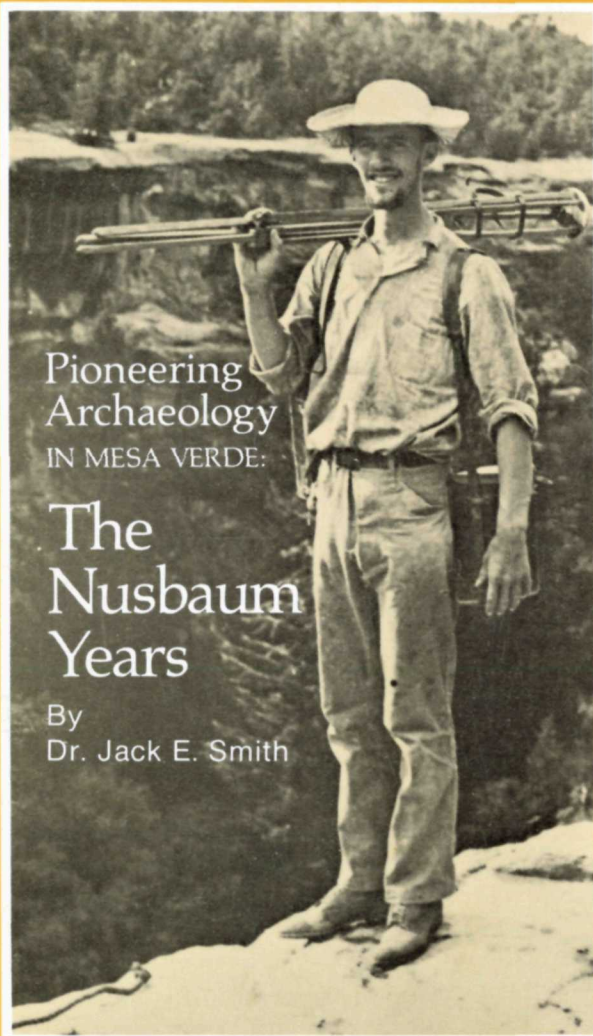




Pioneering
Archaeology
IN MESA VERDE:

The Nusbaum Years

By
Dr. Jack E. Smith

A Love Affair that Almost Wasn't . . . Durango and Mesa Verde National Park

By Dr. Duane A. Smith



MESA VERDE OCCASIONAL PAPERS



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A Love Affair that Almost Wasn't . . .

Durango and
Mesa Verde National Park

Dr. Duane A. Smith

When Charles Mason and the Wetherill brothers stumbled onto the spectacular cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde in the winter of 1888-89, their chance discovery presented a golden opportunity to promote the region's largest and most important community—Durango. Located only 30 or so miles from the ruins as the crow flies (56 miles to the park's heart via today's highway), Durango stood to benefit from an expected tourist bonanza. No similar opportunity had materialized in the eight-and-a-half years of its life, and none would again for several generations. For a town which publicized itself with zeal and an obvious relish for profit, Durango proved surprisingly hesitant to make its move and would take second place to upstart Mancos, which had been dubbed a mere "cow town."

Durangoans had long been aware that they lived in a region inhabited centuries before the coming of the white man. The evidence existed all around them. **The Durango Record** and its spirited lady editor, Caroline Romney, had published throughout 1881 articles and notes on the "new antiquities," the "extinct people," and other descriptive headlines.¹ These referred not to Mesa Verde, however, but to ruins in the Animas Valley, as far south as what became Aztec Ruins National Monument.

Durango in late 1890s. The smokestacks of its chief industry, the smelter, appear in the left corner, and directly behind the railroad roundhouse stands the depot, where the Mesa Verde-bound passengers left the Denver and Rio Grande.

Credit: Amon Carter Museum



Once the novelty wore off, excursions to the sites and the inevitable souvenirs brought back to grace a mantel or gather dust on a shelf became less newsworthy. Small collections of relics could be found in many local homes, and some undoubtedly were sold or given to tourists who came to Durango to enjoy the scenery, the out-of-doors, and/or the nearby hot springs. A slowly growing number of visitors fancied a look at the Indian ruins, and for them the livery stables offered horses and buggies for a trip of several hours or a day or two. A Durango "expert" might be hired as a guide.

Almost from the first day of its existence, this Denver and Rio Grande-sired town showed itself to be a true child of its parent by boasting of its attributes and encouraging tourism. "Durango is a great resort for pleasure and recreation generally," trumpeted the **Southwest**, April 14, 1883, neatly summarizing the prevailing attitude of the entire decade.

There apparently existed some disgruntled souls who did not greet the newcomers with what the pioneering boosters deemed proper hospitality. On several occasions that same spring, the editor of the **Southwest** felt obliged to encourage people to give the visitors a "warm and hearty welcome." He even went so far as to tell potential tourists that they would be treated "courteously and cleanly" and that prices "are not high."² Such condemnation with faint praise seems to indicate that some merchants waited like "paper collar Comanches" to seize upon the innocents. A couple of later visitors on their way to Mesa Verde frankly accused Durangoans of not showing much interest in their welfare.

Meanwhile, curiosity grew as to the origins of those mysterious people who had left their remains so liberally scattered in valley, canyon, and mesa. A long letter in **The Idea**, May 16, 1885, speculated about these "Old Aztec People," thereby tipping the author's hand in the direction from which he thought they had come. The letter talked about cliff dwellings on the San Juan River and the large ruins at Aztec. A year-and-a-half later, a Denver newspaper carried a series of articles which prompted S.E. Osborn from San Miguel County to write and say that he had spent the winter of 1883-84 prospecting among "thousands of cliff houses" and had gathered "hundreds of relics." There seems little doubt that he was in the Mesa Verde region, possibly Balcony House. Durangoans were awakening to the idea that something more spectacular than what had already been discovered lay hidden not far away.

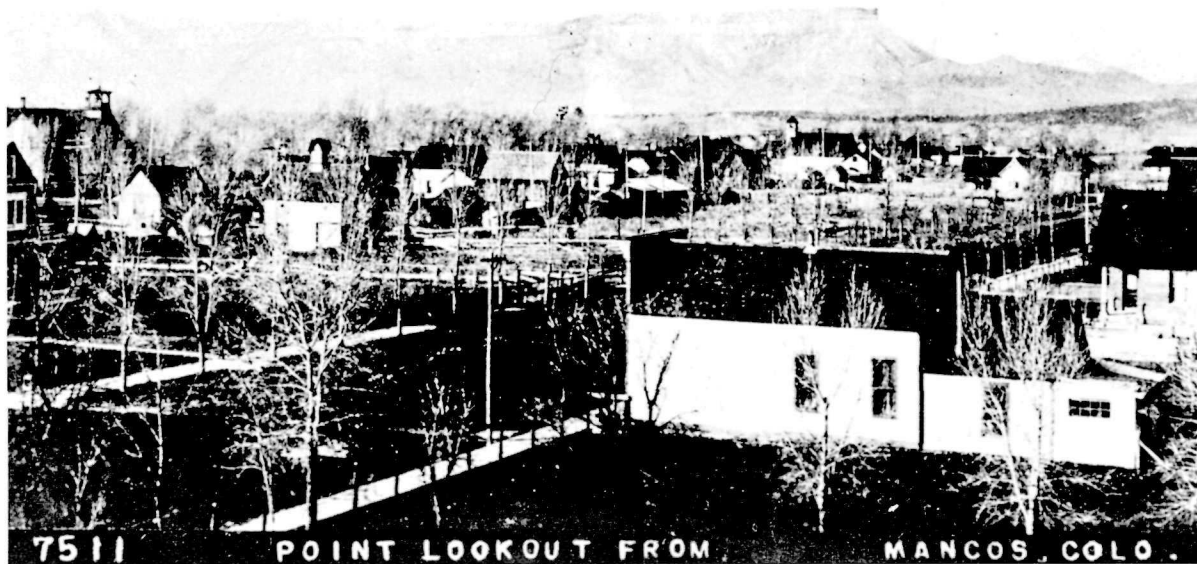
At the same time, in 1886, a call came to establish a park to preserve the Mancos Ruins "in order that they may be accessible to tourists." In an offhand manner, the writer named Durango as the starting point to visit the ruins over a fairly good road, "but this must be understood in the Colorado sense." Easterners might see it as rough, but "they need not hesitate to travel over it."³ The author mainly discussed the ruins in the Mancos Canyon, which William Henry Jackson had seen and photographed in 1874, and which Ernest Ingersoll described for eastern readers that same year.

