

History's a Mystery

Sitting at the edge of the canyon at Bandelier National Monument, I was searching for ghosts amongst the *pinon* pines and cottonwoods scattered across its floor. On that late winter afternoon, my mind was distracted from the beauty of the rugged landscape, a veritable O'Keefe painting come to life. I was so intent that I barely noticed the gecko skitter across my boot or the cold wind swiping across my cheek. No, my thoughts were on something surreal. I breathe in deeply feeling the cold air burn my lungs and come out of my brain space long enough to notice just a hint of pine and juniper. I breathe out, and a volcanic cloud of steam erupts, quickly scattered by the wind. My body eases, I feel tension leave as the tranquility of this scene transfixes me. Scanning the verdant plain of the canyon floor, one that seems like a garden where children once frolicked with dogs nipping at their heels, why would anyone leave? I imagined the older children and adults working at cultivating corn or building mud-bricked buildings, the exteriors smoothed over with a wet clay from the nearby creek bed. My hands touch the cold rock I am sitting on.

I love this place. It's the spacing of the trees, the gaps filled with wild grass and flowering plants. I notice a stand of white-barked cottonwoods next to a glade by the creek. *That's where I'd build my cabin.*

A flash of thought, became a picture in my mind of sitting on ridge tops with my grandfather, scanning open meadows for a passing deer. Rifle laying across my lap. There was a canvas knapsack between us with sandwiches wrapped in wax-paper and a thermos of hot coffee. *Sugary coffee. Terrible. Like drinking soda from a can that had sat in a hot car. No*

wonder I take it black. Sweeping the canyon floor, I feel compelled to check for deer. *Nothing.* He would have said, “Keep watching. There could be one behind a tree. Step out to get something to eat.” Talking while his eyes were on an apple that he was slicing with his pocket-knife.

The people who had lived here, in this canyon, showed up a thousand years ago, according to archaeologists, coming from the north, from areas near what is now the Four-Corners region of the Desert Southwest – specifically the Mesa Verde. They’d come to Bandelier, found fertile land on the mesas above on which to grow crops, and good shelter in the caves hollowed into the sides of the canyon walls. The walls were made of a volcanic residue called tuff. Volcanic ejecta solidified into a rock-like material. Water channels etched in this rock carried snow runoff that flowed to creeks that would dump into the Rio Grande. Everything they needed was here. Had they pushed other peoples out when they moved in? Had they assimilated? Or were they the first to arrive? Whatever the case the Ancestral Pueblos that came to this site around 1000 CE, found a ready-made home.

My eyes scanned the canyon walls. Tuff and on the floor, petrified-ash spires majestically point skyward like a cathedral to the Sky Father.

Living in the caves of the cliffs was an expedient. Shelter against the snow and cold of the northern New Mexico winters. But soon the famed pueblo buildings, constructed of mud-bricks and timbers, some which were built anchored to the cliffs, rose to three stories. These buildings, with many rooms afforded shelter for hundreds. Men, women and children clambered up and down ladders that made access and egress possible. Ground level was for storage of foodstuffs; they lived in the floors above. On the canyon floor I can see the remnants

of more dwellings. The foundations of these ruins formed a complete circle. Inside this circular structure was a common area. Think Colosseum in Rome. But this was no battleground for gladiators. Pictures come. I see women stooped low, milling corn with pestle stones and bowls, men's quick hand movements as they work looms, weaving material for clothes or footwear. Men and older boys carry baskets of beans. The kids still played. "Watch out," an old man groused at them. I hear my grandfather's voice. Inside this circular common area, a smaller circle, the *kiva*, the mud-roofed oval structure where the gods were honored, assuaged with offerings of turkey feathers and corn pollen.

Up on the mesas, formed by the violence of a long-dead super-volcano, what had been *Tierra del Fuego* was now a grass-filled caldera where there was fertile soil for corn, which grew, comingled with beans, and then there was squash – the holy trinity. They had learned that the beans growing in proximity made the corn grow abundantly, they planted so that bean shoots climbed corn stalks.

