

ASPEN
ART
IN THE
NEW MEXICO
HIGHLANDS



This book has been published through the generosity of the International Folk Art Foundation, which was established to fund the research and educational work of the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The Folk Art Museum, and the Foundation as well, were the far-sighted creations of the late Florence Dibell Bartlett, who envisioned folk art as an enduring bond which could unite the peoples of the world in friendship and understanding. The museum she built she characteristically turned over to the State, and the Museum of International Folk Art today is one of the major divisions of the Museum of New Mexico.

Since Miss Bartlett's death the Foundation has carried on with her ideals, advancing the cause of folk art and helping the Museum to develop projects which, for reasons of personnel and funding, it could not otherwise hope to implement so quickly. Indeed, the relationship between the International Folk Art Foundation and the Museum of New Mexico is a model of its kind and one of which both institutions can be justifiably proud.



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A photo essay by James B. DeKorne

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INTRODUCTION

By E. Boyd,
Curator of Spanish Colonial Art
Museum of New Mexico

Before padlocked gates and miles of fences became commonplace, the rolling meadows in our northern mountains were dotted with sheep camps in the summer months. As a rider drew towards the grazing sheep, a keen-eyed herder walked forward to ask the standard questions: "*¿Par adonde vayas?*" (Where are you going?), "*¿De onde vienes?*" (Where are you from?), "*¿Que es de la nueva en la plaza?*" (What is new in the town?). When these were satisfactorily answered, one was invited to the camp for coffee, food, and a place by the fire while gossip and tales were passed on.

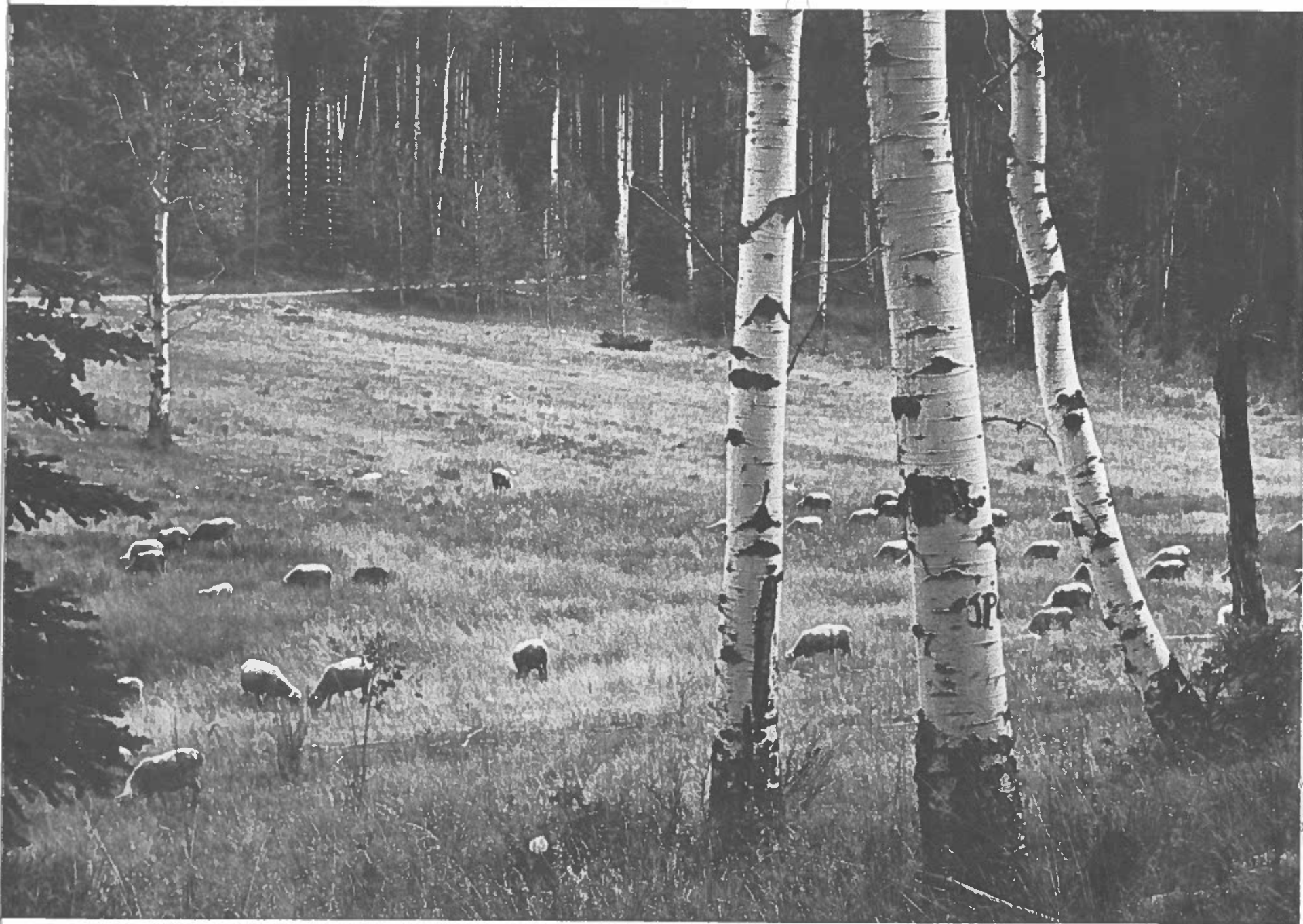
A camp was usually set up on the slope of a meadow, on the fringe of an aspen grove, affording a clear view of the sheep below. If one remarked about the scratchings and carvings on the trunks of surrounding trees one might be shown names of the herders present, or of those of an earlier day who had experienced some remarkable event such as being mauled by a bear or struck by lightning. Explanations about other images, comical or otherwise, might also be recited.

Newcomers to New Mexico have left record of their passage since the Spanish first inscribed their names on the rock cliff at El Morro, and Francisco Vasquez Coronado's *entrada* was described by Casteñeda's pen in 1540. In the last century photographers have left their impres-

sions of the country — its people, monuments, landscapes and cultural innovations, many of which have already vanished. Photographers, however, were often directed by their employer's interest in the selection of subject matter and therefore many aspects of daily life were ignored at the time.

The fresh vision of James DeKorne, a New Mexico photographer, led him to make a remarkably varied series of prints of the sheepherders' doodlings on the parchment-like bark of aspens in the meadows above El Rito. Intrigued by the carvings themselves as an ancient form of man's self expression, DeKorne recorded these pictures before he had really learned who made them or why. As far as I know this is the first serious collection that has been made of the dendroglyphs of New Mexican sheepherders.

While aspen trees have a short life, more will grow, but it is not likely that the same sort of sayings and motifs will continue to be cut into the tree bark. Roads, trucks, the radio, modern communication and transportation in general, as well as declines in the sheep business, have reduced not only sheep camps but the time span of isolation and the character of subjects for carving. This, then, is a record of a vanishing form of popular art taken at a crucial moment in history by a sympathetic observer.



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1 & 2 Sheep meadows in the Carson National Forest — typical of the terrain in which the aspen carvings are found.

The sheep industry in New Mexico dates back to 1598, when Don Juan de Oñate and his colonists brought a flock of three-thousand with them from Mexico. From that time until the recent past, sheep raising has figured prominently in the economy of the Spanish villages of the upper Rio Grande Valley.

From earliest times it was the wealthy landowner, the *rico*, who had the largest flocks. A man's wealth and influence was in a large part measured by the number of sheep that he owned. Essentially, the economy evolved around sheep on the hoof, and by 1850 New Mexico was the principal sheep area west of the Mississippi.¹

The sheep were cared for at first largely by "Christianized" Indians but when the Pueblos were no longer forcibly compelled to serve the Spanish, the *partido*, or contract on shares, came into use. Under this system the landowner parceled out his flocks among various neighbors or poor relatives with the understanding that in one or two years the *rico* would receive his original flock plus a specified number of new lambs. Any additional lambs were the recompense of the *partidario*, or share holder.

In practice this often ended with not only no lambs at all for the *partidario*, who had tended the flock, but also a shortage of new lambs for the owner. Thus, the *partido* system tended to keep the herders in perpetual debt to the sheepowner.² As a result of this system, and the lack of merchants and banks, two classes developed in New Mexico. The *ricos*, or *patrons*, were greatly outnumbered by the poorer people who were either shepherds or farmers in the Rio Grande Valley.³

The following *partido* contract from the Mexican archives of New Mexico clearly indicates the responsibility that the *partidarios* assumed when they took charge of the patron's sheep:

A PARTIDO CONTRACT FROM
THE MEXICAN ARCHIVES OF NEW MEXICO

I the citizen Jose Antonio Montoya, resident of Corales, in the presence of two witnesses, by this (document) declare that I have received from Don Vicente Armijo,

resident of Albuquerque, to my entire satisfaction and contentment, one thousand five hundred ewes on shares. According to the usual custom twenty per cent of the sheep and wool are to be paid as interest since the twentyninth of August of the past year of 1829 when I received the fifteen hundred ewes, of which I have possession until April of 1831, three hundred rams and as many bundles of wool since the time when the agreement was made, giving each year the total income or share of the whole quantity. For the assurance of the said ewes and their progeny I obligate my person and property that I have and may have, notwithstanding irreparable accidents such as the invasion of enemies, death by lightning bolts and common loss of which perils, should they happen to me, I shall give immediate notice to the nearest Judge and, in order that I may be believed, shall submit myself to the National Lord Judges, in order that they with all vigor may legally compel me to keep this obligation, renouncing the said mandatory allegation which was and shall be of the terms and conditions aforesaid. In virtue of which, for this contract, I authorize this document that, although it is judicial, I wish to have the same force and validity as if it were made before a competent judge and on the sealed paper as it ought to be. Because there was none it was made (as it is) for lack of which I promise to make a new one when opportunity comes with all proper formalities, notwithstanding the obstacles that have hampered me now.

Villa of Albuquerque, September twenty fifth, Eighteen hundred and twentynine.

