The Story of the Discovery and Early Exploration
of the Cliff Houses of the Mesa Verde.

Written by C.C. Mason with the Approval of the Wetherill Bros.

About the year 1885 the Wetherill boys began to winter their cattle in the Mancos Canon and its numerous branches. The Mancos river cuts through Mesa Verde from northeas to southwest. On the southeast side three large branches enter the canon, known as Ft.Lewis, Johnson and Grass Canons. Those coming in from the northeastare Moccasin, Cliff, Navajo and Ute Canons. Nearly all the cliff houses, those ruines dwellings of an extinct race, that have made Mesa Verde famous, are in three of these side canons, namely Johnson, Cliff and, Navajo.

One of the favorite camping places of the boys was in Johnson Canon, a short distance from the river. Previous to this time, only a few of the smaller buildings had been seen by white men. The Indians occupying this part of the Southern Ute Reservation were not friendly and they made it unpleasant for all who came into thori country; so no one had thought it worth while toexplore the side canons. Richard and Al Wetherill and a few other cow boys were in this camp a greater part of each winter;Al spending more time there than any one else.

It was soon learned that up the canon there were several other cliff houses much larger than any yet discovered, and Al more than any one else explored them. Through conversations that I had with himand Richard, I became somewhat interested in their explorations, so as soon as I was able to do so I spent a few days in their camp. This was during the winter of 1887- 1888. Al went with me and we visited the larger houses,and by scratching around in rubbish we found several pieces of pottery and other articles used by the inhabitants. I also climbed around the cliffs alone and reached several small houses that had not bwwn reached by white men. On our return to the home ranch with the stuff we had found,B.K. Wetherill, father of the boys,sent it to Mrs. Chain, wife of Mr. Chain(Of Chain, Hardy & Co., Stationers and Booksellers, of Denver)/ Mrs. Chain had taken a short trip down the canon and visited some of the cliff dwellings, and she was much interested in them.

In December 1888,Richard and I started out to explore. We followed the Indian trail down Chapin Mesa, between Cliff and Navajo Canons,and camped at the h ad of a small branchof the Cliff Palace fork of Cliff Canon. There is a spring of good water in this canon, just under the rimrock. On the smooth rock near our camp we found a series of concentric circles cut, which we supposedd was intended to represent the sun, and we called it the Sun Rock,and the spring the Sun Rock Spring. We rode out to the point of the mesain the angle between the Cliff Palace Canon andthe small fork on which was our camp, and saw the ruins that Dr. Fewkes excavated in 1910, and called the Sun Temple. From the rim of the canon we had our first view of Cliff Palace just across the canon from us. To me this is the grandes view of all among the ancieb ruins of the Southwest. We rode around the head of the canon and found a way down over the cliffs to the level of the buildings. We spent several hours going from room to room, and picked up several articles of interest;among them a stone ax with the handle still on it. There were also parts of several

human skeletons scattered about. A year or more before this, Al had seen Cliff Palace but did not enter it.;he was on his way to camp after a long tramp on foot, and was very tired; he was following the bottom of the canon and only got a partial view so did not climb up,and it remained for Richard and I to be the first to explore the buildings.

On this trip we discovered the Spruce Tree House and what we called the Spruce Tower House,from a square structure, the tallest building we found standing.This has since been named Peabody House in honor of Mrs. Peabody, who was instrumental in having Mesa Verde made a national park. We also discovered several small houses. On our way home we came acrossx the camp of some old friends,Charles McLoyd, Howard Graham and L.T. Patrick. They were much interested in what we had discovered, and decided to go to the big house and try to make a collection of relics. John Wetherill went with them. As it was along way round to get there with the horses,they took just what camp outfit they could carry and made their way up the canon as best they could. They only had provisions for three or four days, but before this was gone they had found as much stuff as they could carry out. Many of the rooms had only a few inches of rubbish in them, and it appeuredas though the inhabitants had left everything they possessed right where they used it last.

McLoyd and party camped with us for some time. We did some work in Johnson Canon;also examined Spruce Tree and Peabody Houses;but did not find much. We had not yet learned that much hard work was needed to get results. Early in the spring the collection was taken to Durango and exhibited there. We had not expected that other people would be as much interested in the collection as we had beeen. Of course we soon learned our mistake.

Clayton Wetherill and I having two or three weeks at our disposal, went back to the canon and made some good finds. Among them was the first mummy ever found in the cliff houses, that of a child a few months old. These mummies were not embalmed, but simply dried,from the corpse having been buried in ground so dry that complete decomposition did not take place. This was added to the other collection and taken to Denver.McLoyd being in charge and it was soon sold to the State Historical Society.

