

Though Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe's publications about the historical tree carvings created by Basque sheepherders in the American Southwest represented a turning point in arborglyph studies, they unintentionally created a problem of perception. The author, a "glyph" himself, discusses the work of other researchers to document carvings in other regions of the country as a reminder that arborglyphs hold significance for all people in all regions.

EXPANDING THE RANGE

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF ARBORGLYPH DOCUMENTATION

In the Spring/Fall 2001 issue of *Forest History Today*, Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, professor of Basque history at the University of Nevada, Reno, introduced readers to arborglyphs, or tree carvings.¹ The article neatly summarizes Mallea's 2000 book, *Speaking Through the Aspens: Basque Tree Carvings in California and Nevada*.²

The article and book, along with speaking engagements and television documentaries, helped raise public awareness of arborglyphs as legitimate subjects for historical inquiry.³ The narrow focus on Mallea and the carvings he recorded, however, created a problem of perception.⁴ Too often in recent years the term arborglyph has been associated not with tree carvings in general, but instead with tree carvings created exclusively by Basque sheepherders, who etched the bark of aspens in the American Southwest. Such a view discounts the known carved words, images, and symbols of trappers, hunters, fishermen, explorers, surveyors, politicians, landowners, cowboys, indigenous peoples, lovers, travelers, and others who have carved various species of trees in any number of regions since, in Mallea's own words, "time immemorial."⁵

Although the "Mallea model" represents the best-known effort at cataloging arborglyphs, other glyphers in various parts of the country have quietly been amassing substantial collections of carved tree images. Perhaps the work of the diverse researchers profiled here will inspire others to document arborglyphs in various areas.

In 1997, Carol Pedersen volunteered to help document arborglyphs in the Fremont National Forest in southern Oregon. Pedersen has since published one book regarding arborglyphs (another is in the works), and she also received a significant grant to continue research on historical carvings in and around Steens Mountain and Lakeview, Oregon.⁶ Like Mallea, Pedersen documents aspen glyphs created by sheepherders; however, she does so in the Pacific Northwest—an area in which tree carvings have attracted less attention—and she focuses on Irish herders rather than just their Basque counterparts. In particular, she has labored to document the life of an Irish sheepherder and carver named Mike Lucey.

Aspens are not the only medium for arborglyphs. In the well-preserved confines of Yosemite National Park, retired park historian James Snyder spent years recording carvings inscribed on lodgepole pines, several of which display dates from the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ Snyder observed his first Yosemite tree blaze (a term he prefers to arborglyph) in 1958 and began documenting the carvings in the mid-1960s. Historically significant themselves,

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the blazes also provide a link to a well-known American artist. In 1894, Maynard Dixon—painter of natural and cultural elements in the West—created sketches of the Yosemite landscape, including arborglyphs, while on a horseback trip through the park.⁸

Like James Snyder, David McNeill documents arborglyphs in the Sierra Nevada. McNeill, who spent almost three decades working for the United States Forest Service, records carvings by Basque Herders, though the glyphs are often on lodgepole pine rather than aspen. He has also discovered arborglyphs created by Native Americans, cowboys, and (as can be seen on page 51) even a famous American test pilot.

In the southeastern United States, filmmaker Eric Mofford and Atlanta visual artist and writer Sandy Corley are working to document beech tree arborglyphs. Because American beech can survive almost five hundred years, the trees are potential repositories for nearly a half-millennium of carved history. Even though most carvings lose legibility as the elements take their toll,⁹ Mofford and Corley have recorded several clear dates from the early and mid-nineteenth century, many of which can be viewed at their Witness Trees website. The two glyphers intend to convert their data into an IMAX movie that will showcase the carvings of “soldiers, settlers, and other travelers on the trails of our past, who left no other visible legacy.”¹⁰ Mofford and Corley are also seeking to document arborglyphs created by Native Americans in the 1830s, when the indigenous population was forced west along the Trail of Tears. According to tradition, when their belongings became too heavy to carry on the long trek from the South to Oklahoma, Cherokee and Creek Indians buried them beneath marked beech trees.

