

MOUNT CABEZA

In which is described the Valley's most prominent landscape feature, which was also its most hidden

IT WAS EASY to overlook Mount Cabeza. This seems odd because it was the highest feature in the Sierra Blancas. You could see it from Chokecherry or Lacuna or from far across the sea of red-rock plateaus. But once in the tumbled mountains, you could view it only from another peak. Within the confines of Brittlebush Valley it was invisible. Within the usual panorama of landscape esthetics it was yawningly undistinguished. It was simply there.

Cabeza resisted normal categories. It was a volcano that seemingly forgot to blow. It had built up a rocky pile halfway and then stopped, so that it resembled a lumpy, out-of-place mesa. It appeared to have risen upward as though lava had seeped out of the land's pores into a blocky pile, like blood oozing out a puncture wound and congealing into a scab. It lacked the majestic history of eruptive peaks, the elegant symmetry of a Mount Fuji or Mauna Kea, the erosional sculpting of a Shiprock or Mount Ellen. It was to volcanoes what the Blancas were to the Cascades, or what Brittlebush Valley was to New-West towns like Sedona or Telluride. It was a hardscrabble monadnock, raw with blisters of basalt and blotchy with conifers. But no one remembers a state's third-highest peak, which Cabeza was, and tourists are not likely to seek out a mountain that looked like the leftover putty from a child's playroom. Mount Cabeza simply was.

If no one quite knew how to classify it, they knew even less what to do with it. Its one permanent structure was a fire lookout tower, though it was no longer staffed after its last two occupants had committed suicide. The first, a moody college student, had been looking for a summer escape, and decided that Cabeza wasn't enough, so had scribbled a note and then blew his brains out. The second was an aging hippy who was found spread-eagled on the black lava at the foot of the tower, having apparently jumped off the tower's catwalk in metamphetaminic euphoria and descended to earth with the grace of dirt clod. After that, no one would volunteer to remain at the tower, which was staffed intermittently. This spared the packers - the place was within official wilderness, so motorized transport was prohibited - from the trials of having to cart bodies out after bringing groceries in. Mount Cabeza remained uninhabited.

It resisted every other plan of exploitation. A massive fire had swept it of commercial timber fifty years earlier. High winds had blown around the blocky peak like a mountain stream around a boulder. The flames struck the west base of the mountain and blew to both sides with all-scouring flames. The aftermath was a belt of aspen that effectively shielded the upper reaches of the mountain from the encroachments of loggers who gnawed around the base. Cabeza sloughed off other enterprises as casually as it did the fire. A campground proved impossible on the steep slides. A proposed road could not cross over the eastern pass because a deep patch of loose tuff made the soil unstable. A ski resort was frustrated because the dome was too narrow to hold sufficient winter snow and the north flanks were anyway scabbed with lava. That didn't matter for a gang of speculators but when they no longer had Savings & Loans to plunder, and a northern goshawk, a threatened species, was sighted overhead, the scheme collapsed and the land fell to the Resolution Trust Corporation which sold it to a hobby rancher. Geothermal activity was too feeble to support a powerplant. The vesicular lava was too pocked to serve as decorative stone, and the absence of cinder cones eliminated even road chips as a commodity. Throughout, the mountain endured, flourishing neither as a natural phenomenon nor as a cultural monument.

Yet Brittlebush Valley always knew, if only in the subliminal dark corners of its collective mind, that Mount Cabeza was there and that the Valley was somehow the better for its presence. A few newcomers from time to time devised schemes to convert the great black skull into cash but they soon abandoned the projects. The old residents ignored Cabeza as they did the stony foundations of their houses. It was there; it would persist. That was enough. The mountain

returned their indifference, uninterested in what cultural speculations it might attract, shrugging off ideas and common notions of landscape as it did summer thunderstorms and deerflies. The towering head of this basaltic bear rug would never roar. That fact was enough for both Brittlebush Valley and the mountain.

Copyright 2004 Stephen J. Pyne