In December 1889, we started out to make another collection. This time we went at it in a more business-like manner. Our previous workhad been carried out more to satisfy our own curiosity than for any other purpose;but this time it was a business propositio In no work I have ever did are ones expectationsco stimul ted-something new and strangeneing uncovered every little whils.

We left the Wetherill ranch, five of us:Richard, Al and John and Clate Wetherill, and myself. Win Wetherill, the youngest of the boys was still at school and did not take part in the work until late We began work in the first cliff house in Mancos Canon. This house has only ten or twelve rooms in it,but it panned out well. A ~~xxxx~~ considerable portion of the cavein not occupied by buildings, and as is usual in such cases, this space was used as dump-ground. All kinds of rubbish thrown out here:ashes, corncobs, husks, squash necks and rinds, worn out sandals and sweeping from the house;also much broken pottery and implements of bone and stone. These rubbish heaps are to be found in the cave with all cliff houses, and were used as hiding places for various articles, apparently put there for safe keeping. This one proved to be rich

and in a few days we were able to send a pack horse load of stuff back to the ranch. We found an unusual number of sandals here and named it Sandal House.

The sandals were made of Yucca leaves torn into narrow strips and plaited into a mat the size and shape of the foot, and were held in place with strings over the foot. In cold weather, corn husks and cedar bard were placed under these strips to keep the feet warm. When Sandal House was worked out we moved farther down the canon, and later up on the mesa north of Johnson Canon, near the head of a branch which we named Acowitz Canon, after a Ute Indian who lived in Mancos Canon.

Just under the rim rock at the head of this canon is a building to which we gave the name of Fortified house. Some walls along the ledge on which the house is built were undoubtedly put there for defensive purposes. This house did not yield much, until one day John found by measurement that there was space under thecenter of the building for a small room, to which no entrance could be found, So he made one through the top. The room was a small one, not over five or six feet square; but in it were five skeletons, about a dozen pieces of pottery, several of the finest baskets we had seen, also a bow and a dozen arrows, all nearly perfect except the bow, which had been broken. The bow was the heavies one we ever found and it was well wraped with sinew. art of the string remaoned-made of twisted sinew and larger than a slate pencil; and he who could draw one of those arrows to the head with such a bow must have been a powerful man. One of the skeletons was that of a large man, which had been clothed in a suit of buckskin, including a cap which was nearly perfect. The balance of the clothing had been badly damaged by rats. It was to him that the bow probably belonged and he may have been a great warrior chief.

In the left hand fork of Johnson Canon are several houses. The largest has about forty rooms. In a kiva in one of thesehouses were the skeletons of four people who had no doubt been killed where we found them. There were two grown people, a man and a woman; one was that of a child twelve or fourteen years old, and the other a child a few months old. The skull of each of the three older people had been crushed in, and between them on the floor was a large stone ax, the blade of which just fitted the dent in the skulls. The bones of the skull of the child were scattered all about the room, so we could not tell in what manner it had been killed. Beneath the floor of an open passage way, in a small pit formed by a semicircular wall, the arms of which were against the cliff which formed the other side of the pit, we found our second mummy, that of a woman. The face was not handsome but we called her She. We had been reading Rider Haggard's Story of She; the building we called the She house.

After this we moved across the river and did some work at Cliff Palace, Spruce Tree House and Square Tower House. All these houses had been named the year before. When these hoqses had been worked out to our satisfaction we were at the end, so far as known houses were concerned. So we started out to explore, and found several more buildings the first day. We worked these out and again found more houses, and worked these out also. We continued in this way until all the many branches of Navajo Canon had beeen explored.

Beyond a certain point there is a change in the rock, a different stratum of sand stone comes to the surface and forms the cap of the mesa, which does not break into caves or cliffs that overhang. So there are no cliff houses in that region. To the larger houses discovered by us that winter we gave the names Spring House, Long House , Mug House, Kodak House and Step House. Of all these houses the one most remarkable for what we found in it was the Mug House, so named because of four or five mugs found tied together with strings by their handles. It appeared as though the people had been frightened away with no opportunity to carry anything with them. All seemed to have been left just where it had been used last. No house in Mesa Verde yielded so much in proportion to size. Spring came before we were able to excavateall of these buildings. We all had other work to do and having made a splendid collection we decided to quit.

