

1SHORT.DOC 11-1-01

On the Colorado part of the trip, we reached the gate to Mesa Verde National Park moments before opening time. The ranger held us up for two minutes to pass. I'd raced to be early to beat the Winnebago caravans climbing the lofty roads. Causes dizzy spells to follow along behind a mishmash of bumper stickers plastered on the back of a bus, especially if a wheel on an upside-down bicycle is spinning on a bumper rack.

Gatekeepers at national parks must be assigned the post to work their dyspepsia off on the public. Seemed the ranger checking my pass and handing over a folder of directions wore the same expression of contempt on a turnip-colored face fitted under a Boy Scout hat as the one working the entrance of Padre Island National Park in Texas last spring. (Symptoms of dyspepsia are lips powdered in Roll-Aids and a purple tinge to the skin.)

Once we arrived at the visitor's center, the reception was the opposite. Park Service people worked the long lines as patiently and courteously as a street-side ministry. All the rangers from the center to the ones leading folks to the ruins took time to answer questions. Careful, precise directions are critical when dealing with the many foreign visitors, as the trails are steep and ascend through narrow crevices difficult to pass.

Unaware, I became a bad example without saying a word. Before we descended to the ruins in a huge cave several hundred feet below, the ranger warned people suffering physical impairments, coronary or weight problems, or wearing improper footwear to consider the difficulty of the tour. I stood away from the group in a "U" shaped overlook bordered by a rock wall. I'd already concluded in the days

the Anasazis lived in the caves, stout Indians, fat Indians and old Indians alike climbed the same wall on handholds cut in the rocks. I figured if I watched my footing on the ladders and double-gripped the staircase banisters, I could descend without mishap. However, the shocking part was the way graybeards and grannies kept collecting over the "U" next to me. Realize I am not a born, unborn, natural or unnatural leader. But when I caught on, the thought hit mighty hard, "These folks think if a gray-whiskered fellow like him passes muster, we can make it down to base and back on top without ever missing a stair or slipping on a ladder rung."

Not knowing what to do on such short notice, I turned, put my hands on the waist-high rock wall, leaned over, and began to do false pushups to flex the way kids stretch before running. Distance concealed my lungs pumping the mountain air so hard the intake rolled my tongue back and the outgo flattened it as flat as pressed banana peel. At the signal "Let's go," I rose up and down on my toes a few counts and fell into last place.

Historians and archeologists combined ruined the story of why the Anasazis abandoned the adobe brick pueblos in 1300. Thirty years ago the rangers spoke of the big mystery of why they left the canyons, implying bloody massacres or a pitched battle down the canyon of flying flint projectiles shot by marksmen with deadly aim. Later, much later, a professor circulated a theory that the Anasazis, or "the ancient ones," were the Mayas in Mexico. I liked the imagery of the tribes leaving the canyon to migrate way down into Mexico to build new cities and huge temples and tall pyramids to bury the chiefs and priests. A jungle scene of throbbing drums and beautiful virgins sacrificed

on a flaming pyre to appease gods so omnipotent that thunder stilled in their presence.

Leave it to the busybody excavators to spoil the drama. The rangers now say that in 1276 a drouth hit for 26 years. Crops of corn and beans failed; the domesticated wild turkeys, not only a source of food but clothing, perished from starvation. By 1300, the people left to assimilate with the Hopis. A few are thought to have migrated to Canon de Chelly in Arizona.

Some mystery that one. Crooked up no doubt by a bunch of busybody professors encouraging students to sift cave dust for bones to carbon date eras and episodes as if the Indians used Gregorian calendars to keep time. Our ranger missed his chance, using one measly sentence to dismiss a stunner: "fecal specimens showed cannibalism occurred." What an opportunity to claim the Anasazis were dreaded by all the tribes of the desert for being so fierce they ate human flesh.

Well, scientists ruin stories digging up facts and storytellers handle facts in the lightness and rhythm a cricket composes his song. I completed the climb without help. I stayed around for recognition from my contemporaries, but they filed by without the slightest notice.