

## Vermilion Cliffs

*Diana Hawks, Bureau of Land Management*

ONE OF THE MOST SCENIC AREAS in northern Arizona is now the Vermilion Cliffs National Monument. The majestic Paria Plateau is a large geologic terrace lying between two great geologic structures, the East Kaibab and the Echo Cliffs monoclines. The lower Paria River Canyon defines the north-eastern and eastern edges of the Paria Plateau. The Vermilion Cliffs, which encompass most of the plateau and define some of the walls of the canyon, are the south-east, south, and southwest sides of the plateau. Access to the Paria Plateau is from the west only, on one of three dirt tracks that require 4-wheel drive.

Work conducted by the Museum of Northern Arizona (MNA) beginning in 1967 located hundreds of prehistoric sites in House Rock Valley, the western third of the Paria Plateau, and in the Paria Canyon. At that time, the majority of sites appeared to date to the Pueblo II and early Pueblo III time periods. More recently, BLM inventories using Sierra Club Service Group volunteers have re-evaluated some of the sites located by MNA in the Paria Canyon. A large portion of the rock art in the canyon appears to date stylistically to Archaic and Basketmaker times and is very similar to rock art found in the San Juan drainage system northeast of the Paria Canyon. However, later Pueblo II and Pueblo III rock art styles also appear in the canyon.

Sites in the Paria Canyon are primarily rock art with a few rockshelters also found. This suggests that the canyon served mainly as a travel corridor or was used for the water, plant, and animal resources it contained.

On the Paria Plateau and in House Rock Valley, the presence of larger sites that may have been occupied longer suggests a slightly less mobile population. Both Kayenta and Virgin Anasazi ceramics and architecture are found in these areas. No sites have been excavated within this new monument; therefore, details of the Ancestral Puebloan occupation are simply not available.

Southern Paiute were living in the monument when the first European explorers arrived. On October 22, 1776, Father Escalante says:

Night overtook us while we were descending on the other side along a very high ridge, steep and full of rubble [Buckskin Mountain due west of the monument]. From it we saw several fires below, beyond a short plain . . . we came to the fires where there were three tiny camps of Indians.

Descendants of these Indians live on the Kaibab Paiute Indian Reservation at Pipe Springs, Arizona.

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*View across Marble Canyon of Paria Plateau.*

Several hogans and sweat lodges on the Paria Plateau attest that the Navajo had at least a limited presence here. These sites are believed to date to the early or mid-twentieth century.

Historic travelers through the monument include the Dominguez-Escalante expedition of 1776, Mormon exploring parties led by Jacob Hamblin in the 1860s and 1870s, and John Wesley Powell's mapping endeavors of the 1870s. A portion of the Old Arizona Road/Honeymoon Wagon Trail traverses House Rock Valley to cross the Colorado River at Lee's Ferry, just south of the new monument.

In 1911, Sharlot Hall came to the Arizona Strip to see if the land north of the Grand Canyon should be included in the new state of Arizona. The high Vermilion Cliffs caught her attention.

We crossed a rough divide and turned down toward the Colorado River. Far across the rim the Pahreah Plateau stood huge and gorgeously colored. This great cliff wall . . . is wilder and grander than anything we have seen so far . . . They are so wonderful that I can hardly take my eyes off them . . . They are the brightest and deepest red of anything in the way of earth that I have ever seen and a purple mist fills all the little clefts and canyons.

As Hall left House Rock Valley heading west, she wrote:

Now we had the most tremendous mountain panorama before us; we were climbing every hour and could look out over the top of the Pahreah Plateau on the right hand—a semi-mesa covered in wildest confusion with cones and saw-toothed peaks [Coyote Buttes] of rich-tinted sandstone and overgrown with cedar and pinon trees. The red land seemed to grow redder every mile and the sunset brought masses of purple and gold in the sky and deep smoke-drifts of lavender haze in the canyons.

The scenery and history so admired by Sharlot Hall remains today for visitors to discover and enjoy.