



## Museum lecture looks up to solve intaglio mystery



By Mark Wheeler For the Hi-Desert Star

YUCCA VALLEY — Hi-Desert Nature Museum’s Lecture Series speaker held the attention of a full house Thursday as he told the story of a mystery tortoise located not far from Barstow.

Speaker John Rafter first read about and saw a photo of the tortoise in a book by Bill Mann called, “Guide to 50 Interesting and Mysterious Places in the Mojave Desert, Volume 1.”

About 40 feet in diameter, the tortoise was created when all the rocks on a large expanse of desert pavement were removed by someone so that the sand underneath would make a

recessed design in contrast to the rocks still remaining around it. This kind of earth art is called an “intaglio.”

Some thought the intaglio was a modern construction, perhaps made by the troops who trained with Patton in the region. Upon studying the weathering on the stones of two rock cairns associated with the intaglio, and doing some background research on Patton’s training area, Rafter wasn’t so sure. But, if it wasn’t the work of bored tank crewmen, or some other contemporary desert rat, who did make it, and why, he wondered.

Five years later, Rafter thinks he has the answer, and the trail to that answer took him to the stars and back into the cultural history of Native American tribes that inhabited the region.

Not one to keep his audience waiting in too much suspense, Rafter dealt quickly with the ancillary research he did and got right down to the Eureka! discovery of his investigation. This involved finding alignments between certain points on the tortoise body and celestial bodies in the sky.

Rafter knew enough about such earthwork artifacts to suspect alignments right from the start of his study, and he quickly determined that the tortoise was laid out according to the cardinal points. The head pointed exactly true north, confirmed on a night visit by John when he observed the head’s perfect alignment with the North Star. However, upon subsequent overnight vigils, he couldn’t find any other such directional alignments.

None of the legs pointed at anything he could observe, nor did a mysterious arrow- or spear-shaped shaft cutting across the middle of the body point at anything. Of further mystery was the fact that all the appendages and the two ends of the shaft were all different lengths.

Looking for any line-of-sight coordinates on the intaglio he could think of, Rafter finally sighted across the tips of different appendages. There it was. His first confident alignment sighted across the tips of the tortoise’s front legs and right onto the tip of the equinox sun rising on the distant eastern horizon.

All in all, Rafter found numerous alignments between the tips of the appendages and solstice and equinox sunrises and sunsets. In addition, he found alignments with different star groups such as the Pleiades and Orion.

Still eluding him, though, was the shaft through the tortoise body. Why couldn’t he find an alignment for it? Studying star charts for some idea of what he might look for and when, he noticed a particular star called Spica that would be setting in the area right about sundown at summer’s end. He settled in one late summer afternoon and, sure enough, the star appeared brightly, right after sunset. Remaining visible just long enough to be seen, it then disappeared below the horizon. It aligned perfectly with the pointed tip of the shaft.

Showing his audience the alignment in his slideshow, Rafter noted he might have taken the alignment to be coincidental. However, he knows of one regional tribe that recognized the star because there is a name for it in their language. Moreover, the Chemehuevi, who inhabited the area in the near past, have a specific word for “the beginning of autumn” that is different from a word they have for the season of autumn. According to historical records, the beginning of autumn, besides launching harvest activities, was observed by the Chemehuevi as a ritual time for honoring the recent dead.

Much work remains in actually confirming the intaglio’s meaning and author, but Rafter is accumulating strong evidence that the artifact is Chemehuevi in origin, was built during the last 500 years and served as a calendar to pinpoint the exact end of summer. In Chemehuevi lore, the tortoise is the symbol for summer. At the fall equinox, summer dies, Spica appears briefly on the horizon at sunset, and the pointed shaft through the tortoise intaglio’s body points directly at it.

Rafter’s audience was convinced, and judging from the swarm of people around him at his lecture’s end, a lot of them will be eager to hear the mystery’s final outcome. Death of summer? Or, does the mystery win again?