Like Mofford and Corley, this author has spent years documenting beech tree arborglyphs, though in Ohio rather than the Southeast, and he has published a pair of articles about an early twentieth-century tree-carving trapper.¹¹ The effort to reconstruct the life of trapper Lawrence Orr Linton (“LOL”) bears some resemblance to Carol Pedersen’s detailed study of Mike Lucey, but the Linton story also calls to mind the research that Mofford and Corley have conducted on Native American glyphs. Linton apparently learned his carving technique from his mother, who was reportedly “a full-blooded Cherokee.”¹² Like most early carvers, including Native Americans and Basque shepherders, Linton used the scratch technique—razor-thin incisions created with a small knife or nail. The scratch technique has little immediate effect, but with time the incisions expand to reveal the artist’s true intent. The scratch technique distinguishes old arborglyphs from modern tree graffiti, which according to western environmental historian Andrew Gulliford involve “brutal gouges” that “can damage and even destroy trees.”¹³

Like most carvers, Linton used arborglyphs to blaze trails and indicate cached possessions and as a medium of communication, though he occasionally carved for pleasure or purely out of boredom. The author first encountered the Linton legacy while developing a park program, which suggests that arborglyphs can be adapted for purposes of public outreach and education.¹⁴

The documentation of tree carvings is nearly as old as tree carving itself. Virgil recorded the use of European beech trees for arborglyphs in the first century BC.¹⁵ One of the few clues to the disappearance of the second Roanoke colony involved an arborglyph that read “Croatoan.”¹⁶ The “witness trees” of American surveyors—trees that were used to demarcate prop-

erty boundaries—can still be referenced from public records that date to colonial times. Similarly, broad-arrow trees—trees in the colonies that were marked for the British Navy—have long been known to historians. William Clark reported in one of the journals of the Corps of Discovery that he carved an inscription on a tree to commemorate reaching the Pacific in 1805.¹⁷ Documentation of arborglyphs, however, should not merely be an exercise involving the distant past.

Several contemporary researchers published brief works regarding arborglyphs in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, before Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe began documenting tree carvings.¹⁸ However, Mallea’s efforts represent a turning point in arborglyph studies. His work is more thorough, more systematic, and more analytical than any single earlier effort. Mallea approached arborglyphs as a subject for serious historical inquiry, and in so doing he helped legitimize the study of tree carvings while also raising public awareness of arborglyphs. His assertion that arborglyphs are “unique to the American West,” however, is wrong.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Mallea could not have anticipated that his diligent efforts at recording the aspen arborglyphs of Basque herders in the Southwest might inadvertently divert attention away from the research he helped inspire. The problem, in fact, is not an excess of attention toward Mallea and the carvings he has documented, but rather a relative lack of attention toward arborglyphs of other traditions in other regions.

Many historic tree carvings remain undocumented. If we are to continue to raise awareness of arborglyphs and inspire new efforts at recording historic tree carvings, we must demonstrate that arborglyphs are not exclusive to a particular people or a specific region but rather hold significance for all people in all regions. □

Chris Worrell is a historian living in Cleveland, OH. He would like to thank the many glyphers who offered and provided images and information for the article. Thanks also to David McNeill and FHT editor Dr. James Lewis for encouragement and advice.

NOTES

1. Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, “Carving Out History: The Basque Aspens,” *Forest History Today* (Spring/Fall 2001): 44–50.
2. Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, *Speaking Through the Aspens: Basque Tree Carvings in California and Nevada* (Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2000).
3. Mallea and others in the U.S. West helped raise awareness of arborglyphs through newspaper articles, posters, radio interviews, and movies, in addition to speaking engagements, television documentaries, and a book. Even now, tree carvings are perceived as legitimate subjects for historical inquiry primarily in the West.
4. Mallea is widely regarded as the authority on historic carvings. His status is probably best summed up by journalist Emma Nichols, who writes “if anyone knows about tree carvings, it is Mallea.” See Nichols, “Mystery of the Arborglyphs,” *Sacramento News and Review*, August 22, 2002.
5. Quoted in Mallea, *Speaking Through the Aspens*, 16. There are many good reasons to focus on documenting aspen arborglyphs, as the trees are short-lived and often succumb to sudden aspen decline (SAD), fire, logging, and development. However, other trees face similar man-made and natural threats.

