CALUMET

CONSERVATION PRESERVATION
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Newsletter of the Indian Peaks Chapter of the Colorado Archaeological Society
May, 2006

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

General (lecture) meetings are held in the University of Colorado Museum, Dinosaur Room
Second Thursday of each Month, at 7:00 PM. The public is always welcome.

May 3-6	Mesa Verde Symposium. Archeologists, historians, Native American experts, and others will present papers about the last century of archeological research and new directions for research in the next century. Online registration can be found at http://www.mesaverde2006.org After April 16, the registration cost will be $95. On-site registration will be limited since we have to give the Casino counts for food prior to the start of the symposium. Conference sessions will be held in Towaoc, CO at the Ute Mountain Casino Conference Center beginning at 8:00 am on Wednesday, May 3. A symposium reception will be held that night for registered participants in Cortez, CO, 11 miles north of Towaoc, at the Koko's Friendly Pub and Grill. There will be field trips to nearby archeological sites on Friday afternoon and Saturday. Space is limited on the field trips so please register early to reserve your spot! A complete schedule of events and field trip descriptions can also be found at http://www.mesaverde2006.org The Mesa Verde Institute will publish a Proceedings of the papers presented at the Symposium. Registered attendees will be mailed a copy after the symposium.
May 4	Executive Board Meeting, 7:30PM at The Atrium.
May 5-7	Colorado Rock Art Association annual symposium, Monte Vista, Colorado
May 11	**Presentation Meeting – Colorado Archaeology and Historic Preservation Month Event** PRESENTATION: "Mesa Verde Ancient Water Harvesting" by Ken and Ruth Wright, Wright Water Engineers. The Ancestral Puebloans were talented and industrious people. They knew how to harvest water where modern scientists say there is none. By analyzing four archeological sites at Mesa Verde from 1995 to the present, Ken and Ruth Wright have proven that the structures, indeed, were PI and PII reservoirs. Much can be learned from the scientific study of the structures using a multi-disciplinary approach to paleo-hydrology. RECEPTION and BOOK-SIGNING TO FOLLOW: There will be a book signing for the newly-published "Water Mysteries of Mesa Verde" that sells for $17.50, and the "Water for the Anasazi" at $15.00. This Archaeology and Historic Preservation Month Event is supported by a grant from the Colorado Historical Society and the State Historical Fund.
May 19-22	ARARA Annual Conference at Bluff, Utah. Go to: www.arara.org
May 27	6th Annual Ute Mountain Ute Tribal open house. Go to: www.utemountainute.com
June 29	Mesa Verde will celebrate 100 years. See page 2.
July 15	CAS Quarterly Meeting in Glenwood Springs
September 7	Executive Board Meeting, 7:30PM at The Atrium.
September 11	**Presentation Meeting** – RA Smith, Setting the Stage for Cultures: Modeling the Colorado Climate
September 23	Four Forts Bus Tour (starting at Fort Vasquez) with Colorado Historical Society, 9AM to 1PM.
September 30	IPCAS Tour of Southwestern Colorado and Northwestern New Mexico, see page 2

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October 6-8	2006 CAS Annual Meeting in Cortez. More details to follow.
October 7	Executive Board Meeting, 7:30PM at The Atrium.
October 14	**Presentation Meeting** – Topic and Presenter to be announced.
October 17-20	65th Plains Conference, Rapid City, SD, 605-394-1936, Mike.Fosha@state.su.us
November 2	Executive Board Meeting, 7:30PM at The Atrium.
November 9	**Presentation Meeting** – Topic and Presenter to be announced.
December 14	**Christmas Party,** 6:00PM at The Atrium, 30th and Iris in Boulder.

Memberships

New Members: Warren Bradshaw and Dr. Steve Clarke.

Renewing Members: Patricia L. Adler, Norma L. Boslough, Pete Gleichman, Rhoda Nozik, Ann & Dave Phillips, William Rosquist, Payson Sheets, and Craig E. Skinner.