During the winter of 1890- 91, no work was done in the cliff houses. But the following winter we were again on the job, enlarging our collection of two years previous, that had not yet been disposed of. Early in the spring of 1892,H.Jay Smith and C.D. Hazard, of Minneapolis, bought the entire collection and placed it on exhibition at the World's Columbian Exhibition at Chicago. Mr. Smith and an artist from Minneapolis, made extended trips with us through Mesa Verde and McElmo Canons, the artist making colored sketches of the cliff houses and their surroundings.

On the Midway at the Chicago Fair, a building was erected in imitation of the Battle Rock of McElmo Canon. In this a cliff house was shown all painted in true colors, and the collection was exhibited within. After the exhibition closed, the collection was donated to the University of Pennsylvania.

During the summer of 1891, the Wetherill boys made a collection for Gustave, son of Baron Nordenskjold of Sweden. This collection is in the National Museum of Stockholm. Nordenskjold also gave the world in book form, one of the best descriptions of the cliff dwellings ever issued, with the colored plates showing pottery, baskets and other articles.

During the year 1892, we made a collection for the state of Colorado, to be used as part of the state exhibit at Chicago. This was done under the supervision of A.F. Wilmarth, of Denver,with D.W.Ayers of Durango and Richard Wetherill successively in charge of the field work. In spite of the fact that all of the chief dwellings had been worked out two or three times, we succeeded in making a very good showing. In our earlier work we seldom cleaned out a room that was filled deeply with rubbish. Ofetn the walls of one or more stories had fallen into the rooms below, filling them several feet deep with rock and mortar. This was almost invariably the case with the estufas or kivas. These are circular rooms below the surface of the ground, the roof being on the same level as the floor of the buildings around them,and were often nearly full of the debris of fallen walls. At first we did not excavated any of these rooms, as we could always find something easier; but they were well worth the labor required to clean them out. The kiva was the living room of the cliff dweller. There is always a fire place in the center, mats of rush and willows on the floors, and tools of bone and stone were nearly always found; and the walls are always smoked. The square rooms seldom have fireplaces in them.

The State collection was the last we made in Mesa Verde. After the Fair it was brought back to Colorado and is now in the State Museum at Denver.

In making these various collections we learned much of the Cliff Dweller's mode of life. They were agriculturalists and raised crops of corn, beans and squashes; and kept tame turkeys. Their corn is a yellow dent, with some red ears, not at all like the corn frown by the Navajoms. Their beans are similar to the brown beans of the Mexicans. The squashes were of good size. It is not certainwhere they did their farming, except in a few places. Almost every house has its turkey pen in which the birds were probably fastened at night. They also used the seedm of lambs quarter and other wild plants for food, as the Navajos do today/

Their clothing seemed to have been limited to the feather blanket and sandal, often with short skirt and britch- clout of cedar bark, and these probably were not even worn in warm weather. They were no doubt successful hunters, as most of their bone implements were made of deer bones. Beads and many of their awls were made of turkey bones. Not much buckskin was found.

As to the antiquity of the cliff dwellings, nothing definite can be said. The earliest Spanish explorers did not mention them. No scrap of writing, no article of metal or other material that would indicate thepresence of civilized white men, were found in Mesa Verde. On the wall of Inscription House, in northern Arizona, is what appears to have been a mame and I66I,no doubt the year in which the inscription was made; and the building was a ruin at that time. Only a few letters of the name are now legible. There can be but little doubt that none o of the inhabitants remained at that time. This carries us back nearly four centuries. The buildings themselves, being protected by the overhanging cliffs, do not show age. This is easily accounted for by a dry atmosphere and absolute protection from rain. Some front walls that are partly exposed are complete ruins. On these walls trees as large as any in the vicinity are growing in a perfectly normal way, showingthat but little change has taken place during their life. The spruce tree at Spruce Tree House was growing in the ruins of an outer wall;Nordenskjold countedI62 annual growth rings showing that these walls were in ruins at least 200 years ago. Therefore,there can be no doubt that the cliff dwellings have been unoccupiedat least 400 years, and probably for a much longer time. Considerable as this period seems, it was very short compared to the time the caves of Mesa Verde have been inhabited by human beings. The cave in which Spruce Tree House stands has probably been as long and continuously inhabited as any in this region. It is dry, well protected from the wind and near plenty of water.

On the wall of one kiva sixteen coats of clay,which had been used as a white wash, with as many layers of black smoke, were counted. Near this a hole six feet deep did not reach the bottom of ground made up almost entirely from the clay mortar of walls that had been torn down and the rock used for rebuilding.

