

Scientists Probe Cliff Dwellings for Lost Secret

IN THE remote southwest corner of Colorado, archeologists are digging into the history of early cliff-dwelling Indians who flourished for centuries, then mysteriously vanished.

The site is Wetherill Mesa, one of the tree-studded, canyon-carved hills in 80-square-mile Mesa Verde National Park. There, through the joint efforts of the National Park Service and the National Geographic Society, a year's work in exploring and restoring cliff-side ruins has just been completed.

The first major settlement to be studied and rehabilitated is Long House. Park officials plan eventually to open it as an alternate attraction for the floods of visitors now literally wearing out the ruins at nearby Chapin Mesa.

A REPORT on what has been learned so far about Mesa Verde Indians appears in the November National Geographic Magazine. The article, by Park

Service archeologist Carroll A. Burroughs, reveals a wealth of detail on every day life in stone villages laboriously built into the caves and under sheltering ledges.

But still tantalizingly out of reach are the answers to basic questions raised by the findings.

From about A.D. 600 to 1100, most Indians living in small farming villages on lower elevations moved up into large, compact communities on the mesa top. Why?

Equally puzzling is what happened next. The Indians moved again in about 1200 to caves that reached deep into canyon walls. The building problems must have been enormous, Burroughs points out. "Just to terrace some of the steeply pitched cave floors must have taken as much work as building a good-sized village on the mesa top."

In all, some 800 ruins have been found—proof of a prodigious investment in time and labor. Yet by 1300 these homes, too,

had been abandoned. Their inhabitants moved "right off the pages of history."

FOR CENTURIES, the vacant settlements of the Mesa Verde remained undisturbed. Then in 1888, ranchers named Wetherill discovered one of the huge cliff villages while chasing stray cattle.

Soon stone corridors echoed to the crunch of sightseers' feet. Souvenir hunters and commercial prospectors scoured the ruins for artifacts. A Swedish archeologist dug into several sites in 1891, and gathered a large and valuable collection destined eventually to wind up in the National Museum at Helsinki, Finland.

The end of the treasure hunt came in 1906, when Congress created Mesa Verde National Park to give the area Federal protection.

The current Park Service-National Geographic undertaking is a major scientific drive to solve mesa mysteries. The job is expected to take five or six years, with still more time needed to evaluate the finds.

From bits of pottery, bones, and animal snares, information on the Indians' way of life is gradually emerging. Studies of pollen and soil hint at the kind and extent of farming carried on. Hunting apparently went on steadily to supplement a diet of corn, beans and squash.

Of special interest are burial sites uncovered near Long House. "Such discoveries," writes Burroughs, "will provide new clues to the customs of the people who once lived here, and may help link them historically with present Southwestern Pueblo Indian tribes."

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Good Start

MOST of us with average nerves will feel sympathy for the TV announcer doing his first commercial for a new sponsor. With cameras centered on him, the announcer smiled, took a deep draw of the sponsor's cigarette, blew out a ring of smoke and sighed blissfully: "Man, that's real coffee!"

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