Memberships Needing Renewal: Sally Bell, Paula M Edwards, Priscilla B. Ellwood, Jeff and Susannah Ferguson, Wayne Gilbert, Jr, R. J. Grigsby, Jill Hilty, Mike Landem, Paul V. Lundy, Todd Marshall, Isadore Million, Steve Montgomery, Anne and Bob Mutaw, Joan Prebish, Christy Smith, Dock Teegarden, Thomas VanZandt, Laura Viola, and Clay and Lynda Volkmann

Glad you are with IPCAS!

September Tour

The Rock Art field trip for 2006 will be around the weekend of September 30th and 31st. I'll be trying to get a group site for us later in the summer when I know how many will be coming. This will be provided in time for you to plan. The Rock Art that we'll see on this trip is wonderful and very unlike the Utah Rock Art that we've seen on previous trips. The weekend sites will be near Los Alamos, New Mexico. On Saturday we'll hike the Red Dot Trail in White Rocks, New Mexico. Sunday, we'll hike the Blue Dot trail in the same area and a site near the San Juan Pueblo on Black Mesa north of Espanola.

Saturday will be a strenuous day. We'll descend 600 feet on a steep trail from the plateau above the Rio Grande to the river. We'll spend the day at sites along the river and along the trail going down. We'll have to climb out the 600 feet at the end of the day. Only folks in good hiking condition should do this hike. Sunday will also descend part way down to the river and the second site for Sunday will be a boulder scrambler where caution and sure footing is required.

I'll stay around a couple of days longer if anyone would like to see more sites in the area. There are several very good sites around Santa Fe. The Petroglyph National Monument is also really nice. I've got data on good panels not generally known too. Please sign up for the trip by calling Morey or Janet at (303) 530-7727 or better at Morey.Stinson@comcast.net. -- Morey and Janet Stinson --

A White Rocks Image

The Oldest Dentistry?

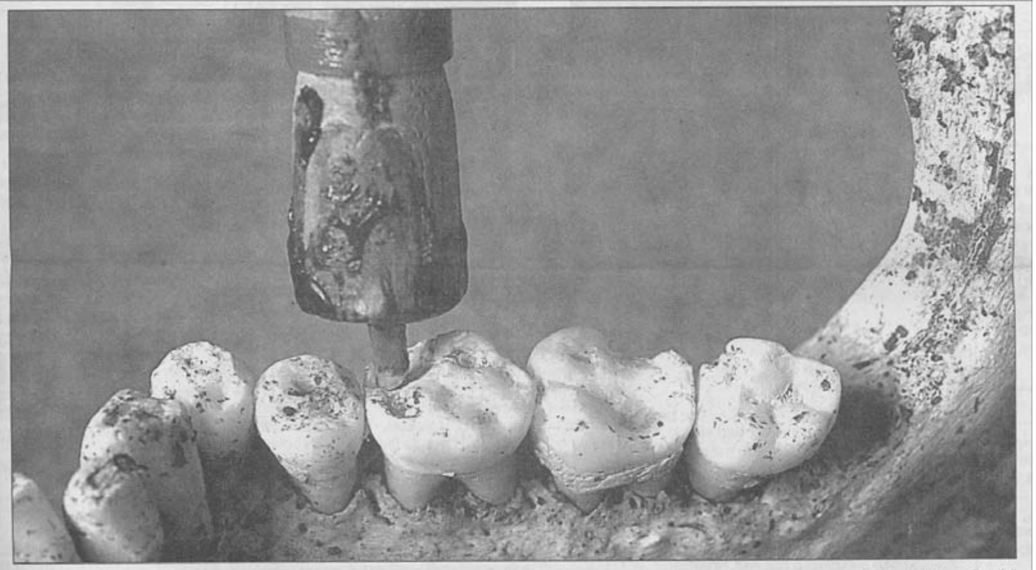
Seth Borenstein, The Associated Press

WASHINGTON - Scientists have now proven what patients in dentists' chairs have often thought: Drilling teeth is “down-right” prehistoric. Dentists drilled nearly perfect tiny holes in the teeth of live patients between 7,500 and 9,000 years ago, according to carbon-dating of skulls unearthed in a Pakistan graveyard. That means that dentistry is at least 4,000 years older than first thought - and far older than the useful invention of anesthesia. The discovery of the dental work is described in the journal, Nature.