(Signed) *Jose M. Antonio Montoya* (rubric)
Witnesses *Rafael Martin, Gregorio Xaramillo*

The men who watched over the sheep were entrusted with the care and protection of a flock whose breeding and wool value might exceed twenty-thousand dollars.⁴ They had to keep an accurate daily count of their valuable charges as they moved through steep, brush-covered terrain. A flock of a thousand head might be strung out over an area of a half mile or more, with the constant danger of a bear or coyote picking off a straggler, or a small band breaking away from the main group.

In earlier centuries, or until the 1860-70 era, the herders had to fend off nomadic Indian raids on their livestock, whether in valley villages or on the summer range. Consequently the herders seldom ventured out except in small groups.⁵ In modern times, of course, this has become unnecessary, but although Indian raids are

no longer a problem, and there aren't as many bears and coyotes as there used to be, today's sheep herder still has his difficulties. As recently as January, 1969, wild dogs killed 24 sheep in one week in a northern New Mexican village.⁶

The shepherd's life was and is a lonely life; a man might not see his family for over five months, or another human being for weeks or even months at a time. The herder was a simple man with little formal education, and despite the tasks involved with tending upwards of fifteen-hundred sheep, he had a lot of time on his hands. What did he think about during those long months alone with his flock?

As good a clue as any can be found recorded on the aspen trees which grow in profusion around the sheep meadows of the Carson National Forest. The clean white bark of the aspen provided a ready-made slate upon which the lonely herder could give form to his thoughts. Most of these carvings are merely names and dates, but sometimes a man carved pictures of what was on his mind. Such things as horses, women, crosses and dogs are common themes. Simple subjects for the most part, but often executed with considerable style and sophistication.

This collection of photographs begins with the carving of one of the oldest and most universal symbols used by man: the human hand. Predating the use of written language, hand prints are found all over the world, and say most simply: "I was here."

Among Southwestern Indian pictographs the hand print is perhaps the most common symbol. Andreas Lommel, in his book *Prehistoric and Primitive Man*, comments on handprints which were painted on the walls of caves over 20,000 years ago: "The meaning of the silhouette prints of human hands is not understood, but it was almost certainly connected with hunting magic."⁷

While "hunting magic" was probably not a factor which influenced the Spanish tree carvings in New Mexico, some of the hand prints on aspens have been attrib-

uted to members of the infamous *Mano Negro* (black hand) society—a group of outlaws active in the 1930s. It is said that these night riders were responsible for much stolen livestock and many a barn-burning. Limited largely to the Chama-Brazos area, the *Mano Negros'* aim was to retrieve grant privileges from the new, non-Spanish owners on the old Brazos grant.⁸

From hand prints we go to men's portraits, many of them perhaps of the herders themselves. Sometimes it isn't clear exactly who is being portrayed; in plate number 9 we have a man with a pistol in his hand. At first glance this appears to be an Old West theme, but when we look closely at the details of his dress, something else emerges. Around his head is what resembles a piece of cloth or yarn tied with knots at the corners; he has long hair, a big, bare paunch, pants and boots, a belt, possibly for cartridges, and seems to have just shot a bird. The man suggests a New Mexico Spanish view of a Pueblo Indian, either in a dance or on a hunting trip.⁹

The mystique of the West is a common theme of the carvings. In the 1920s and 1930s there were constant showings of C and D grade cowboy and Indian silent films in the villages, which undoubtedly influenced many a lonely herder's imagination. Also, the West was dotted with small theaters, opera houses and halls in which live performers appeared. Among the most popular features were the wrestlers; these came to Santa Fe until World War II, and were about the most popular ticket sellers around. When we look at the figure in plate number 13 we are reminded of one of those big grunt-and-groan artists.¹⁰

With plate number 14 the female portraits begin. Whether representative of wives, sweethearts, or just "women," we have no way of knowing. Number 18, *Tu Retrato*, (literally, "Thy Portrait"), suggests that the model may have been present when the carving was made. Number 19 is a carefully drawn woman dressed in her fiesta costume. The hair, with large knot at back and pulled in buns over the ears, is of the style of 1918-20.

The blouse seems to have fancy embroidery, beads, or sequins on it. The skirt is widely pleated, full, and with a fancy border on the hem. The feet suggest the rapid tapping of Mexican dances, as do the hands on the hips. Nothing in the dress suggests Anglo styles, but it seems to have caught the Mexican "chino-poblana" costume very well.¹¹

Although there is no dearth of nude carvings they are not as prevalent as one might expect. Most of these have recent dates, indicating that they may have been a taboo subject in earlier generations. Blatant pornography is also fairly rare, most of it appearing in areas frequented by many people, such as in public campgrounds and along well-traveled roads. The Amazon-proportioned female in plate number 22 is typical of the type of nude carvings found in the sheep meadows.

The horse (beginning with plate 26) is far and away the most common subject carved on aspen trees. This is significant, because most herders, until quite recently at least, did *not* have horses. Their prevalence as a subject might be attributable to wishful thinking. The automobile and truck have taken the horse's place as a means of transportation and symbol of male virility, but it wasn't many years ago, particularly in the more isolated areas of the West, that the man on horseback, the *Caballero*, was the equivalent of today's Ford *Mustang* owner.

Dogs, too, are a common subject. The sheep dog has been the herder's indispensable companion for hundreds of years. Edward Norris Wentworth, in his book *America's Sheep Trails*, quotes some of the legendary stories about these animals:

"One (sheep owner) tells of trailing three to four hundred young rams over a four-day route and losing five head the first day. One of his dogs was also missing and on delivering the band he returned to look for the strays. A day's drive behind the flock he found the dog, bringing the five rams, and farther back he found

where the dog had bedded them down on the three different nights of the journey. Other stories are told of the sagacity of dogs in saving sheep in storms, of their ability to sort dry ewes from ewes with lambs, or their rescue of flocks trapped by forest or prairie fires, and of their forcing sheep to water holes when thirst madness made the flock utterly uncontrollable by man alone. . .¹²

In plate number 39 we see an enigmatic carving of a hand and arrow pointing toward a dog. Illegible marks above the dog's back appear to be arithmetic problems—perhaps a sheep tally. Is this the record of an incident similar to the one quoted by Wentworth above?

The subjects of the carvings go on—cattle, deer, owls, pumas, crosses, and sayings, or *refranes*, in Spanish and English. Perhaps Guilbert Duran (plates 58-59) and his philosophical legends might be mentioned here. One of them, "Washington is the William Tell of the United States," was too overgrown with scar tissue to photograph legibly. One wonders what was on his mind when he carved, "All beginnings are difficult." (Sic) The tone of the epigram suggests that of a school copybook of that era (1903-09). Although he seems to have learned English (by no means so common for a Spanish villager in those days), it is not certain that he took his *refranes* from an English textbook. Sayings or proverbs go back to ancient prehistory in the Mediterranean and, according to scholars, more exist in Spain than anywhere else in that region. Many of these traveled to New Mexico, and became a substitute for books, serving as a collective store of ideas by which to live. The same themes, admonitions and ideas appear in many languages, since they are concerned with universal human experience.

There are many thousands of aspen tree carvings scattered throughout the high country of Northern New Mexico, and these photographs (made in the summer of 1968) represent but a small sampling of this unique form of folk art. Hidden away in areas accessible only by prim-

itive roads, or often by no roads at all, the pictures are seldom seen by anyone other than the herders, or occasional hunters and fishermen.

The carvings shown here represent a time span of over sixty years. The oldest date found, 1898 (plate 62), was carved on a dead tree which was still standing. The most recent dates extend up to the present, but in many cases these were probably not made by herders.

Since the early forties the sheep industry in the Spanish villages has declined. There are many reasons for this, among which are the heavy restrictions put on grazing by the Forest Service, the effect of the vast Australian sheep industry on the world wool market, and the general economic trend since World War II which militates against the small, subsistence type economy which had been practiced here for over four hundred years.