By the mid-eighties some of the prominent themes that would recur over the years were already emerging. The movement for a national park to preserve the ruins was one of them. "Unless something is done to protect them the vandals of modern civilization will destroy them." This expressed fear has relevance even now. Concern for making the ruins more accessible to the average tourist, who did not wish to undertake a wilderness expedition, came much later. Obviously, something had to be done to improve the roads leading to the sites. La Plata County, which at this time covered the entire southwestern corner of Colorado, possessed neither the resources nor the ability to construct and maintain a network of roads. What it offered were the aforementioned "roads" and trails from the Denver and Rio Grande depot in Durango.

All these questions became much more pertinent after the Wetherill brothers and Charles Mason discovered the great ruins in the canyons of Mesa Verde. Durango first became generally aware of the new discoveries when about "1,000 relics and specimens" were brought into town in March, 1889, the fruit of a busy winter's searching. These "valuable curiosities" were placed on exhibition by the enterprising owners with the intent to sell the entire collection to some fortunate local resident.⁴ None had the money nor the inclination and thereby missed the chance of a lifetime.

Mancos, looking toward Mesa Verde. This settlement was Durango's rival for a while.

Credit: Mesa Verde National Park



Durangoans were also slow to provide for the first tourists who came amazingly early to see these wonders of the southwest. Frederick Chapin arrived in September and found it difficult to obtain much information about the Mancos country. Nor was it any better the next year, and Chapin duly noted that had his party not been well informed, they "should have been led to turn aside to visit ruins of minor importance," in the lower Animas Valley.⁵

Such reluctance to accommodate visitors is perplexing, since there were people in the community who could have provided the information which Chapin sought. Perhaps it reflected a trace of jealousy toward Mancos. A small ranching/farming town that posed no threat to Durango, it, nevertheless, held a much better location in relation to Mesa Verde than did its older neighbor. Mancos also happened to be the home of the Wetherills, who quickly emerged as the leading discoverers and guides. Durangoans may have wanted to bask in the glory of the discoveries and resented the attention Mancos initially attracted. The controversy was resolved in due time, because, as Chapin admitted, the Mancos Valley was naturally approached from Durango, "the principal town" of southwest Colorado. Durangoans simply lacked the patience to wait.

It is also possible that, despite the exhibit of the spring of '89, Durangoans still believed their ruins to be the more impressive and honestly and enthusiastically wanted to guide Chapin to them. Whatever the reasons for their attitudes, they rapidly turned their attention to Mesa Verde in the 1890's.

When the Rio Grande Southern Railroad built out of Durango and past Mancos on its way to Telluride and beyond, it opened a whole new era of visitation to the ruins for both communities. The horse and buggy gave way to the ease and comfort of the parlor car. A visitor still had to take an overland route from Mancos, but the time and distance involved had been drastically cut. The railroad also promoted the area, encouraging visits to the "Homes of the Cliff Dwellers." Mancos initially gained the most from the promotion,⁶ but Durango nearly kept pace because the trip required the changing of trains there and perhaps a layover. It also offered better accommodations, more aggressive merchants, and a broader economic and tourist base upon which to build, facts that at the moment provided small consolation.

Durangoans were becoming much more appreciative of tourists. The Board of Trade took as two of its objectives to advertise the city and promote its interests. A pamphlet sponsored by this group in 1892 provided several pages describing what could be seen in the immediate area. Among the attractions was a thirty-mile ride on the Rio Grande Southern, which brought you "within a short distance of the marvelous Mancos cliff dwellings and ruins." It was necessary to confess that guides and horses would have to be secured at Mancos, but Durango could offer everything else.



Gustav Nordenskiöld and his pretty young wife. Nordenskiöld carefully examined the ruins, only to find that Durango was not happy with his removing the relics.

Credit: Mesa Verde National Park

Following the exhibition of relics and photographs at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893, where they almost rivaled Little Egypt for attention, interest in Mesa Verde increased. So did visits and collecting of artifacts, which were sometimes displayed in Durango on their way to another destination. A fine line was drawn in those days between collecting and vandalism, and it was often crossed. Even people who had no intention of digging were caught up in the excitement of it. In the words of one who was there, "... the writer must plead guilty to the charge of delving a little in the burial places, rather with the greed of the collector than the calm and purposeful motives of the scientific archaeologist . . ."⁷ Durangoans' motives were little better; they kept collecting and exhibiting, including a mummy in one of their parades.

These reprehensible activities renewed fears for the ruins and artifacts. Gustav Nordenskiöld, one of the earliest individuals to gather a collection scientifically, found evidence of this concern when he was arrested in Durango in October, 1891, for excavating illegally. He was apprehended on charges prepared by the Ute Indian Agent, Mesa Verde at that time being part of the Ute reservation. The matter was resolved quickly enough, but it demonstrated the increase in local awareness.⁸ Nordenskiöld chose to ignore the episode in his classic volume about his excavations.

Within a year-and-a-half a Durango Archaeological and Historical Society was organized, which the **Great Southwest** hoped would help see that "vandalism among the ancient ruins" in the region was stopped. Unfortunately, its best intentions went awry. Hoping to raise enough money to purchase a collection then in town, the members failed to find the necessary funds and turned to contributing from their own collections to build a local exhibit. They were encouraged to make "collecting tours" during that coming summer (1893) to fill it with specimens.⁹ Eighteen-ninety-three was not a good year to begin any project; the United States crashed into a depression, taking Durango and all of southwestern Colorado with it.

The Society did not survive the depression but, fortunately, interest in preserving the ruins did. This time it came from within and outside of Colorado, encouraged primarily by a group of women led by Virginia McClurg. This strong-willed, outgoing woman, also a noted poet, first visited the region in 1882. Immediately captivated by the ruins and scenery, she became concerned about their preservation. A dedicated writer and speaker, McClurg used all the talents at her disposal to preserve the ruins, once Mesa Verde was discovered and the vandalism started.

She began her campaign in 1893-94 with lectures in Denver and Chicago to arouse interest. Almost alone she quickly acquired supporters among scholars and particularly the public, yet not until 1897, at the Colorado Federation of Women's Clubs meeting at Pueblo, did the drive finally start to gain momentum. A committee for the Preservation and Restoration of the Cliff and Pueblo Ruins was organized with McClurg as chairman. Local chapters and women carried the cause to their homes, and the fight was joined.

Two Durango women were charter members of that committee, Mrs. Jeannette Scoville and Mrs. O.F. Boyle. The Durango women were stalwarts in the struggle, even though they did not assume prominent roles statewide or nationally. Mrs. Scoville was typical. A charter member of the local reading club, Ladies Library Association, and the Village Improvement Society, she was an activist in a man's world, which left few outlets for her energy and talents. The fight to save Mesa Verde was a natural for Scoville. Her like-minded reading club friends joined with her.

Nearest to the ruins and in a town that had already shown concern about their destruction, the Durango ladies served mainly as hostesses for groups that McClurg led or organized and sent to see Mesa Verde. After one visit, Virginia McClurg, who came to talk to the Utes about leasing the ruins site, thanked the Durango women for their kindness and was cheered to report, "The people of the Southwest are enthusiastic over the movement . . ."¹⁰

The ladies generally met the visiting party at the depot, provided overnight lodging, and entertained them. These might include a reception, a tour of the town (a promotional opportunity never overlooked), and a night spent in a member's home. Some local women occasionally accompanied the visitors on to Mancos and the ruins.¹¹ The ladies came mostly from Durango's upper crust, women such as Estelle Camp, wife of the president of the First National Bank and herself a pioneer resident.