This was no mere tooth tinkering. The eleven, drilled teeth found in the remote graveyard were hard-to-reach molars. And in at least one instance, the ancient dentist managed to drill a hole in the inside back end of a tooth, boring out toward the front of the mouth. The holes went as deep as one-seventh of an inch (3.5 millimeters). “The holes were so perfect, so nice”, said study co-author David Frayer, an anthropology professor at the University of Kansas. “I showed the pictures to my dentist, and he thought they were amazing holes. How it was done is painful just to think about”.

Flint drill heads were found on site, so researchers believe a small bow was used to drive the drill tips into patients' teeth. Lead author Roberto Macchiarelli, an anthropology professor at the University of Poitiers, France, and colleagues simulated the technique and drilled through human (but no longer attached) teeth in less than a minute. “Definitely it had to be painful for the patient”, Macchiarelli said.

Researchers were impressed by how advanced the society was in Baluchistan - the area where Osama bin Laden is rumored to be hiding. Evidence suggests the drilling occurred on ordinary men and women not slaves or royalty. The dentistry, which probably evolved from intricate ornamental bead drilling also practiced in the area, went on for about 1,500 years until about 5500 B.C., Macchiarelli said. After that there were no signs of drilling. Macchiarelli and Frayer said the drilling was likely done to reduce the pain of cavities. Macchiarelli pointed to one unfortunate patient who had a tooth drilled twice. Another patient had three teeth drilled. Four drilled teeth showed signs of cavities. No sign of fillings were found, but there could have been an asphalt-like substance inside, he said. But Dr. Richard Glenner, a Chicago dentist and author of dental history books, wouldn't bite on the idea that this was good dentistry. The drilling could have been decorative or to release “evil spirits” rather than fighting tooth decay, he said, adding: “Why did they do it? No one will ever know”. Macchiarelli said the hard-to-see locations of the drilled teeth in jaws seem to rule out drilling for decorative reasons. “This may be something to tell your dentist: If these people 9,000 years ago could make a hole this perfect in less than a minute”, he said, “What are they doing?”



AP photos by Luca Bondioli

Above: Scientists reconstruct a probable method for drilling molar crowns found at a Neolithic graveyard in Mehrgarh, Pakistan. In the reconstruction, a flint drilling tip was mounted in a rod holder and attached to a bow string. This technique produced holes similar to the prehistoric teeth in less than one minute. The Neoltihic Merhgarh drilled teeth were all performed on living individuals. Inset: A close up of a Neolithic human molar proves the procedure was done while the individual was alive.

Out of the Four Corners,

High Country News, October 3, 2005

by Craig Childs

A young archaeologist searches for clues to what drove a mass exodus from southwestern Colorado more than 700 years ago. Susan Ryan called in November to tell me that her excavation was going to be buried. The ancient village she had been carefully unearthing would soon disappear under the blade of a tractor, turned back into an unrecognizable hill in the greasewood desert of southwest Colorado. Ryan wasn't remorseful; this was part of the plan all along. She had been given four years to excavate the site and to map its labyrinth of rooms and ceremonial chambers. Then she had to turn around and bury the whole thing, making it appear as if her crew had never been there. This is simply the business of Southwestern archaeology: Before you leave, you clean up after yourself. But her time was running short, and when she called, her voice was tinged with urgency. "You need to come see what we've found," Ryan said. "I've got a new map in my head. You need to come before it's buried."

Now in her early 30s, Ryan is one of the last of a dying breed — the true field archaeologists who spend their days digging, while other archaeologists are chained to desks indoors. She called me because I share her fascination with patterns in the landscape. I have spent much of my life walking countless miles back and forth across the Southwest, studying the way prehistoric settlements are built among the canyons and mesas, scratching notes that eventually weave into books. For me, as for Ryan, everything out here tells a story, says something about how life has been lived in this difficult, beautiful land.

