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Robert Mallouf
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DREW: You're listening to KRTS Marfa, Public Radio for Far West Texas. The following "Talk at Ten" interview with Robert Mallouf, the Director of the Center for Big Bend Studies at Sul Ross State University, was originally recorded in the spring of 2006.

KELLY: This is "Talk at Ten." I'm Kelly Fenstermaker and we're speaking with Robert Mallouf, archaeologist and Director of the Center for Big Bend Studies. Good morning, Robert.

ROBERT: Good morning, Kelly. It's a pleasure to be here.

KELLY: It's good to have you here. As part of Sul Ross University, what is the function of the Center for Big Bend Studies?

ROBERT: Well, the Center for Big Bend Studies is a department of Sul Ross State University, and we conduct research in archaeology and history primarily, and related disciplines. We promote research in the Big Bend and the eastern Trans-Pecos region and some into central-northern Mexico. We serve as a liaison between the University and the public on historical matters and we train students for careers in the fields of anthropology and archaeology. And we have a staff of about 15 people and we're going strong. It's a good organization. We're focused on research and we turn out good researchers.

KELLY: What exactly is archaeology? It's beyond digging, isn't it?

ROBERT: Well archaeology, simply put, is the study of past ways of human life. We study the relationships of objects made by peoples in the past in relationship to their behavior. In other words, archaeology is the study of past cultural behavior, from the beginning of human past, some five million years ago to events—even up to events that happened yesterday. And we do those studies through the artifacts that people leave behind. We apply scientific techniques and excavation and analysis to reconstruct past ways of life to understand, for instance, how different customs developed and evolved and to understand human adaptations to changing environments through time. We try to reach into the minds of ancient peoples. We try to understand the human condition and to understand ourselves in the process. We try to share that information with the public.

KELLY: One of your most important projects is the Trans-Pecos Archaeological Program. Can you tell us about that?

ROBERT: Yes, the Trans-Pecos Archaeological Program is a five-year endeavor to—essentially what we say is bring the eastern Trans-Pecos and Big Bend back into the mainstream of scientific research—archaeological research. There was a period of about 40 years from 1940 to 1980 when the Big Bend, especially, was left out of what was going on across the rest of Texas in the sense that there was very little archaeological research carried on out here. And for that reason this region fell behind the remainder of

the state and the southwest United States in general in terms of archaeological inquiry and in terms of conducting archaeological research. So we essentially are trying to bring it back into the mainstream, both in terms of archaeological methodology and in archaeological theory. That includes history as well because anthropology, archaeology, and history are all linked together. Archaeology is a sub-discipline of anthropology. So, we're talking about a lot here when we say "bring it back into the mainstream," more than just archaeology alone, but other disciplines as well.

KELLY: What is your background as an archaeologist?

ROBERT: Well, I did most of my archaeological training at the University of Texas at Austin. I also did some graduate work at the University of California at Berkeley and at the American University in Cairo, Egypt.

KELLY: That must have been very interesting.

ROBERT: Very interesting. In fact, I was headed for the Middle East to work with very ancient sites initially. And I got interested during that period in working with Paleoindian sites here in Texas in the interim between going over there to school and eventually just stayed here and carried out my research here.

KELLY: How far does your area reach—your research area here?

ROBERT: Well, the Center for Big Bend Studies is focused on the eastern Trans-Pecos region and the Big Bend. And also on central-northern Mexico because we have to understand what's going on across that river in order to interpret what happened here in the past. We're closely linked, of course, to northern Mexico and so we look at it as part of our territory, if you will, in terms of focus, research focus.

KELLY: In historical significance, how does this area that you're working with now compare with other areas in Texas?

ROBERT: Oh, it's extremely interesting. When I—I was in Austin for years and years as the Texas State Archaeologist for about 15 years—and I was working all over the State of Texas. But I always took every opportunity to get out to this region because it was my favorite area to work and I think it has great potentials for major accomplishments in the area of archaeology and for major contributions to the science.