The purpose of these expeditions was to create interest in Mesa Verde, and the Durango women did their share in helping make the trip as pleasant as possible. They and their husbands could not ignore the possibility that Durango would benefit, too, if the town put its best foot forward. The community had come a long way in the decade since Chapin had had difficulty ferreting out information about the ruins and the way to them.

The Durango ladies' finest hour came when they were compelled to visit the Ute Chief Ignacio at his camp at Navajo Springs to attempt to secure a lease on the ruins; this was one of several such attempts. The extent of the ruins was not easily determined, and inaccurate surveys hampered all efforts. Always the question of the Utes and their relationship to the land and ruins lurked in the background. Some of the women in the movement expressed guilt over removing the Utes, while others rationalized that the preservation of the cliff dwellings overshadowed the rights of the Indians.

Camp, Scoville, Boyle, and Mrs. Ben Bishop braved a long, dusty, seventy-five-mile horse and buggy ride to Navajo Springs to meet with Ute leaders and their agent. The discussions proved fruitful, and the Utes consented to release their claims to the canyons in which the ruins were situated. Unable to return home because of the lateness of the hour and the distance involved, the ladies stayed overnight at the Ute camp and trading post. Never were they more aware of the cultural differences between themselves and their hosts than during that “fearful” night. To celebrate the agreement and promised payments, the Ute braves threw an all-night dance (“a wild drunk, dancing and shouting about the store . . .”), which, to the petrified Durango women, seemed to mean only that they would be attacked and suffer “a fate worse than death” (to use a Victorian euphemism). The feared attack never came, and all the ladies lost was a night’s sleep, as the “roaring drunk” braves shouted and sang the hours away. Mrs. Camp vividly remembered, even years later, that her greatest fear had been that the Utes would “. . . further celebrate by setting the building afire.”¹²

In her 1903 annual report to the Cliff Dwelling Association, McClurg complimented the women for their efforts. She had already visited the Utes and knew the problems. They “. . . hold the land as a tribal reservation, not in severalty — therefore they cannot individually lease or sell. To lease the land from the Indians seemed the only practical expedient — as the gov-

ernment could give us no title . . .” She took a swipe at the Department of Interior, which “. . . fondly imagines that Weminuche Utes sit at ease at their agency, pens and blotting paper in hand, ready to sign leases, but such is not the case.”¹³ Virginia knew, because she had taken the overland trip from Mancos only to find the Ute leaders gone.



Part of the first automobile caravan into the park on May 28, 1914. The advent of the car and the removal of the park headquarters from Mancos gave Durango its victory.
Credit: Mesa Verde National Park

In 1905-06, with victory in sight, discussion arose in the ladies’ ranks about who should control the park. Virginia McClurg suddenly altered her goal of better than a decade and decided Mesa Verde should be a state park under the jurisdiction of the Colorado Cliff Dwellings Association instead of a national park. Other factors in the bitter struggle shattered the movement at the moment of its success and damaged McClurg’s reputation. Fortunately, a strong core of determined women remained loyal to their original goal and their national support was overwhelming. In June, 1906, Mesa Verde National Park was created, an event that went virtually unnoticed in local papers. Although the Durango women had played a minor part, they could still be proud of their efforts.

With the fight won, Durango merchants revitalized their efforts to capitalize on their nearness to the park. They and others were highly disgruntled to hear of Virginia McClurg’s bitter intention to build a reproduction of the cliff dwellings near Manitou Springs. The Durango Historical and Archaeological Society spoke for many when it called her efforts “undignified and injurious, unscientific and hurtful to the state.”¹⁴ It might also have gone on to emphasize that the threat of a rival attraction was not appreciated either. These reprisals did not stop McClurg, but her fake ruins paled in comparison to the originals and did little to stem the tourist flow into southwestern Colorado.

More pressing was the fact that Mancos still held the advantage as the point of departure for park visits, a fact reinforced when the park headquarters were established there. Travel to the ruins continued to be a tedious undertaking despite the new status. The Federal Government did not rush in with a multitude of road-building, tourist accommodation, and ruin identification projects. It did build a campground near Spruce Tree House and clear away rubbish left by camping parties of previous years.¹⁵ Not until 1909 did the visitor total top 100, and in 1916 it went over 1,000. Yet the potential existed and Durangoans were determined to capitalize on it.

The coming of the automobile and the construction of good roads during 1913-14 finally began to tip the scales in favor of Durango. Those first Studebakers, Hupmobiles, Reos, and Fords, which chugged their way from Mancos to Spruce Tree camp on May 28, 1914, indicated the wave of the future. The trip took over three hours, including numerous stops for pictures, but the three hours were far more comfortable ones than they had been before. Liverymen at Mancos saw the end of their era that day. For the little community, another ten years passed before it, too, slipped into second place.

Mesa Verde meant more than just tourist business to Durango. As early as 1911, a Durango man was appointed a ranger and, even more important, were the road construction bids and other contracts which the government advertised yearly. Mancos firms originally had the advantage here, too, but Durango merchants and companies soon made inroads and federal money found its way into local pockets.

The final blow came for Mancos when headquarters were transferred to the park, removing one of its greatest advantages. Durango — larger, wealthier, and more aggressive — pulled ahead of its one-time rival. It offered more attractions, accommodations, and a much more dynamic advertising program, which promoted itself as the regional center and hardly mentioned Mancos. The improvement of the interstate highway system, the building of an airport, and the community boom which came after World War II all strengthened Durango. It had won a decades' long struggle. Mancos no longer represented a threat for the tourist dollar. However, a new, more serious challenger appeared in Cortez, located much nearer the park. That rivalry continues to this day.

The tourist who visits Mesa Verde today is probably not at all aware of Durango's role in the park's history, nor of those women who did their best to bring the whole idea to fruition. Fleeting has been the remembrance of people and events of 70 to 100 years ago. Think of them and their efforts next time you enjoy a visit to Mesa Verde.

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¹**Durango Record**, Dec. 17, 1881, for example, has a comment; so do other issues throughout the year.

²**Southwest**, March 10 and April 14, 1883.

³**Denver Tribune Republican**, Dec. 1 and 2, 1886.

⁴**Durango Morning Herald**, March 3-14, 1889.

⁵See F.H. Chapin, "Cliff Dwellings of the Mancos Canyon," **American Antiquarian** (July, 1890), and **The Land of the Cliff-Dwellers** (Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club, 1892).

⁶For example, F.H. Newell, "Mesa Verde," **National Geographic Magazine** (Oct., 1898), p. 434, mentioned Mancos only, and the Rio Grande Southern as the way to get there.

⁷T. Mitchell Prudden, "A Summer Among the Cliff Dwellings," **Harper's Magazine**, (Sept., 1896), p. 551. Helen S. Daniels, **Adventures with the Anasazi of Falls Creek** (Durango: Center of Southwest Studies, 1976), p. 9. **The Cliff Dwellers** (H. Jay Smith Exploring Company, 1893) described the exhibit.

⁸**Rocky Mountain News**, Sept. 19, 1891. Frank McNitt, in his **Richard Wetherill Anasazi** (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 42, states that Nordenskiöld was arrested on a charge brought by "incensed townspeople." Nordenskiöld's hearing was held two weeks later in district court, after which he was released for lack of violating any specific law. Unfortunately, no Durango papers exist for this period, the records of the district court do not mention the incident, and a check of later issues of the **News** and **Denver Republican** (weekly) failed to uncover further items.

⁹**Great Southwest**, April 4, 13, 14, 1893.

¹⁰**Rocky Mountain News** (Denver), Oct. 29, 1899.

