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July 2024

The Ancient Ones are Visited

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The Vail Trail, Volume 21, Number 50, October 16, 1987  — “THE ANCIENT ONES” ARE VISITED [ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

“THE ANCIENT ONES” ARE VISITED

By MARK HUFFMAN
Special to The Vail Trail

There is something fascinating about a ghost town.

And though the ruins left by the Anasazi aren't usually thought of as such, that's what they are — the oldest and most impressive ghost towns in the West. Built 700 years or more ago, they still stand, imposing and strange, relicts of a mysterious people who were gone from the scene centuries before Europeans arrived, gone even before the Navajos appeared.

The Anasazi. The name means "ancient ones" in the language of the Navajo. The ancient ones were there before Columbus, building cities in the dry Four Corners area and throughout New Mexico and Arizona, spreading northward into the southern parts of Colorado and Utah. Judging by the buildings they created, the pottery and baskets and other artifacts they left, they were the most advanced civilization north of Mexico City, and may even have had contacts with the Aztecs.

Today little remains but the stones, evidence of the people and their thousand-year reign over the area. But if it's only stones that are left, the stones are impressive enough in themselves to draw millions of visitors from around the globe. For people in Vail who have an interest, the trip is an easy one, a day on the road. And, besides the attraction of the handiwork of the Anasazi, there's the additional benefit of warm, dry weather.

Here's a look at three of the most impressive sites:

Mesa Verde: Mesa Verde is the place most people think of when they think of Anasazi ruins. A national park since 1906, Mesa Verde was one of the centers of Anasazi culture and is today the center of tourists interested in learning about the people and their work. Hundreds of ancient ruins line the canyon walls of Mesa Verde, many of them closed to the public and still unchanged by modern man.

The ruins that are open, though, are more than enough to keep the interest of anyone except the most ardent fan of Anasazi life.

Mesa Verde visitors will find an outstanding museum of Anasazi artifacts at the park headquarters. Adjacent to the museum is Spruce Tree House, one of the park's most famous ruins. Others well-known and well worth seeing are Cliff Palace, Balcony House, Long House, and Square Tower House.

Park rangers are on hand at each ruin, ready to explain how the Anasazi lived and to speculate about why they left their homes around 1200 and never returned. They are also there, unfortunately, because of the threat of theft and vandalism.

A sidelight of a visit to Mesa Verde is the view. From the northern edge of the mesa, at a spot called Park Point, you can see forever — almost. From an elevation of about 8,500 feet, you look from on high down toward the flatlands that stretch away into Utah. From Park Point you can see the La Sal Mountains, more than 100 miles away, and the Blue Mountains, the La Platas, and other peaks that reach northward.

There are a variety of services, including campsites and a hotel, in the park. Lodging is also available in Cortez and Durango, west and east, respectively, of Mesa Verde on Colorado Highway 160.

Chaco Canyon: The cousins of the Mesa Verdeans, the people of Chaco Canyon in northwestern New Mexico, built cities as impressive as those created by their northern relatives, but in an entirely different style. Instead of building on the steep walls of canyons, the Chaco people instead built on the flat land along the small rivers that cut through the mesa country. It seems an unlikely place for a major culture to grow and flourish — it's dry and hot, and the soil is the fine dirt and sand of the desert. But the Chacoans apparently found the area to their liking — they built 400 or more settlements around the region, some with hundreds of rooms, and connected with other centers by excellent roads.

At the start of their history in the area, the Chacoan's dwellings were crudely built and often were created a room at a time, with no overall design. Later, however, the evidence shows that the structures were built after careful planning, and the

workmanship changes from primitive to expert, with finely built walls, up to five stories high, that join at razor-sharp right-angle corners.

Among the best examples are Pueblo Bonito, Pueblo de Arroyo, and Kin Kletso. Other ruins worth seeing are Hungo Pavi, Chetro Ketl, and Casa Rinconada.

Getting to Chaco Culture National Historical Park is a little more difficult than getting to Mesa Verde. It's a good 20 miles off the paved road, and it's a trip across land that emptier now than it was when the Chacoans were living there. You can drive all the way in from Highway 44 and not see a house.

Hovenweep: Still further off the beaten path is Hovenweep, a group of clustered ruins that are in both Colorado and Utah and a long way from a real town.

A couple hundred people probably shared the small canyon that cuts through the flat sagebrush and juniper land of southeastern Utah, getting a hard living from the tough land and climate. Hovenweep structures aren't as big as those at Mesa Verde or Chaco Canyon — more like individual homes rather than apartment buildings.

