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Secret and safe

The new local Historic Preservation Office protects history by marshaling volunteers. And by knowing how to keep a secret

BY ANDREW KIRALY

That old saw about Las Vegas mistreating its past usually brings to mind imploding casinos, maybe the occasional historic building going to seed. But there's a different brand of neglecting history that doesn't involve resorts toppling.

Far beyond the Strip, the harassment of history takes place in quieter but no less grave fashion: relic-hunters plucking pottery shards from archeological sites, off-roaders tearing over places where prehistoric man once walked, taggers hitting grave markers in dead mining towns. In Nevada, there are more than 7,000 such documented cultural sites. Among those, several hundred are in danger of being ruined by humans -- which can in turn ruin the research of historians and archeologists.

So who's watching these sites? Volunteers, mostly. And now heading up those volunteers is Sali Underwood, new site stewardship program coordinator for the Nevada Historic Preservation Office. Underwood started Jan. 19 in a position created during the 2005 Legislature that will bring some extra protection to lesser-known history in Southern Nevada. Formerly, the office would fly agents down from Carson City to keep tabs on sites in burgeoning Clark County. Now it's got a permanent office, housed in the Nevada State Museum and Historical Society.

"It's a very important program," says Underwood. "There's so much going on down here that it's important to have a local presence. That way we can address things more immediately when they come up." Things like vandals spray-painting petroglyphs -- say at Valley of Fire's Atlatl Rock.

Indeed, the swelling population of Clark County doesn't just mean bigger traffic headaches and more homes, it means more pressure on historic sites off the beaten path. With that in mind, Underwood's job is to beef up the volunteer program with standardized training and certification. She'll also serve as the main font of information for the agencies the volunteers work for -- which can be anything from the National Forest Service to U.S. Fish and Wildlife to the Bureau of Reclamation.

"It's a program that's deeply needed throughout the state, but particularly in the south, because of the increase in population," says Ron James, state historic preservation officer. "The site stewardship program is desperately needed."

Where are these sites? Ask Underwood, and you'd have better luck finding an arrowhead in an arroyo than getting her -- or anyone else -- to talk about them. It's secrecy with a point: One central tenet of preserving such sites is keeping a lid on them lest they're overrun by the public.

"Lots of sites are confidential," explains George Phillips of UNLV's Public Lands Institute. "Many of



Rednecks and relic hunters, beware: Sali Underwood of the Nevada Historic Preservation Office is here to help guard sensitive sites.

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these sites are discreet because there's a lot of need to study them before they're destroyed. It's not meant to be secret," says Phillips. "The land belongs to the people, but what this is is just confidentiality or discretion."

Adds Underwood: "We'd love to be able to share more, but every time we do, it just damages the site and the resource. You get bitten a couple times, and you don't do it anymore. You can love a site to death."

Volunteers -- about 200 of whom are in Clark County -- are sworn to the same code of silence, signing confidentiality agreements. It's an oath volunteers don't take lightly. "They take [volunteering] very personally," says Phillips. "If a site is damaged, they report anywhere from on a quarterly basis to once a week. They're there as very interested volunteers, and in return they get to understand the site."

And they're an integral part of cultural and historic preservation, as state and federal agencies chronically lack the people to watch over such sites.

"Volunteering is a great way of reaching out to the public," says Underwood. "Some of these [volunteers] are natives who've been here a long time, others have been here a month, but they want to learn. But the more educated anybody is about what needs to be done, the more it disseminates throughout the population."

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