



## **Kansas Petroglyphs** By Rex Buchanan

*Originally aired May 2021*

When I was a kid, it seemed like I was taught that Kansas history started in 1541 with the arrival of Francisco de Coronado. From there we jumped to 1854 and territorial Kansas, then statehood. It was almost as if Kansas didn't exist until Europeans showed up.

That bothered me, because I lived in central Kansas where there was much evidence of earlier people. Our neighbors turned up arrowheads and grinding stones in their fields. And on outcrops of sandstone, within a mile or two of our farm, were carvings that were clearly Native, clearly old. Yet seldom discussed.

That was one reason I worked with Burke Griggs and Josh Svaty to produce a book called *Petroglyphs of the Kansas Smoky Hills*, published by the University Press of Kansas in 2019. The book consists of photographs from thirteen sites in the state where those carvings are found. Carvings include bison and birds, horses and people, and various geometric figures like circles and zig zag lines.

There are far more sites in central Kansas, including many that we didn't get to. The book isn't meant to be exhaustive, and it doesn't give the location of these features. It also includes minimal interpretation, in part because relatively little, like the age or the creators of many of these features, are not known for certain.

We've given lots of talks about the book, some in person, some remotely. And I've learned a lot in the process.

For starters, I don't use the term "rock art." Many people do, when referring to petroglyphs. But I think that the term rock art encourages audiences to think of these features the way they do art in a museum. And I don't believe that was the way they were meant to be seen. They were created as a part of the landscape, near rivers and springs for instance, and are probably meant to be viewed that way.

We didn't provide locational information is because many of these sites are on private property, and many have been vandalized. That destruction, along with the natural erosion of the soft sandstone, has damaged or destroyed many of these carvings. Audiences always decry that disappearance. And while I hate the vandalism, I also respond this way: How do you know they the carvings meant to be permanent? Maybe they were meant to be transitory, to disappear like much else in life? Do not apply your standards to the people who created these features.

Finally, I learned another lesson early on when I spoke to sixth graders at a middle school in Lawrence. Rather than talk about the glyphs, I showed slides, then asked the students what they saw. They nearly always focused on things that I hadn't. Where I saw a site dominated by a bison, they pointed out a handprint. Where I saw a person, they saw a lizard. Different eyes see different things. And sometimes, younger eyes see different things from older eyes.

I believe that, like those students, the people who created these carvings saw the world differently than the rest of us. They had lived in this place much longer than Europeans have and knew the land in

different, more intimate ways. We should know and acknowledge those people who were here first. Who saw this place so well.

*This transcript of “Kansas Petroglyphs” is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit [humanitieskansas.org](http://humanitieskansas.org) or call 1-888-416-2018.*