KELLY: If you were to pick one discovery that's the most important of any of them that you've found out here, what would that one be?

ROBERT: Well, that's kind of a hard question to answer because there's so much that is exciting about our finds. I guess one of the most interesting things to me is trying to get into the heads of people in terms of their religion and ritual practices—ancient ritual practices. This is one of the few areas in the State of Texas where we've been able to do that. And there's one site in particular that's very well known. It's in the Davis

Mountains; it's called Tall Rockshelter. It has 17-foot tall pictographs that are ritual in nature and they leave you kind of astounded when you see them. It's a wonderful site and we've been carrying out work there off and on.

KELLY: I had the pleasure of seeing that site. It looks almost like modern art.

ROBERT: It's abstract, yes. It's abstract. Apparently it was extremely important to the people who did it. And it's shamanistic in design. It's a shamanistic panel related to their ritualism and religion.

KELLY: What kind of artifacts do you tend to find in these digs of yours?

ROBERT: Well, most of what we find—it depends really on the kind of site we're working in. If we're working in open campsites that are just out in the open, say along arroyos or areas like that, then mainly what we have to work with are stone artifacts, the stone tools they left behind, because everything else has deteriorated. In prehistory, these people had an extensive material culture that included basketry and matting and sandals and snares and all kinds of things that they used to survive. But you only find those kinds of artifacts along with stone tools in rockshelters where the perishable artifacts have been protected, they're not exposed to the elements.

KELLY: Have you learned much about how these people lived from these artifacts?

ROBERT: Oh, yes, we've learned a great deal. We're learning every day. That's one thing about the discipline of archaeology is that you never really get bored with it. You learn something new every day. And we are reconstructing, essentially, the lifeways of people in the past, the lifeways of people who first came to this region 12,000 years ago all the way up through the Spanish period and into modern times with the pioneers in the Big Bend. We're studying everybody's work.

KELLY: If you're just joining us, this is "Talk at Ten." I'm Kelly Fenstermaker and my guest is Robert Mallouf, Director of the Center for Big Bend Studies. Getting back to these digs, Bob, how far back in history do they extend?

ROBERT: Well, the very first people into the Big Bend, the eastern Trans-Pecos region—they came in here about 12,000 years ago or about 10,000 B.C. These were the people that you probably read about, some that hunted mammoth and other large Pleistocene animals. And we are busy looking for their sites. The Big Bend has been the subject of some controversy relative to what we call the Paleoindians, the very earliest people that we can document that were in the region.

KELLY: Was this the Ice Age?

ROBERT: This was at the end of the last Ice Age, the end of what's called the Pleistocene Epoch. Things were very different then. What you see out in the environment today is not what you would have seen back then.

KELLY: What was it like back then?

ROBERT: Back then there was much more water. There were lakes in some of these basins. When you look across some of the basins today, you see creosote everywhere; it's hot, it's dry. Back in the Paleoindian times you would have seen lakes and ponds and lots of springs. And there were marshes and sedges around the edges of ponds. There were big animals, like mammoth, wandering around. And the people, generally, were following and after the big animals as well as small animals and plants as well. The earliest people are typically thought of as big game hunters but that particular kind of interpretation is slowly being dispelled as we learn more about them. They also hunted and gathered many other species and we're learning a great deal about them.

KELLY: As the climate changed and the animals disappeared or changed and the plants changed, how did these people adapt to that? Did they have different kinds of tools or hunting methods?

