



# DISTANT TREASURES IN THE MIST: THE MYSTERY OF THE REDOUBT SITE

BY DAVID P. BAILEY

This map of Baja, California and the coast of New Spain was created by Domingo del Castillo in 1541. It is one of the first maps to show a mythical city on a large river that empties into the Gulf of California.

For thousands of years the Kannah Creek area has been home and refuge, first to native groups, then mountain men, explorers and settlers. The appeal of this small green valley between high desert plateaus is the cold clear water that flows from Grand Mesa, situated 5,000 feet above the valley floor. It may seem the perfect place to do an archaeological investigation. However, the usually gentle Kannah Creek can become a channel for rapid snow melt and flash floods.

Over the centuries the creek banks have been stripped of soils and then covered again time after time. The archaeological record is not found in neat stratified layers but is a jumbled mess near the banks of the creek. This can be a curse or a blessing for the diligent researcher when artifacts buried for centuries are brought to the surface.

In March of 2004 I received a letter and newspaper article from Anita Clark detailing the 1961 discovery of a strange relic found on a family hike in Kannah Creek. She said the artifact had been sent off for scholarly study to historian Father Sierra in Pueblo, Colorado, and never returned to her and her husband. The article suggested the relic was a fragment of a 17th century proces-

sional cross from the Dominguez and Escalante Expedition, named for two Catholic priests who traveled through present day western Colorado in 1776.

The expedition attempted to establish a route from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Monterey, California in order to connect with the western Catholic missions. *The Southern Colorado Register* article headlined “Did Colorado’s First Explorers Lose Bronze Relic?” was dated Sept. 1, 1961, and showed a grainy photograph of a strange metal rectangle with intricate designs. The article relat-

ed how a photograph of the bronze relic was sent to various museums to determine its origin.

Steven V. Grancsay, Curator of Arms and Armor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, said it might have been an applied band on a Catholic processional cross. The highly decorated band would have been placed on the face of a processional cross carried by priests to proclaim their Christian faith. Numerous Spanish colonial paintings and drawings show priests carrying processional crosses on their expeditions in the New World. It was intriguing to think the relic may be the only artifact ever found from the Dominguez and Escalante Expedition. While examining the photograph of the relic, I noticed the bottom half was broken off and hoped we could find additional pieces of the relic where it was originally discovered.

In March of 2004, Anita Clark accompanied former Museum Director Mike Perry and me to the area in Kannah Creek where she found the relic. We used a metal detector to do a preliminary search for metallic artifacts associated with the relic that would shed light on how it ended up in western Colorado. That search yielded nothing from the Spanish colonial period that would solve the mystery of the relic.

In 2005, a new investigation group was formed, called the Western Investigations Team (WIT). The team is composed of historians, archaeologists, scientists and interns from the Museum of Western Colorado and Colorado Mesa University (known then as Mesa State College). WIT is dedicated to solving historical mysteries through in-depth research aided by the latest in scientific technology. I was made the Director of the Western Investigations Team, and Mesa State College professor Dr. Rick Dujay was named the Scientific Coordinator. One of our goals was to revisit the Kannah Creek relic mystery with better equipment and a larger team.

On June 22, 2006, the team returned to the Kannah Creek area of the 1961 relic discovery in search of other remnants or associated artifacts. On that same day *The Denver Post* ran a front page story about our expedition and featured a

picture of the artifact found forty-five years earlier by the Clark family. The next day the team, consisting of twenty-two scientists, historians and archaeologists, conducted the first official survey of the area.

Several days earlier, the team had created a large grid area — 96 feet by 132 feet — with wooden stakes and recorded the grid coordinates with GPS units. At the center of the grid was the location of the relic discovery. The team conducted a search both with metal detectors and by visual inspection of each corridor within the grid. Unfortunately the team found no other artifacts associated with the relic. We did find an unusual rectangular stone structure during the survey that would become a very significant addition to the unique history of the Kannah Creek Valley.

A few days later I received a call from Cara DeGette, an editor with the *Colorado Springs Independent*.



I learned that 94-year-old Monsignor Howard Delaney of Pueblo had seen the picture of the artifact in *The Denver Post* and realized that he had the relic in his possession (at left).