6. Carol Pedersen's original status as a volunteer demonstrates that a recorder of arboglyphs need not be a professional scholar or a federal employee, as are the majority of well-known glyphers. Pedersen won a Loring and Loring grant from the Oregon Archaeological Society to continue documentation of carvings in southern Oregon. She is the author of *Mike Lucey: The Crazy Herder* (Lakeview, OR: Lake County Museum, 2005), which details the life of the tree-carving Irish herder.
7. James Snyder considers the word arboglyph to be modern jargon and prefers the more historically consistent *blaze*. The blazes Snyder recorded at Yosemite National Park exhibit a technique formerly employed by surveyors in marking witness trees at property boundaries: a patch of bark was completely removed, and the underlying surface was then inscribed. James Snyder, historian with the National Park Service (retired), email correspondence with the author, November 2008.
8. Dixon was also the husband of Depression-era photographer Dorothea Lange. "Famous Artist Maynard Dixon: Recollections of Yosemite Indian People in 1894," *The Hive*, <http://thehive.modbee.com/q+node/3083> (accessed on June 2, 2008). Ansel Adams later photographed arboglyphs in the Sierra Nevada, though he generally did so unintentionally.
9. According to University of Alabama anthropologist Vernon Knight, Indian tree carvings would be quite rare. See Katherine Bouma, "Forest Tells Stories from Long Time Ago," *Smallwood News*, <http://www.smallwoodnews.com/Forum/phpBB2/index.php> (accessed June 5, 2007).
10. Visit the *Witness Trees* website at <http://witnessstrees.org>. For similar Native American arboglyphs, explore the *Indian Burial and Sacred Grounds Watch* website at <http://www.ibsgwatch.imagedginn.com/-37k>. See also Forest Wade, *Cry of the Eagle: History and Legends of the Cherokee Indians and Their Buried Treasure* (Atlanta: self-published, 1969).
11. The two articles by Chris Worrell regarding the tree-carving Ohio trapper are "Tracking a Twentieth Century Ohio Trapper," *Parks Plus* (Fall 2006): 2–3, and "LOL: The Life of a Twentieth Century Ohio Trapper," *Lake County History News and Review* 45, 3 (July 2006): 6–8.
12. Greta Shipman-Pallister, "Orr Linton Left His Mark," *The Historical Society Quarterly: Lake County, Ohio* 14, 2 (May 1972): 1–2. The information regarding Mrs. Linton's Cherokee heritage was provided by Robert Shankland, a young trapping protégé of Linton's. Although the claim of Cherokee ancestry for the Lintons is suspect, Shankland's credentials certainly are not. Shankland eventually became head of the physics department at the Case School of Applied Science, while also doing work for the Atomic Energy Commission.
13. Andrew Gulliford, "Reading the Trees: Arboglyphs & Aspen Art," *Inside-Outside Magazine* (November–December 2006): 3–7.
14. Lake (County) Metroparks continues to offer the educational program that I researched and designed on Lawrence Orr Linton, the tree-carving trapper.
15. Paul Alpers, *The Singer of the Eclogues: A Study of Virgilian Pastoral* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 33.
16. Some maintain that the "Croatoan" arboglyph was carved on a fence-post rather than a living tree. Recent discoveries suggest that settlers of the second Roanoke colony may have moved fifty miles south to the Croatoan chiefdom on Hatteras Island. See Catherine Kozak, "Buxton Crew Digs Up Possible Lost Colony Link," *The Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk, Virginia), October 14, 1998.
17. Clark's inscription reads: "William Clark, December 3rd 1805. By Land from the U. States in 1804 and 1805." See Gary Moulton, ed., *The Lewis and Clark Journals* (Elko: Bison Press, 2004).
18. One other book on arboglyphs has been published. See James Dekorne, *Aspen Art in the New Mexico Highlands* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1970). Several significant articles about arboglyphs predate the arboglyph research of Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, which Mallea began in earnest in 1989. Mallea lists at least fifteen such articles by twelve different authors (or pairs of authors) in his bibliography. See Mallea, *Speaking Through the Aspens*, 215–21.
19. Mallea, *Speaking Through the Aspens*, 13.