ROBERT: That's, of course, one of the goals of archaeological research is to understand culture change. After 10,000 B.C. there's a slow drying trend that takes place that we're still in today. This drying trend has been going on for thousands and thousands of years, but it's been interrupted at times by periods of wetness. And, for instance, around 300-500 B.C. we had a period that was unusually wet out here and we had bison herds coming in off the plains of the Big Bend. And the people that hunted bison were following them. But as the drying continued through thousands of years, the plant communities and animal communities changed. Of course, the bison, the giant bison, and mammoth and animals like that became extinct. The mammoth became extinct by 9000 B.C. They were only hunted for three or four hundred years by people, what we call the Clovis culture. So through time you have this continuous change in environment and people had to adapt. They had to adapt or they became extinct just like the mammoth.

KELLY: Are we going to look forward to a continued dry phase?

ROBERT: That's a good question. In this modern world, we don't really know what to expect in the sense that change can be wrought by things other than the natural process. And that, of course, is part of the controversy now, how much has the human population changed the normal cycle of things. Normally we might be coming out of an intense long drying period now and moving back towards another glaciation. Whether or not that will occur is a question because we have the glaciers—apparently they tend to be melting at a very rapid rate, due to people possibly.

KELLY: Obviously there have been different cultures using these sites throughout the ages. Can you tell us something about these people?

ROBERT: Well, yes I can. We have some very, very interesting cultures here to study. For example, we have what's called the La Junta Phase that's centered along the Rio Grande and the Rio Conchos from about 1200 A.D. forward until about 1500 A.D. These

were farming peoples. They were the only real farming peoples that ever existed in the eastern Trans-Pecos and Big Bend region in terms of establishing permanent or semi-permanent settlements. And when you get up to the Guadalupe Mountains, there probably were some more established farming groups up there as well. But in the Big Bend, in what we call the La Junta area—La Junta de los Rios—the juncture of the Rio Grande and the Rio Conchos—that area was the focus of farming Indians from 1200 A.D. forward. They were living in pit houses much like southwestern peoples. They may be southwestern pueblo peoples that actually colonized the Big Bend and came down the river from the El Paso area, what we call the Jornada Mogollon people, possibly. Or they might have been indigenous hunters and gatherers who took up the practice of agriculture. Whoever they were, when agriculture was introduced, it changed the lives in a major way of many peoples. The peoples who adopted agriculture changed their lifeways. The hunters and gatherers who lived around them, peoples that we call the Cielo Complex, and various other groups that lived around them in the Big Bend, might or might not adopt agriculture. The ones who didn't continued a hunting-gathering lifeway. But they interacted with the farmers, so you have a dynamic there, a symbiotic relationship between farmers and hunters and gatherers, nomadic peoples. That's very, very interesting archaeologically. They became dependent upon each other but at the same time were very suspicious of each other and they live a certain way so they could watch each other, watch each other's movements.

KELLY: To get back to rock art, we know that there are lots of rockshelters in the Trans-Pecos. But where do you find most of them?

ROBERT: Well, rockshelters, of course, are a very special class of archaeological site, extremely, extremely important for research because they contain the full sequences many times of our cultural past, as well as the artifacts, including perishable artifacts. Unfortunately, rockshelters are also the target of people who like to collect artifacts, so many, many rockshelters have been destroyed through the years. And we are attempting now to get scientific samples from rockshelters specifically because we expect that eventually we're going to lose the rockshelters of the eastern Trans-Pecos and Big Bend probably entirely.

KELLY: That's a shame.

ROBERT: It's really a difficult problem. But rockshelters are fairly common. You know, it's a fairly common kind of archaeological site in the eastern Trans-Pecos and Big Bend. They're found in the mountains and cliff areas and foothills, even out in the basin sometimes when you have outcrops of rock.

KELLY: They could be in a lot of different places. What can these paintings tell us? They seem to be so mysterious. Does anyone have a clue what they mean?

ROBERT: Well, yes, there are certain kinds of rock art that you can interpret. Much of rock art cannot be interpreted, unfortunately. We can try but we have to interpolate from living groups usually in other parts of the world or from the southwestern United States

to try to interpret rock art. When you can actually link rock art to a particular culture is when you can really begin to make inroads in understanding the significance of it and usually it provides you with some information concerning their ritual life. And that's what we're doing in the Davis Mountains. We're working with a culture called the Livermore Phase—that's an archaeological term for the people—because we cannot demonstrate a linkage between these prehistoric people and the modern, or historic, Indian groups.

