

Spanish Trail Treasure: S. Alva Matheson

Editor's note:

The following article is a copyrighted excerpt from the writings of **S. Alva Matheson** (1903-2000), Cedar City, Utah, regarding some of his findings of Spanish "TREASURE" along the Old Spanish Trail in Iron County, Utah.

The artifacts referred to herein are currently on display at the Museum of the San Rafael, Old Spanish Trail Exhibit, Castle Dale, Utah.

This article was included in a limited edition hardback book under the title of "*Indian Stories and Legends*," published in 1974 by the Southern Utah State College, (pp. 172).

***"My Find Along The Spanish Trail,"***

My summers when I was a kid were spent on the Cedar Bottoms on our 200 Acre ranch. As a farm it paid little dividend to speak of but it furnished good pasturage for a few animals and a good place to keep four growing boys out of town and mischief. There was enough work to keep us all busy and my Brother Rass and I spend many hours riding horses in the valley and the Three Peaks country (Iron County, Utah). In our travels I noticed many places in an east-west line where the vegetation growth seemed to be stunted and sometimes almost bare of growth up to two hundred yards in width. These patches were in a line between Enoch and Iron Springs. This was puzzling to me. Rass and I commented on it but neither of us could come up with an answer. On day when Father and I were together I asked him if he could tell me the reason for these spots. He said, "Oh..., that's the Old Spanish Trail." This meant little to me so I asked for an explanation.

He told me how the Spanish traders had driven cattle, mules and horses from Monterey, California through the Cedar Valley. They were on their way to Santa Fe, New Mexico, stealing and taking what they wanted, even men, women and children from the Indian tribes they came in contact with. They made slaves of them, selling and bartering as they went to one end of the trail, and then reversing their travel and doing it all over again on the return trip. He told me of the pounding of the trail to powder by the thousands of head of animals which was the reason for the bare spots. This part of our local history has never ceased to intrigue me, and I've never failed to grasp any information I could about The Old Spanish Trail.

Before there were too many fences in the Cedar Valley I have ridden horses over this ground many times following the old (Spanish) Trail, trying to visualize just what had taken place, the trail-weary animals starved and falling by the wayside, the footsore slaves plodding along through ankle deep dust, chained together so they couldn't break away and escape to the hills for freedom. In my mind's eye I tried to picture the cruel lashings administered to humans and animals alike. Since that time I have heard of many atrocities carried out against the Indians by the unfeeling Spanish masters.

About two miles east and a little north of Iron Springs there is an abrupt outcropping of grey sandstone which overlooks one of the most frequently used Spanish campground in this area. I have spent many hours on top of this pile of rocks which is probably fifty or sixty feet above the flat ground and is situated right where the flat ground of the valley meets the gently sloping hills to the north. There is quite an area of rough, weather-worn sand rock strata to the west which reaches a height of probably twenty five feet above the flat ground and is eroded into gullies, holes, and flat places deep enough to afford protection from wind. It is high enough to be out of the mud in wet weather and from it the travelers could look out over several hundred acres of grass and marshy pasture lands that provided feed for the hundreds of head of animals that passed through. A nice camp situation under the circumstances could hardly be found. Some people may question my statement as the marshy grassland, but they do not know or remember this part of our county as I do (circa 1910).

This place received much of the drainage from Cedar Valley, especially during high water and summer floods from the south and east, as well as from Quitchipah Lake, plus several quite large springs at Eight mile which drained down the west side of the valley and spread over this flat ground, finally finding its way into the Iron Springs Lake and on out into the neck of the desert. I have seen water in the drainage way from Eight mile, several feet wide and deep enough to reach a horse's belly.

Since the advent of deep pump wells for irrigation, Quitchipah Lake has dried up. There are no springs at Eight mile and only a seep where the Iron Springs used to flow a good irrigating stream. To my knowledge, no water has reached the Iron Springs Gap from Coal Creek for many years, but the Old Spanish camp site and trail are still very much in evidence.