This interesting Alabama beech tree carving is often interpreted as a sunburst. The same image appears on the *Witness Trees* website (<http://www.witnessstrees.org>). Paper, now often taken for granted, was not always a readily accessible medium for creative expression; however, the bark canvas was often seen as an acceptable substitute in past times.



This Alabama arboglyph (left) depicts the Confederate Flag and a cannon and lists the year 1862. The commemorative carving may not date to the Civil War, though it appears to be quite old.



Though distorted by time, this blaze (right) depicts crossed sabers, with the number four (for 4th Cavalry) above, and a “C” (for C Troop) below. Lieutenant Nathaniel F. McClure marked the tree in 1894 while mapping Yosemite National Park and pursuing illegal herders. Yosemite National Park historian James Snyder and his crew searched for more than a decade to locate this glyph.



Most documented arboglyphs use the bark as canvas, but lodgepole pine blazes are inscribed into the wood after the rough bark of the tree is removed. James Snyder discovered this tree (right) in Yosemite National Park in 1963. The inscription reads, “T.G.S. HELLS DELIGHT, JULY, 4th 77.” We are fortunate to have a record of this interesting nineteenth-century carving; the tree and its blaze have now returned to the earth, the ultimate fate of all arboglyphs.



One of five crosses in the woods (left) that once marked an outdoor chapel for herders in Yosemite.

According to long-time observers, this image of a flower seems to have “bloomed” with age. The ornate carving (below), located at the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes, in Shaker Heights, Ohio, is an outstanding example of the use of the scratch technique, which involves fine incisions that expand over time. The creator of this carving may be “Jas. S.,” who signed a nearby tree (in a very similar hand) and then added the date 1912. Both the tree and the arborglyph could have been destroyed in the 1960s if not for a grassroots effort to halt the construction of a freeway. Shaker Lakes, named for the North Union Shaker religious community, is—like many preserved areas—both historically and environmentally significant.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



This profile (left), perhaps a self-portrait, appears on a beech tree in rural Leroy Township in Lake County, Ohio. Although the name is difficult to decipher, the date appears to read 1891. The significance of the bird, if any, remains a mystery. More involved images such as this suggest that tree carvings are an expression of the relationship between people and the environment at a certain point in time.

COURTESY OF JAMES SNYDER/NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

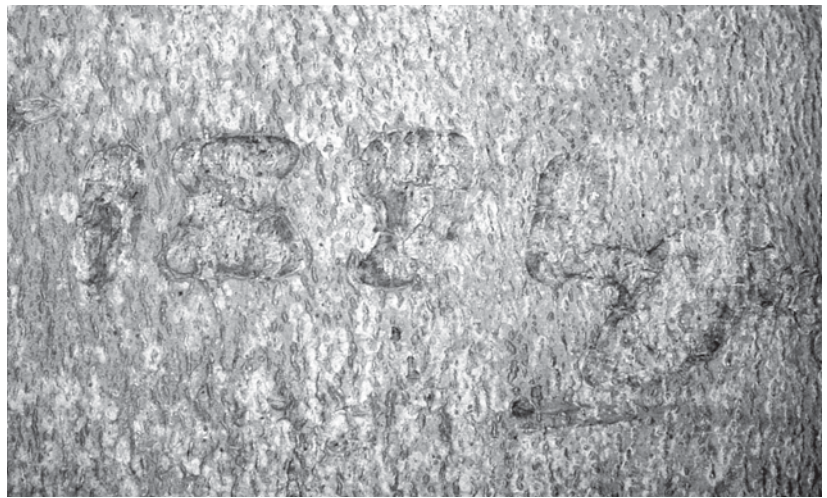
COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

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Though born into an affluent and influential Pennsylvania family, Lawrence Orr Linton preferred the life of a simple trapper. In Ohio, Linton earned a reputation as a skilled outdoorsman before suffering a mysterious death in 1926. About a dozen “LOL” trees are still standing in Cuyahoga and Lake counties, though few people know of this particular carving, which is deep in the woods of the Cleveland Metropark-owned North Chagrin Reservation.