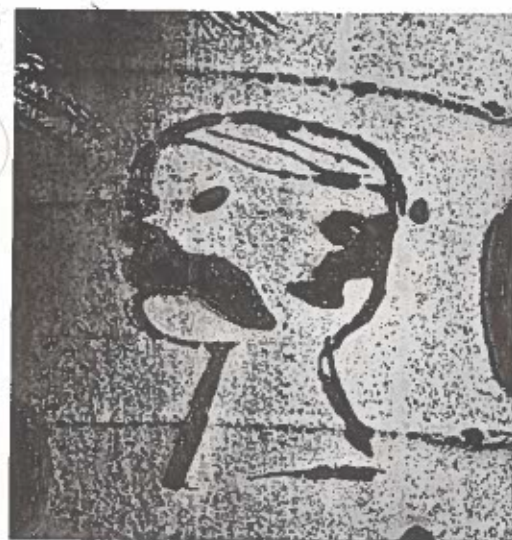
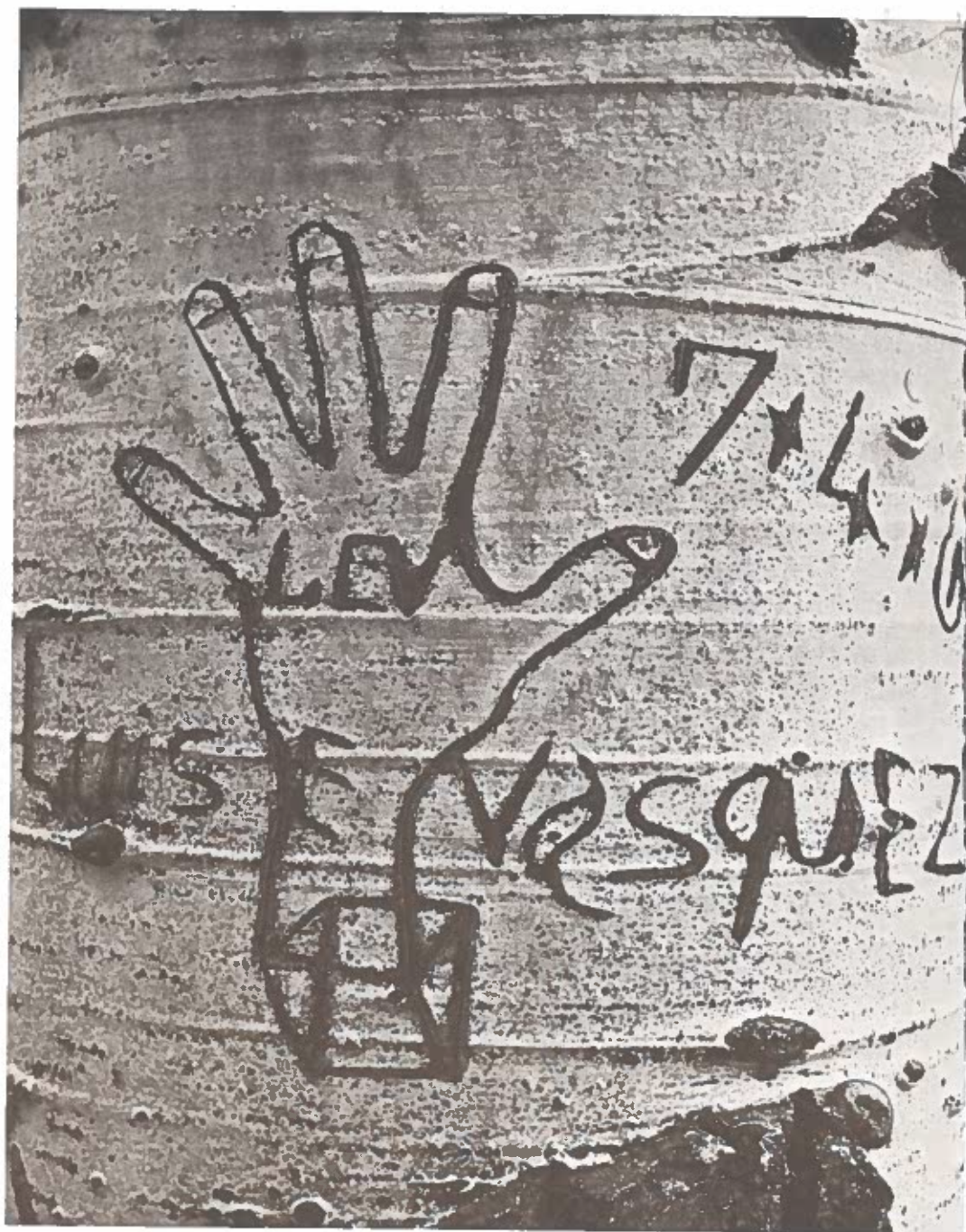
When one notes that the average age of an aspen tree is something less than sixty years, it becomes apparent that the carvings shown here are soon to go the way of the world view which created them. It is the author's hope that these photographs may serve as one small tribute to this world view and the values for which it stood.

James B. DeKorne
Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1969

FOOTNOTES

1. Carlson, Alvar Ward, "New Mexico's Sheep Industry", *New Mexico Historical Review*, vol. XLIV, No. 1, January 1969, University of New Mexico Press, pg. 27.
2. E. Boyd, Curator of Spanish Colonial Collections, Museum of New Mexico— from a personal letter (10/11/68) commenting on the photographs of the aspen carvings.
3. Carlson, op. cit., pg. 30.
4. Wentworth, Edward Norris, *America's Sheep Trails*, Iowa State College Press, Ames, Iowa, 1948; pg. 402.
5. E. Boyd, op. cit.
6. Kincaid, Sandra, *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Jan. 3, 1969, "El Rito Riflemen Await Canine Attack on Sheep".
7. Lomell, Andreas, *Prehistoric and Primitive Man*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1966.
8. E. Boyd, op. cit.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Wentworth, op. cit.





5

5 & 6 Two portraits probably made by the same man, as they appear on adjacent trees. No dates are given, but the handlebar moustaches suggest the turn of the century.



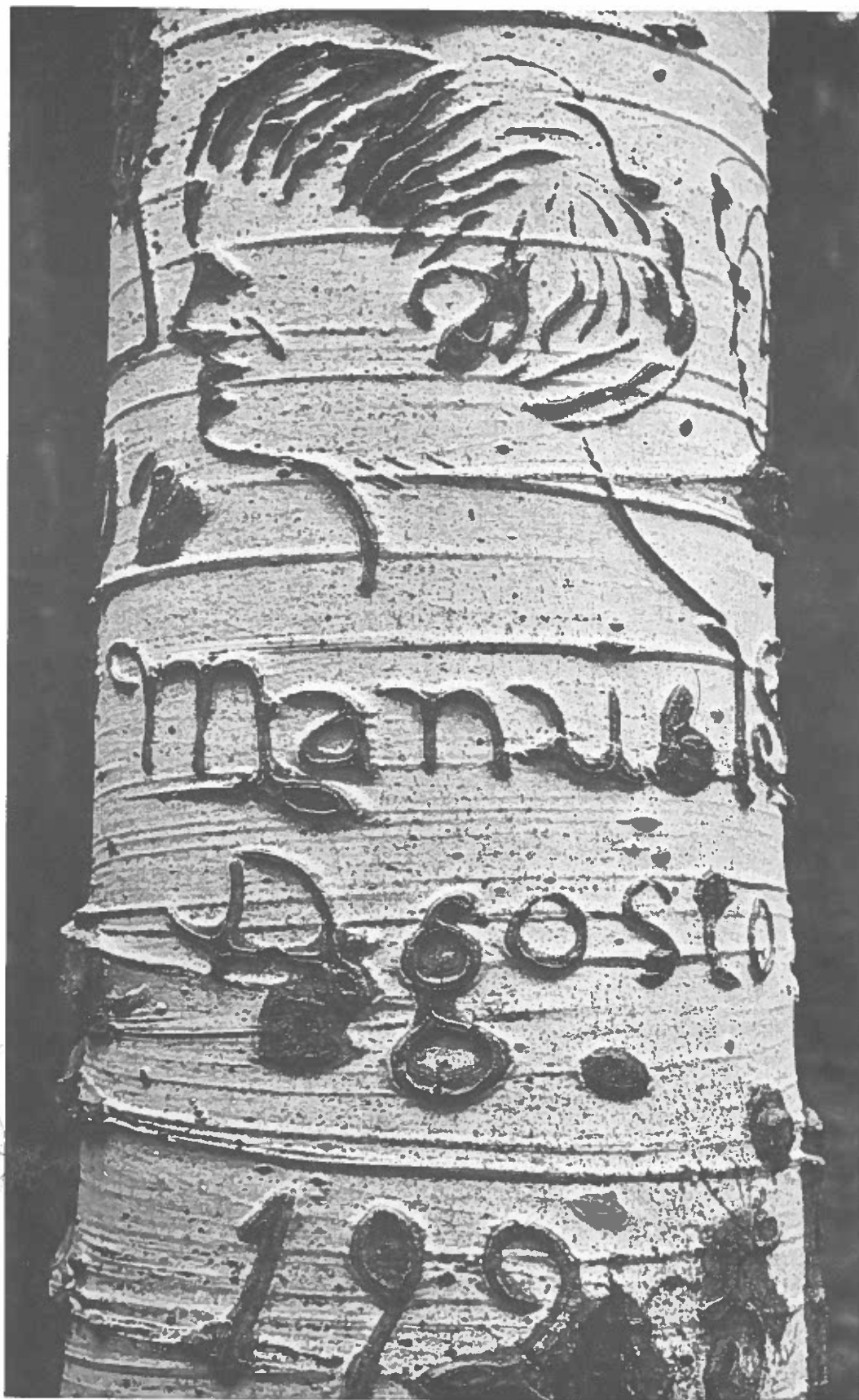
6



7

7 Quick sketch of a cowboy type.

8 *Manuel S., Agosto, 1925.* A skillful portrait which seems to portray a real person, as opposed to the generalized "picture of a man" carvings which are most commonly found.



8



9



10



11

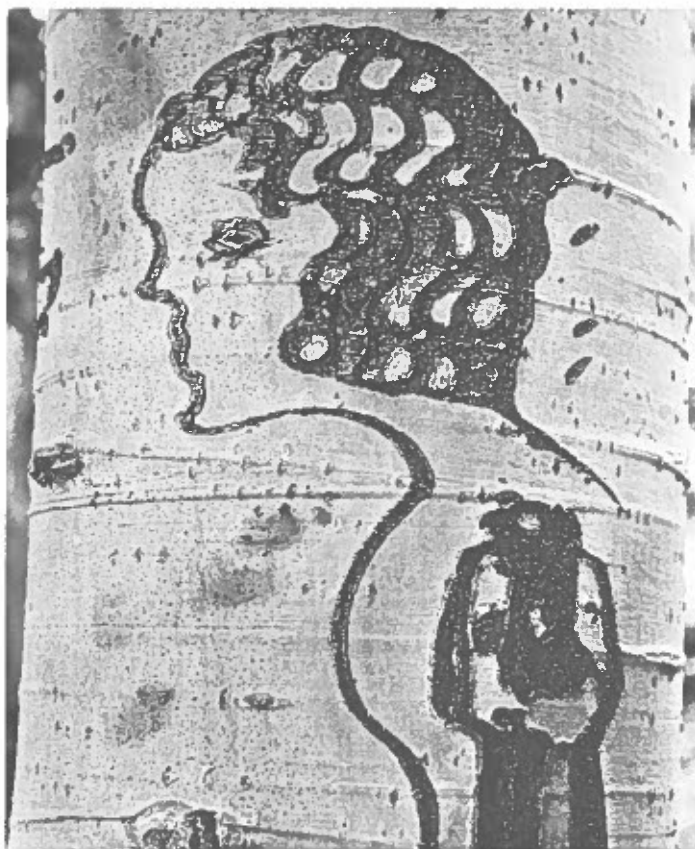
9 & 10 Men shooting pistols; the mystique of the Old West is a common theme of the carvings.

11 & 12 Two primitive types, circa 1908.

13 (*Following page*) This crude figure seems to be sleep walking, or groping for something. The carving toward which he is reaching is an unrecognizable, abstract blob.







14

15



16

14, 15 & 16 We have no way of knowing whether these three portraits represent wives, sweethearts or just "women." The 1934 lady in Plate #15 resembles the magazine illustrations of that era.



17

17 Note the eye makeup and lipstick on this 1961 *femme fatale*.

18 *Tu Retrato* — Thy Portrait.

