

Thinking they were the first individuals to reach the top of the Grand Teton, Nathaniel Langford and his climbing partner, James Stevenson were surprised to find a stone structure, nestled into a saddle immediately below the summit. Langford wrote in his diary for July 29, 1872:

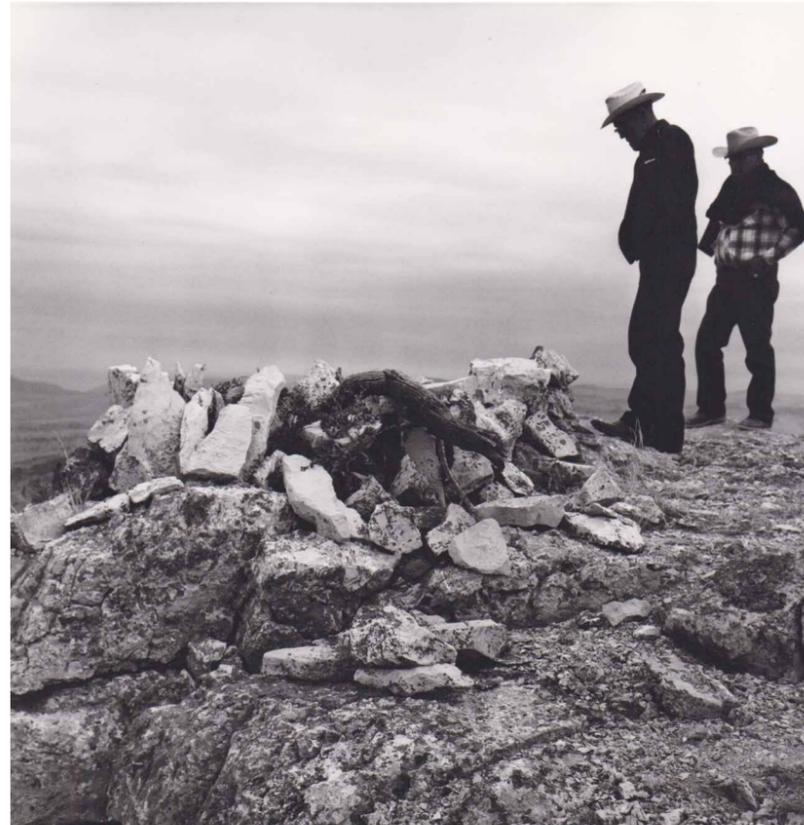
On one of the adjoining buttresses, which was but a little lower than the very summit, we found a curiosity in the shape of granite slabs piled up on end, in circular form, 6 feet diameter, the space filled with disintegrating granite, eroded from these vertical slabs, and completely filling the interstices between the rocks at the bottom. This was probably done hundreds of years ago, for hundreds of years must have been required to fill this space with granite fragments as small as these.<sup>1</sup>

With this 150-year-old description, the debate started as to why someone would build a rock structure at 13,280' asl. One thing was clear, if Langford and Stevenson were the first Euroamericans to access the top of the mountain, the structure must have been built by Indians. Less clear, however, was why Indians would build such a feature.

An early explanation was that the structure was a hunting blind. In the late 1800s western explorers saw structures of similar shape and size along game trails that were used by Indians for hunting bighorn sheep and other game animals. Noting that the enclosure resembles a hunting blind it was only logical to suggest it was a similar feature. It takes only a few minutes of speculation, however, to realize the hunting blind idea is not practical. Why would a hunter crawl to the top of a mountain when any game they killed would need to be carried to a camp thousands of feet below? That is, of course, if they even shot an animal that did not fall off a cliff to a place where it could not be retrieved.

The hunting blind explanation made little sense, but it persisted as a reason for the enclosure until the 1960s when Crow Indians started to visit similar stone structures with archaeologists in the Pryor Mountains and adjacent lands in Montana. The Crow explained that the rock features were the fasting beds of supplicants

who were seeking a guardian spirit helper. After a few dozen of these fasting beds were recorded in locations on prominent places, it was apparent that the Teton enclosure was the same kind of structure.