KELLY: There's a gap there.

ROBERT: Yeah. They, as far as we know, became extinct but we have expressions of their ritualism and religion in the archaeological remains, which is highly significant. It's a real way to get into their heads.

KELLY: Do you find symbols that pervade throughout the world, certain symbols that lots of rock art has?

ROBERT: Oh, yes. In rock art there are certain symbols that are found on a global basis, such as handprints. Handprints are found all over the world. There are certain kinds of symbols like circles and concentric circles and various other symbols that are found worldwide. The handprints are found in the upper Paleolithic fantastic rock art of southern France and Spain and places like that, Australia and South Africa. Many times digits are missing from the handprints because when people lost a loved one, they mourned their loss sometimes by cutting off a digit on their fingers. So you have digits missing in the handprints. You know, we study these things. We try to learn what it is that they're trying to say through the rock art. Rock art is a major aspect of archaeology. It is certainly an area that many, many people are interested in.

KELLY: This has a lot to do with ritualism, I know, and you are writing a book on the subject. Can you talk about that?

ROBERT: Yes, I'm working on a book that involves ritualism of the Livermore Phase, these prehistoric people who were centered in the Davis Mountains from about 900 to 1300 A.D. They were nomadic peoples; they moved around a lot; they didn't stay in one place for a particularly long period of time. But they would come back and re-occupy sites that they had been at before. And they created the 17-foot tall rock art panel that I was talking about in the Davis Mountains that is shamanistic. They had a shamanistic religion. We know from one of their burials that contained a woman that women could be shamans in their culture. And we know that they placed caches of artifacts at particular places, such as the famous Livermore cache that was found in 1895 on the top of Mt. Livermore. It was an offering made by Livermore Phase people. That cache contained almost 2000 arrowpoints. And it was placed there as an offering. What we are learning, basically, about the Livermore Phase is that the focus of these people's religion tended to be the mountain itself, Mt. Livermore. And there are certain aspects of their culture that are directed strongly towards the mountain.

KELLY: You're listening to KRTS, Marfa Public Radio. I'm Kelly Fenstermaker, speaking with archaeologist Robert Mallouf, Director of the Center for Big Bend Studies. Bob, earlier you were talking about the problem of looting. With your permission, I would like to read a paragraph you wrote for the American Indian Quarterly entitled Unraveling Rope. Here it is: "A boy sat spellbound, lost in thought about what this Indian campsite and its inhabitants must have looked like so long ago. Like so many other youngsters, he had little in the way of education to draw on in his mental reconstruction of the camp. The concept of prehistory was essentially unknown to him. His small town schooling in history began with the arrival of Columbus in the New World and his concepts of the native Americans were based more on Western movies of the 1950s than anything else. Unbeknownst to him at the time, the boy's craving for knowledge would eventually lead him to a university and ultimately into a career in archaeology. Many years later he would anxiously return to the ancient campsite, only to find it devastated by looting and destruction." That boy wasn't you, was it?

ROBERT: Well, yes, actually it was. I grew up on the Colorado river area of Brown County and became interested in archaeological sites very early. I had absolutely no background for it but just interest—curiosity primarily. It happens to lots of kids and sometimes they go on to become collectors of artifacts, which can be very destructive to the archaeological sites. Or they might sometimes move into the science of archaeology. In my case, I went that route.

KELLY: You did it right. And how did you feel when you returned to this site several years later?

ROBERT: It's the same feeling every time I walk into an archaeological site that's been looted and torn up. Until you have worked with scientists in a scientific excavation, you really have no idea what you're losing by digging up an archaeological site. It's just tremendous information. Every archaeological site is like a book, a book of knowledge. And every time you disturb it or tear into it, you're tearing out the pages of the book basically. And it's reached proportions now that it's making it very difficult for us to really reconstruct the past in the way we should.