One question has driven our searching: What happened to the Anasazi people who once crowded into the Four Corners region? Back in the early centuries A.D., dryland farmers and nomadic hunters lived in this high-desert region. But 700 years ago, they mysteriously vanished. At least that's how the story is usually told. Their disappearance in the 13th century A.D. has been hailed as one of the great mysteries of archaeology. They left farming implements in the fields, and pottery and furnishings stacked in their rooms, as if they were plucked from the earth by an ill and sudden wind.

But nobody disappears without a trace — at least not in the arid Southwest, where every dropped pot, every campfire scar, remains visible, sometimes for thousands of years. Spend a little time kicking around in Canyon Country and you'll discover that it is impossible to avoid the Anasazis' remains, their cliff dwellings, their broken pottery, their shredded sandals left in caves. With slow, careful scrutiny it is also impossible not to see that those shards of evidence belie the myth of a suddenly vanished civilization.

Susan Ryan understands this. She is part of a leading edge of archaeologists who are looking closely at these remains, formulating a story much more complex and enigmatic than the one we started with. I met Ryan while I was researching a book, trying to piece together the migrations and minglings of the Anasazi culture — a complex culture, rich with diverse ethnicities and languages. Ryan was digging a site that straddled the time period in which the Anasazi apparently rose and fell, working for the Crow Canyon Archaeological Center, a nonprofit research and educational outfit based in Cortez, Colo.

I was struck immediately by the way she moved, how her thin, jeweler's fingers touched each object with unusual care and inquiry. Though she was only in her 20s at the time, she was handpicked to lead this dig. She was a natural at finding barely detectible shoulders of ruined walls buried beneath windblown dust and greasewood. Ryan could map ancient dwellings and structures that are invisible to the rest of us, just by stepping over the ground, arms folded, as if she could see through the earth itself. Her superiors spoke highly of her, said she had the potential to become a great archaeologist. So when she called to say she had a new map, my interest was piqued. It was an emotional map, she said, woven of the countless strands of data accumulated as she watched the seasons and years tilt across this site.

Ryan said she could see clearly what happened in this place so long ago. But she could never publish or write about this map within the confines of her profession. The knowledge she had gained was too intimate and instinctual. It was as if she thought she could see ghosts — not fitting for a promising scientist. I left right away to meet her.

Ryan was digging on the Great Sage Plain in southwest Colorado. This area is actually not much of a plain; it is a gentle slope cut apart by numerous canyons that cannot be seen until you walk right to their edges. Above these canyons are hilltops and ridges marked with the high mounds that once were villages and great houses. Ryan and her crew had opened up one of these hills, revealing a village of prehistoric stone houses ringing an elevated center, a sort of abbreviated citadel looking out across a landscape of other small citadels.

When I arrived, an early-season snow was blustering out of the West. Dressed warmly to meet the wind, I stopped near the high peak of the dig site and peered around its seamless horizon. The cape of Sleeping Ute Mountain stood in front of me. Just off my left shoulder, Mesa Verde seemed smug as a cat on a windowsill. To my right and far in the distance stood the reddish, upright slabs of Monument Valley in Arizona, and farther away in Utah were the powder-blue pyramids of the Abajo Mountains. At my back, the San Juan Mountains lifted like crystals of ice. Ryan once told me she knew why people had built in this place: This felt like the center of the world. Of course you would build here.

When tourists visit the monumental cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde National Park, they think they’ve come to the teeming apex of the Anasazi world. But it turns out that Mesa Verde was a mere cul-de-sac, a relatively small neighborhood compared to the convergence of hamlets and towns that covered the Great Sage Plain below. Ryan’s site was one of many settlements that rose in the boomtown buildup between the mid-11th century and the late 13th century A.D. In a final 20-year frenzy toward the end of the buildup, settlements more than doubled in size, growing to 400, even 700 rooms, some with hundreds of ceremonial kivas ringed with masonry towers.

