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## The American West, 150 Years Ago

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In the 1860s and 70s, photographer Timothy O'Sullivan created some of the best-known images in American History. After covering the U.S. Civil War, (many of his photos appear in this [earlier series](#)), O'Sullivan joined a number of expeditions organized by the federal government to help document the new frontiers in the American West. The teams were composed of soldiers, scientists, artists, and photographers, and tasked with discovering the best ways to take advantage of the region's untapped natural resources. O'Sullivan brought an amazing eye and work ethic, composing photographs that evoked the vastness of the West. He also documented the Native American population as well as the pioneers who were already altering the landscape. Above all, O'Sullivan captured -- for the first time on film -- the natural beauty of the American West in a way that would later influence Ansel Adams and thousands more photographers to come. [\[34 photos\]](#)

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A man sits in a wooden boat with a mast on the edge of the Colorado River in the Black Canyon, Mojave County, Arizona. At this time, photographer Timothy O'Sullivan was working as a military photographer, for Lt. George Montague Wheeler's U.S. Geographical Surveys With the One Hundredth Meridian. Photo taken in 1871, from expedition camp 8, looking upstream. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress)





2

Pah-Ute (Paiute) Indian group, near Cedar, Utah, in 1872. (Timothy O'Sullivan/National Archives and Records Administration) #





3 Twin buttes stand near Green River City, Wyoming, photographed in 1872. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





4

Members of Clarence King's Fortieth Parallel Survey team, near Oreana, Nevada, in 1867. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





5

The Pyramid and Domes, a line of dome-shaped tufa rocks in Pyramid Lake, Nevada, seen in 1867. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Cor





**6** Panoramic view of tents and a camp identified as "Camp Beauty", rock towers and canyon walls in Canyon de Chelly National Monument. Tents and possibly a lean-to shelter stand on the canyon floor, near trees and talus. Photographed in 1873.  
(Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





**7** Old Mission Church, Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico. View from the plaza in 1873. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





8

Boat crew of the "Picture" at Diamond Creek. Photo shows photographer Timothy O'Sullivan, fourth from left, with fellow members of Wheeler survey and Native Americans, following ascent of the Colorado River through the Black Canyon in 1871 (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





9 Browns Park, Colorado, 1872. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





10 Shoshone Falls, Snake River, Idaho. A view across top of the falls in 1874. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





**11** A man sits on a rocky shore beside the Colorado River in Iceberg Canyon, on the border of Mojave County, Arizona, and Clark County, 1871. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #



**12** Timothy O'Sullivan's darkroom wagon, pulled by four mules, entered the frame at the right side of the photograph, reached the center image, and turned around, heading back out of the frame. Footprints lead from the wagon toward the camera, revealing the photograph. Photo taken in 1867, in the Carson Sink, part of Nevada's Carson Desert. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





13 The mining town of Gold Hill, just south of Virginia City, Nevada, in 1867. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





**14** A wooden balanced incline used for gold mining, at the Illinois Mine in the Pahrangat Mining District, Nevada in 1871. An ore car would travel on the parallel tracks connected to a pulley wheel at the top of tracks. (Timothy O'Sullivan/National Archives and Records Administration) #





**15** In 1867, O'Sullivan traveled to Virginia City, Nevada to document the activities at the Savage and the Gould and Curry mines on the Comstock Lode, the richest silver deposit in America. Working nine hundred feet underground, lit by an improvised flash -- a burning magnesium -- O'Sullivan photographed the miners in tunnels, shafts, and lifts. (Timothy O'Sullivan/National Archives and Records Administration) #





16 The head of Canyon de Chelly, looking past walls that rise some 1,200 feet above the canyon floor, in Arizona in 1873.  
(Timothy O'Sullivan/National Archives and Records Administration) #





17 Headlands north of the Colorado River Plateau, 1872. (Timothy O'Sullivan/National Archives and Records Administration) #