How many times must this process have been repeated? These facts and others prove that the caves were used for dwelling places for a long period of time. But it remained for almost the last work we did in Mesa Verde to give us anything like a basis on which to calculate time. It was late in the summer of I892, while we were working on the State collection, in one of the far western branches of Navajo Canon,at what we called the Step House, from a stairway or series of stone steps leading from the cave to the mesa above. Only a small

portion of the northern end of the cave is occupied by buildings, leaving a considerable space open. In this open space, Nordenskjold made some good finds, but he did not go deep enough to get one of the most important items of information yet discovered. This cave does not seem to hace been a favorite place of abode for the Cliff Dweller. They do not appear to have lived in it very long, and only a small community at that. On the surface of the space not occupied by buildings, when we were first there, was from one to two inches of fine dust. Under this was the usual Cliff Dweller rubbish; several feet deep near the buildings, thinning out to only a few inches at other places. Under this stratum of rubbish we found from two to three feet(it was not evenly distributed) ~~mif~~ of dirt similar to the surface dirt, only quite solid and compact and devoidentirely of any signof human presence. Under theis, however, were the remains of ancient buildings of wood;no stone having been used in their construction. They had been destroyed by fire, but enough charcoal and parially burned wood remained to give an idea of how they were built; much like the Navajo hogan of today. We found 24 pieces of mica pottery, the roughest and crudest we had ever seen, being ungalzed and unpainted. Not much different from what children sometimes make in play, except that the shape was regular. A few bowl shaped pieces had been moulded in baskets, the imprint of the basket being un mistakable on the outside. Archaeologists tell us that the first pottery was made that way. The important part of this discovery, however, is the positive proof of great antiquity of the older ruins which could not be less than 5000 years, and probably they are much older.

More recent work on both sides of the San Juan river in southern Utah and northern Arizona, proves beyond question that the caves of tha section have been used as dwelling and burial places through long ages, and also indicates that wo or more distinct races, or the same race in very different phases of its advancement, have successively occupied them. The skulls of the more ancient people are of natural shape, while the cliff house builder has the skull flattened nearly perpendicularly behind. They appear to have made no pottery, but were adepts in the manufacture of baskets. It is not certain that they used the bow and arrow,but certainly did possess a weapon, one called atlatl, still in use, I understand, in some parts of Old Mexico. There were also many other differences in their manufactures and their mode of life. There is still much to be learned on this subject. However, ther is a party of archaeologistsfrom Harvard College in the field each summer, with Clayton Wetherill as assistant, and as they know what to look for and where to look for it, they are sure to throw much light on this obscure page of history.

Another interesting question, on which we gained some information, is what became of the cliff dweller. I have already described our find of a family murdered in a kiva of one of the housesin Johnson Canon. In a kiva in Peabody House we found skeletons of two men, each with a small round Hole in the skull. No doubt shot with an arrow and thrwon into the room,as the skeletons were just under the entrance. The final tragedy of the cliff dweller probably occurred at Cliff Palace. There is scarcely room to doubt that the place withstood an extended siege. In the entire building only two timbers were found by us. All of the joist on which the floors ~~were laid~~ and roofs were laid, had been trenched out. These timbers are built into the walls and are difficult to remove,even the little willowson which the mud roofs and upper floors are laid are carefully taken out. No plausible ~~re~~ reason for this has been advanced,

except that it was used for fuel.. Another strange circumstance is, that so many of their valuable possessions were left in the rooms and covered with the clay of which the roofs and upper floors were made,not to mention many of the walls that were broken down in tearing out the timbers. It would seem that the intention was to conceal their valuables,so that their enemies might not secure them;or perhaps the people were in such despair that property was not considere There were many human bones scattered about,as though several people had been killed and left unburied.

Had Cliff Palace been abandoned, as has been suggested, and the timbers used in other buildings, all movable articles of value would have been taken away, and much of it broken and destroyed unnecessarily. It seems to me that there can be no doubt that the Cliff Dwellers were exterminated by their more savage and war-like neighbors. The men being killed and the women being adopted into the tribe of the conquerors, although in some cases migrations may have become necessary as a result of drouth or pressure from outside tribes.

Sgd. by C.C. Mason
andand approved by the Wetherill boys.

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It must be thrilling indeed, to pick up something just where one of these people had left it possibly more than a thousand years ago. This time has all flown in seconds. There will come a time when today will be a thousand years ago. What will be the change?

D.C.L.