19 No date, but this peasant-type woman appears to be an old carving. Trees around it have dates of the early twenties.

20 (*Opposite page*) This carving resembles the comic book character, *Little Lulu*.



18



19



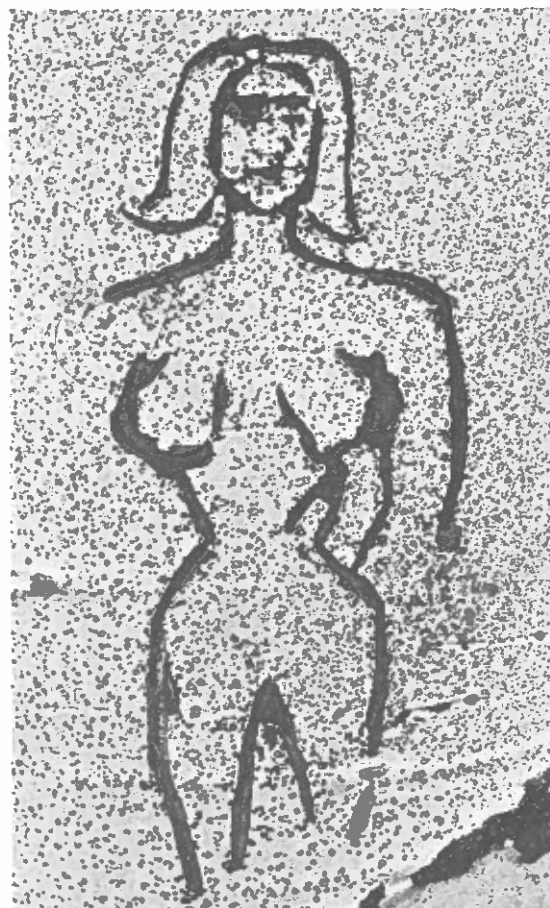


21

21 There are three dates in this picture — 1916 (almost obliterated by the torso), 1944, and 1950. Torso was probably done in 1950, as scar tissue most resembles that date.

22 This Amazon-proportioned woman is typical of the type of nude carvings found in the sheep meadows.

23 A recent carving, this bouffant-coifed nude with drink in hand and foot on bar-rail reflects the contemporary trend in "girlie" magazines.



22



23



24

24 & 25 The style of these two carvings suggests that they were done by the same artist. Note that, while there is little left to the imagination, they *are* clothed.



25



26



27

26 & 27 The horse is far and away the most common subject carved on aspen trees. The boots and saddles theme of Plate #27 continues the Old West motif.

28 (Opposite page) Burro with halter and bell — probably a portrait of the herder's pack animal.



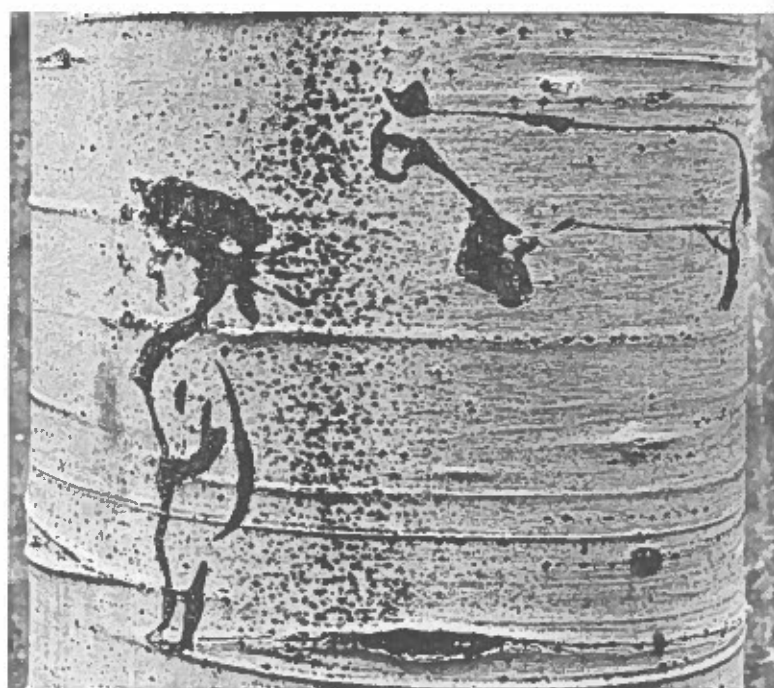


29

29, 30 & 31 More horses. In Plate #30 we see where Jesus Martines carved a horse on August 18th, 1936 and L. Vasquez, circa 1961, put his name in it many years later.

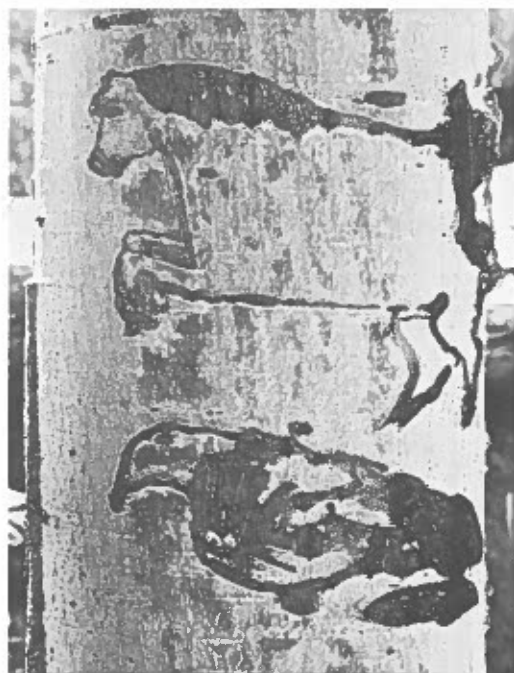


30



31

32



32 Prancing horse resembles the style of Lascaux cave paintings. Note perched bird below. No date.

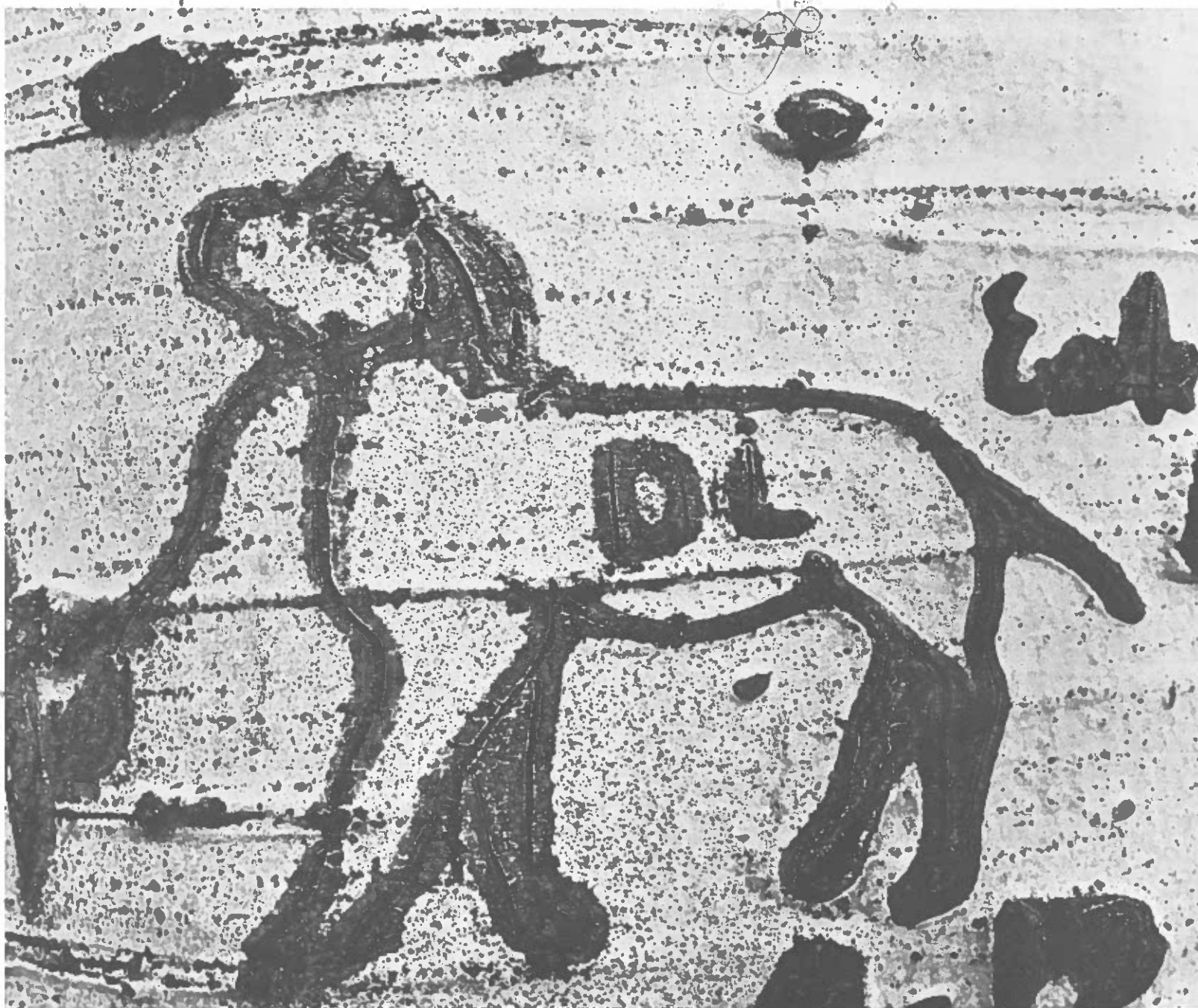
33 Charming double portrait of a man and his horse. The handling of space in this carving reveals an unexpected degree of artistic sophistication.