Forty-five years earlier, when Father Sierra had been sent to Argentina on an eight year mission, he had entrusted the relic to his friend the Monsignor for safekeeping. Kept in a greeting card box in his file cabinet for forty-five years, the artifact was forgotten until the newspaper article rekindled his memory.

Museum of Western Colorado Director Mike Perry, WIT Scientific Coordinator Dr. Dujay and I took a fifteen hour round-trip drive to pick up the relic in Pueblo and talk to Monsignor Delaney. The relic was brought back for study at the Mesa

State Electron Microscopy Laboratory and at the Museum of the West. Pleased that the relic had been found after forty-five years, Anita Clark graciously donated it to the museum.

Dr. Dujay tested the artifact at his lab and found the object was cast out of pure copper. The fine quality of this copper casting was not typical of the Spanish Colonial Period, which normally utilized iron and bronze for decorative metal designs. Having the actual relic made it easier to discern the symbols and we found it was not of Spanish origin, but was a decorative element from a Masonic Knights Templar sword scabbard that dated to the mid-19th century.

This created mixed feelings for me because although the mystery of the relic was solved, it was not the important artifact that would have linked the Spanish explorers to western Colorado.

In the fall of 2006, the team decided to investigate the stone structure found during the earlier expedition and look for other possible Masonic artifacts near the site. The team excavated around and below the boulders and found the stones on top actually were part of a wall that tilted inward nearly forty degrees (below). When it was uncov-



ered, it took on the appearance of a shallow truncated pyramid (a four sided pyramid with the top cut off). The team investigated the area around the pyramid with metal detectors and found no metallic objects.

After the identification of the Masonic relic, I did extensive research on the history of Freemasonry and discovered that the unfinished pyramid was

a major symbol used by the Masons. Masonic researchers believe it stood for King Solomon's chief architect, Hiram Abiff, who was murdered before he could finish the temple, and his master mason secrets were lost with his death. Perhaps the Knights Templar scabbard relic found nearby was connected to the pyramid site. It is well known that the early Freemasons who traveled out west often met at outside locations when no lodge was available. Also, the site is near the Spanish and Ute trails traveled frequently by early mountain men such as Kit Carson, a well-known Freemason.

In early 2007, the team revisited the stone structure site. Dr. Dujay and I carefully excavated the interior of the pyramid structure. Dr. Dujay removed ten inches of dirt and found what looked to be a mid-19th century muffin style military button. The button was buried too deeply to have been picked up by the earlier metal detection. This type of button got its name because it resembled the top of a muffin. Dr. Dujay tested the object at the university lab and found the button had an iron core and had been brass plated, consistent with 19th century technology.

I researched military buttons from the pre- and post-Civil War eras and found that the button most closely resembled an 1850s style military button and was from the same era as the Masonic relic. The thought occurred to me that an unknown group may have excavated the stone structure out of curiosity in the 1850s. I contemplated the idea that important artifacts explaining the significance of the stone structure may have been removed by early treasure hunters. Unfortunately, treasure hunters and looters are not a recent innovation, and sites that could reveal so much information on the past have been recklessly destroyed.

The Masonic sword scabbard fragment and military muffin button may have been from an 1850s military unit traveling through the area. Often soldiers in the United States Army were also members of Masonic lodges, and their swords reflected their affiliation to a particular lodge. The mystery only deepened when residents told of additional stone structures overgrown or in ru-

ins in the area. The team documented and photographed several of these sites from 2007 to 2011, including a 145-foot-long stone wall built into a hillside. In the book *Tales of the Colorado Pioneers* by Alice Polk Hill, I found an 1882 account of a hunting party that looked down from the edge of Grand Mesa and sighted fifteen miles of stacked stone fence. This meant that some of the stacked stone structures predated the settlement era of Kannah Creek in the late 1880s. The group interpreted the ruins as game drives created by Native Americans to trap and hunt large game. I wondered if the strange stone structures could have been interpreted as an abandoned colony or village that may have created myths for passing travelers.



On Dec. 3, 2011, the team (above) returned to the Kannah Creek site to attempt to find more definitive answers about the four sided stone structure. The new search was the result of an interesting iron artifact found in July of that year, and tentatively identified as a wrought iron trigger guard from a wheellock pistol (at right), used chiefly in the 16th and 17th centuries. When the stone structure was discovered, Dr. Dujay thought it looked like a rifle pit, a defensive bunker used to protect riflemen. I began to think that Dujay was probably right and the structure was a hastily built early defensive fortification known as a Redoubt. The site was then officially named the Redoubt Site.