¹¹**Durango Semi-Weekly Herald**, Sept. 9, 1901, describes one such visit. The **Denver Republican**, Sept. 10, 1901, and the **Mancos Times**, Sept. 6, 1901, further elaborate on the same tour.

¹²Daniels, Helen S., **The Ute Indians of Southwestern Colorado** (Durango: N.P., 1941), p. 40.

¹³Virginia McClurg, "1903 Report," copy in archival files of Mesa Verde National Park. The Durango ladies' trip took place in either 1903 or 1904. Mrs. Scoville is known to have gone in 1903, and Scoville, Boyle, and Camp were appointed to go in 1904 to get a lease on the ruins. Legal technicalities foiled their best intentions.

¹⁴**Denver Daily News**, Nov. 16, 1906, quotes the October 30 meeting of the Society.

¹⁵Hans Randolph, "Report of the Superintendent of Mesa Verde," Sept. 4, 1908, copy in the archival files of Mesa Verde National Park.



The Old Knife Edge road, the main entry into Mesa Verde National Park. The official park vehicle was the one used by Nusbaum and the Rockefeller party in the summer of 1924.

Courtesy Colorado Historical Society, Denver

Pioneering Archaeology IN MESA VERDE: THE NUSBAUM YEARS

By Dr. Jack E. Smith

John D. Rockefeller, Jr. standing in Cliff Palace during his 1924 visit to Mesa Verde National Park.

Courtesy Denver Public Library, Western History Department

On the morning of July 3, 1924, a three-car caravan drove up the old Knife Edge Road into Mesa Verde National Park — two convertible Packards with their tops up led by a Buick touring car. In the Buick were two men who were to play important roles in the development of the park and in the archaeology of the southwestern United States. They differed greatly in their backgrounds, in their careers, and in their ways of life; but in the quiet of the evening on the edge of the canyon overlooking Spruce Tree House, these men formed a bond that linked their lives together for years to come.

The two men who rode together that day and who later sat talking under the summer stars were Jesse L. Nusbaum, Superintendent of Mesa Verde National Park, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., one of the most influential of American financiers. Rockefeller had motored up from Santa Fe with three of his sons on a brief summer vacation. Superintendent Nusbaum personally escorted him into the park and guided him to the great cliff dwellings and through the then partially completed museum. He and Mrs. Nusbaum opened their home to the Rockefeller party, and in the evening after a steak fry overlooking Balcony House, Nusbaum and Rockefeller sat on the porch of the Superintendent's home and discussed the park and its future.



Rockefeller was particularly impressed with the fact that Nusbaum was building a museum without governmental support. His only financial help was a \$5,000 donation that had been given by Mrs. Stella Levison of San Francisco. Mrs. Levison had visited the park several times and had been concerned that the only "museum" in the park was one room of a two-room log cabin that had been built in 1916 as a ranger station and storage shed. She offered to help finance a permanent fireproof building, and with this encouragement Superintendent and Mrs. Nusbaum had gone ahead with plans for a museum, only a portion of which, however, could be constructed with the \$5,000. Rockefeller, impressed by Nusbaum's initiative, offered another \$2,500 to complete and to furnish the four-room section that was then under construction, hoping, like Nusbaum, that once a start had been made a governmental appropriation would be forthcoming with which the rest of the structure could be built. Their hopes were eventually fulfilled; but it was not until 1936 that funds were appropriated to complete the museum as it stands today.

An empty museum is of little use, and Rockefeller was also concerned with the small collection of prehistoric artifacts that it was to contain. Both he and Nusbaum felt that it should display a meaningful collection of material from the archaeological sites in the park so that the Mesa Verde story could be visually presented to visitors. Nusbaum explained that although several scientific excavations had been conducted in the park, which had produced large collections, an act of Congress in 1879 had specified that all collections of whatever sort made by parties for the United States Government were to be housed in the U.S. National Museum in Washington D.C.* As

a consequence, all of the artifacts that had been recovered in these excavations had been removed from the park and could not be returned. The few items that were in the old log cabin museum had been illicitly collected by a former ranger, apparently with the approval of the former Superintendent, from many sites throughout the

park. The ranger, being untrained in archaeological methods had dug haphazardly in the ruins and had kept no records of his work. Most of the items which he had collected could not be identified as having come from a particular site. Hence most of their informational value had been lost.

* Dr. J.W. Fewkes was sent to the Mesa Verde in 1908 to begin a program of excavation and stabilization of major ruins in order to prepare them for tours by visitors to the park. Fewkes continued this work intermittently until 1922.



Superintendent Nusbaum is shown here seated on the steps of the Superintendent's residence, designed and built by him and his wife during his first year as Superintendent in 1921.

Courtesy Colorado Historical Society, Denver

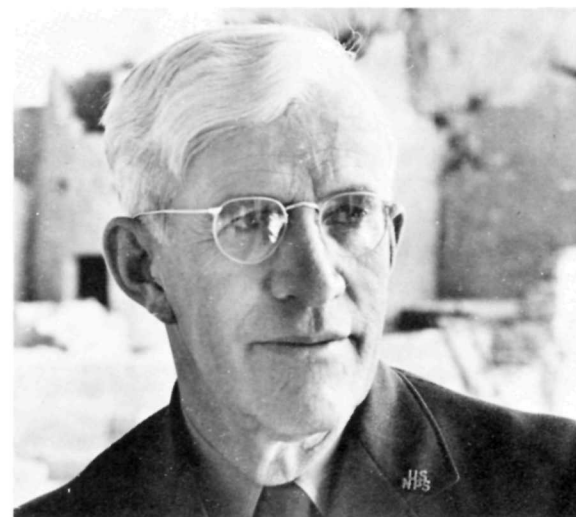


Early photograph of Cliff Palace

As they chatted, Rockefeller wondered if there were sites in the park where properly conducted excavations might yet yield more specimens with which a meaningful collection for display in the new museum might be assembled. Nusbaum felt

certain that in many of the cliff dwellings, in spite of the illicit digging by the ranger and by several early explorers, there were many items that still could be recovered. When asked how much a project might cost which could salvage this material, Nusbaum gave an estimate of \$1,000. Rockefeller doubted that this would be sufficient, but pledged that amount with the assurance that more would be available if needed. Thus began a program of expeditions which not only produced many museum-quality specimens, but which also provided the base upon which additional chapters in the story of the prehistory of Mesa Verde people could be written.