*Crow Indians Joe Rock Above and Henry Old Coyote visiting a fasting bed on the edge of a cliff in the Pryor Mountains, Montana, 1970. Photograph by Lawrence Loendorf.*

The acquisition of power and a guardian spirit helper was widely practiced by American Indians across western North America. Young males were the most common supplicants, but all ages and sexes were open to seeking a spiritual assistant. A first step in the process was to purify in a sweat bath. This was followed by smudging or lighting a pungent-smelling herb to create incense smoke that was passed over the body. Crow Indians often used dried “ise” or bear root for their purifying smudge as it was important to remove the human smell from



the body so the “without fires” (the name used by the Crow for the spirits) would not be afraid. When the cleansing was complete the individual went to an isolated place, often on a mountain crest, where they fasted and prayed for a visit from a guardian spirit. The ritual might last for four days and nights while the supplicant went without food, water, or fire. Depriving one’s body of essential nutrients would enhance the opportunity to enter into a trance state where the spirits abound. In the olden days, the individual might practice self-mutilation to increase the susceptibility to a guardian spirit. Crow Indians usually cut off part of a finger to offer to the spirits as their penitence.

If the supplicant was fortunate, a guardian spirit would appear. Their visit might begin with a “little person” appearing while the supplicant was in trance. The little person would act as a go between to lead the man on a journey into another world where he would be introduced to the supernatural spiritual forces. There he would receive his power, perhaps from an eagle, a bison, or a bear. He would also be taught a medicine song and told to construct a bundle to hold talismans or sacred objects that were to be brought forth when he needed to call upon his spirit helper.

Most of the western tribes followed a similar ritual with some variations. The Shoshone, for example, chose to fast at rock art sites, while Salish-speaking groups would fast in isolated places but without any rock enclosures. Crow Indians followed a somewhat different process. After selecting a location, the faster will build a rock structure known as a bed *Alaxape*, in a U shape or some cases in an oval shape.<sup>3</sup>

There does not seem to be a reason as to why one style was chosen over the other. One possibility, offered by Marvin Stewart, an Apsáalooke elder, is that perhaps the horseshoe beds’ high backs were built during a time of intertribal warfare. This design may have provided a place for protection of the faster.<sup>4</sup>

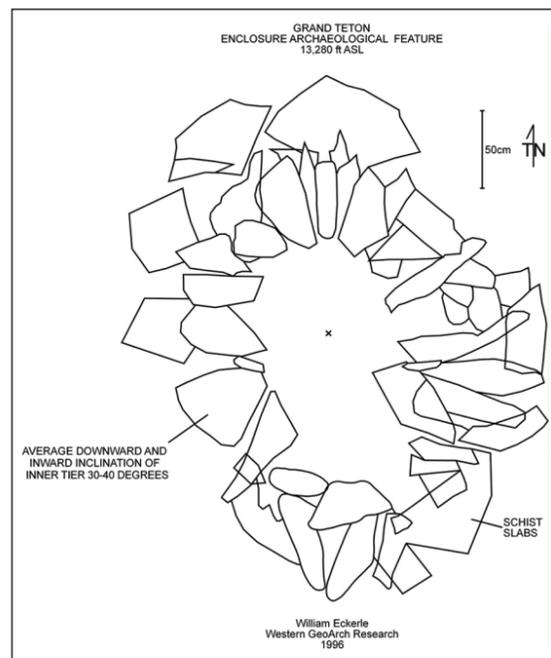
The structures were made from rocks. It is in this structure that the supplicant stays for the duration of the fast, only leaving for bathroom breaks. Occasionally a faster would leave the bed but to stay close was essential. Each faster would build his own bed.

In a controlled study, eighteen of these fasting beds along the Dryhead Rim of the Pryor Mountains were photographed, measured, and recorded in plan-view drawings. They range in height from 5 cm to 70 cm with an average of 33 cm; the widths range from 40 cm to 350 cm with an average of 202 cm; and the lengths are from 80 cm to 400 cm with an average of 239 cm. These measurements, of course, represent their collapsed state and do not reflect the original size before they eroded and weathered in the past hundreds of years.

