrate a purchase-option agreement that would transfer 18 prehistory-laden acres to the Archaeological Conservancy at below market price.

"We see this as a closing of the circle, a healing of aggrieved spirits. We celebrate the finding of a happy solution as we reconsecrate this site for future generations," said the conservancy's Jim Walker.

Then the Cornville Fire Department

led a procession of marchers, puppies, and kids to the base of Sugarloaf.

But, having stayed the hand of imminent destruction, the friends of Sugarloaf faced another challenge: they had to raise \$110,000 (which included the cost of fencing and perpetual stewardship) to help the conservancy meet its spring 1992 purchase-option deadline.

In December, 1991, assisted by a \$49,568 grant from the Arizona Heritage Fund, the conservancy purchased the 18 acres.

The future of Sugarloaf and its Sinagua past was secured.

— John Guynn



(TOP, RIGHT) At the Sinagua ruin on Sugarloaf mountain, Mike Steward, left, Kathleen Dusek, and Eric Wyles examine a piece of clay with imprints of wood thatch from a prehistoric roof.

The Cornville residents are in a huge gash gouged into the hill by a backhoe, which also damaged the partially burned beams behind them.

(RIGHT) Sugarloaf overlooks Oak Creek near Cornville, southwest of Sedona.

(BELOW) Adults and youngsters from Cornville tie ribbons on vegetation surrounding the site, symbolizing the successful effort to save the ruin.