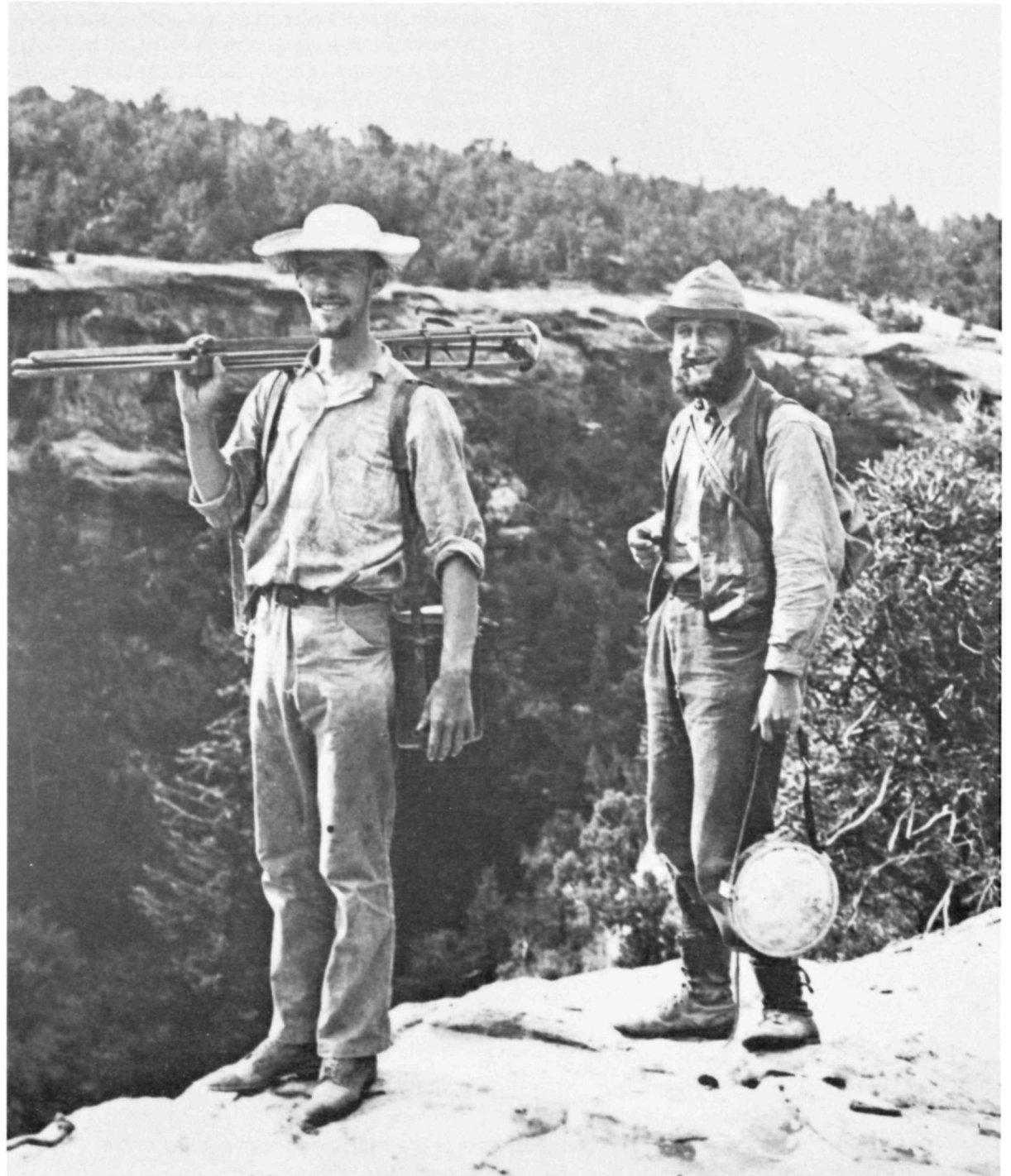
Nusbaum was unique among the superintendents of Mesa Verde National Park up to that time in that he was already a trained archaeologist. He had first visited the Mesa Verde in 1907 as a photographer for the Archaeological Institute of America, working under the direction of Edgar L. Hewett. Later he worked in New Mexico and Central America in various archaeological excavations, and in 1910 he had returned to the Mesa Verde to excavate and stabilize Balcony House, again under the direction of Hewett and the Archaeological Institute of America, and financed by an organization called the Colorado Cliff Dwellings Association. Nusbaum had discovered and excavated one of the earliest Basketmaker sites in the southwest — Cave Du Pont in southeastern Utah — in 1920, the year before he became superintendent of Mesa Verde National Park. He was thus fully qualified to conduct the excavations that he and Rockefeller envisaged. His main problem was to find sufficient time from his duties as superintendent to be away for the extended periods that such a project would require.



Superintendent Jesse L. Nusbaum

The only possible opportunity would be during the late winter months when the old dirt entrance road was closed by snows and no visitors came into the park. Then, after the worst of the winter weather in January, there were a few weeks during which he might conduct excavation projects. So it was, despite the still frigid weather and occasional heavy snows, that Rockefeller-sponsored excavations were carried out in the winters from late 1924 through early 1929. Nusbaum led these expeditions to remote areas of the park where, working through the often badly torn-up refuse of early diggers, he and his staff recovered, and often laboriously restored, many of the items that are still to be seen in the displays in the Mesa Verde Museum.

Shortly after the Rockefellers had departed, Nusbaum received two other visitors — Alfred V. Kidder and Frederick W. Hodge. Both were old friends and both had already made names for themselves in southwestern archaeology. Kidder had begun his career in archaeology in the Mesa Verde area, working for Hewett in 1907; and he and Nusbaum had worked together in 1907 and 1908 on one of the first surveys of the park. All three, Nusbaum, Kidder and Hodge, had been students together under Hewett at the Rito de los Frijoles (now Bandelier National Monument) in New Mexico in 1910. The three men now journeyed out to Wetherill Mesa at the west edge of the park where they spent a day visiting archaeological sites, including Kodak House and Step House. These sites had been partially excavated in the first scientific excavation on the Mesa Verde by Gustav Nordenskiöld, a Swedish gentleman who had visited the area in 1891 and who had published the results of his work in the Mesa Verde in 1893. As they looked over the old diggings in Step House Cave, Nusbaum recalled having read Nordenskiöld's observation that certain unusual fragments of pottery had been found in the south end of the cave and that these perhaps indicated earlier inhabitants than those who built the stone-walled building in the north end.



Jesse L. Nusbaum (left) and Alfred V. Kidder above Spruce Tree House 1908.

Courtesy of Columbia University Press, NY, NY

He selected Step House Cave as the site of his first major winter excavation, and it would seem that he had more than just museum collections in mind, for in the manuscript that he later wrote describing his excavations in Step House Cave he notes: “ . . . in February 1926 . . . I questioned John Wetherill* at length concerning what had been found there in each of the three previous excavations in which he had participated. I particularly sought evidence of early occupation, our primary re-excavation objective.”

* John Wetherill of Mancos, had been one of Nordenskiöld's guides and workmen and had dug in the site on his own, along with his brothers, both before and after Nordenskiöld's visit.

As the winter of 1924-25 approached, Nusbaum began to make preparations for the first of the excavations that he and Rockefeller had planned. He had the funds, and the winter months would give him the time, but he lacked a trained crew. Late in 1924 he set about to correct this situation by establishing a kind of winter school in archaeological excavation for several members of his staff. He had a perfect location nearby in Spruce Tree House. Although this site had been excavated and stabilized as Dr. Fewkes' first Mesa Verde project in 1908, there was a dark north corner which neither Fewkes nor the Wetherills, who had dug in the site earlier, had been able to excavate effectively; for it was almost totally dark and a thick layer of dust made work there extremely unpleasant. A considerable refuse deposit still lay in the back of this cave, and Nusbaum, with the aid of electric flood lights and respirators, excavated it that winter and taught his staff how to excavate a dry deposit in a cave — the kind of situation he would encounter in Step House Cave. Here, Chief Ranger C. Marshall Finnan, clerk-storekeeper Jim Maier, Navajo foreman-interpreter Sam Akeah, and Nusbaum's eleven year old step-son, Deric, received their first archaeological training.



In the dark alcove in the back of Spruce Tree House, Superintendent Nusbaum trained his staff in archaeological techniques with the aid of electric floodlamps.

Courtesy Denver Public Library, Western History Department

A small but important collection was taken from this dark recess in Spruce Tree House. Two child burials were found, one partially mummified, the other only a skeleton. The first they found wrapped in a coarse cotton blanket, a netting of yucca fiber, and a large piece of matting. No artifacts were found with it; but with the other were two baskets, a digging stick, a mug and a ladle. Elsewhere in the refuse they found several more pieces of pottery, numerous woven sandals, more digging sticks, fragments of arrow shafts, and a large collection of stone and bone tools. Many fragments of baskets, cordage, mats and broken pottery and many bits of corn cobs, tassles, and shucks gave further evidence of the possessions and food of the ancient inhabitants of the cave. The best of the items were placed on display in the museum and the others were stored for future study.

Early in 1925, while winter conditions were still severe, they excavated a similar, also previously disturbed, site farther south on Chapin Mesa, but the cold weather terminated the project shortly after it began. The rest of the winter was spent working on the collections that had been recovered from Spruce Tree House and in continuing the work on the museum, but plans were being made for the first major excavation—in Step House Cave.