33

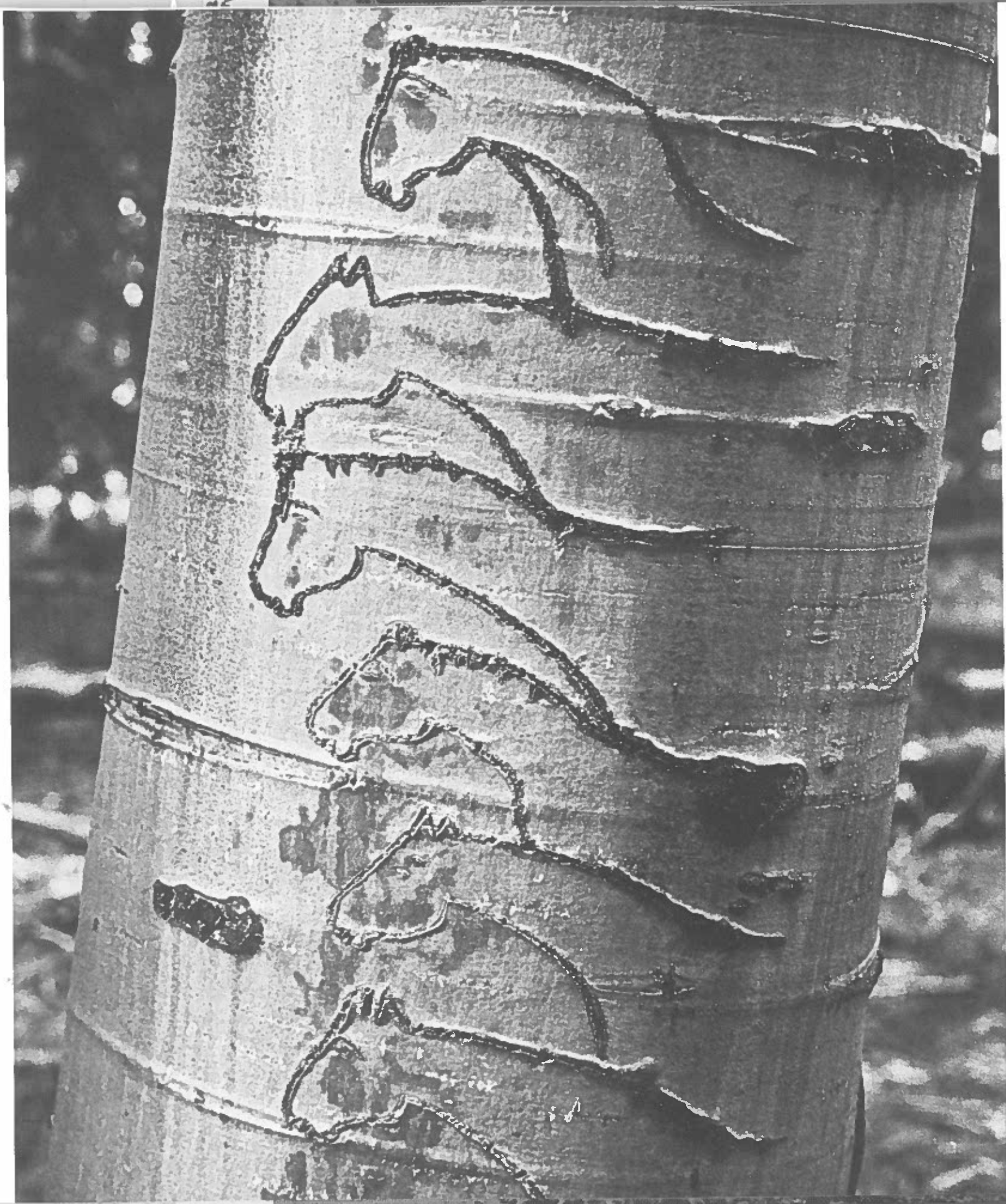


34 Branded horse tethered to a stake.

35 (*Opposite page*) Man on horseback is almost obliterated by natural scar tissue; copulating horses resemble fertility symbols found in prehistoric cave paintings.







36 (*Opposite page*) Either a herd of horses or else a man practicing his horse-carving technique.

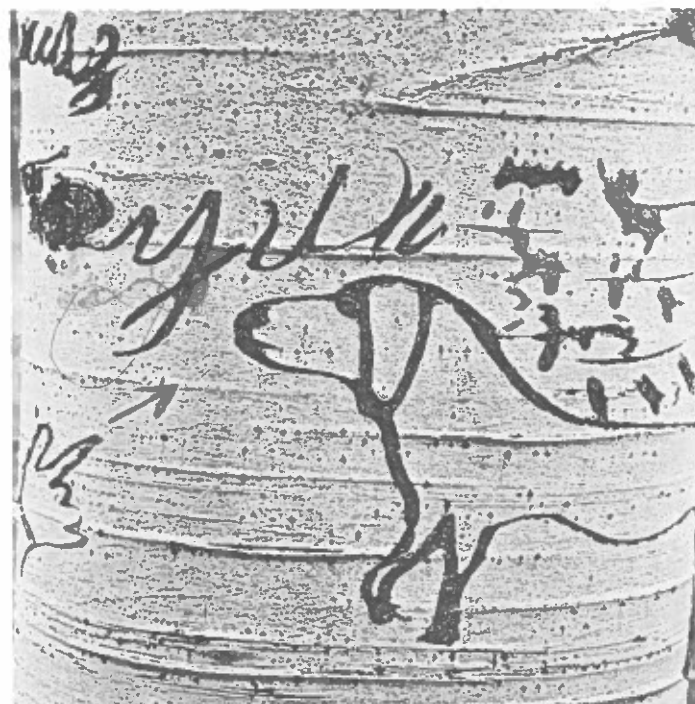
37 Primitive horse-like creature. No date.



38 Pipe-smoking dogs have a date of 1927 — resemble calendar illustrations popular during that era which portrayed pipe-smoking, whiskey-drinking dogs seated around poker tables.

39 Enigmatic carving shows hand and arrow pointing toward dog. Illegible marks above dog's back appear to be arithmetic problems — perhaps a sheep tally.

40 (Opposite page) The sheep dog has been the herder's indispensable companion for hundreds of years.



39

38







41 (*Opposite page*) Steer carved on very old (dying) tree. No date, but probably an old carving.

42 A montage of beasts.



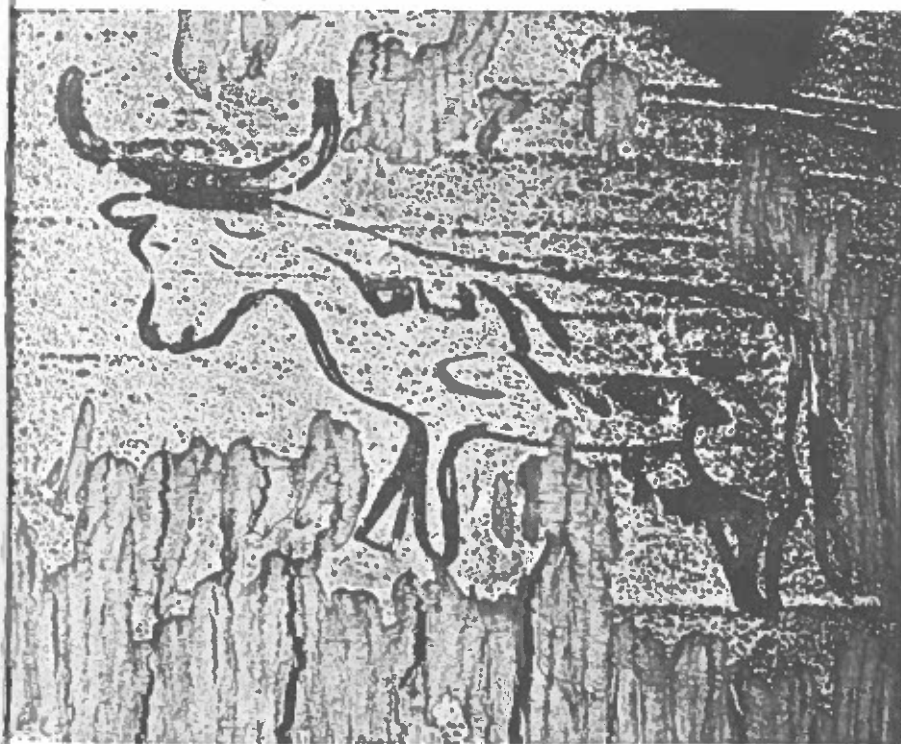


43 (*Opposite page*) Cat-like creature; perhaps a puma — an animal once fairly common in the Carson National Forest.

44 Picture of a cow with legend: *Bull Cheat*. One wonders at the humor here — a sophisticated pun, a misspelled word, or phonetic spelling with a Spanish accent?