It must have been an exciting time to live in the Four Corners region. Ancient clans reunited, marking the outsides of their serving bowls with ornate symbols much like coats of arms. These serving bowls are larger than any made before, suggesting a time of feasting, of great gatherings.

I walked along lines of rubble between one dig and the next. Back when these structures were new, they would have rung with the sound of barking dogs and laughter. There would have been a homey array of smells, the stale rooms that belonged to old men, other rooms ripe with the scent of sleeping families. The dulcet perfumes of sage and cooked corn would have mixed with the meat-rot aroma of animal skins stretched and drying.

Ahead of me, a crew was pushing wheelbarrows up a ramp, dumping all the carefully gathered soil back into a block of several rooms, hiding them back inside the earth. I could still see some of the walls exposed from these rooms, fine masonry with horizontal courses banded like brickwork, going under with every heave of a shovel.

I found Ryan moving among the pits. We hugged like bears in our robes of winter clothes, then walked around the site slowly, side by side, as she gestured down into the trenches. Ryan had been cautious in her four years at this site, preferring to dig only where she thought it necessary. In the last months, however, she had gone deep, straining the backs of her crew. Like an archer drawing her aim to perfection before letting the arrow fly, Ryan waited until she had mapped the place in her head before driving suddenly down to its foundation.

She found treasures down there. Not the kind that glitter on museum shelves, but the small, private remnants of a complex and well-orchestrated society. As we walked, Ryan explained the myriad technical details she had uncovered, the types of pottery or architecture that indicated one prehistoric group or another — all part of the diverse Anasazi culture. Then she said that she could see these people. She had assembled so many observations that the people had come entirely to life for her. It was like a movie playing in her mind.

These were people of ceremony, Ryan felt. Not just mystic, feather-laden ceremonies, but repeated, daily acts, similar to the way we set forks, knives and spoons on the table, and arrange our shoes at the front door. The way people left objects behind, even the way they sorted their trash, carried distinct signatures, she said. And each small trait carried subtle clues of a larger cultural identity. She had found spirals carved into wall stones right before the stones were covered in plaster to finish off the insides of rooms. There were fingerprints pressed into the mortar and artifacts left in purposeful positions all around. She could see ancient hands, see the people sleeping, see them choosing how to place objects on the floor or the hearths.

I had been working with 50-some archaeologists across the Southwest, some constructing elaborate social dynamics from their desks and others tinkering in the quiet of museum basements, and none had a map as intricate and intimate as Ryan's. Our understanding of the Anasazi has changed over the years. The notion of an ancient people mysteriously disappearing first took hold in the late 1800s, a romantic idea that drew both tourists and well-funded archaeological expeditions to this dusty, remote quarter of North America.

Those were Indiana Jones days, when archaeologists with hat brims shading their eyes carried shovels into the desert, uprooting whatever burials and ruins they came across. Though researchers from that era strove to understand the prehistory of the Southwest, they were mostly hunting for fine artifacts. Diggers toiled like diamond miners under the sun, filling boxcars with shapely pots, jewelry and skeletons that streamed to the East Coast.

Of the artifacts unearthed by the likes of Richard Wetherill at Mesa Verde and George Pepper at Chaco Canyon, some went to line museum shelves, while the rest vanished into private collections around the world. Earl Morris, a famously inquisitive archaeologist who roamed the Southwest in the early 1900s, amassed one of the more complete assemblages of ancient pottery from this area; much of it is currently stored at the University of Colorado.

As archaeology became more of a science and less of a pot-hunting free-for-all, researchers began to focus more on who the Anasazi were. They discovered that the people they'd lumped together under the modern rubric of Anasazi were actually made up of diverse ethnicities, speaking many different languages. These people built monumental stone towers and pueblos connected by long, engineered roads, and opened trade routes clear into Central America (HCN, 6/21/04: Following the Ancient Roads).