In early February of 1926, Nusbaum, accompanied by his six excavators and the horse wrangler, left with a pack train carrying the first load of camping and excavation supplies to a camp on the rim of Wetherill Mesa above Step House Cave. Excavation was begun on February 5th and continued until the end of the month.

Several days were required to clear the debris left by the earlier excavations, but finally, at a depth of about four feet below the surface, they found what they had come to find — the houses of a small Modified Basketmaker settlement along with several associated features. There were three houses. Each had been a circular semi-subterranean structure with a roof and side walls of wood and adobe. Vertical sandstone slabs lined the earth walls of the subterranean portion. Each of the houses had burned; the charred remains of roof support posts were found in the floors and the stubs of smaller wall poles were found anchored at an angle above the sandstone slabs, demonstrating that the walls had sloped to a presumably flat roof.* The houses had been heated by a circular fire-pit near the center of the floor. The size of the houses varied from about 14 feet to nearly 17 feet in diameter. They were mostly well-preserved although the wall of one had been damaged by the early pot-hunting expeditions. A small outdoor fireplace, a curious underground pit with a flue which Nusbaum interpreted as a prehistoric pottery kiln, and an unexplained circular area near the houses completed the structural features found in the site.

A variety of stone and bone artifacts, typical of the modified Basketmaker culture was found in and about the houses; and sherds of broken pots were found from which, in many laborious hours in the museum, numerous pottery vessels — mostly bowls and jars — were reconstructed.

* One of these houses has been partially reconstructed as part of the interpretive display at Step House, and the entire site is portrayed as it must have appeared in one of the dioramas in the Mesa Verde Museum.



Step House cave during the 1926 excavation, one of the first of the Rockefeller sponsored projects in the park.

Courtesy Denver Public Library, Western History Department



Charred corn meal, corn cobs, squash stems and rinds.

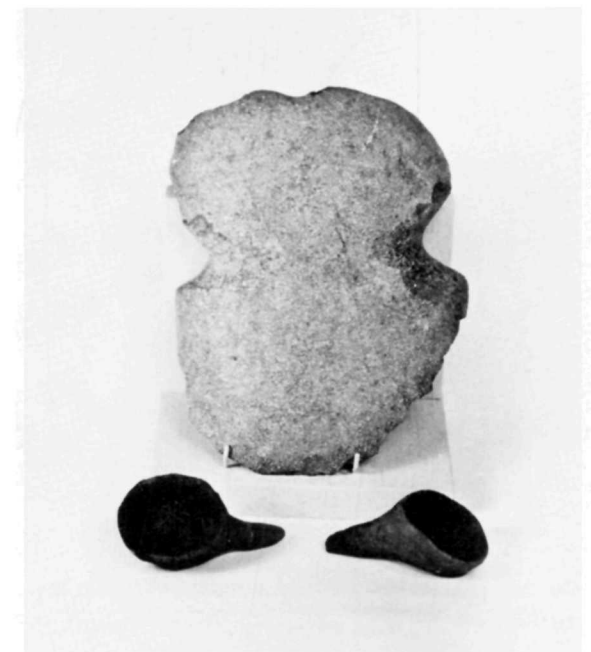
Courtesy Mesa Verde National Park

Several burned and one unburned sandal gave clues to the dress of the people, and the burned remains of corn, beans and squash indicated their diet. Burned timbers from the roof later provided tree-ring dates which showed that the houses had been occupied from about A.D. 593 to sometime around A.D. 626. There had been suggestions of occupation by Modified Basketmakers in some of Fewkes' work in earlier years, but the Step House Cave excavations definitely established it and helped to delineate the culture through the architectural and other material culture items obtained. Thus, this first major excavation by Nusbaum was successful in providing material for museum display, and from the research point of view it established a whole new chapter in the prehistory of the Mesa Verde. One entire case in the museum is devoted to the display of the material recovered from the Step House Cave expedition.

Modified Basketmaker axe and clay objects from Step House Cave.

Courtesy Mesa Verde National Park

About a mile south of Step House Cave is another cave which it was thought might contain more Modified Basketmaker material. This is site 1291. It was examined briefly once the Step House Cave excavation was completed. There is an interesting circular room measuring about 11 feet in diameter, with thick stone masonry walls still standing about six feet high. It was nearly buried in silt which had washed in from the mesa top. It was partially excavated, but no indication of a Modified Basketmaker occupation was present, and the site was not investigated further.





Ruin 12 on Wetherill Mesa, first excavated by Nordenskiöld in 1891, and re-excavated by Nusbaum in 1926.
Courtesy Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

Probably with a view toward future excavations, on the final day on Wetherill Mesa Nusbaum took his crew south to Nordenskiöld's Ruin 12 where the Swedish investigator had worked briefly and where his guides, the Wetherill brothers, had also done some digging. Here they trowelled through the refuse of these earlier excavations. In one kiva they found half of a cradle board, two digging sticks and some fragments of pottery. In another kiva they found considerably more, most notably two broken mugs, a large ladle with rattle

handle and animal head fashioned at the end, and a fragmented black-on-white bowl with an elaborate geometric design on the interior and an ithyphallic Kokopelli* on the outside playing a flute to two turkeys and a part-animal, part-human figure. The bowl was complete except for a single sherd, and one of the mugs was missing a handle. Later, in looking through a collection of sherds that he had picked up in Kodak House during the visit there with Kidder and Hodge in 1924, Nusbaum found both the missing bowl fragment and

the handle of the mug. He explained this as evidence that the Wetherills had had a habit of pocketing interesting sherds from one ruin only to discard them in another, and that they had carried the missing pieces to Kodak House where he later had picked them up.

* Kokopelli is a name given to an ubiquitous hump-backed figure who appears on pottery and is engraved on rocks over much of the southwestern United States. He is frequently portrayed in a state of sexual arousal. If his frequency of portrayal is any indication, he was a very popular fellow.



The bowl with the figure of Kokopelli and two turkeys which was found during the initial excavations at Ruin 12, in 1926.
Courtesy Mesa Verde National Park

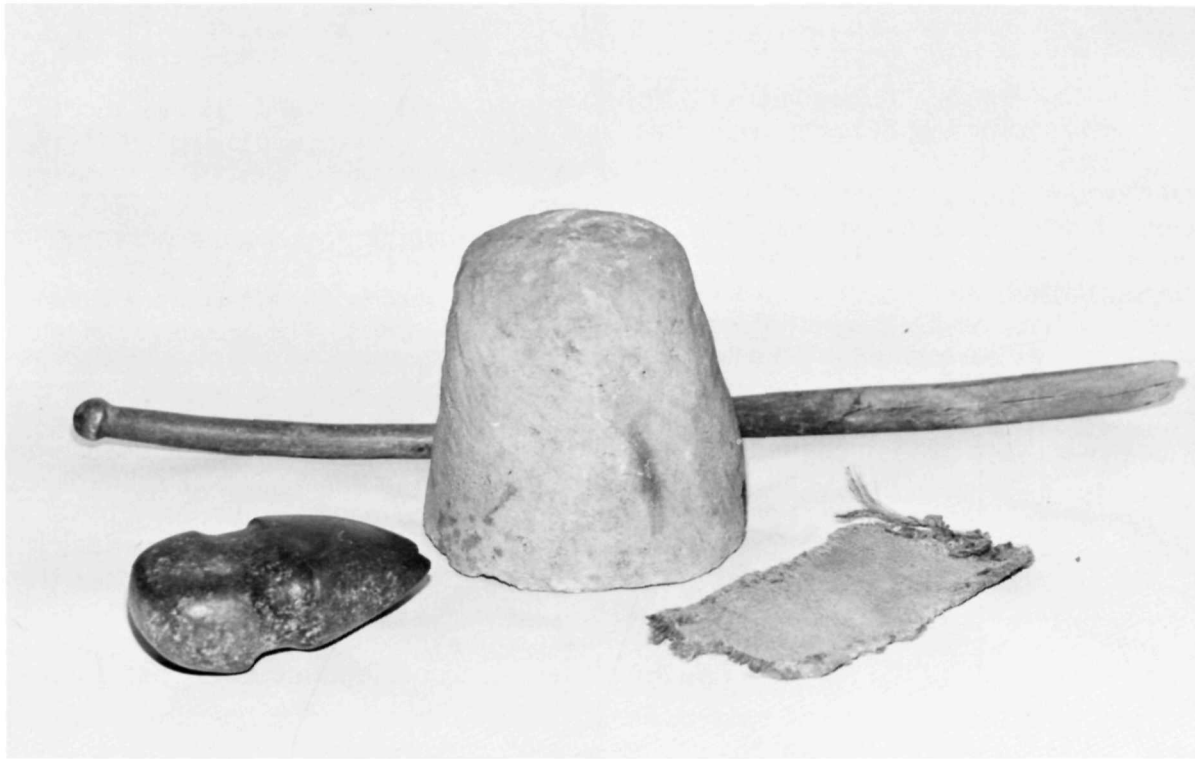
The excavation crew is shown here working in one of the rooms in Bone Awl House during the 1926 expedition to Moccasin Mesa. Courtesy Denver Public Library, Western History Department

