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Indian ruins in canyons are imperiled by too much 'love'

By ALLEN BEST

When Vaughn Hadenfeldt studied archaeology in college, he was fascinated by the Indians of the mountains and of the Great Plains.

The cliff dwellers of the Southwest? Just a bunch of farmers, he thought.

All of that changed just before he moved to Glenwood Springs 13 years ago. A friend who was the ranger for the Grand Gulch area of southeast Utah took him on a backpack trip into the canyon.

Grand Gulch, something of a subdivision of the ancient ones, was full of pottery shards, little bitty corn cobs, granaries, and other artifacts of the Pueblo Indians (a.k.a. the Anasazi) who lived in the Four Corners region 700 to 2,000 years ago.

Although artifacts of Grand Gulch had been picked over since at least the 1890s, what Hadenfeldt saw was relatively virginal. His interest in mountain Indian archaeology waned, replaced by an intense interest in the Pueblo and basketmaker Indians of canyon country.

Since then, Hadenfeldt founded and continues to operate Summit Canyon Mountaineering, but he has pursued his interest in Southwestern archaeology through the White Mesa Institute, a Utah-based group. The group has worked on several projects.

DURING THE LAST five years the institute members surveyed archaeological sites in Grand Gulch and nearby canyons, looking for the "signatures" of Richard Weatherill and others of the 1890s. Weatherill was a cowboy who discovered the Cliff Palace and other notable dwellings of what is now Mesa Verde National Park. Soon after, Weatherill more-or-less ceased chasing cows and instead devoted his life to leading archaeologists to different Anasazi sites of the Southwest. He was killed by Navajos in 1911?

Weatherill and the archaeologists commonly left their "signatures" and the dates incised into the canyon walls near where they dug for pottery and other artifacts. The artifacts were shipped to museums in New York City and Chicago, and to a lesser extent, to Copenhagen.

By going through journal

entries, what Hadenfeldt and other amateur archaeologists have done is link the artifacts now stored in the museums with the sites where they were taken, better determining the archaeological record.

Eventually, Hadenfeldt would like to see the artifacts returned to the Southwest, although that is not likely to happen soon. The closest museum to Grand Gulch, for example, is at Blanding, Utah, and while it has fine exhibits telling the story of the Anasazi, it lacks the temperature controls and other means found in larger museums to ensure preservation of artifacts.

However, many artifacts excavated from Grand Gulch a century ago have never been exhibited in public since the Chicago World's Fair more than 90 years ago. The White Mesa Institute would like to change that.

Hadenfeldt and others at the institute are also working to reduce the destruction of archaeological sites at Grand Gulch. Despite the ever-present and much-publicized threat of commercial pot hunters, he says, a greater threat is from backpackers.

FROM THE perspective of archaeologists, people visiting Grand Gulch have several annoying habits. The red and bluff-colored pottery shards that Hadenfeldt saw on his first trip to the canyon are disappearing, no doubt ending up in desk drawers and on fireplace mantles. What is left are the duller grayish shards. The attitude of "it won't hurt if I just take one" will eventually eliminate all shards.

One of Hadenfeldt's pet peeves is that people commonly pick up shards and then lay them on top of rocks, like in some kind of outdoor museum display. He'd rather they remain on the ground, presumably where the Indians left them. Also, he asks you don't tramp on the middens (trash piles) left by the Indians.

Also destructive are campfires. The ones built in the stream beds are fine, and they're allowed by the Bureau of Land Management, which administers Grand Gulch and most of the canyons in Southern Utah that were home to the Anasazi.

However, backpackers almost always build campfires and eat their lunches on the overhangs, invariably on archaeological sites. In doing so, they preclude options for future study by archaeologists using pollen and radiocarbon testing.

To combat the slow deterioration of Grand Gulch archaeological sites, Hadenfeldt and others at the White Mesa Institute are doing several things. One idea is to reproduce artifacts found in the canyon, putting out the reproductions for public inspection in a sort of outdoor museum

while storing the originals in a museum.

SUCH WAS THE case with a weaving loom found in a side canyon of Grand Gulch during the 1970s. As more and more people visited Grand Gulch during the last decade, more and more of them stopped to inspect the loom. No vandalism was intentional, but the loom was beginning to fall apart from the repeated inspections.

The loom was duplicated, put out for display in the canyon, and the original exhibited at the museum in Blanding.

The White Mesa Institute has also been cranking up educational efforts, and is currently seeking money from the Outdoor Conservation Alliance, the group to which such manufacturers as Patagonia contribute for public-spirited causes. The institute hopes to prepare a film about cultural resources as wilderness, stressing such things as how to go backpacking in Grand Gulch without impairing the archaeological sites for future backpackers.