As time went on I seldom visited this place until after I joined the Rock Club in 1948, when in studying rocks and minerals and being anxious to obtain as many minerals and crystal forms as I could, I went back for some of the magnetite crystals. At this time I discovered some hieroglyphics on a flat surface rock but lacked time to do any exploring. Later, about 1960, in talking to my sister Rhoda, she said she had never been out to this place so we planned a picnic lunch and she and her husband and our sister Marcella and her husband, my sister Ella and my wife Zella and I drove out for a pleasant afternoon of visiting. I was interested in the Indian writings and spent some time studying the place where they were. Sometime in the long-distant past a large part of the ledge had been broken away leaving quite a large angular wall on the west and north, making a good place to build a lean-to with a flat floor, a nice room for protection from

the elements. Long since the lean-to and floor have been eroded away leaving pictures of men and deer pecked into the west wall. By studying and trying to reconstruct in my mind the scene of activity as it might have been at one time long ago, I decided that if any artifact had been left there it would by now have been washed out and down the slope to the dirt below and would be covered by erosion. I decided to follow my hunch and dig a little bit. As I raked the pick quickly several times, to my surprise I uncovered a stone doll about three inches long, one and one fourth inches wide with its arms crossed in front and with a rather wide, Indian-type face. I left to return home with the resolution to return the next day to dig some more, but time marches on. It was several years before opportunity allowed me to return.

One day about the first of October, 1971, I decided to ride my motorbike out through the three Peaks area to observe deer signs in view of the coming hunt. After following the old roads and trails that crisscross through the hills I found myself again on this pile of rocks. Climbing to the top I sat there for a long time, once more trying to visualize the activity of the camp as it might have been many years ago with animals munching the luscious grass after traveling the long, dusty trail while the men were busily unloading pack mules and making camp for the night. Camp! The thought struck me and lingered. If I were in their shoes where would I pitch my camp? I picked out four of the most likely spots and decided that the urge to investigate them was too strong to resist.

I returned the next day armed with my hand pick, camera, and lunch. Parking my motorbike in the shade of a large cedar tree, I walked across the small flat to where the Indian writings were and to where I had found the doll. The light was not just right for picture taking so I attempted to chalk the pictures to make them show up better. In reaching up to them my feet kept slipping on loose rocks on the ground, so I began to move them for a more firm footing. As I scraped the loose rocks away, there in a crack lay two beautifully made arrow points with about one-fourth inch broken from the point of each and two quite poorly made points that were complete.

I finished taking pictures and then started to dig at the number one place I had chosen the day before, but found nothing. I moved to the number two spot. Still nothing, but at the number three spot I began to uncover ashes and bits of charcoal so I dug deeper to the bottom of the ashes, going from side to side and chopping a little bit at a time so as not to miss anything in the dirt. As I made one chop with the pick a lump of dirt fell away from a dark object which I dug out very carefully to expose a beautiful earthen bowl four and one half inches wide by four and one half inches high. On examining it I decided it was definitely not of Indian origin as it appears to have been made on a potter's wheel which the Indians of our area never had, and the decoration is a maze of circular, zigzag lines which is not of Indian origin. It was lying on its side at almost a forty-five degree angle so that no frost or moisture could harm it. There had been a small mouse nest in it at one time.

Needless to say I was highly delighted at making this find. Have hunted many long hours, in many parts of the country, and have found thousands of broken potsherds but

this is the only complete pot or vase I ever found. I sat and tried to visualize the circumstances under which it might have been left there. Was it forgotten in their preparation to move on? Was it forgotten or was it left by one man with food in it for another man while he started the herd of animals on the way? Was it tipped over by a squirrel in search of food to lay there on its side, and if so, for how long? While wind and storms had covered it with sand and silt, it had laid there, hidden from view, until I chanced to bring it to the light of day with a lucky strike of my pick. I felt highly rewarded as I carefully wrapped my prize in my jacket and placed it in my backpack to start for home.