Thoughts swirled with pictures. Historians believe. Archaeologists believe. But we can't know, and that is the frustrating part. And especially history is of little use because there is no written record on which this discipline depends. Archaeology could help, but will it come to my rescue? No. Archaeology tells us when things happened, give or take a hundred or more years. If the materials they find or building techniques they encounter abruptly change, then they, the archaeologists, can assume new people have come. Or trade contacts have taught new technology. But new information is always coming to light. Maybe someday they can explain the departure definitively. Was it *en masse* or did a few slip away, then others? Who turned out the lights? Everything ends. There is always a last day or last time. Then everything changes or

stops. Or had it already begun to change and they just didn't notice much until a few hundred turned into a handful?

I feel a smile crease my face as I recall one of my students asking, "What is the truth..." about the topic *de jour*. I can't recall what it was that had piqued his curiosity. I explained that history is like a detective's investigation of a crime scene. You piece together evidence, written, physical, maybe you have some eyewitness accounts, and you arrive at an educated guess of what occurred, after much arguing back and forth by academics. Papers written, reviewed by peers. *That's the best we can do.*

But there are roadblocks to "the truth." The interpretation of evidence involves the interpreter's bias about the event being studied. The writers of accounts of the event had their biases. The eyewitness reporters to the event had their biases.

I feel snowflakes brushing my cheek. I look at the horizon and see the setting sun just above the Jemez Mountains. It's peeking just between the mountaintops and the break in the cloud-layer, splashing the clouds with purple, orange, and yellow light just as an artist streaks paint across a canvas. Georgia would be smiling, with brush and pastels in her hand. The wind has picked up, my hands sting, and my hair stands a little. I wonder if the canyon with its caves formed in the tuff was warm for them. I assume since the cliff dwellings were on the south-facing wall, that the sun had helped to warm their homes even in winter.

I stand, shudder, hoping to shake off the chill and glance once more into the canyon. What am I looking for? I still have no definitive answers as to why these ancient Pueblo people left this canyon. *Probably drought-caused crop failure. Does it matter? They left and went to the mesas. To be near the river. That answer doesn't seem right. If there was a drought, wouldn't*

the river run dry too not just the creek in the canyon? Can we check ancient water levels? Or tree rings or something?

I take a small, notebook out of my coat pocket. A stubby pencil is stuck in the spiraled wire at the top. I flip a few pages until I get to a fresh, clean page, "Note," I write. "Check with Sam at USGS in re to ancient water level studies of Rio Grande and Google tree ring studies." *Samantha's cool. She'll help.* Replacing the pencil in the wire, I stuff the notebook into my coat pocket. I turn to go. *Maybe disease. Smallpox brought by Spanish conquistadors? The sick stayed and died. The healthy left to save themselves. It's just theory.*

I'm a few feet from the canyon rim when I hear something in the wind. *Is it the sound of a dog barking, children laughing?* I walk back to the canyon for just an instant. *The ghosts are still here, but in my mind the people in the canyon have sought shelter.* The circle is empty. I see no one. I turn and walk away. I don't linger as darkness is falling fast upon me. Finding the Frey Trailhead, I make the steady trudge uphill, through the ripples in the landscape. *Arroyos.* Finally, I get to my truck only because I'd had the foresight to bring a head lamp. On the first turn of the key the engine roars to life. Headlights illuminate flakes drifting down. Then comes the sound of icy snow crunching under tires.

I think of my grandfather. There's a memory that I don't like to have come up, but it does from time to time. He tried to wake me to go hunting. I was thirteen. It was five in the morning, I could hear the wind and rain, and I said I didn't want to go. Besides, I had tagged a deer the previous weekend. He went anyway. I slept in. *Like to have that one back.* I feel the tendons of sorrow reaching across my chest. *Is this what they mean by heartstrings?*

As I get to the entrance of the Monument I stop and speak with the ranger at the pay station.

“See any ghosts tonight, Doc?”

“I always see them, Pete,” I reply. “Didn’t find any answers though.”

“Sometimes it’s just the circle of life.”

That’s it. Life changes. Shit happens.

My eyes widened, “Damn Pete. That’s it!”

“What, Doc?”

“Nothing. Just a thought that occurred to me. Have a good night. See you tomorrow.”

My truck turns right onto Highway 4 and I make my way home through a light snowfall.