

HISTORY

FIRST DRAFT

A royal hermit once inhabited Dolores Canyon

The rugged and isolated canyons of western Colorado have attracted many people who wanted as little contact with other human beings as possible. The story of John Christian is as intriguing as any.

Christian reportedly was a member of the Danish royal family who fled Denmark to avoid military service. He became a blacksmith and inventor and probably a miner. But he lived alone along the Dolores River and shunned all but a few people.

A stop near his former homesite is planned to be part of a self-guided tour of the Dolores and San Miguel River canyons between Naturita and Gateway that members of the Rimrocker Historical Society of Western Montrose County are in the process of developing. The tour, which is expected to be ready by early next year, will also feature natural rock sculptures, such as the one pictured on this page, and other historical and scenic locations.

"It's about attracting people to this area. There's so much here to see," said Dallas Holmes, secretary of the Rimrocker Museum. "It's about introducing them to who we are and all the wonderful scenery."

The idea for the self-guided auto tour of the canyons began in about 2000 with Marie Templeton, who grew up in the San Miguel Basin and has been a longtime member of the historical society.

"We were on a bus tour of the Northeast and we stopped at the Old Man of the Mountain," the famous rock formation in New Hampshire that appeared to be a giant male face until it collapsed in 2003.

Prior to the collapse, that site attracted thousands of visitors each year, and Templeton thought, "My word, the Dolores River Canyon has a lot more rock faces than that." Following the trip to the Northeast, she began working on a plan to create a tour to see the local rock formations.

Eventually, the effort expanded into a proposed tour that is to include historic sites as well as geologic ones. These will include ancient Indian pictographs, overlooks of the famous Hanging Flume and sites that were important in the heyday of the uranium mining industry. And there is a planned spot near the location where John Christian's cabin once stood.

According to several sources, including author Wilson Rockwell, in his 1965 book, "Uncompahgre Country," when Christian turned 21 — the age for mandatory military service for his family — he rowed a small boat out into the North Sea, then purposely capsized it within sight of a steamship headed for the United States. The crew of the ship rescued him and took the young man with them.

He made it through the immigration system then in place, probably changing his name in the process. The surname for Denmark's royal family was Oldenburg until 1863, when a cousin named Glucksborg took the throne. The Glucksborgs have maintained the throne ever since, but several Danish kings and princes have taken the surname of "Christian."

What John Christian did prior to arriving in western Colorado, and how long it took



THE RIMROCKER HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WESTERN MONTROSE COUNTY

John Christian, a hermit, lived five miles below the Club Ranch on the Dolores River. He was an inventor and interested in perpetual motion.

him to get here, is unclear. According to a report provided by Alpine Archaeological Consultants of Montrose, he is believed to have moved into the Dolores River Valley, after many of the silver mines in the San Juan Mountains closed in the early 1890s.

Alpine Archaeological, which surveyed the homesite in 2004 as part of a larger research project on the Hanging Flume, said there is no evidence that Christian worked on the flume, but he did build his cabin on a site used earlier by construction crews working on the flume. He also used lumber salvaged from the flume to construct his cabin and at least one outbuilding. The Hanging Flume operated only a single season in 1891.

It is known that Christian was in the Dolores River basin by 1899, based on mining claims he filed then and in 1901, Alpine reported. Alpine also found the remains of several cave-like

storage areas with handmade rock walls in front of them at the Christian homesite. And there is evidence that others, perhaps placer miners in the 1930s, used what once was Christian's homesite decades after his death.

Christian worked part-time for many years for the Club Ranch, an organization that is worthy of historical mention in its own right. The ranch was founded in the 1880s, soon after most of the Ute Indians were removed from western Colorado. One of the early financial backers of the ranch, and later its primary owner, was R.W. Johnson, one of three brothers who founded the Johnson & Johnson medical supply company in 1886. It remains among the best known medical-related companies in the world today. Johnson eventually sold the ranch to his ranch manager, Ed Wetzel, and it was sold several more times before being purchased by Standard Chemical.

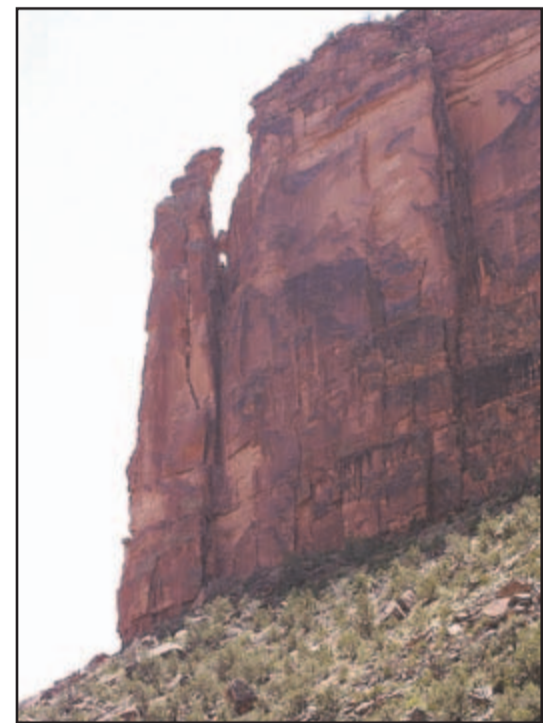
Christian worked for several different owners and managers of the Club Ranch, according to Rockwell and information provided by the Rimrocker Museum. He did blacksmith work and invented a type of horseshoes with special cleats designed to reduce slipping by horses on ice and snow. But his real interest as an inventor was to create a perpetual-motion machine. "He kept a water wheel in the Dolores River to aid him in his experiments," Rockwell wrote, "and he built a path from his cabin down the steep rocky slope to the river" to conduct his experiments and to gather water for his personal use.

Although Christian reportedly trusted Wetzel and got on well with several other ranch employees, he was anti-social and "used to hide out in the rocks near his cabin when he heard people approaching,"

Rockwell wrote.

That tendency for solitude meant he was alone when he died in his cabin in 1916, and his body wasn't discovered until well after his death. Employees of the Club Ranch removed his remains and buried them near his cabin, marking the grave with a stone. Then because of the terrible odor, and perhaps fearing contagious disease, they burned his cabin down. Someone eventually put up a headstone marking his grave, but misspelled his last name as "Christian," according to the Alpine Archaeological report.

Thanks to Dallas Holmes and Marie Templeton with the Rimrocker Historical Society, and Jack Pfertsch with Alpine Archaeological Consultants, for their assistance on this article. Contact Bob Silbernagel at bob-silbernagel@gmail.com.



Rock formations in the Dolores River Canyon, such as this one known as "Praying Saint," or "Praying Jesus," will be included in a self-guided auto tour the Rimrocker Historical Society is developing.

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