45 Double U branded bull appears to be sitting on his haunches.

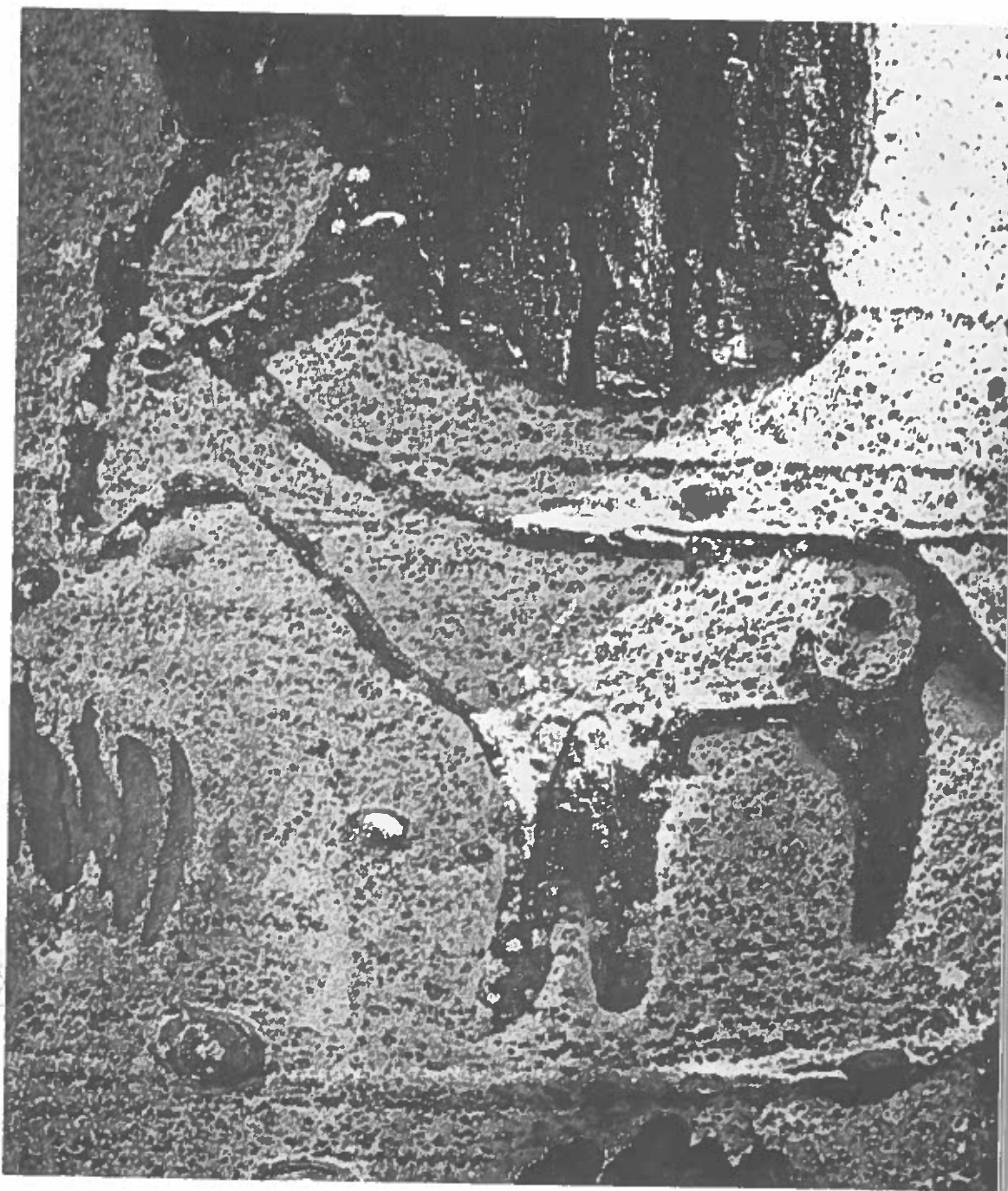
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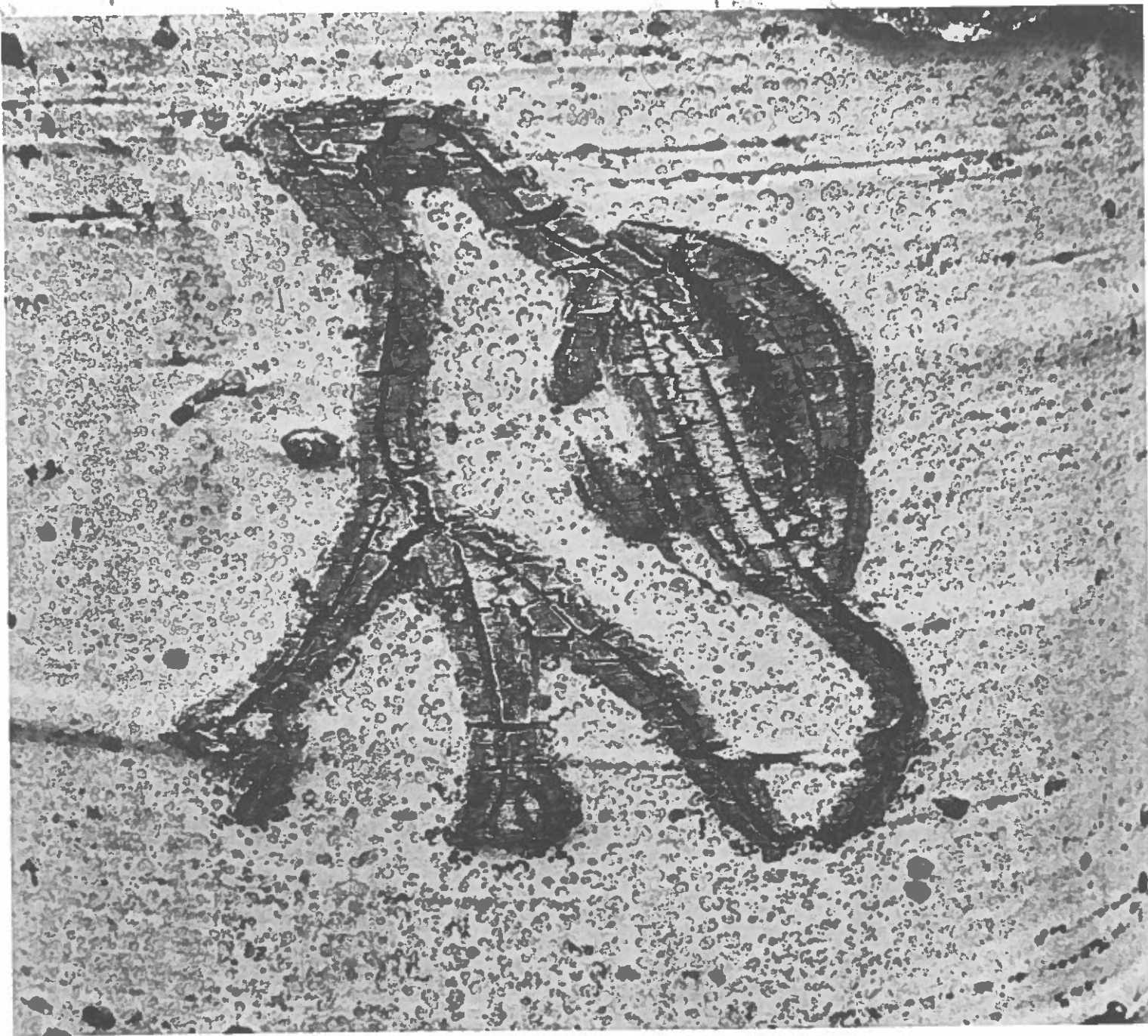
45



46 & 47 Game animals. Plate #46 resembles a moose, but probably is supposed to be an elk — an animal native to the area. Plate #47 is a deer.



4
48 & 49 Birds. Plate #48 might be a grouse, while Plate #49 is a stylized "bluebird" carving which appears, with variations, on many trees.









51

50 (*Opposite page*) This ambiguous creature could be an owl, a cat, or even a human. The owl, or *Tecolote*, is an important figure in the witchcraft mythology of Spanish New Mexico.

51 & 52 Two more birds. Some herders, as in Plate #52, carved images after their names as a sort of totem or "trademark." Mr. Chacon's name appears on many trees, always followed by this same bird design.

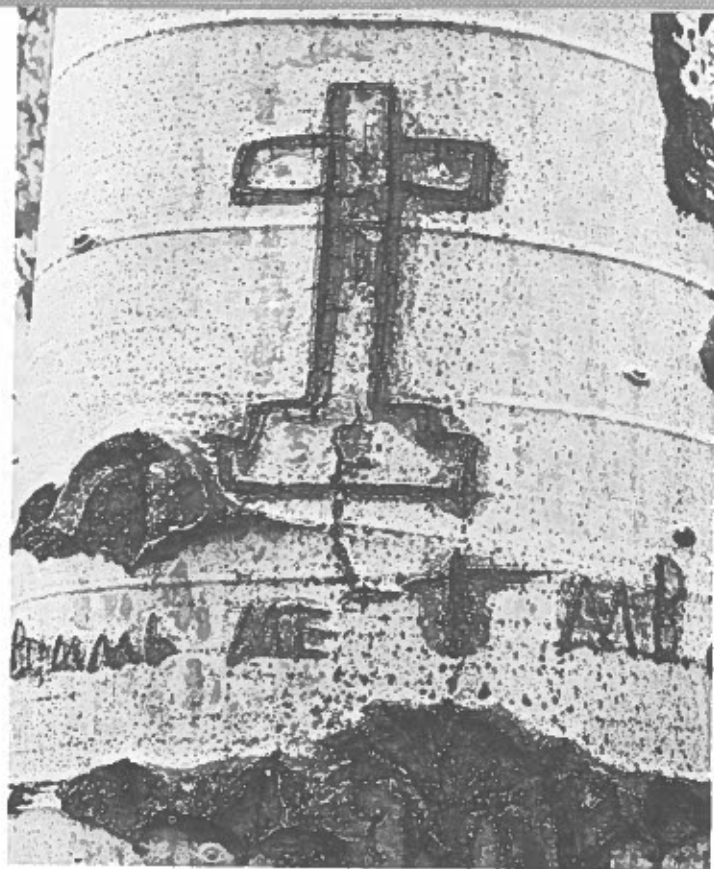
52



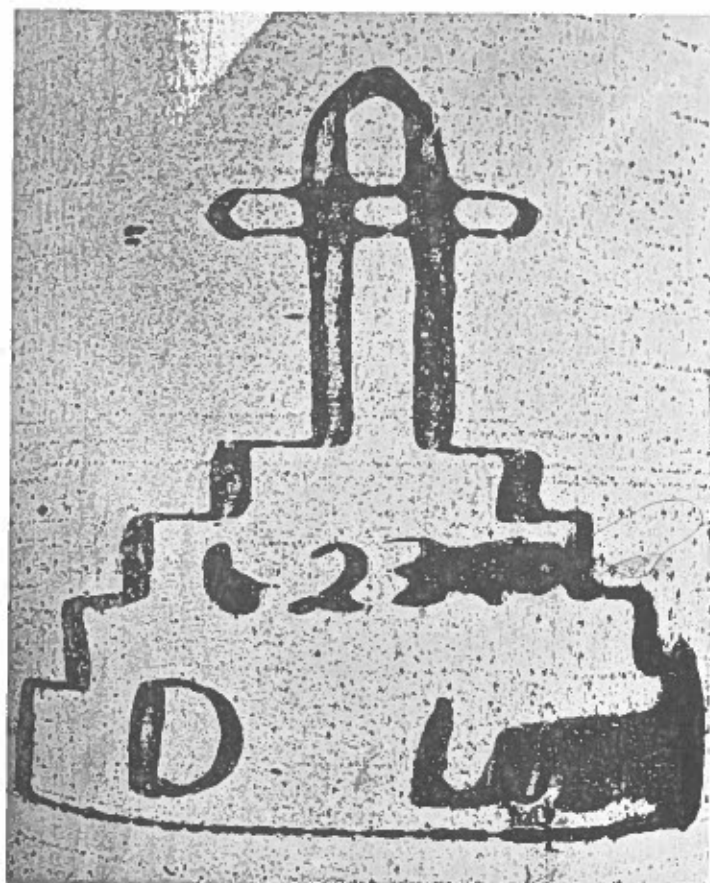


53, 54, 55, 56 & 57 Crosses are commonly found subjects in the aspen groves and reflect the deeply religious dimensions of Spanish culture.