The expedition returned to Spruce Tree Camp at the end of February, but soon Nusbaum set out again, this time with a crew of five on another expedition. He moved east, crossing Soda Canyon and climbing an old cattle trail to Bone Awl House, a cliff dwelling tucked under the west rim of Moccasin Mesa in a small tributary drainage of Soda Canyon. Here too, he had been preceded as evidenced by a carved inscription in the ruin which reads "J. Wetherill Jan. 12, 1890". The ex-ranger had also dug in this ruin, and some of his collected artifacts may have come from here. Nusbaum spent three days at this site to see if the ruin warranted more excavation. In clearing two square kivas, the crew found a broken but reconstructable black-on-white water jar with a yucca netting still around it, a set of bone tools which included a deer scapula scraper and several bone awls, stone implements including two skinning knives, and a jet pendant with a tiny turquoise inlay. The results were encouraging enough to warrant plans for a return the following winter.



There still remained some time for excavation, and Nusbaum did two more brief but interesting projects closer to headquarters. In late March he went to a site known as "Buried House" (site 510), located in a large overhang just north of Cliff Palace. This overhang had long been thought to contain an extensive structure, perhaps comparable to Cliff Palace itself,

which had been buried beneath a tremendous rock fall from the roof of the cave. Excavation proved the name to be erroneous, for there was no ruin beneath the rock fall. The only evidence of occupation was the remains of three crude rooms and a kiva and a scattering of Modified Basket-maker/early Developmental Pueblo potsherds near the rear of the cave.



Hand molded cone of crystalline salt with digging stick, ax and sandal.
Courtesy Mesa Verde National Park

The second site was known as "Buried Cave" (site 519), a much smaller overhang located in the south wall of Fewkes Canyon. This site had been briefly tested years before when Fewkes sent a small crew there while he was digging in some of the ruins across the canyon. The darkness, dust, and deep deposits of rat nests and cactus made conditions extremely difficult, and Fewkes had abandoned the project. Nusbaum returned to the site equipped with lanterns and respirators, but even so the crew could bear the oppressive conditions only for thirty minute intervals before they had to retreat for fresh air. There was room only for three men to work at a time, and the cave was in total darkness. They could only work a total of four hours per day before exhaustion made it impossible to continue. yet the yield was rich and the results worth the efforts. Most interesting, perhaps, was the discovery of a rare find of two large hand-molded cones of pure crystalline salt, an excellently preserved Modified Basketmaker sandal with an orange and brown design, a hafted stone axe and a well-made digging stick. The material seemed to be a mixture of Modified Basketmaker and later Classic Pueblo. There was evidence that some stone masonry had been built in the cave by the later occupants, but later removed, perhaps for building elsewhere.

These two final excavations of the 1926 season were not merely fortuitous choices, for after his success on Wetherill Mesa at Step House Cave, Nusbaum wanted to determine if the Modified Basketmakers had also occupied caves on Chapin Mesa. Both "Buried House" and "Buried Cave" seemed likely spots to search. Sherds which he found in the former were typical of the Modified Basketmaker culture, and the sandal which he found in the latter indicated the presence of these people on Chapin Mesa. Subsequent work on the mesa top has demonstrated that they were indeed present here. They seem to have preferred the mesa top rather than the caves for their villages, but the impossibility of a thorough search of the cliff-dwelling localities without destroying the later structures has hampered efforts to assess the degree of their use of cave sites. It may be significant that the ranger who had pot-hunted over the park had found in Cliff Palace a sandal which appears to date from the Modified Basketmaker period.

What remained of the winter of 1926 was devoted to repairing some of the objects which had been found and in restoration of some of the broken pottery vessels. This year Nusbaum ran an informal school in museum preparation in which Mrs. Nusbaum and Mrs. Finnan, wife of the Chief Ranger, developed their skills in pottery mending and in preparation of displays for the museum.

The winter of 1927 found Nusbaum again preparing for new excavations. In March, with a larger crew than the previous year, he once more crossed Soda Canyon and climbed the steep east slope to Bone Awl House. The trip had been delayed almost a month by heavy February snows, but they were finally able to clamber up the snowy trail and once more made camp near the site where they had spent three days the previous year. Bone Awl House proved to be something of a disappointment this year; most of the ruin that they had not investigated the previous year proved to be so badly torn up by earlier digging that little remained. They salvaged some material from another square kiva, including yucca and juniper bark jar rests, a badly rotted basket, a few stone tools, and some pottery fragments. Another kiva, round this time, yielded a fine digging stick, but it had been otherwise cleaned out. Two large ollas, one corrugated, the other black-on-white decorated, and a few bone awls rounded out the 1927 collection. After a few days, it was clear that there was very little point in continuing the search in this badly looted cliff dwelling. The camp was moved across Moccasin Mesa to the east edge overlooking Pine Canyon where another cliff dwelling, Hoot Owl House, promised better results.

Hoot Owl House is located about 2/3 of a mile southeast of Bone Awl House. It is a small compact ruin containing three small rooms along the back of the shelter, with a kiva in front and a badly deteriorated two-story tower near the west end. A series of stone-lined mealing bins is located along the back wall, and a partial retaining wall encloses the west end of the site. The mealing bins had once contained metates, but these had been removed and the bins themselves were badly damaged.

It was hoped that this cave might contain perishable material, but most of the deposit proved to be damp and little was found except for the mummified remains of an infant in one small dry area and some hitch-toe sandals of the type worn by the later cliff dwellers.

An adult burial, reduced to only the skeleton, was found deeply buried with two black-on-white decorated bowls, one containing three bone fleshing tools and a bone awl. A corrugated storage jar was found which was still filled with shelled corn, the jar broken but restorable. Six stone axes, some bone tubes and beads, some miniature pots (probably children's toys), a few deeply grooved metates and some manos make up the bulk of the rest of the collection.

East of the tower an odd circular depression about 12 feet in diameter was excavated. It was enclosed partly by sandstone slabs set on end, much in the fashion of the lining of the Modified Basketmaker houses found in Step House Cave, but also partly by crude horizontal sandstone masonry. Little was found in the four feet of fill in this depression other than a slate axe, but a mixed collection of sherds suggested a considerable time span for the occupation of the cave.

Most of the 22 days of this expedition were spent in Hoot Owl House. The site had been badly damaged and much fallen wall material had to be cleared before the excavation could be completed. Time ran out, as did supplies, before they could complete the work which proved to be less rewarding in museum specimens than the expeditions of the previous year, but the unusual architectural features made this one of the most important of the winter excavations. There seemed to be clear evidence here for a considerable span of time of occupation, perhaps, like Step House Cave, extending back to the time of the Modified Basketmakers.

