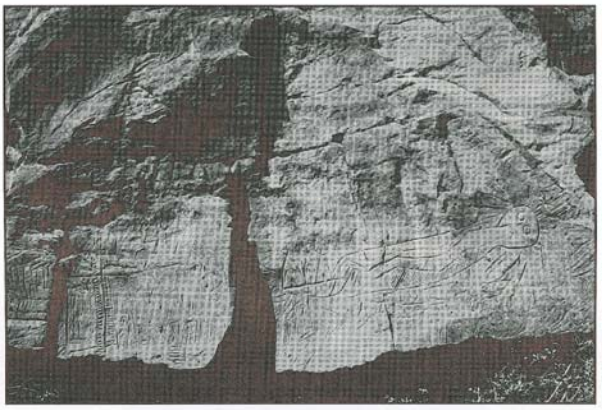
Erosion Claims Ellsworth County Petroglyphs

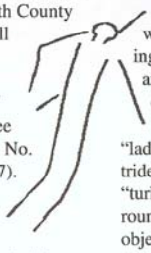
Author's Note: I wish to thank Jack Grothusen of Ellsworth for informing me of the loss of the Palmer's Cave petroglyphs and providing a photograph showing the damage.

An irreplaceable element of Kansas history was lost in September 1995 when the petroglyphs at Palmer's Cave, also known as Cave Hollow (14EW33), fell from the bluff face on which they were carved. A large section of the short bluff was apparently weakened by erosion and by undercutting. It gave way, destroying the petroglyphs that had been carved on its face and on a section of the tunnel or opening in the sandstone bluff that had inspired one of its names.



This view of the bluff face was taken by Alexander Gardner in 1867. The reclining figure is on the right side of the picture.

These petroglyphs were first photographed by Alexander Gardner for a series of stereoscopic views taken along the route of the Union Pacific Railway, Eastern Division, published in 1868. The destruction of this site follows that of another noted Ellsworth County petroglyph site, the Indian Hill (14EW1) site, also photographed by Gardner, which was heavily damaged in 1987 by erosion of its bluff face (see *Kansas Preservation*, Vol. X, No. 1, November–December 1987).



Located in the headwaters of Mulberry Creek, Palmer's Cave consisted of a south-facing bluff approximately fifteen yards long, located on a steep-sided sandstone promontory. A curved tunnel, approximately six feet wide and from six and one-half to twelve feet high, ran parallel with the bluff face, having openings on its east and west ends. A seep at the base of the bluff provided a low, but constant flow of water, which trickled down the lower elevations of the steep slope.

The promontory containing the site was on the north side of a narrow but deeply incised valley created by an intermittent unnamed tributary to Mulberry Creek. Extensive pastures are located above and around the site, but trees are growing in the valley next to the bluff. A few trees can be seen in Gardner's photos showing the protected nature of the site's location, which was apparently shielded from the cleansing effects of prairie fires.

Numerous petroglyphs were incised into the bluff face and on the walls of the tunnel and around the openings. These included geometric designs, animals, human figures, and a large enigmatic figure. Geometric figures included "ladder" designs, tridents or "turkey tracks," round shield-like objects, "butterfly" designs and zigzag lines in opposed pairs. Some triangular figures strongly resemble representations of tipis. Horses and vestigial remains of other animals (deer?) also were depicted.

One group of four human figures with round heads, rectangular bodies, straight stick legs, and stick arms formed in a characteristic "v" on either side of the body, appear to have been placed together. They are flanked on either side by large "spears" and the two outside figures have large circles (shields) superimposed on their chests. Solitary figures appear at other locations.

The dominating glyph of all those at the site was a large enigmatic reclining figure, which featured a "head" at its east end, from which emanated a series of short lines forming "rays." Two circular "eyes" were present as was a straight line "nose." Parallel zigzag lines beginning at its "mouth" ran west, forming a shallow "w." Two other straight parallel lines were placed above and below the zigzag lines to enclose them and form a "body" for the figure. The termination points of all these lines was lost in a maze of other lines forming designs and figures carved at the west end of the enigmatic figure. A series of short parallel oblique lines

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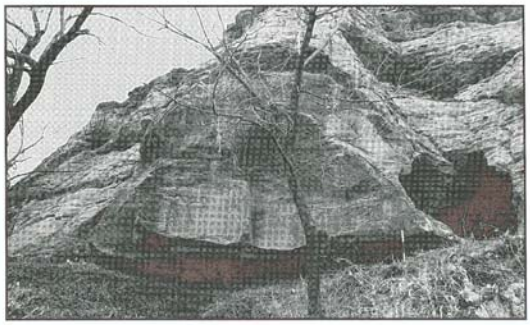

This 1980 photograph of Palmer's Cave shows the east entrance and the bluff face upon which the reclining figure and other glyphs were drawn.