### The Grand Teton Enclosure site (48TE374)

Charles Love assigned the Teton enclosure site an official site number while completing an archaeological survey of the Jackson Hole region in early 1970s. Although he did not visit the site, he identified it, based on other descriptions, as an enclosure or stone circle and possible vision quest structure. Gary Wright and Melissa O'Connor, other archaeologists who undertook extensive research in Grand Teton National Park, offered the same conclusions, albeit without visiting the site.<sup>6</sup>

*Plan view map of the Teton Enclosure feature made by William Eckerle in 1996. The structure's size is consistent with other Crow Indian fasting beds in Wyoming and Montana.*



It was apparently not until 1998 that William Eckerle, a geo-archaeologist, and his climbing partner, Forrest McCarthy, visited the site to obtain accurate location information and make a plan-view drawing of the enclosure structure. The drawing is instructive. It shows that the enclosure is not circular, rather it is oval-shaped with a long axis oriented north and south. The inside measurements of the feature are slightly more than 150 cm in length by about 120 cm in width. Outside measurements are 200 cm in length by somewhat more than 150 cm in width.<sup>7</sup> The schist slabs that make up the enclosure are standing on end at angles that range from 30 to 40 degrees. They have obviously slid down from the weight of the snow since they were originally stood into the oval outline and they have almost certainly been altered some by hikers who passed though the feature intent on their goal to reach the mountain top.

These alterations notwithstanding, the Teton Enclosure is well within the size variation for an Apsáalooke fasting bed, a fact that suggests it was made by a Crow Indian. Crow traditions confirm that the structure represents a Crow fasting bed. Grant Bulltail, a respected Crow elder, explained that the Grand Teton Mountains were known to the Crow as “Bishish’s Father”, a name that was bestowed on the mountains because a young Crow man by the name of Bishish fasted on the Teton peaks. He had a vision



*Fasting Bed Pryor Mountain Brien Collection, 2013. Photograph by Aaron B. Brien.*

of horses on an island surrounded by water. Bishish then traveled with a companion, “Carries Marrow Bone in his Mouth” on a seven-year journey to the south to

obtain the tribe’s first horses. Through his life Bishish was protected by the power of the Teton mountains.<sup>8</sup>

While there is no certainty that Bishish is the person who constructed the enclosure, the story offers confirmation that the Apsáalooke knew the Teton Mountains as a powerful place to seek supernatural guidance. Regardless of who built it, the Grand Teton Enclosure site is an enduring legacy to the Native groups who lived in the region for millennia.

<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Langford’s diary is housed at the Heritage and Research Center for Yellowstone National Park, Gardiner, Montana.

<sup>2</sup> Nabokov, Peter, and Lawrence Loendorf, *Every Morning of the World: An Ethnographic Overview of Bighorn National Recreation Area: Including Information on Adjacent Lands Managed by Custer National Forest and the Bureau of Land Management* (1994). Typescript Report on file with Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, Lovell, Wyoming.

<sup>3</sup> Brien, Aaron B., *Bilishhiisaannuaal/To Go without Water: The Importance of Fasting among the Apsáalooke* (2015:46). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 4625

<sup>4</sup> Marvin Stewart personal communication with Aaron Brien (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Brien, Aaron B., *Bilishhiisaannuaal/To Go without Water: The Importance of Fasting among the Apsáalooke* (2015:48). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 4625.

<sup>6</sup> Love, Charles, *An Archaeological Survey of the Jackson Hole Region, Wyoming*, MA Theses (1972) Department of Anthropology, University of Wyoming, Laramie; Wright, Gary, *A Preliminary Report on the Archaeology of the Jackson Hole Country, Wyoming* (1975), Department of Anthropology, State University of New York, Albany. On file with the National Park Service; Connor, Melissa. Site form data (1991).

<sup>7</sup> Eckerle, William, Grand Teton Enclosure Archaeological Feature plan view map, (1996), Western GeoArch Research.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Grant Bulltail. *Crow Place Names: Grand Tetons*. Native Memory Project <https://nativememoryproject.org/memory-maps/>

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# THE ENCLOSURE

Lawrence L. Loendorf, President  
Sacred Sites Research, Inc.

Aaron B. Brien, Director  
Crow Tribal Historic Preservation Office