

“The Big Horn Medicine Wheel”

by

Virgil “Woody” Baston

Presented to

The Dixie Archaeology Society

April 8, 2015

Woody Baston is a trained chemical engineer / scientist and also a cowboy. He was raised in northern Wyoming and worked in the Big Horn Mountains as a cowboy. He became interested in the Big Horn Medicine Wheel from his father and has maintained that interest to this day.

The Big Horn Medicine Wheel is a large geoglyph located in the Big Horn Mountains of northeastern Wyoming. It is located at above 9000-foot elevation and is on a route over the mountains that connect the Great Plains to the Big Horn Valley. This route was and is important to the Native American people of the region.

The wheel (Figure 1) is 84 feet in diameter and contains 28 spokes. There are seven cairns in the design, six on the outside and one in the center. The cairns are large enough to have sheltered a person (sun watcher).



Figure 1

The site is important to the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Crow and Shoshone peoples. Woody feels that the “sheep eater” clan (?) of the Shoshone people could have been responsible for the creation of the wheel because this area was noted as having a large population of big horn sheep.

An article by the Stanford Solar Center,

<http://www.lessonpaths.com/learn/i/ancient-astronomy-2/bighorn-medicine-wheel>, describes the key solar interactions predicted by the wheel.

In 1974, an archaeoastronomer named Jack Eddy visited this Medicine Wheel and studied its alignments, that is, its arrangements of rocks, cairns, and spokes. He found the arrangements point to the rising and setting places of the Sun at summer solstice, as well as the rising places of Aldebaran in Taurus, Rigel in Orion, and Sirius in Canis Major -- all bright, important stars associated with the Solstice (Figure 2). Later another astronomer, Jack Robinson, found a cairn pair that marked the bright star Fomalhaut's rising point with the Sun 28 days before solstice.

Sighting from cairn E through the center hub (which may have supported a pole) marks the summer solstice sunrise. Sighting from C through the center marked the equivalent solstice sunset. Standing at cairn F, one could sight the once-yearly dawn, or *heliacal*, risings of the key stars Aldebaran, Rigel, and Sirius, which play symbolic roles in an ancient [Cheyenne Massaum ceremony](#) and are also important stars in the sacred Lakota circle constellation "[The Animal](#)".

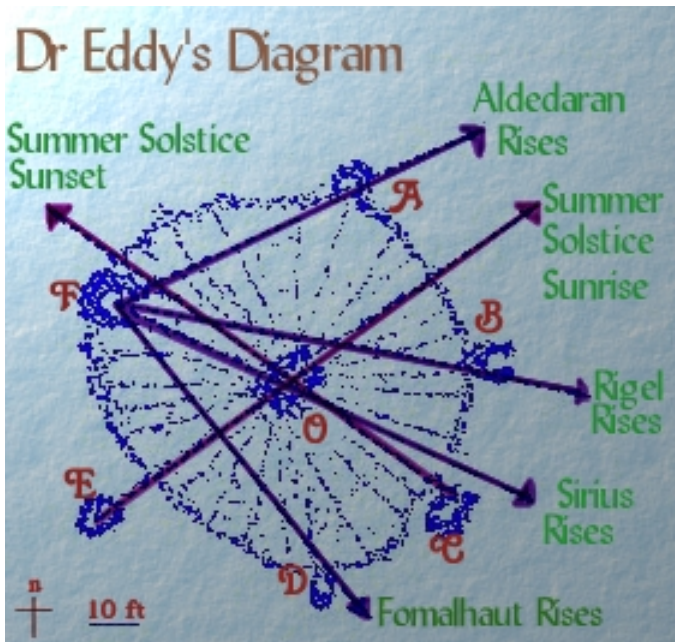


Figure 2

The dawn or heliacal rising of a star is important because it pinpoints a date exactly. This is the day a star is first seen, just before dawn, after it has been behind the Sun for an entire season. From about 1200 AD to 1700 AD, these 4 stars would have acted as solstice markers for the Native Americans - Fomalhaut (F to D) would rise 28 days before the Summer Solstice, Aldebaran (F to A) would rise during the 2 days just before the solstice, Rigel (F to B) would rise 28 days after the solstice, and Sirius (F to C) 28 days after that, at the end of August and hence marking the end of summer and time to leave the mountain.

The area around the medicine wheel is accessible only in the summer months. The area is famous for the late summer / early fall storms that occur in the region. Woody describes them as being “life threatening” at times. Woody’s thesis is that it is important to know when it is time to leave the mountain. The medicine wheel fulfills that function – it was build as a calendar that tells precisely when to leave the mountain – at the end of August before the winter storms arrive. The 28 spokes mark the days between the key solar events.

Woody also points out that the wheel is located on a migration trail - the “only” trail off the mountain. Consequently anyone on the mountain would know about it and its significance.

Woody says that the wheel is a ceremonial site for the Native Americans. However he believes that is was build first as a calendar for survival. Later the wheel became a ceremonial site. – Survival first and then Religion.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

John Mangels