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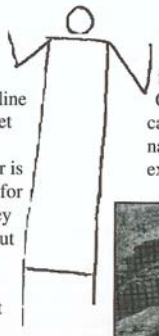


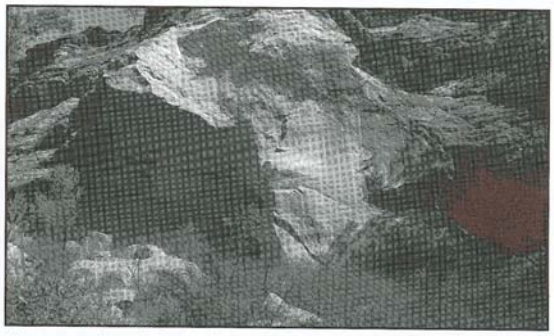
filled approximately three quarters of the space between the lower zigzag line and the lower body line of the figure. The glyph was approximately two feet by nine feet in size.

Like many other petroglyph sites where water is present, Palmer's Cave was a popular picnic spot for early settlers and later residents of the region. They left names, dates and initials sometimes next to, but sometimes superimposed over the glyphs. In an 1877 *Saline County Journal* article, the author describes his visit to Palmer's Cave and notes that among the "...Indian characters we find names more familiar..." The author of a later reminiscence of life in the area around Brookville noted that on a last-day-of-school picnic at Palmer's Cave the teacher carved the names of the younger children into the stone for them.

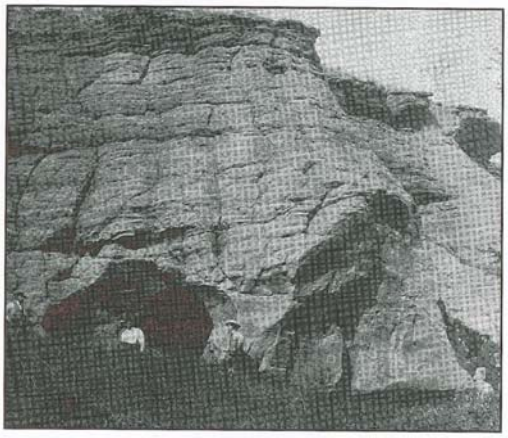
This activity continues today. On a visit to assess the recent damage the author of this article found the fresh stone face exposed by the fallen rock that destroyed the petroglyphs already had initials carved into it. Some of the petroglyphs at Palmer's Cave, like petroglyphs elsewhere in the region, were destructively copied by covering them with dark paint or ink. The resulting darker surfaces of these glyphs are more susceptible to erosion, since they absorb more heat than the surrounding lighter colored stone and are subject to greater temperature fluctuations each day.

A more immediate impact of copying the reclining figure was its use as a handy target after being stained, apparently since the darker color made it stand out. This fate has befallen other stained glyphs in the region.

Palmer's Cave was a unique place that is now gone. The impact of the fallen blocks on the talus slope below and the poor cementation of the sandstone of which they are composed have reduced the petroglyphs to small pieces and buried them under a mass of sand. There are no intelligible fragments of the glyphs to salvage, and nature has begun to incorporate the sand grains into the soil below or to transport the excess into Mulberry Creek. Sadly this is the ultimate fate of all the petroglyphs carved into the sandstone outcrops in the region. The forces of nature are unceasingly wearing away or breaking down the exposed stone faces containing the glyphs.



A current view of the bluff shows the east entrance and a portion of the tunnel now exposed on the west. The lighter colored rock indicates the extent of the rock fall.



Another Alexander Gardner photograph shows the west opening of the cave in 1867. Petroglyphs are located within the tunnel and on the rock face at the right.

We are fortunate to have a record of the site. The Gardner photographs of 1867 provide a baseline from which to measure later changes to the Indian petroglyphs, or the additions of names and figures made by later visitors. Carlyle Smith, University of Kansas, took photos of the bluff face in 1948. Kansas State Historical Society staff took a series of slides and photographs and made notes about the site in 1980.

A number of people have donated original photographs or allowed us to copy photographs they have taken of the site and its petroglyphs. Harold Reed of Salina took a series of slides in 1962, as did Leon Janzen of Lorraine in 1964. Joy Staples of Kansas City, Missouri took a series of photographs of the interior of the opening in 1983, and Bruce Arvizu of Topeka took a series of photographs in 1995. There may be others who have photographed the site. We would appreciate the opportunity to copy slides or photographs of the Palmer's Cave petroglyphs.

The loss of the petroglyphs at Palmer's Cave reinforces the need for complete documentation of all petroglyph sites. A complete record will allow us to pass on knowledge of these sites, and accurate and comprehensive records will provide the means to do so. Interpretation of the Palmer's Cave petroglyphs, as well as others in the region is needed to provide a basis for increased public understanding and appreciation for these kinds of sites. Finally, a survey of the physical condition of each site should be made to determine if there are feasible corrective measures to be taken to ensure the maximum longevity of each.—*Martin Stein*