Dr. Dujay, Dr. Susan Longest and I, accompanied by five Colorado Mesa University students, set out to explore the site. The team set up a grid system around the stone structure and used

metal detectors to attempt to find more fragments of the wheellock pistol or any other diagnostic artifacts. Amazingly, two WIT student-interns, Marryssa Russell and Greg Johnson, uncovered curved metal armor-like fragments on a slope below the Redoubt Site. Johnson also found an L-shaped Spanish colonial style nail and a mysterious iron billet typically used by Spanish colonial blacksmiths for stock iron.

The team was excited by the finds but we tempered our enthusiasm until the artifacts could be tested. Another interesting find at the Redoubt Site was the discovery of five campfires in a straight row, indicating the era of a military style encampment. An important question was, what era did the camp represent? I wondered if this was an unknown Spanish colonial military encampment that had slipped through the cracks of history.

After the expedition, Dr. Dujay and his student interns returned to the university laboratory and used the Leica 3D microscope to examine the metallurgic properties of the artifacts under extreme magnification to create micrographs indicating what era the metal had been manufactured and the efficiency of the casting methods. The micrographs indicated significant deposits of carbon slag and other impurities typically found in 16th and 17th century casting.

On March 7, 2012, Dr. Dujay and I held a press conference at the CMU Electron Microscopy Lab to discuss our finding on the artifacts discovered



at the Redoubt Site. The team announced the metal armor fragments, wheellock trigger guard and iron billet were consistent with metallurgy from the 16th and 17th centuries. In May and June of 2012, Dr. Ken Kosanke, a noted scientist with a Ph.D. in physical chemistry and post-doctoral work in nuclear physics, offered to do additional testing on the armor material found at the Redoubt Site. Dr. Kosanke used an Energy Dispersive X-Ray Florescence (EDXRF) machine at the CMU lab to determine the metallurgic makeup of the artifacts. The machine bombards the artifacts with X-rays, which give off energy within a certain spectrum and identifies metallic composition.

### Distant Treasures in the Mist

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#### About the exhibit:

The *Distant Treasures in the Mist* exhibit at the Museum of the West features Spanish Colonial Period artifacts found at the Redoubt Site including fragments of armor and a wheellock pistol trigger guard, and a 60-inch Plexiglas dome (at right) that houses artifacts and simulates the high-desert environment in which they were found.

The Museum of the West is located at 462 Ute Ave, Grand Junction. Admission is \$6.50 for adults, \$5.50 for seniors, \$3.75 for children and \$20 for family groups. Admission is free for Museum members. Please check our website for hours.

#### About the book:

WIT Director/Curator of History David Bailey's expedition book, *Distant Treasures in the Mist*, is available in the Museum of the West gift shop. The 52-page, soft cover 8 ½-by-11-inch book sells for \$12.95 and features many photographs of the excavation from the Redoubt Site.

#### About the film:

The *Distant Treasures in the Mist* exhibit includes a 25-minute movie directed by Ross Deardorff explaining the discovery of the Redoubt Site and the various interpretations of its history.

The artifacts were compared to previously published metallurgy tests of 16th and 17th century armor and proved consistent with their findings. The iron billet had one final surprise, a faint Spanish colonial quinto tax stamp. Spanish colonial metals were stamped at the time to show the quinto, or "fifth" tax had been paid to the King of Spain. The design of the crown in the tax stamp matched others from the 16th century. The team seemed to have found proof that an unknown early Spanish expedition traveled to present day western Colorado.

Two well-known Spanish colonial expeditions through western Colorado were led by Juan Rivera in 1765, and Fathers Dominguez and Escalante in 1776. However, there were many expeditions not officially sanctioned by the Spanish government that looked for rich mines and lucrative trade.

Our metallurgic testing showed the Redoubt Site artifacts predated the known Spanish colonial expeditions by about two hundred years. Southwest lore is full of lost conquistadors and expeditions

David Bailey and Museum of Western Colorado Board Member Jerry Hamilton at exhibit opening.



that disappeared without a trace. The team had discovered fragments of armor, a wheellock pistol trigger guard and a stamped Spanish colonial billet. But historical quests are never easy to solve, even with substantial evidence.