It was nearly springtime before time and desire compelled me to again mount my trusty motorbike and head for this spot. On February 20, 1972, I went to this Old Spanish Trail campground and spent another half day. I found a few more hieroglyphics, took some pictures, but found nothing more until, reaching my bike, I was looking around the huge old cedar tree wondering what might have taken place there in its shade from the sun or the protection it may have given from a cold north wind when I noticed some burned marks. The trunk is about two and one half feet high and then branches into two large branches. I have sawed trees of similar size and have counted the annular growth rings and from this experience I estimated the short stump to be approximately five hundred years old. The burn marks I had noticed were all but healed over, indicating that a campfire or lightning had damaged the tree many years ago. It takes nature a long time to heal such burn scars, especially in a slow growing tree such as a juniper tree. Then too, in a partially burned tree the heart wood dies and turns pithy and decays leaving the stump hollow. This was the case with this tree. And in moving some of the collected debris in the crotch in order to examine the burns more closely, I uncovered an old powder horn lying across the opening in the stump.

The horn is of the type used by most of the pioneers and frontiersmen. The shell of a cow's horn was used and the large end was plugged, usually with a piece of wood which was water proofed and fastened securely in the horn. In the center of this plug was a smaller removable plug that could be removed for the purpose of filling the horn with gun powder. The plugs in this horn were long since rotted out and gone. The smaller end contained a groove around the outside for the purpose of fastening a carrying thong, usually of buckskin, and in the end was a small hole for the purpose of fastening a carrying thong., usually of buckskin, and in the end was a small hole for the purpose of dispensing a charge of powder into the old muzzle-loading guns, which were used from the Thirteenth century until the middle eighteen hundreds when the cartridge ammunition came into use.

When I found his horn it was damp and soft from the moisture from the inside of the stump, and though dried out it is still very soft and chalky, almost to the point of falling to pieces showing great age. What adventures this horn could tell if able to talk, telling stories of early trappers and traders. Could it have been left by one of Father Escalante's men or by one of the early Spanish trail traders? It was found at one of their favorite camps—why not? Or was it an early pioneer or Indian who laid it there while

resting or eating a meal of grass seeds and jerky. Its stories are dead, as is its voice—gone except for the viewer’s imagination.

During the first part of July, 1972, my son Neal and family spent their vacation with us having driven from their home in Michigan. On July 7<sup>th</sup> we were deciding how to spend the day when Neal said, “Dad, I would like to go out where you found the stone doll.” The rest of the family agreed so in a few minutes lunch was packed and we were on our way. It was a hot day so we found the shade of a large cedar tree very inviting. Parking the car in the shade we all walked over to the out copping of rocks hunting on and around them. After a while Neal, Zella and the children returned to the car. Kevan left a short time later leaving JoAnn and me, and we continued to look around. Coming to some rocks with hieroglyphics on them we found a large rat’s nest in a hole formed by a misplaced boulder. I decided that if someone had been sitting on top of these rocks and had dropped anything it could well have dropped into this hole and been lost.

On this assumption I started to pick into the rat’s nest and pull it out. I had the nest all pulled out and was about to give up, but on one side I could see what appeared to be a deep crack between the rocks that was filled with sand. I raked my pick through the sand loosening it, growing deeper each time. To my surprise, my pick hooked into a metal ring. As I pulled it out my first thought was that it was what is called a running iron, used for branding cattle in the absence of a regular branding iron, but on closer examination, it was a large key about nine inches long. Across the shaft, close to the ring on the end, was a piece of metal shaped like a trigger and a hammer for a gun. I knew then that it was a very, very old Spanish jail or castle key pistol. I had read about this type of firearm several years earlier but because they are so rare I never expected to see one