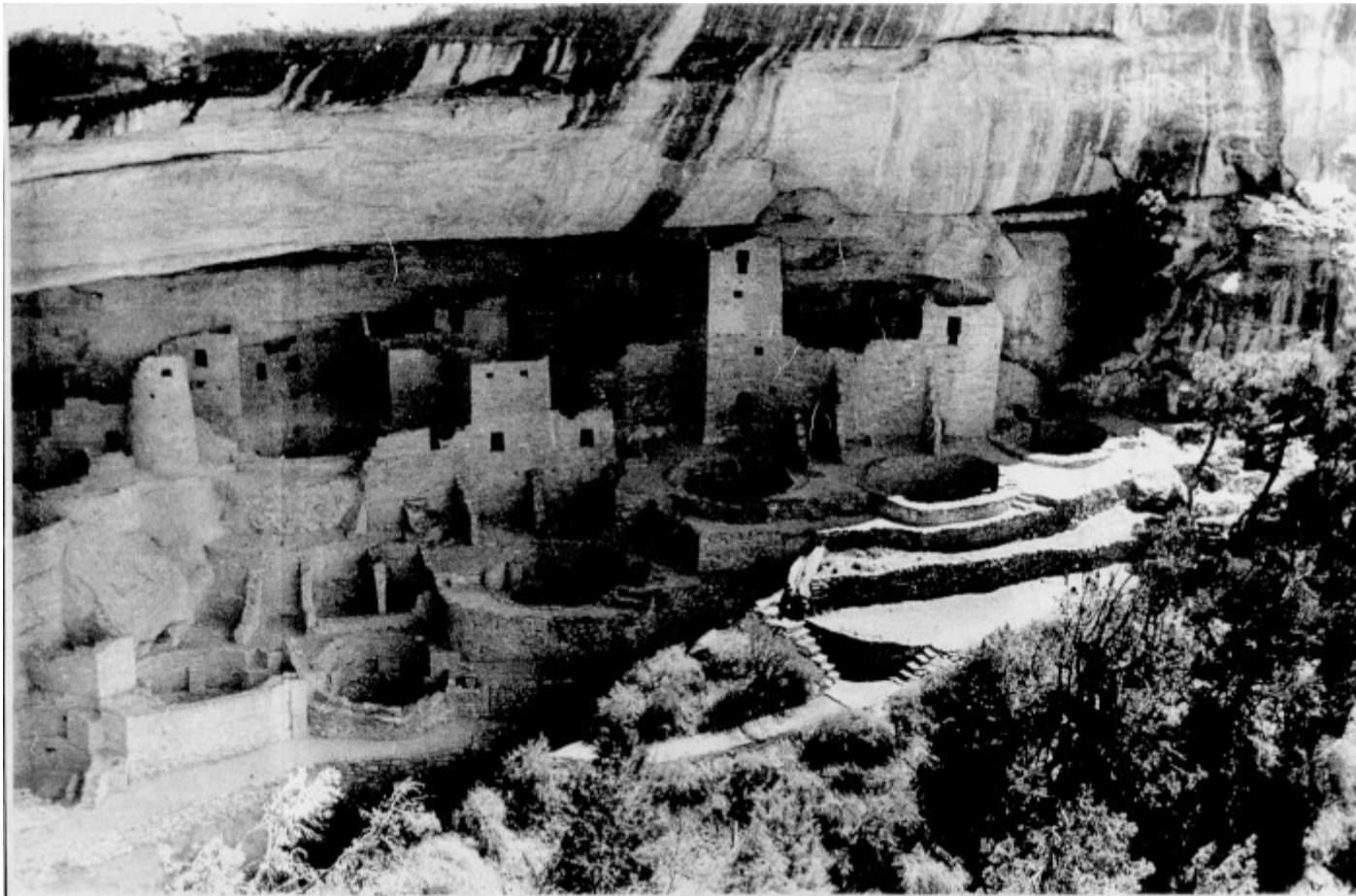
Hovenweep is best known for its towers, some of which are square, others which are D-shaped. Archaeologists believe the towers were probably used for astronomical observations, something very important to a farming people.

Like the people who made Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon, the builders of Hovenweep created the architectural wonders they left behind in a relatively short period, probably no more than 100 years. And then, also like the Chacoans and Mesa Verdeans, they left suddenly. After about 1300 the entire civilization had disappeared.

Today some experts believe the dispersal and disappearance was the result of drought or exhaustion of the land. Others speculate that some unknown enemies must have made the Anasazi to build such fortified homes and then, finally, forced them from the area forever.

In any case, the following of the culture was brief. And when the Spanish and later the Americans arrived, they found only crumbling ruins and abandoned tools to mark the passing of the ancient ones.





(Left) The Anasazi ruins, located in the Four Corners area and throughout New Mexico, Arizona and the southern parts of Colorado and Utah, offer many relicts, such as these hieroglyphics, of a civilization that existed more than 700 years ago. (Below) The most well known of the Anasazi ruins is Mesa Verde. Hundreds of ancient ruins line the canyon walls of Mesa Verde. Photos by Mark Huffman.