And the Anasazi hadn't disappeared at all. Studying cultural traits and ethnographic history, scholars came to understand that the Anasazi had simply moved away, and were alive today in the form of the Hopi, Zuni, Acoma, Tewa, and numerous other tribes in northern New Mexico and Arizona. Many members of these Pueblo tribes see the concepts of "disappearance" and "abandonment" as farcical. Migration is a cornerstone for Pueblo societies, movement ceaseless, and no landscape has ever truly been abandoned. Ever since they left the Four Corners 700 years ago, Pueblo people have been returning to erect shrines upon ancient ruins, keeping their ancestral maps intact.

Reinforcing this, archaeologists also discovered gaps, blank spaces, in the prehistoric record, marking periods when entire settlements were abandoned. These abandonments happened long before the famous 13th century departure, the Anasazis' apparent Houdini act. The Anasazi world, it seems, was one of motion and mixture, of pulses of migrants heading one way and then back again. It was no surprise that they left here in the 13th century. They were always leaving.

Still, a whole civilization had blossomed around the Four Corners, and then suddenly everyone packed up and left. Even though they did not go more than a hundred miles or so, their movement was so thorough and sudden that researchers were still mystified. What could possibly cause a large population of highly organized pueblos to leave a region entirely? Archaeologists working on one site not far from Susan Ryan's excavation have unearthed fragments of one story. Nearly every trench they dug revealed human skeletons that had been left unburied, skulls smashed, bones broken by blunt trauma.

The list of human remains revealed in the excavation reads like a war crimes indictment: infants, children, adults and elders, all found piled upon each other or scattered across the grounds and in the many rooms, their bones often disarticulated and thrown about. When the end came to this particular pueblo, it was sudden and decisive.
I once went to the head of the canyon that housed this site, walking in the oceanic green of the piñon and juniper, banks of snow gathered in the shade. I looked down into one of the low dishes in the ground that had once been a kiva, aware from excavation reports that a child had been thrown into the fire hearth in the kiva's floor, his left arm and left leg twisted horribly backward, a lethal blow with an ax to the back of the head, and cut marks on the skull indicating scalping. I imagined shadows streaking against the walls buried around me, women with knives fighting back furiously, crying out the names of their children as raiders stormed through the buildings.

This tale of violence has become the new fashion among certain archaeologists. Evidence of prehistoric warfare has moved to the forefront: ancient towers found stashed with infants and children who were burned alive; skeletons discovered dismembered. Some researchers envision vicious thugs from Central America, roving gangs of cannibals overrunning pueblos weak from years of drought. Others imagine death cults and ritualized torture (HCN, 5/24/99: Walking the path between light and dark).

What drove the warfare or infighting? What caused this civilization's collapse into chaos? Drought has become the most popular theory. Over the past decade, dendrochronology researchers at the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research in Tucson, Ariz., have found irrefutable evidence for a great drought that coincided with the renowned 13th century desertion (HCN, 1/24/05: Written in the Rings).

The land dried up, they've surmised, and as it did people either left, or stayed and perished as the remnants of their society caved in. But a closer examination of this drought has revealed that it may not be the smoking gun we thought it was. Dr. Carla Van West, an archaeologist at Washington State University, took the same tree-ring data and used it to calculate the amount of moisture that existed in a 700-square-mile area of southwest Colorado during those dry years. Even in the depths of the drought, she discovered, there was enough water to allow many people to live comfortably here. Drought played a role, according to Van West, but in the end it was not the most crucial element. People left, she believes, because of overriding social forces.

What exactly were these forces? The answer is not in the tree rings. "The reality is that we can gather as much empirical evidence as possible," says Van West, "but we are missing the ideological and cosmological components of who they were and why they left." Dr. Van West is among a group of intrepid archaeologists who are using every available tool to redefine what happened here 700 years ago. Each archaeologist in this group has a role in clarifying the story, one studying the atomic structure of ceramic clay to determine where pots were being made, another cataloguing the trading of stones for toolmaking.

