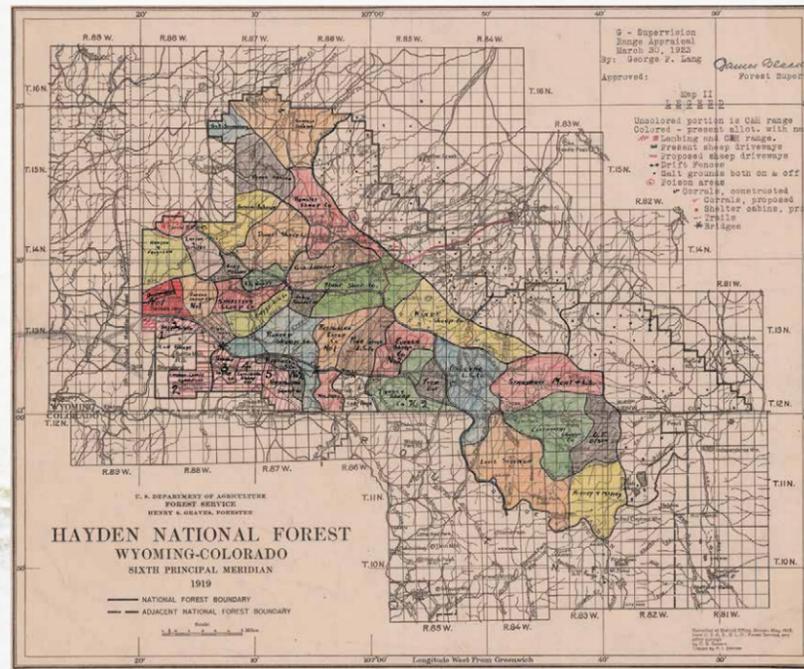


For more than 100 years shepherders in Wyoming have cared for their flocks, weathering blistering heat, blustery storms, and financial ups and downs. The history of Wyoming cannot be told without acknowledging the part played by sheep—the animals, the owners, and the herders. Books tell us the stories of the conflicts with cattlemen and the romance and hardships of living in a sheep wagon. Statistics give us data on the rise and fall of the sheep industry. County histories are replete with the names of sheep owners, like the Cosgriffs, Nicolaysens, and Iberlins. But in the high mountain aspen groves of the Sierra Madres and Medicine Bow Forest, it is the trees that tell the tales of the shepherders.

Jim Bridger is said to have brought the first sheep into Wyoming around 1845. Several frontiersmen, including Kit Carson, trailed sheep along the Oregon-California Trail through Wyoming. Permanent flocks were established in Albany County in the 1860s and in Carbon County by the 1880s. The U.S. Forest Service was created in the early 1900s, and in 1907 formal grazing districts were established in the forests to control overgrazing and forest degradation.



This tree has multiple glyphs including a man in a cowboy hat (perhaps a self-portrait from the herder) and indiscernible text below.



Hayden National Forest map, annotated with grazing information by USFS, 1923.

Through a practice known as transhumance, in southern Wyoming the shepherd's season began in June when bands of 2,000 to 2,500 sheep were moved into the mountains to fatten for market. There they would graze until fall, when the flocks were moved to the foothills to be culled for market. Grazing would continue in the foothills until weather forced them to their winter range in the Red Desert.¹

Most often, the shepherders were poor immigrants, commonly Mexican, Basque, Greek, and Irish and were almost exclusively men.² In Wyoming, as well as throughout the west, sheep bands of several hundred to several thousand, were tended by a single herder. They would spend months tending their sheep in isolation, with only occasional visits by camp tenders.³ Generally only paid at the end of the grazing season, some shepherders took their pay in sheep as a way to build up their own flocks. Often herding became a family business, with the older

generation sponsoring and teaching their sons and nephews.⁴ Basque shepherders concentrated in Johnson County, with a few located in Rock Springs. However, based on tree carvings, most of the shepherders in the Sierra Madres of southern Wyoming were Hispanics from northern New Mexico.