Before they left Moccasin Mesa for the return to Spruce Tree Camp, they spent one day looking at Hemenway House (Site 1062), a large ruin in a deep overhang around the corner and just north of Bone Awl House. This ruin had been repeatedly explored since at least 1884 as indicated by the dated inscription in it, and little remained in it. It was hoped that some tiny rooms high up on an isolated ledge might have been overlooked, but even though it required a hazardous climb up some poles to enter this section, they found that others had been there before them and nothing remained. A few bone awls and two badly smashed corrugated pots were all that they found in the ruin. They then packed up the material collected from the other sites, made a slippery and hazardous descent through over a foot of snow, and crossed Soda Canyon once more to the headquarters at Spruce Tree Camp. Preparations for the reopening of the park required Nusbaum's immediate attention, and a planned trip to Wetherill Mesa had to be postponed until the following year.

The expedition to Wetherill Mesa did get underway in March of 1928. Before they left, Nusbaum spent a few days excavating six burials from a disturbed mound in the southern portion of Chapin Mesa. Three of the burials were damaged and little could be learned from them, but the other three were undisturbed and together contained 15 pieces of pottery.

Also, in February of 1928, before the regular winter expedition, Deric Nusbaum made a trip with his tutor to a site where he had found a hafted stone axe in the fall of 1926. This site is located on the west cliff of Long Mesa, in an area which had been explored years before by the Wetherills. In exploring the ruin, Deric discovered several unusual items lying on the top of the bench in one of the kivas. These are thought to have been part of a "medicine man's kit" and included several bone awls, small bundles of herbs, a fire hearth stick and fire stick, and a rattle made of discs cut from the side of a gourd and containing small sandstone pebbles. These objects, along with several others of undetermined use, seemed to be lying just where they had been placed centuries ago, and it can only be due to the haphazard methods of early diggers in the ruin that these were overlooked. The precise site in which these interesting objects were found is not certain, for the account does not exactly identify it; but it appears to be Site 1445, recorded by Alden Hayes during the Wetherill Mesa Survey in 1959. This is a large cliff dwelling located just south of another site which yielded an unusual collection of items in 1915, the so-called "Daniels House".*

* "Daniels House" was perhaps the last remaining untouched cliff dwelling in the Mesa Verde. Its virtual inaccessibility had preserved it from the looting which had gone on in the years previous to the establishment of the park. It was entered in 1915 by the same ranger who had dug in so many of the other ruins, by means of a ladder lowered over the cliff edge. In it he found several corrugated cooking pots and some stone axe heads all of which he removed, again keeping no record of where the objects had been found or of the conditions under which he found them.



Corrugated cooking pots.
Courtesy Mesa Verde National Park

With this as a propitious beginning for the 1928 season, Nusbaum took a seven-man crew back to Wetherill Mesa in March for about three weeks of work in cliff sites on the side where Nordenskiöld had worked in 1891. These sites, Nordenskiöld's Ruins 11 through 19, were probably the most severely damaged by early digging before Nordenskiöld arrived, and many of them were investigated by him only briefly because of the condition in which he found them. Nusbaum hoped that by a careful search of the debris, some items of value could still be salvaged.

The camp was established that season just above Long House, and the work was done from this base. Snow and freezing temperature made the work difficult, and some of the debris in exposed areas of Ruins 11 and 16 was under a snow cover, frozen and impossible to excavate. Both ruins, however, contained disturbed refuse inside the walls, and this, protected from the snow, was trowelled through. The finds were mainly pottery fragments which it was hoped could be reassembled into their original vessel forms, but Site 11 also produced an unusual hematite pendant in the shape of a bird with rock crystal eyes secured by pinyon gum.

Ruin 12, where they had spent a day in 1926, was once more explored but little remained. The south kiva yielded the skeletal remains of a tall adult male, but there was nothing with it. More sherds were collected, again in hopes of being able to reassemble the original vessels.



Superintendent Nusbaum, at far right, with the Step House cave excavation crew in front of the museum prior to their departure for the 1926 excavation program.

Courtesy Mesa Verde National Park

A small ruin with two kivas which Nordenskiöld had not investigated is located between his Ruins 11 and 12. This was also searched briefly and, because of its location, it was assigned the site number "11½". Two kivas in the site appeared to be worth further work, but this was postponed until the following year. Meanwhile, most of the other large cliff ruins on the west side of the mesa were at least briefly tested, including Long House and Jug House.

The yield from this season was, with the exception of the hematite bird pendant, unspectacular, and consisted mostly of smashed pottery fragments. Yet, during the rest of the winter months the tedious process of sorting, matching and restoring produced 30 new bowls and jars for the museum collections.

Heavy snows delayed the departure of the last of the "west-side expeditions" in the winter of 1929. It was mid-April before Nusbaum and his crew were able to return to Wetherill Mesa to complete the work begun the previous winter. This left them two weeks in which to work.

They began the season by returning to Ruins 11 and 16 for one week to work through the debris that had been frozen under the snow the preceding year. At Ruin 11 little new was found, but they collected a few fragments of the pottery that was being reconstructed from the collection made in 1928, which included a rather unusual unfired bowl.

Ruin 16 likewise yielded pieces of pottery which were in process of reconstruction at the museum. They also found nearly all of the fragments of what is perhaps the most beautiful kiva jar ever found in the Mesa Verde. This, now completely restored, is displayed in the Mesa Verde Museum.

The second week was spent excavating two kivas in Ruin 11½ which they had looked at only briefly the year before. In this small deep cave just south of Ruin 12, the few room walls had been almost completely destroyed, but two depressions at the front of the cave had not been dug into. These proved to be kivas, one of which apparently had been abandoned during the prehistoric occupation of the site, for five burials (four adults and one child) were found in it at varying depths in the fill which was mostly refuse. Apparently it had been used as a burial area as it gradually filled.



A black on white bowl reconstructed from many fragments collected during the west-side excavation at Ruin 11.
Courtesy Mesa Verde National Park

With the exception of a brief reinvestigation in the fall of 1929 by Nusbaum and Earl Morris of the old "Earth Lodge A", a Modified Basketmaker house originally excavated under Fewkes' direction in 1919, the two-week season on Wetherill Mesa marked the end of the Rockefeller-sponsored expeditions in Mesa Verde National Park. That they had succeeded is attested to by the greater knowledge of both the earliest and latest occupants of the Mesa Verde which they provided, and by the impressive collection of material items of both groups which today still forms the core of the displays in the Mesa Verde Museum. The end of the expeditions did not, however, mark the end of the association between Jesse Nusbaum and John D. Rockefeller Jr. For several years, Rockefeller, whose interest in the art and archaeology of the southwest had continued, had been negotiating with archaeologists in the Santa Fe area with the aim of establishing a research center there. By 1929, these plans had resulted in the creation of the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe. This was to be a Rockefeller-financed institution to further research not only in archaeology but in the study of the life and arts of contemporary southwestern Indian cultures as well. In establishing a governing board for the new institution, the acting directorship was offered to Jesse L. Nusbaum. He accepted and took a leave of absence from his job as Superintendent of Mesa Verde National Park for one year. The following year he was elected as the first regular director of the Laboratory of Anthropology and he resigned as Superintendent of the park in March of 1931. Thus ended one Rockefeller-Nusbaum partnership and thus began another.



A black on white kiva jar reconstructed from many fragments collected during the west-side excavation at Ruin 16. This is one of the most beautiful examples of prehistoric pottery ever found in the Mesa Verde.

Courtesy Mesa Verde National Park

In the years following the five winter time expeditions of Nusbaum and his small crews, there were other excavations and surveys in the park. Some were more lavishly financed, more extensive, and some of the results were perhaps more spectacular. Yet these pioneering efforts of Nusbaum established the groundwork for future research, added in significant ways to the story of the prehistory of the Mesa Verde, and built a museum which, in the large quantities of his own recovered specimens still on display there, is a fitting memorial to his devotion to archaeology and to Mesa Verde National Park.



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