55

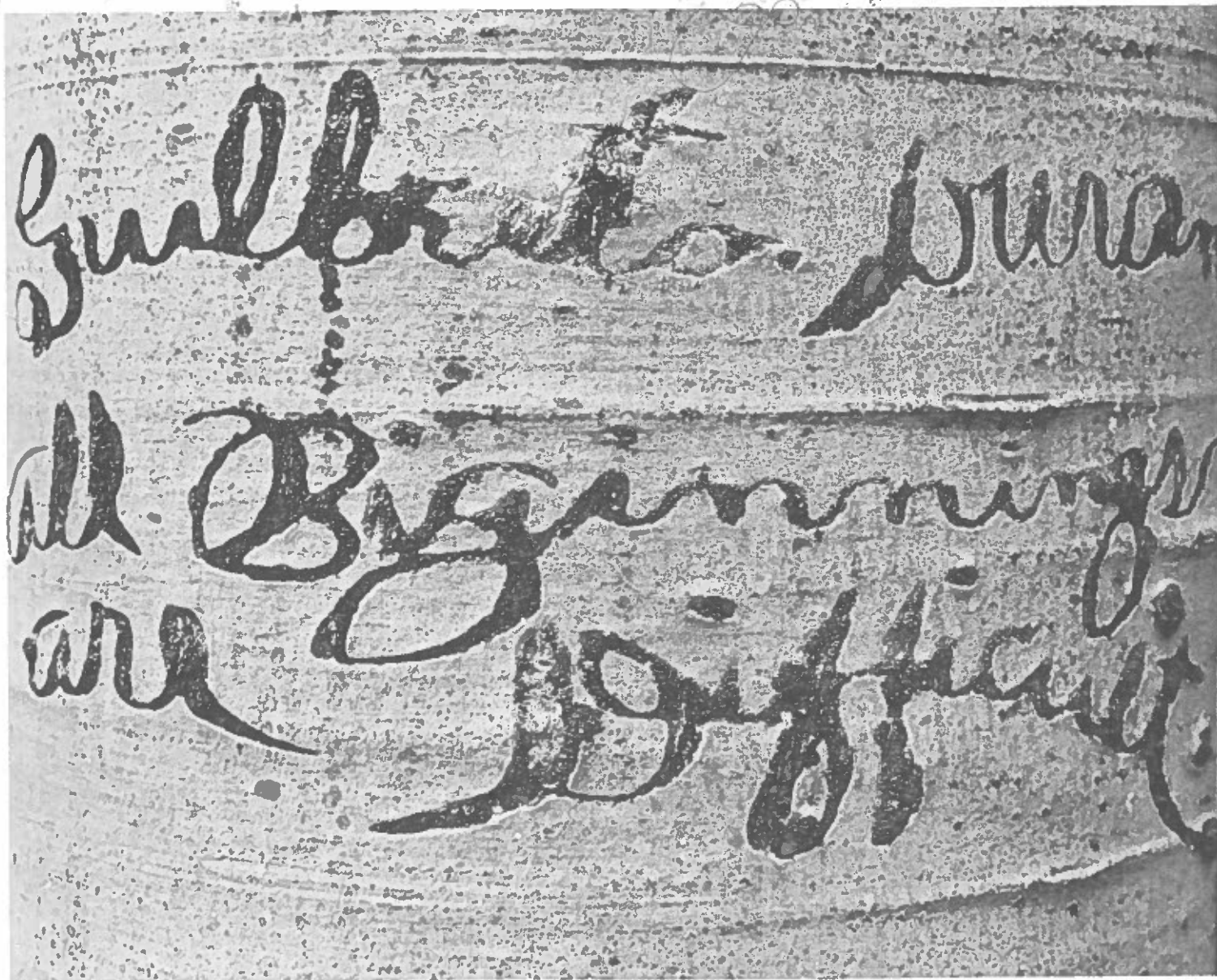


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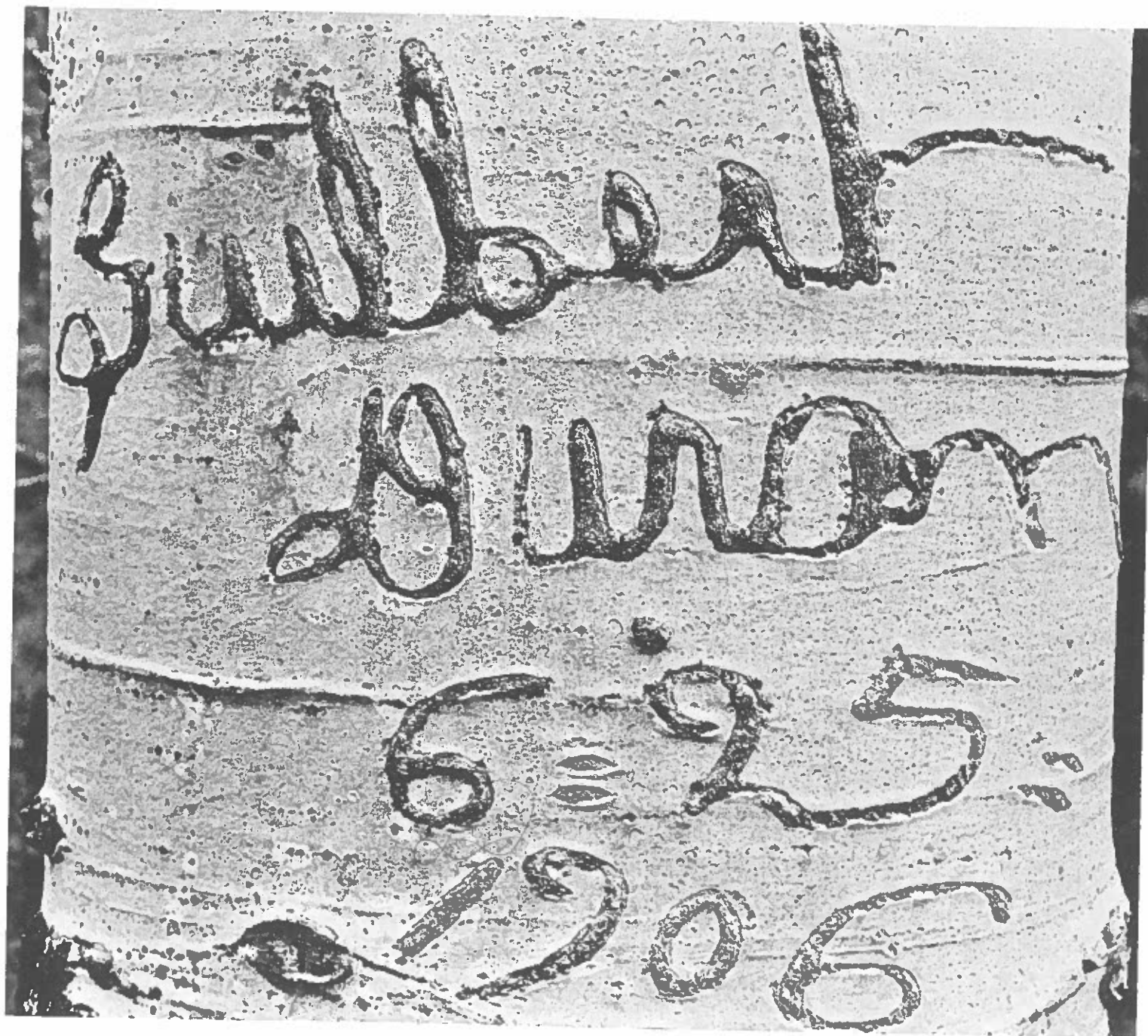
57

