

What Mystery?

In spite of archeological evidence and oral histories, some people still say that the Ancestral Puebloans “vanished” or “disappeared.” This is an entertaining fantasy, but it seriously misrepresents the historical record. Here’s how it got started.

The Ancestral Puebloan’s homeland had been resettled by the time Anglo adventurers arrived. The Navajo laid claim to much of the land and other tribes occupied bits and pieces. All were late arrivals, coming in more than two centuries after the Ancestral Puebloans departed, and none knew the original inhabitants.

In 1849, Lt. James Simpson was among the first westerners to visit Chaco Canyon. Awed by what he saw, Simpson penned a telling remark. The abandoned structures, he said, evidenced “a combination of science and art which can only be referred to a higher stage of civilization and refinement than is discoverable in the works of Mexicans or Pueblos of the present day.”

Exactly three decades later, in 1879, renowned photographer Timothy O’Sullivan visited several sites in northern New Mexico. As a caption to one image of Salmon Ruins, he made the following remark.

This ruin is characteristic of an ancient people and civilization of which the present tribes know nothing, not even in tradition. There is a belief that the Aztec race in its integrity, centuries ago, inhabited the San Juan Region whence they were compelled to migrate by the absence of rainfall and the increased aridity of their land.

Read in context, it is clear that both Simpson and O’Sullivan relied on information from contemporary tribes as did other adventurers of their era. The great pueblos and spectacular cliff dwellings were mysterious to their native informants because none were part of the Puebloan cultural tradition.

The Spanish also played a part in creating the ill-begotten “mystery.” Beginning in 1541, they systematically repressed the Puebloan culture. They destroyed kivas and traditional artifacts, killed elders, and punished everyone who participated in the “old ways.” As a result, the Puebloans learned to disguise their cultural history under a veneer of Christianity. The practice continues to this day and one pueblo elder explained it to me this way. We have, he said, “two cultural traditions: our own and the other imposed by the Spanish. With outsiders, we share the second but not the first.” As a result, their ties to the Ancestral Puebloans were hidden from outsiders and many are still hesitant to discuss them with Anglo tourists and scholars.

Where does that leave us? There is a germ of truth in the statement that the Ancestral Puebloans vanished mysteriously. However, a century of archeological research dispels the germ and those who still cling to the fiction do so for reasons other than factual exposition.