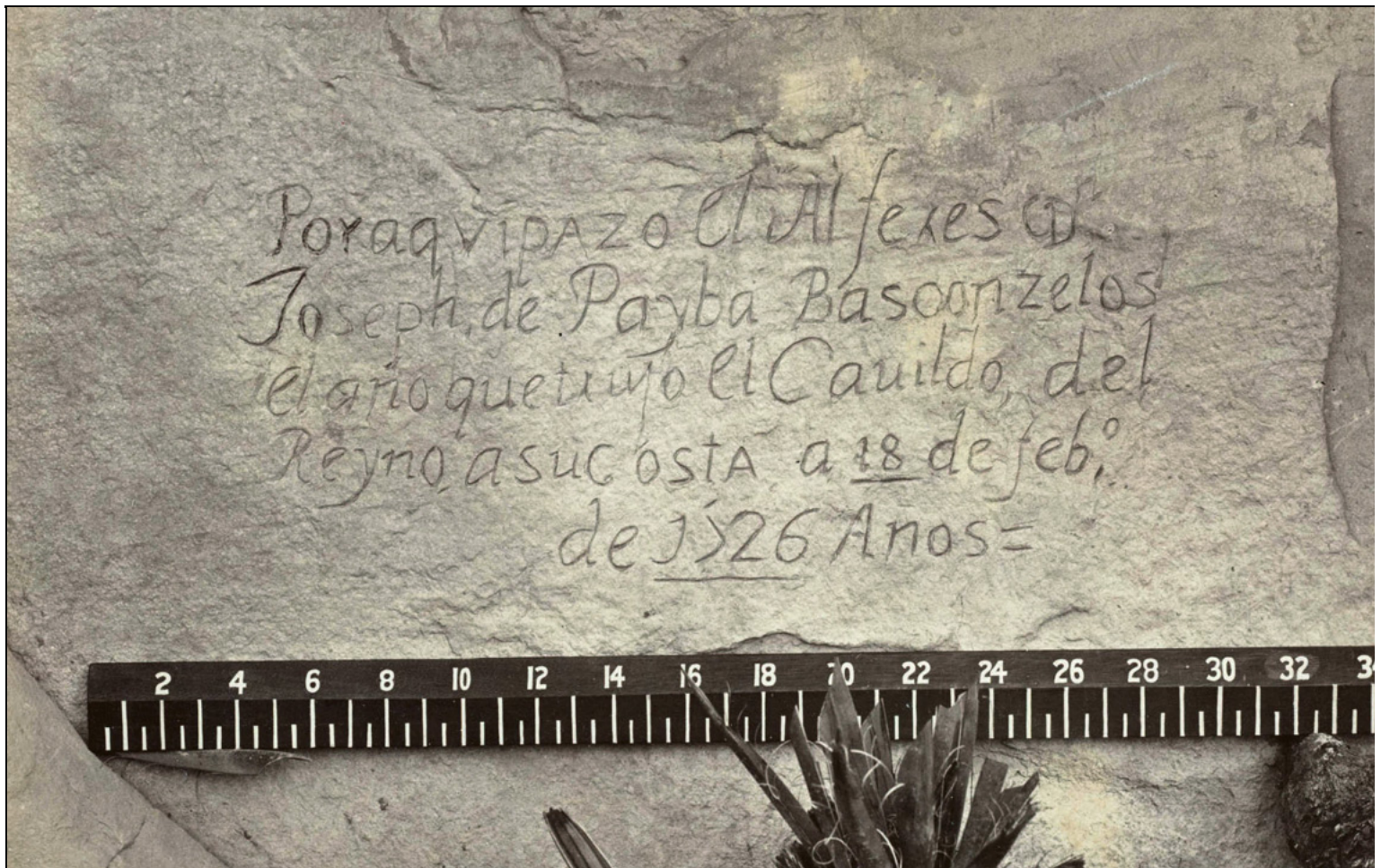
**18** Native American (Paiute) men, women and children sit or stand and pose in rows under a tree near probably Cottonwood Springs (Wade County), Nevada, in 1875. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





19 The junction of Green and Yampah Canyons, in Utah, in 1872. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





**20** Nearly 150 years ago, photographer O'Sullivan came across this evidence of a visitor to the West that preceded his own expedition by 150 years -- A Spanish inscription from 1726. This close-up view of the inscription carved in the sandstone at Inscription Rock (El Mor Monument), New Mexico reads, in English: "By this place passed Ensign Don Joseph de Payba Basconzelos, in the year in which he he Council of the Kingdom at his expense, on the 18th of February, in the year 1726". (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #



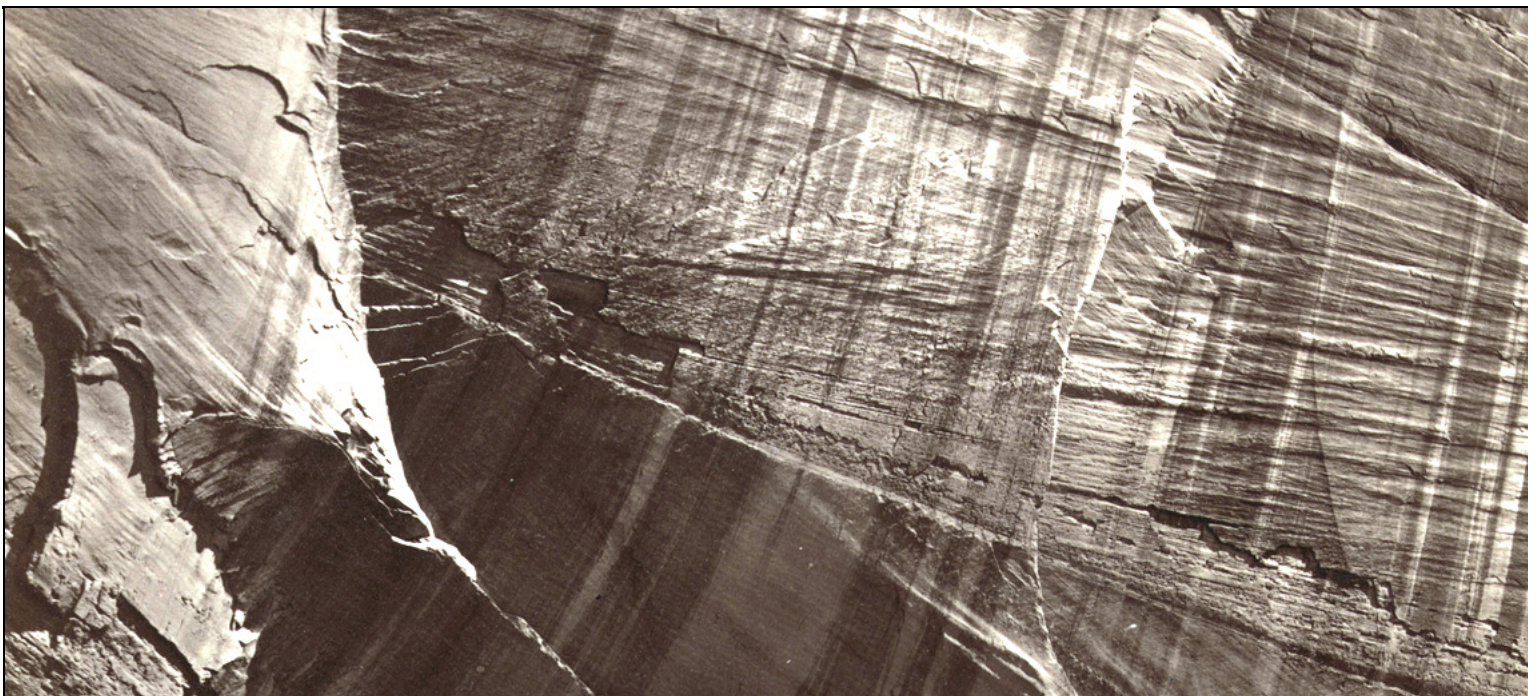


**21** Aboriginal life among the Navajo Indians. Near old Fort Defiance, New Mexico, in 1873. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





**22** The Canyon of Lodore, Colorado, in 1872. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #







**23** View of the White House, Ancestral Pueblo Native American (Anasazi) ruins in Canyon de Chelly, Arizona, in 1873. The cliff dwellings were built by the Anasazi more than 500 years earlier. At bottom, men stand and pose on cliff dwellings in a niche and on ruins on the canyon floor. Climbing ropes connect the groups of men. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





**24** The "Nettie", an expedition boat on the Truckee River, western Nevada, in 1867.  
(Timothy O'Sullivan/National Archives and Records Administration) #





25 Man bathing in Pagosa Hot Spring, Colorado, in 1874. (Timothy O'Sullivan/National Archives and Records Administration) #





**26** A distant view of Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1873. (Timothy O'Sullivan/National Archives and Records Administration) #



**27** Maiman, a Mojave Indian, guide and interpreter during a portion of the season in the Colorado country, in 1871.  
(Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





**28** Alta City, Little Cottonwood, Utah, ca. 1873. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





29 Cathedral Mesa, Colorado River, Arizona, 1871. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





**30** Big Cottonwood Canyon, Utah, in 1869. Note man and horse near the bridge at bottom right. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress)





**31** Rock formations in the Washakie Badlands, Wyoming, in 1872. A survey member stands at lower right for scale.  
(Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





**32** Oak Grove, White Mountains, Sierra Blanca, Arizona in 1873. (Timothy O'Sullivan/National Archives and Records Administration) #





**33** Shoshone Falls, Idaho, in 1868. Shoshone Falls, near present-day Twin Falls, Idaho, is 212 feet high, and flows over a rim 1,000 feet (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #





**34** The south side of Inscription Rock (now El Morro National Monument), in New Mexico in 1873. Note the small figure of a man standing center. The prominent feature stands near a small pool of water, and has been a resting place for travelers for centuries. Since at least the 17th century, natives, Europeans, and later American pioneers carved names and messages into the rock face as they paused. In 1906, a law was passed, prohibiting further carving. (Timothy O'Sullivan/Library of Congress) #

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