I went to Phoenix, Arizona to visit Neal. He took us to Nogales, Mexico for the experience of going into Mexico. In several of the shops along the street there were large bailing wire rings filled with larger than usual keys. I began looking for one large enough that I could bore a hole in the shaft to make a replica of the Spanish Trail castle key pistols I had read about. Finding one that suited me I asked the clerk how much it was. He answered curtly “\$6.00.” “You don’t want to sell it very bad,” I said, and turned to leave. “Oh, \$4.00,” he said. “No,” I said, “I won’t pay even two dollars,” and I started out the door. He came and took me by the arm and turned me around. “50 cents?” he asked in a rather timid voice. I paid him the fifty cents.

Upon arriving home I started to bore out the shaft of the key to make the replica pistol as I had planned, and to my surprise I bored into one-half inch of lead, then into about three-fourths inch of black powder. I then looked for a touch-hole, which I found under a coat of rust. I had a very rare item which I would gladly have paid several times the \$6.00 for if I had known. Now I have two of these extremely rare old antiques with no know history except that they were made in Spain for use by the Spanish conquistadors. I doubt if there is any definite date of their manufacture. They were used as jail and castle keys. From history books and picture we know that there was always an oil lamp near the door or gate. These pistols usually had a cotton cord attached to them with a live coal smoldering on the end, or the cord could be quickly lighted by touching it

to the oil lamp, and it was in readiness to ignite the powder in the touch hole. If necessary, one could shoot through the keyhole with the key in place in the door.

In early August of 1972, the Iron Mission Park Commission had decided to open a museum to the public. In thinking of material for it I had been reflecting on the items mentioned as a possible display. Saturday, August 5<sup>th</sup>, I was having trouble with my back but had kept working anyway. I went to bed too tired and sore to sleep or rest very well. During my sleeplessness I did some dreaming. As I dreamed, I seemed to be busy doing something with tools and was working in the dirt in a place similar to the area where I found the stone doll, bowl, powder horn, key pistol, and arrow points. I looked up to see a man on a large grey horse standing on a mound slightly higher than the surrounding ground with a large pile of rocks to the side of him in about the same position as the rock outcropping I have spoken of. As I looked up, he was nonchalantly leaning on the horn of the saddle in a careless, sitting position. He looked at me for a moment, and then asked what I was digging there for. I answered that it was as good a place as any I knew of, and besides it was easy digging. "Well," he said, "You're digging in the wrong place." I said, "Do you know of a better place?" I mentioned finding the other things and he said, "Well, there's more." "Where?" I asked. "Try digging over there," he said, nodding toward the direction of the large, flat boulder mentioned before with the hieroglyphics on the top of it. Then he was gone and I was wide awake.

Usually my dreams are gone when I wake up, but I kept thinking about this one, probably because of the location. Being Sunday morning, I went to church and then started to get ready to do my work at the Cedar City library. Still thinking about the dream, I told Zella about it saying, "I want to go out the one more time to see if there is someplace I have over looked.

It was a nice day so I hurried through my work, climbed on my motorbike and was soon at the side of the flat topped boulder. I studied it for some time. It seemed to be of volcanic origin and was much finer grained and much harder than any of the surrounding terrain which was composed of coarse grained, rotten granite. I looked and walked around and over the ground, back and forth, and could find nothing. I finally tired of looking and came back to the boulder to see if I could make heads or tails of the drawings on top of it. As I started to get on it my eyes looked at the same thing I had seen many times before but I saw it somewhat differently now. There was a wedge-shaped part of the boulder that had broken away from the parent rock and had moved out about twelve inches leaving quite a crevice. Now anyone knows that a rat will drag anything it can into its nest. I decide to see what was in this one. The rat wouldn't mind too much. He had plenty of time to rebuild it.

