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Mesa Verde National Park

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Off to the Messa: A history on Mesa Verde National Park

Rocky Muntain ?

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By JACK FOSTER

MESA VERDE — It seemed appropriate that we should spend my birthday in this unique corner of America. For we had something special in common.

On the day that I was born, June 29, 1906, the great green tableland of Mesa Verde was made a National Park by an act of Congress. Therefore, we two old gentlemen could celebrate our 63rd years together. And I never have enjoyed a more exciting present.

We had written ahead to Meredith M. Guillet, general park superintendent, to ask him whether it would be possible for us to visit Wetherill Mesa, which is a portion of the park recently excavated but not yet open to the public. I wanted to write some stories.

He replied that the going in that area still was rugged, and he doubted that we could make it, but to come along anyway. And, sure enough, when we came out of our cabin after a lazy night's sleep at Far View Lodge the chief park archeologist, Gilbert R. Wenger, was waiting for us.

Off to the Mesa

"It's off for Wetherill Mesa we'll go," he said. And it's off, indeed, we went—over a winding road that still was being smoothed out by giant bulldozers. It followed an old trail that had been laid down by donkey hooves years before. It crossed fields of sage and wound through groves of pinon, which Gil Wenger said never attracted lightning, and juniper, which did.

It skirted the Ute Reservation, which was practically forbidden to anyone except members of that proud, aloof tribe. There are many ancient ruins within its boundaries, but the old men of the council deny archeologists and students access to them.

Recently a college professor, with several members of his archeological class, who were trying to preserve one of the ruins within the reservation, were marched out of the area with guns aimed at them. Some day, say those who know the Utes, the young men returning from colleges will change this edict.

National Park. Mesa Verde



their elders.

Plenty to See

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Meanwhile, there was plenty to see within the Wetherill Mesa itself as we bounced along the freshly cut road which will be paved in 1970 in preparation for the probable opening of the area to the public in 1971.

"The interest in Mesa Verde is so great that we simply had to develop this part of the park," said Gil Wenger. "Last year almost a half million visited the present park—the Spruce Tree House, the Cliff Palace, the Balcony House. To date we are 14 per cent ahead of last year. We had to make more sites available to accommodate more visitors. Besides this, Wetherill Mesa has many places of unique historical importance."

Indeed, it does. We were now crossing ancient land as we approached the canyon. Here, for at least 1200 years, the Anasazi—the "old Ones"—had dwelt. Out of the mists of antiquity their ancestors had crossed the Bering Straits from Asia, and, after many years, they had drifted down to this apparently secure part of the hemisphere.

Here the "Old Ones" hunted game with their atlatls—arm thrust weapons—and later their bows and arrows, here they made their baskets which can be seen in the charming Mesa Verde museum and in Denver's Colorado Historical Museum, here they learned to grow corn and squash and beans and to tame the wild turkeys. They made fine pottery and lived in half-underground pit houses which later were built on the ground in rows like city houses of today.

Fled to Caves

The Anasazi were living well. Their civilization was a far cry from the pathetic march of their forebears south from what is now Alaska. But in the early part of the 13th century—almost 300 years before Columbus discovered America—something happened—we do not know exactly what—that caused them to leave their mesa-top villages for the shallow caves on the face of the canyons below.

Within these caves they built their cliff dwellings—remarkable examples of stone architecture—round towers and rectangular, small rooms for sleeping, large ones for gathering, lookout points, round pit houses.

Wetherill Mesa—named for the five Wetherill brothers, who had discovered many of them as ran cattle in the area. About eight of the dwellings have been excavated and stabilized. We were to see three of the most interesting on my birthday expedition.

Discovered 1880

From the rim of the canyon we caught our first glimpse of Long House, which had been discovered by the Wetherills in 1880.

"How small it seems in comparison with the Cliff Palace!" I said.

"Wait until you get down there," Gil Wenger replied. "You'll see. It's actually the largest in the park. It's longer than Cliff Palace but did not house quite as many people."

And, of course, he was right. After a steep descent down the sheer wall of the canyon, we came out upon a broad shelf under a long, shallow scoop in the rock. It was a sturdily built village, with towers and tiny stone rooms with narrow windows on a ledge above. I thought these windows were for lookouts. Wenger thought they were for storage. He was right.

And there were more kivas than I had ever seen in a single village. At least a dozen of them. They were much the same as those found in Pueblo villages today. Round, with stone seats, a ventilator duct, a circle for fire, and near it a small hole, a sipupa, from which it is supposed the soul has come, since all life rises from the earth. There had been a roof over it ages ago and a hole through the roof down which the men stepped down a ladder.

Why So Many?

"Why were there so many kivas?" I asked.

"Maybe it was because the times were getting tough," Gil replied. "They may have felt that they ought to get in closer touch with their god. You know, tough times, in some form or other, did lead the cliff dwellers to leave their dwellings 700 years ago."

And so they vanished as if in thin air, leaving their household utensils and other possessions behind.

"Now let's go to the Cliff Palace."

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"Now let's take a look at two other cliff dwellings—Step House and Mug House," Gil added.

Which I shall tell you about in Saturday's dispatch.