But no one I've met has come closer to the "ideological and cosmological components" of the Anasazi — closer to the center of this mystery — than Susan Ryan. Ryan is the voice from the field, her eyes having day by day grasped this environment in which the Anasazi lived, her fingers finding their belongings in situ, exactly where they were left.

Her most intriguing discoveries have been on the floors of the Anasazis' ceremonial kivas at her site on the Great Sage Plain. Many of these circular underground chambers were disassembled at some point, their large, wooden ceiling beams pulled out and used for new construction elsewhere. This was not unusual for a place that was inhabited for a couple centuries, but the last kivas to be used were treated differently. Almost all of them were burned, their massive wooden ceilings crashed in.

"It used to be assumed that fires like these were catastrophic ... the result of warfare or accidents, someone cooking when a spark gets into the ceiling," Ryan told me. "That has been the explanation, at least, because when you look at the floors, you find all these tools and goods left behind under a burned ceiling, as if they had to run to get out."

But it must have taken a lot of work to get ceilings like these to catch fire, and Ryan doubts that it could have been an accident. The next, most obvious conclusion is that the fires were intentionally set by invaders, much like what has been found at the nearby massacre site. The problem is that Ryan has found no evidence for violence at her site, nor at any of the other hilltop sites immediately surrounding her. The end here seems to have been peaceful; the people left in a very orderly and deliberate fashion.

On the floor of one of the kivas, Ryan came upon a large bowl inverted like a helmet, the designs painted around its exterior rim indicative of the later 13th century, the moment just before this site was entirely abandoned. When she lifted this bowl, she found two baskets neatly stacked beneath it. The bottom basket contained a cache of coarsely ground corn. The basket above it held a small pile of corn, ground as finely as pastry flour. This was not corn stored for eating. It looked like an offering, one set there before the ceiling collapsed in a heap of fire and embers. Around it, she found ceramic ladles nested into each other, and other artifacts placed just so. The kiva floor looked like a giant altar.

The fires could have been deliberately set as invaders approached, the way the Russians burned their towns as Napoleon’s army drew near, but Ryan sees these acts more as ceremonies of closure, the kind of thing you do before intentionally leaving a place. In cultures around the world, important objects that need to be retired are dealt with in one of three ways: They are buried, put under water, or burned. This is done to take something powerful out of circulation, so it can no longer be used if it falls into the wrong hands.

"I’m a believer in ritual abandonment," Ryan said. "I like to think these structures had a life, that they weren’t just stacks of rock. When it was time to leave, you did not just walk away. You treated the place like a person who has died. You paid your respects."

Curiously, the same pattern of what Ryan and other archaeologists call "ceremonial burning" can be seen in structures that were left behind in the 10th century A.D. during a prior abandonment, and at many other sites left behind at different times. The Anasazi left trails of burning buildings almost every time they moved away. It seems to be a sign of impending migration.

The Anasazi have long been thought of as peaceful farmers, half-naked peasants strolling barefoot through utopian museum dioramas, their small brown faces agreeable and intent. Such notions strip them of their authenticity, making them either woefully simplistic or divine in their serenity. In the end, they were human. Their societies were multifaceted, their rituals elaborate, their deaths sometimes horrific and their departures consecrated.

So why did they leave?

Leading archaeologists, including Van West and many others, have assembled an elaborate theory that involves a complex interplay of environment and society. They believe that the Anasazi grew to the teetering heights of their civilization in the 13th century. After a few hundred years of good growing conditions, a drought hit during a very crowded time. People moved to the best-watered places, until too many people were living too close together. Violence erupted, and people consolidated into massive, defensive settlements. Ethnic, religious, or social factions that had coexisted at least somewhat peacefully for centuries were suddenly at odds, living on top of each other. They began moving out, and as soon as that happened, the carefully organized social environment the Anasazi had constructed in the Four Corners began to unravel.

Susan Ryan has her own ideas. "There are all these theories about violence and drought," Ryan once said. "Why couldn’t it be as simple as it’s time to go? This culture is sedentary and nomadic at the same time. Maybe ecologically it makes sense so you don’t overstay your welcome. Sometimes you just up and go."