Humans document their presence in the world through various means, as exemplified by prehistoric rock art and historic inscriptions along the Oregon-California Trail. For shepherders in Wyoming and other western states, the canvas of choice was aspen trees. Aspens have a smooth light-colored bark and a large trunk with relatively few limbs. Additionally, the growing requirements of aspens favor the growth of vegetation for animal fodder and aspen groves are generally in close proximity to a water source, thus making the areas near the groves excellent sheep bedding grounds and shepherd campsites.



Ruben Vigil, sheep herder and arborglyph artist in the Sierra Madre Range, ca. early 1950s. Photo courtesy of the Wyoming State Archives (Sub Neg 24565).

During the long, lonely summer days and nights, shepherders would carve into the bark with a sharp tool leaving a thin line. As the tree grows, the thin line begins to widen and a scar is created, revealing and enhancing the carving. Eventually the scarring builds up to the point the carving becomes illegible.

Cultural resource surveys completed in the Sierra Madre Range have documented thousands of aspen carvings or arborglyphs. These glyphs were made by a variety of people, including shepherders, recreationalists, and others. Some of these glyphs are the result of a single visit or even multiple visits over time. However, shepherders are one of the few groups who spent a sustained period in isolated forests with time to create multiple carvings, and some of the earliest arborglyphs in the Medicine Bow National Forest date to the early 1900s. The glyphs cover a range of subjects, including dates, names, phrases, pictures, and abstract designs.

The most overwhelming number of glyphs are names and dates, sometimes with a hometown and state. Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe feels that just by placing their name on a tree, the shepherders were "claiming" the area as their own.⁵ Additionally, by placing their names on trees, the shepherders provided an accounting of individual people, population numbers, and families. Arborglyphs recorded in the Sierra Madres show several carved by the same individual over multiple years, but also names of different family members. For example, Adonaiso Martinez from Cordova, New Mexico carved his name on multiple trees between 1952 and 1961. And during the 1920s through 1950s multiple individuals with the last name Trujillo left their mark on dozens of trees. Since shepherding was seen as a male profession, most of the name glyphs are male names. The few documented female names are generally not associated with dates or place names, suggesting that they

are the names of the shearers' loved ones far away at home.

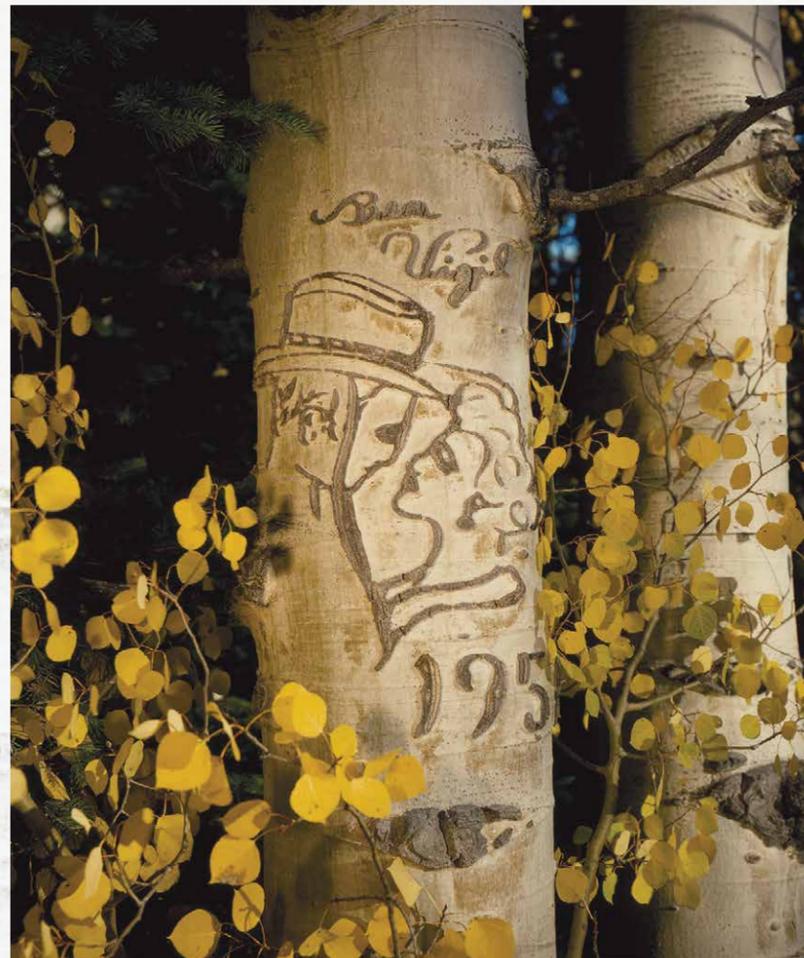
Of all the hundreds of place names identified in the Sierra Madres, Cordova, New Mexico is the most common. Other towns in New Mexico included Arroyo Seco, Chacon, Mora, and others. The majority of the New Mexican place names are from the San Luis valley. The much fewer instances of other states include Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, and Nevada. The only other country identified is Peru.