I used my rock pick and dug out about a wheel borrow full of sticks, prickly pear, rocks, cow chips, etc. but could not reach all of it. I got a tree branch with a right angle branch out from the end and using it for a rake, worked out more sticks and prickly pear. I then decided to work out a rock that had been hindering the removal of the rat debris when the rock finally came out I was surprised to find that it was a hand-shaped stone, oval in shape, about seven and one-half inches long by five and one-half inches wide, and

two inches thick, with a one and one half inch hole at one end, and somewhat flatter on one side than on the other. It is of grayish-blue rock that is rather porous. It had been worn smooth, apparently by grinding it away on another rock, with a certain size, shape, and weight in mind. What the maker had in mind is more than I can comprehend. It must best be a weight for some purpose, but no one seems to be able to figure what that purpose could have been, and whether it was Spanish or Indian. It may be a tool of some sort. By inserting the thumb in the hole and grasping the edge with the fingers it could be used as a sort of hammer for pounding hides in the tanning process, or for pounding jerky or other dried food stuffs before cooking them, but the Indians seldom went to that much trouble when any common rock or club would do as well, so I believe there must have been some other reason for its size and shape. The Spaniards with their slave trading were known to be cruel masters. Could it have been to punish one of their slaves, similar to a ball and chain for a jail convict?

As it is, I know not what this artifact could be, but I think that when it is known it will have some very special meaning and significance, or I would not have been guided to it.

Since finding the Spanish Castle key pistol in July of 1972, I had harbored an uneasy feeling that I must go back again. I tried to console myself with the mental argument that I had been looking pretty well over the surface of the ground, as well as in the cracks and crannies around the rocks, but still the feeling persisted through the fall and winter. From early fall there was too much snow to venture out but as spring came and the ground dried out, that feeling of urgency grew steadily greater until on Sunday, June 10, 1973 (Alva's 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday, ed.) I decided to do something about it. I had taken care of my church duties and the work at the City library and it was four o'clock in the afternoon. I asked Zella, my wife, if she wouldn't like to go for a little ride. She was anxious to go, so in a few minutes we were on our way.

Parking the car in the shade of a tree, we walked to the area of my other finds. We looked casually over some of the ground, but I seemed to be drawn like a magnet to the one rock with the hieroglyphics on the flat top, and from which I had pulled the stone weight from a rat's nest under it. Contemplating more work on the rat's nest before leaving home, I had flattened the end of a piece of electrical conduit and had then bent it into a hook with which I could reach under the rock. I had pulled out most of the nest when Zella exclaimed, "Oh, what is that?" It looks like an old rusty door knob." I raked it out and as I picked it up she said, "Oh, it's just an old cobblestone, but how did it get under the rock?" As I turned it over we were amazed to see that it had been hand shaped into roughly the shape of an Indian stone axe, about three-fourth of an inch at the bottom. A hole had been drilled edgewise through the thick end and it still contained a piece of rawhide string, dried and old, but still in place. On one flat side, of all things, was carved a Catholic Cross one and three-fourth inches by three fourths of an inch, with a small hole at each point of the cross, apparently for the purpose of containing a gem stone. However, no gems were in place. There is no need to state that we were astonished and very pleased. Zella was delighted because it was the first time she had been with me when I made a find.

After getting it home and cleaning off the accumulation of dirt from the many long years it had lain under the rat's nest, we had a beautiful, lavender-colored quartzite stone that had been hand polished to almost a mirror finish. Zella said she could just see it hanging around a Spanish Monk's neck. This old Spanish amulet is the sixth object I have found at this old Spanish camp. From the time I was a teenage boy this place has held a fascination for me, and from the time I found the stone doll there has been a certain urgency to go there again, an indescribably something that had kept tugging at my subconscious mind with each article found, like each time there was still something else there. Since finding this amulet, this feeling of being drawn to that area has subsided and I no longer feel that I must go back. To our family these Spanish trail artifacts are of great value.



S. Alva Matheson, 1974

*“Indian Stories and Legends”*