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Beehive Archive

Welcome to the Beehive Archive—your weekly bite-sized look at some of the most pivotal—and peculiar—events in Utah history. With all of the history and none of the dust, the Beehive Archive is a fun way to catch up on Utah’s past. Beehive Archive is a production of the Utah Humanities Council, provided to local papers as a weekly feature article focusing on Utah history topics drawn from our award-winning radio series, which can be heard each week on [KCPW](#) and [Utah Public Radio](#).

Robert Smithson’s Journey to *Spiral Jetty*

One of the most important artists of the 20th Century took a convoluted journey to create one of the most significant works of land art in the world. And it happened right here in Utah.

Robert Smithson was one of the pioneers of the land art movement in the late 1960s and 70s, which redefined art-making by using landscape as canvas. For Smithson, the journey to find a site for his artwork was as important as the site itself. Both determined the shape of the final artwork.

In 1968 Smithson became interested in salt lakes, particularly the red color resulting from bacteria and algae growing in certain saline environments. When Smithson learned that water in Utah’s Great Salt Lake was the color of tomato soup, he and his wife – fellow artist Nancy Holt – came to search for a place to build his next artwork. After much exploration, the couple visited Rozel Point in the northern arm of the Lake. “As we traveled,” Smithson wrote, “the valley spread into an uncanny immensity unlike the other landscapes we had seen. The roads on the map became a net of dashes, while in the far distance the salt lake existed as an interrupted silver band.” Besides the vast landscape, Smithson was drawn to dilapidated shacks and abandoned machinery in the area, remnants of many decades of oil drilling. Massive deposits of black basalt blanketed the landscape, pinkish water rippled to the shore, and networks of mud-cracks laced across the salt flats. All spoke to Smithson as a “gyrating space” filled with spiraling movement. It was here that he decided to build his most iconic artwork, *Spiral Jetty*, which he completed in 1970.

Today, people travel from around the world to experience *Spiral Jetty*. Once in Utah, the journey consists of long highways, twisting dirt roads, industrial spaces, historical sites, and the vast unknown. This journey is crucial to Smithson’s artwork. It’s not just about clambering on top of the jetty, through deep water or over encrusted salt crystals. Nor merely about the way the jetty focuses the sublime qualities of Great Salt Lake. The real magic of *Spiral Jetty* begins when you step into your car to embark on an adventure into the wilds of the West.

Beehive Archive is a production of the Utah Humanities Council. Sources consulted in the creation of the *Beehive Archive* and past episodes may be found at www.utahhumanities.org © Utah Humanities Council 2015.

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