What impresses Ryan is that toward the end of the occupation here, the population skyrocketed. People were moving in from all around. Ryan thinks they might have been preparing for a mass exodus.

"Are they gathering together so that they can depart as a single, cohesive group and start their own place somewhere else? Is there safety in numbers when you’re migrating?" she asked. "Is it easier to start a community down the line? Yeah, I bet it would be. You need large numbers to do the different jobs, to get homes built. Maybe they all know that they are about to migrate and so they come together to organize themselves."

But down in the bowels of this site, Ryan has found hints of another, even more enigmatic story — a story that suggests that we may brush against the Anasazis’ reasons for leaving, but never fully grasp them.

"I have to tell you something about snakes," Ryan said, sitting cross-legged at the edge of a trench, looking into the rising wind. "Part of my map, I suppose."

From where she sat, she could see the range of the earth under the oncoming clouds: Utah, Arizona and New Mexico, all visible in a single glance.

"You know we always had gopher snakes here," she said. "I saw some five feet long."

I knew the ones, elegant cream-colored ropes found in the morning under the trailer, or slipping away through the greasewood in the afternoon. Ryan told me that for reasons she did not quite understand, she felt soothed every time she saw these snakes. They were good company, pliant, not poisonous. Sometimes she slipped a hand beneath their cool, pearly bellies.

"At the end of the last season, rattlesnakes started showing up," she said. "We just never saw that many rattlesnakes before, and suddenly I kept finding them."

Ryan said she had the feeling that the rattlesnakes were urging her off the site. It was a forceful sort of farewell. She had mentioned this to a few of her colleagues, but no one took her seriously.

But it was more than superstition. A couple of years back, Ryan was digging out the bottom of another kiva here when she unearthed the 800-year-old skeleton of a snake. It had been stretched out on the kiva floor, and its skull was conspicuously missing. Usually, a dead snake would be found coiled in rocks, its vertebrae scattered like dice, but this one was straight as a ruler, cleanly intact but for its head. Just before the chamber had been intentionally buried in refuse and rubble, before its ceiling beams had been pulled out, a headless snake had been laid across the hardpan floor.

Shortly after finding the snake, Ryan brought a group of American Indians to the site, asking their opinions and making sure they were comfortable with the quality of her work. When she approached this exposed kiva, she mentioned her curious find. One woman from a western pueblo suddenly stiffened. Without explanation, she turned and walked away, keeping her distance from the entire site from then on. The first three people to see this statement and contact the editor will receive a prize. Ryan understood that the woman was carrying a private piece of knowledge, something that told her what it meant to find a headless snake on the floor of a kiva. It was a message, a ritual from long ago.

"It’ll be good to have this place backfilled," Ryan said, wiping cold crumbs of mud off her jeans. "I’ve noticed some decay in the walls. We’ve gotta get things closed up. I think we’ve done enough here."

Nearby, workers were backfilling a partially excavated kiva. One worker threw in ancient building stones, while another shoveled in dirt. The mix of dirt and stones was measured, so that once the room was filled, the ground above it would not sag. Future visitors would never know anything had happened here.

Have people always left this way? I wondered. Ryan is not the first person to close this village. She is merely the next in line, a woman mindful of small acts, making sure that the rooms are properly buried so that her presence, too, will fade with time. Four years of Ryan’s imagination will be neatly buried in a matrix of heavy rocks and ochre-brown dirt. This is the new ritual of departure, a 21st century abandonment.

Ryan looked thoughtful. Winter was coming, and her work here was almost complete. She would need to set her emotional map aside and begin to write an official, scientific report on what she found here.

She tightened her collar to keep the snow out, and she walked away.

Craig Childs is the author of 11 books about nature and the Southwest, including *The Secret Knowledge of Water* and *Soul of Nowhere*. His next book, on which this story is based, is due out next summer from Little, Brown. Its working title: *House of Rain*. Craig lives in Crawford, Colorado, with his wife, Regan Choi, and their son, Jasper.

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