Phrases carved into the trees run from factual statements like "Ben's Camp" to the worshipful "Dios Es Amore" and the soulful "Tu Solo Tu Corazon". Glyphs documented in other areas have consisted of poems, directions to specific places, laments about loneliness, curses, and many other forms of expression.

The pictures carved on the trees include human figures, animals, religious symbols, and symbols from nature.



Here, Adonaiso Martinez of Cordova, New Mexico, signed his name with a date in June (Junio) and drew a structure (perhaps thinking of his family and home, or depicting his sheep wagon).



A 1954 arborglyph of a man and woman in a loving embrace, drawn by Ruben Vigil. Photo courtesy of Bill and Beth Sagstetter.

Human figures represent approximately 8% of the carvings recorded. Although some articles about arborglyphs focus on the sometimes lewd nature of these carvings, in reality, these types of carvings represent less than 3% of all the glyphs identified. However, female figures do heavily outnumber male figures by about 3 to 1. Other common themes were religious symbols including crucifixes and angel wings, and more personal symbols like houses/tents, flowers, and hearts.

Some researchers consider arborglyphs as the art, literature, and history of people not well represented in historic accounts.⁶ Sadly, arborglyphs are a finite and fast disappearing cultural resource. Aspen trees rarely live for longer than 100 years and for a variety of reasons, aspen groves are fast declining throughout the western United States. Because of the organic canvas, it is nearly impossible to preserve arborglyphs in their natural setting. Therefore it is imperative to document and preserve the valuable information contained in the arborglyphs before they are gone. In addition to efforts by the USFS in Wyoming and elsewhere, archaeologists, historians, ethnographers, and researchers are developing a nation-wide digital catalog of arborglyph data.

¹ McKee Dave, 1991, *A Historic Overview of Sheep Grazing in the Sierra Madre Mountains*. A Mitigation Report for the Robinson-Jones-Whiskey Timber Sale. Prepared for the Hayden Ranger District of the Medicine Bow NF, Wyoming

² Stubbs, Donna, 2022, *Sierra Madre Arborglyph Context—Appendix A of A Class III Cultural Resource Survey for the Sandstone Vegetation Project, Medicine Bow NF, Wyoming*. (FS Report No. R2021020602005). Organic Act permit (No. R2CRM034).

³ Mallea-Oleatxe, Joxe, 2000, *Speaking Through The Aspens: Basque Tree Carvings in California and Nevada*. University of Nevada Press, Reno and Las Vegas, Nevada.

⁴ Gulliford, Andrew, 2018, *The Woolly West: Colorado's Hidden History of Sheepscapes*. Texas A&M University Press, College Station, Texas. Arnold, Peg, 1997, "Wyoming's Hispanic Shepherders." *Annals of Wyoming* 69, No. 1,2,3,4: 33–36.

⁵ Mallea-Oleatxe, 2000.

⁶ Mallea-Oleatxe, 2000.

Donna Stubbs (ACR Consultants, Inc.) and Medicine Bow National Forest contributed to this brochure. Information in this brochure was, in part, developed by ACR under Forest Service permit R2CRM034 for FS Report No. R2021020602005.

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*Shepherders and Arborglyphs
in the Sierra Madre Mountains*

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