Several archaeologists have suggested that what we discovered might have been a Ute trading site. The Utes could have gathered old armor fragments and iron remnants after the Pueblo Revolt in 1680 and traded the iron at a campsite that may have predated the stone structure. The campfires washed clean of their charcoal remnants by flooding may have been from a later

military exploration. The design of the Redoubt stacked stone structure, shaped like a truncated pyramid, and in close proximity to a Masonic relic, could have been evidence of a mid-19th century outdoor Masonic lodge.

We still need further evidence to unravel this centuries old mystery. Perhaps the Redoubt mystery could be solved by the discovery of a new artifact or by finding crucial Spanish colonial documents. The answer could be very close, at an obscure research library, or over the next hill, like a distant treasure in the mist.

## Key Terms

**Billet** — A small ingot of iron that could be heated and hammered by blacksmiths to repair armor, tools and other utilitarian items.

**Kit Carson** — Christopher Houston “Kit” Carson was a mountain man, trapper, frontier fighter and explorer. His exploits were converted into dime-store novels, which made him a popular figure on the East Coast of the United States.

**Colorado Mesa University Microscopy Laboratory** — Located on the campus of Colorado Mesa University, this laboratory uses the latest scientific technology, including the scanning electron, 3D and digital microscopes.

**Diocese of Pueblo** — Roman Catholic district administered by the Bishop of Pueblo. The Pueblo Diocese includes part of western Colorado.

**Dominguez and Escalante Expedition** — On July 29, 1776, two Roman Catholic priests, Francisco Atanasio Domínguez and Silvestre Vélez de Escalante, left Santa Fe, New Mexico, in an effort to find a route to the Spanish mission in Monterey, California. They traveled through present day Utah and Colorado but failed to reach California, and returned home.

**Energy Dispersive X-Ray Fluorescence Machine** — Uses high-energy X-rays to determine the elemental characteristics of metal, glass and other materials.

**Freemasons** — An international fraternal organization that bases its tenets on belief in a supreme being and traces its origins to early stonemason guilds in the fourteenth century.

**Grand Mesa** — One of the world’s largest flattop mountains located east of Grand Junction, Colorado, between the Gunnison and Colorado rivers.

**Kannah Creek** — Large creek that flows from the top of Grand Mesa to the Gunnison River.

**Kannah Creek Valley** — Small, lush valley created by the flow of Kannah Creek and used for thousands of years as a prehistoric and historic campsite.

**King Solomon** — An early King of Israel known for his wisdom, and as the builder of the magnificent Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem.

**Masonic Knights Templar** — An order within Freemason fraternal organization.

**Processional Cross** — A symbol of Christian faith, processional crosses were carried by priests who accompanied Spanish explorers of the New World.

**Quinto Tax** — A tax levied by the Spanish King on mineral products in the New World and Spain in which Spain received one-fifth of the profits from commercial ventures or imported or exported goods.

**Redoubt** — A small, hastily built military fortification.

**Rivera Expeditions** — In June and October, 1765, Juan Antonio María Rivera led two expeditions through western Colorado. The first expedition was an effort to find the source of silver ore brought to Santa Fe, and the second expedition was to investigate bearded men living in towns along a large river, presumably today’s Colorado River.

**Spanish Colonial Period** — The Spanish government ruled over large areas of the Americas from Cortes’ conquest of the Aztecs begun in 1519 until Mexican Independence in 1821.

**The Utes** — An indigenous people who migrated from the Great Basin and occupied large areas of present-day Colorado and Utah. Their tribal organization now has three major groups: The Southern Ute Tribe in Colorado, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe in Colorado and Utah, and the Ute Tribe in Northeastern Utah.

**Western Investigations Team** — The Western Investigations Team is composed of Museum of Western Colorado staff, Colorado Mesa University scientists, archaeological consultants and interns dedicated to solving historical mysteries through in-depth historical research and aided by the latest in scientific technology.

**Wheelock Pistol** — Developed in the early 1500s, the wheellock pistol had a steel wheel that, when wound up, would spin and ignite the gunpowder. The pistol had a complex mechanism that required constant repair. Eventually the wheellock pistol was replaced in the seventeenth century by the simple and easy to use flintlock.