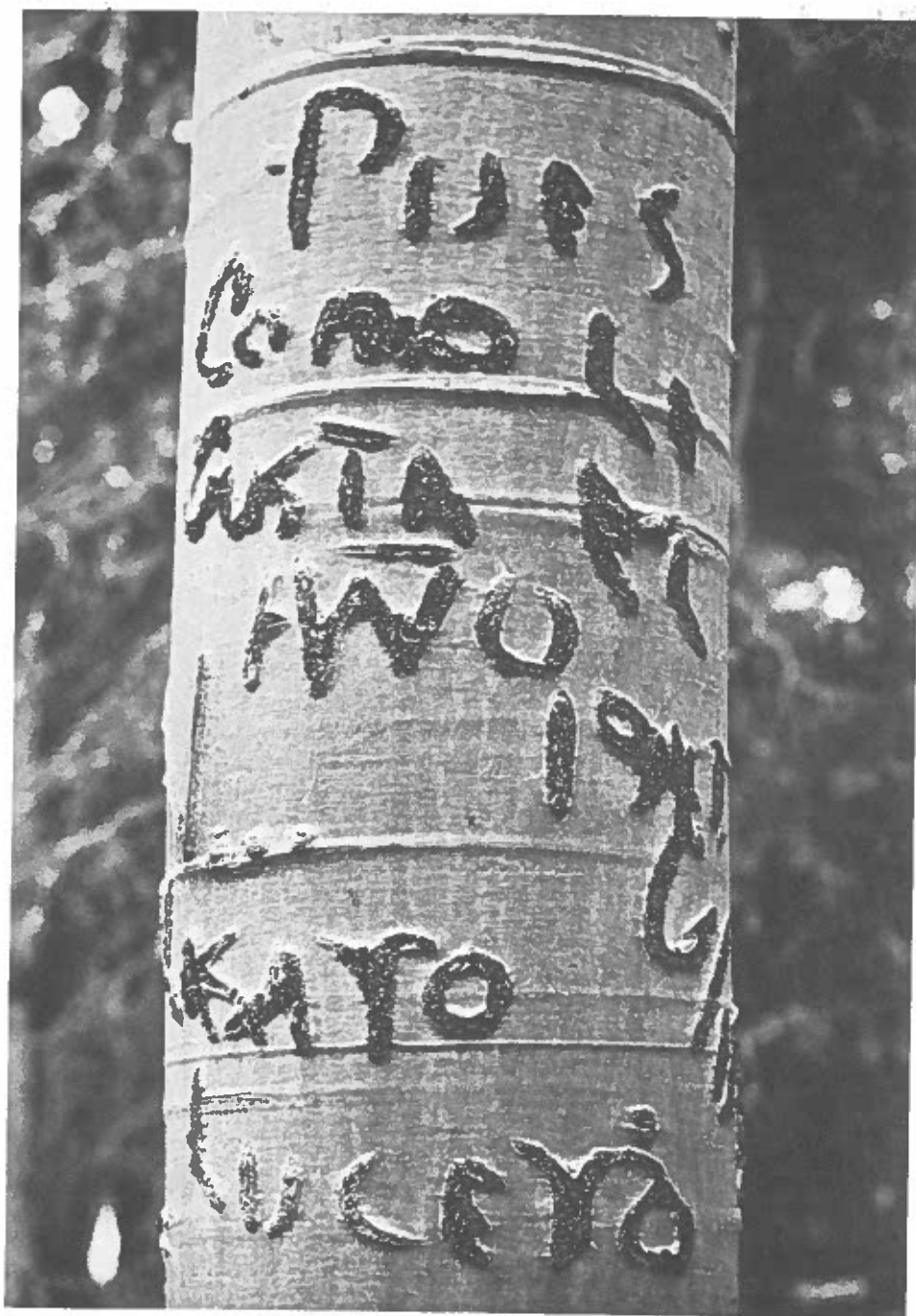




58

58 & 59 Guilbert Duran (c. 1903–1909) was something of a philosopher. His *Washington is the William Tell of the United States* was too far overgrown with scar tissue to photograph legibly.





61

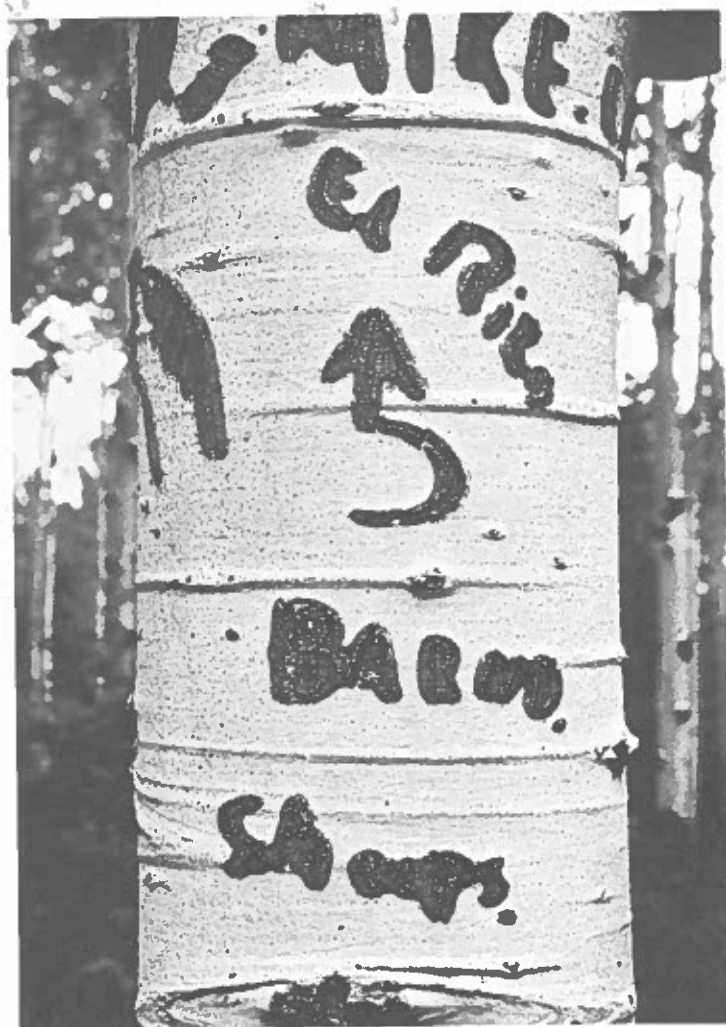
60 *Pues, como le gusta el año 1941?* Well, how do you like the year 1941? Considering the world events which took place that year, this one boggles the mind!

61 *Ha, ha — yo soy que no sabe. Ha, ha — I am (the one) who doesn't know.*

62 *(Opposite page)* The oldest date found — 1898 — on a dead tree.

60





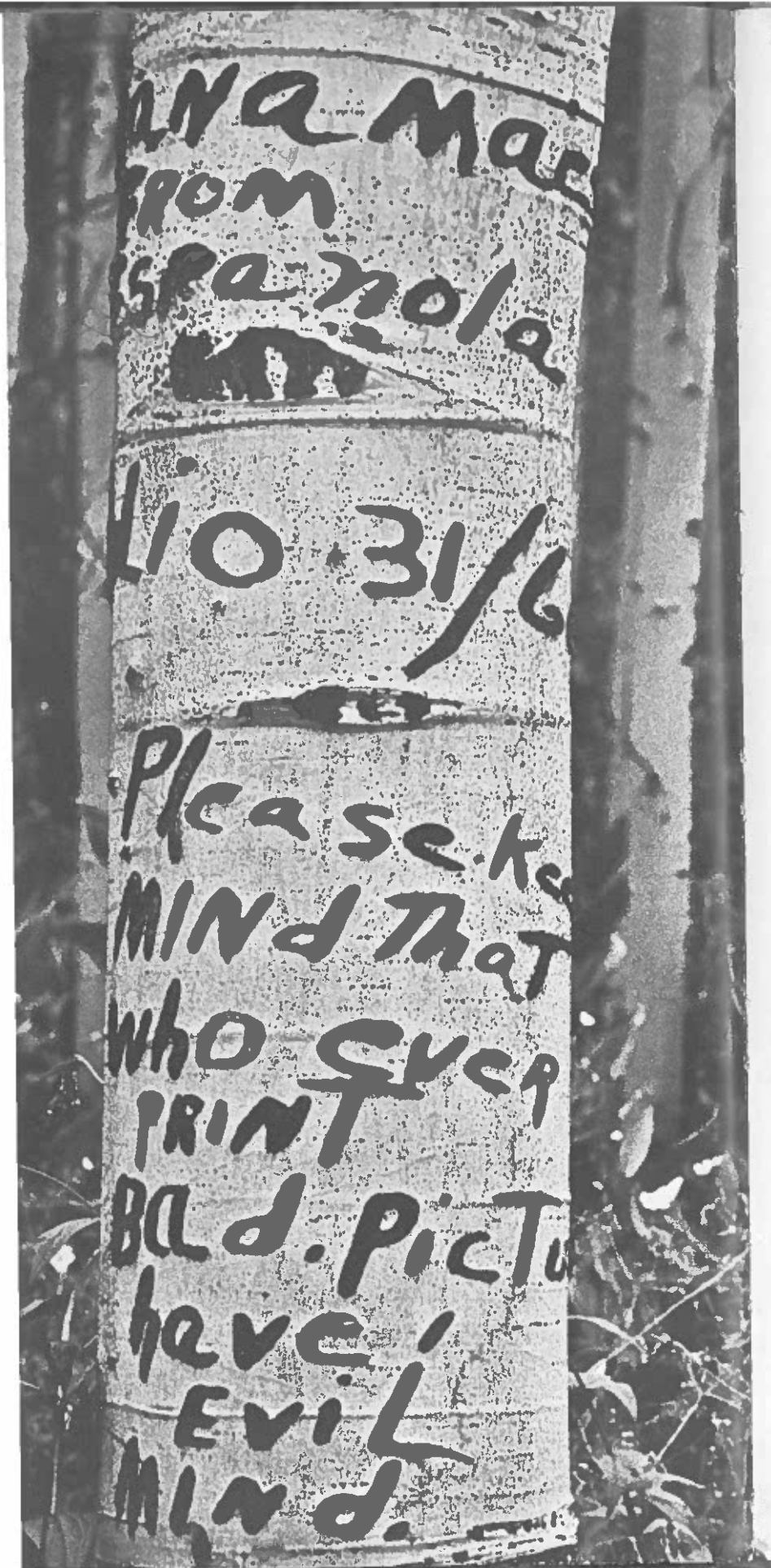
63

63 *Barnd sheep*. The plural adjective after the noun suggests that the author was thinking in Spanish. The curved arrow is apparently the sheep brand to which the legend refers.

64 This recent carving (1961) was found in a public campground where many pornographic carvings exist.

65 (*Opposite page*) Cowboy boot found in a campground where most of the legends were in English.

64









68

66 This enigmatic picture shows a tent with someone sleeping inside, a rat-like animal, a dagger, and other less identifiable objects.

67 Abstract design.

68 A fist fight.

69 An old carving of a steam locomotive. The DRG (Denver and Rio Grande) railroad operated in the area until the 1940s. Narrow gauge trains were also used by lumbering interests during the early days. This carving was the only machine found portrayed anywhere in the area where photographs were taken — there were no automobiles, no airplanes, none of the devices with which modern man surrounds himself.



69





AFTERWORD

In the early summer of 1969 the author returned to the aspen meadows where almost a year before he had spent so many hours wandering with his camera. The scene had changed considerably, for since his last visit extensive logging operations had taken place, and at least half of the trees photographed the previous summer had been destroyed. Aspen is not a commercial lumber in this area. The trees were pushed over with bulldozers to make room for the harvesting of other timber.



James B. DeKorne was born in Michigan in 1936, but spent most of his life in California until 1966 when he moved to New Mexico. He has been, among other things, a venereal disease epidemiologist, an automobile reposessor, a laboratory technician and a college English teacher before he became a free-lance photographer. At the present time he is staff photographer for the Museum of New Mexico.