Because tree carvings fade with time, practiced glyphers develop an eye for names, dates, and other features. This 1894 arborglyph—part of the vast woodland archive of names, dates, and images—is in Cuyahoga Valley National Park, near Cleveland.

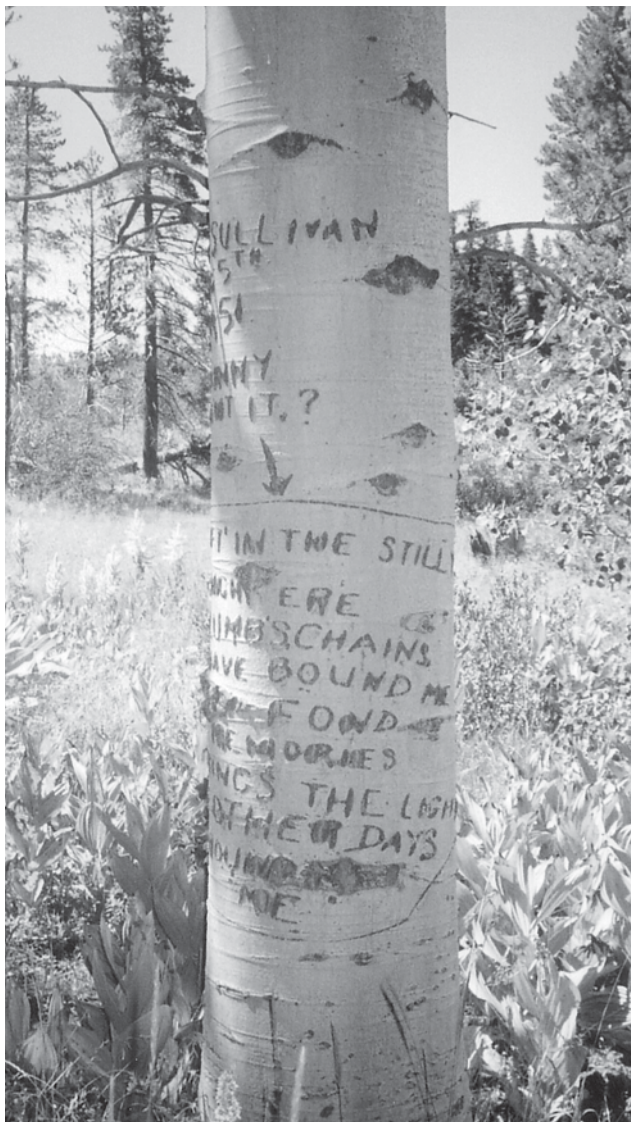


COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

COURTESY OF CAROL PEDERSEN



This female portrait was photographed by Carol Pedersen near Lakeview, Oregon. The arborglyph represents one of the few known carved images of Basque women in the Lakeview area.



Though some of the most interesting arborglyphs reveal artistic flair, many others are meant to communicate, record history, or capture emotion or poetic sensibility. Irish sheepherder Mike Sullivan etched this bit of verse (left) in Lakeview, Oregon, in 1951: “Mike Sullivan, August 5th 1951, Funny isn’t it, oft in the stilly night ere, slumb’s chains, have bound me fond memories, brings the light, of other days, around me.”



Famed test pilot Chuck Yeager, best known as the first person to break the sound barrier, inscribed this aspen (above) near June Lake, California. The signatures of countless overlooked historical figures appear in the woodland archives, though arborglyphs by famous carvers are occasionally discovered.

Even tough, slow-growing pinyon pine sometimes bears carvings. This tree (right) once marked the border of the H.E.S. Ranch and Farm, now owned by the Inyo National Forest. Surveyors’ witness trees not only denote boundaries, but also reveal information about land use and prior forest composition.