KELLY: Is there anything that can be done about it?

ROBERT: It's a difficult problem. There's so much natural, strong interest on the part of people in artifacts that it's a very difficult thing to say to a person "Please don't pick up that artifact, leave it where it is." They have a rationale for picking it up and taking it home. Unfortunately, when they dig in archaeological sites, they destroy the integrity and context of the artifacts in the site, and essentially destroy all the scientific information that the site holds. We strongly encourage people to not dig in archaeological sites.

KELLY: If they want to, they can be a volunteer and dig with you.

ROBERT: Absolutely. We do use volunteers and we have many volunteers actually that work with us.

KELLY: And if one is interested in volunteering for the Center, do they call you?

ROBERT: Yes. They can call us at 432-837-8179.

KELLY: It's listed in the phonebook under Sul Ross University.

ROBERT: Center for Big Bend Studies, Sul Ross State University.

KELLY: Although many of the places you and your staff visit are on private land and you have to respect their privacy, are there some specific sites you could talk about?

ROBERT: Well, yes. We do a lot of work on private land and we work strictly with the cooperation of landowners. On private land is where you have most of the archaeological resources. Some specific sites—for example, we're getting ready to do an excavation at an archaeological site on the Nature Conservancy land, private land, that has a major rockshelter that has a very strong expression of Livermore Phase people in it. And this particular site has raised many questions about the lifeways, the material culture, and the ritualism of the Livermore Phase people. It is a rockshelter. It contains some extremely significant rock art and actually a prehistoric altar that we've been able to relate to the Livermore people.

KELLY: That is very exciting. How old is the oldest site you've ever worked on?

ROBERT: The oldest site I've ever worked on is Clovis culture that dated about 9300 B.C. I've worked, through 35 years of this career—I worked on every age of archaeological site, right up through the Spanish and other cultures. It's all very, very interesting. I can get just as excited about a Spanish archaeological site as I can a Paleoindian site.

KELLY: It's all exciting. How do you find out about most of these sites?

ROBERT: Well, we find out about sites many times from landowners. The landowners many times invite us to come onto their land and they show us archaeological sites that they're curious about and they're interested in. We also learn about sites from people who collect artifacts. Sometimes they actually do a turn-around and work with us, you know, to try to get into the science of archaeology. But we also go out and find the sites ourselves because we've learned through the years kind of where to look.

KELLY: You mentioned an interesting site in Balmorhea.

ROBERT: Oh, yes, there's a particularly interesting rock art site near Balmorhea. It's located on a limestone ridge. It's just an open limestone shelf; it's a huge area with just flat limestone rock and there's over a thousand petroglyphs carved into the rock. It's a spectacular site and we think that some of these petroglyphs—although many of them are abstract designs, there are some that appear to be masks and they may represent possibly

owls. They look like big-eyed owls. And you know, it's interesting—if that's what they are—of course you have to speculate a lot with rock art. You're not always sure you're right.

KELLY: Are these in a museum somewhere?

ROBERT: Pardon me?

KELLY: Are these masks in a museum?

ROBERT: No. In this case the masks are carved into the rock. They are designs that are carved into the rock. Of course, many, many Native American groups were very fearful of owls. They thought owls were the spirits of the deceased and they were essentially scared of them. They would take measures to protect themselves from owls. Even hearing an owl at night would disturb them. The Apaches were notorious for that.

KELLY: Well, they do sound sort of spooky at night, anyway. Bob, it was wonderful talking to you. You're fascinating, and thank you for coming.

ROBERT: My pleasure.

KELLY: Robert Mallouf is the Director of the Center for Big Bend Studies, a department of Sul Ross University. This is "Talk at Ten" and I'm Kelly Fenstermaker.