



Gila Cliff Dwelling Monument

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- HISTORY OF CAMP VERDE, ARIZONA
- U. S. CAVALRY AT GILA RIVER CLIFF DWELLING, 1885
- TROUBLES AT OJO CALIENTE
- NEW NAMES IN NEW MEXICO

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THE U.S. CAVALRY AT THE GILA RIVER
CLIFF DWELLINGS, 1885

COL. G. H. SANDS

Editor's note — the manuscript from which the following has been excerpted was written many years ago by Col. Sands, who at the time of his story was a Second Lieutenant of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment, U. S. Army, then based at Fort Bayard, New Mexico. The complete manuscript, accompanied by several pen-and-ink sketches in unreproducible condition, is now in the files of the Historical Society of New Mexico.

THE STUPENDOUS MOUNTAINS covering western New Mexico and eastern Arizona, locally known as the Mogollon, San Francisco, and Diablo ranges, were for many years the lurking-places and thoroughfares of several bands of the fierce and bloodthirsty Apache tribes, who carried rapine and murder throughout all that country southward and across the Mexican border. Again and again have men, singly and in parties, urged on by greed for precious metals, braved the terrors of mutilation and death by violence or starvation, only to leave their whitening bones, a mouldy page of a letter, or an inscription scratched on a rock surface near an almost obliterated trail — their sad relics being found long after by scouting parties of United States troops. The latter have, from time to time, followed the savage to his strongholds, and have finally succeeded in rendering almost safe the passage of those mountain defiles.

In 1885 it was my good fortune to accompany a scouting and hunting party of cavalry on a trip through the section referred to.

Leaving the hospitable garrison at Fort Bayard, one of the Army Posts in western New Mexico, in early summer, a detachment of nineteen soldiers, accompanied by six hardy little pack mules laden with provisions for twenty days, extra blankets, etc., made directly for the recently "debatable ground." Going always upward from the very beginning of the march . . . we reached our first camping ground — Frog Creek — forty miles away from the garrison.

Lt. L. E. Craig, Sixth Cavalry, was in command of the party . . . As I stretched my weary limbs on the grass by his side, we watched the slender column of troopers, whom we had outridden, as they led their horses down the steep side of the mountain. Wiry, erect,

springy in their movements; carbines over shoulder, belts bristling with ammunition (for who could tell what danger might be encountered), broad felt hats, blue shirts, and trousers tucked in high boots . . . no wonder that my companion often waxed enthusiastic over his profession! Those men of our troop were the embodiment of manly strength; enduring, careful, cool and alert under all circumstances, they had been tried often, so that their respect and affection for their officers were cordially reciprocated . . .

[The next morning] following the stream downwards through the narrowing valley, the column passed over an illy defined trail [through a box canyon and then up to a] sheltered valley not more than a quarter of a mile wide, down whose center flowed a foaming brook . . . For three or more miles we pursued our way and then a halt for lunch was made. [After lunch] the way was followed until we reached a point of rocks . . .

What a grand sight before us! For miles on all sides, until absorbed by the horizon, extended an ocean of brown-hued, fantastic waves of rocks, as if caught, storm-tossed and commanded by the Creator to remain thus for eternity . . . It was with a sigh of relief that we directed our gaze downward. Close by, the rocks seemed to fall away, and a sense of dizziness had to be overcome before we could view unconcernedly the vast depth below, where a thousand feet away threaded a gleaming stream of water through a garden of verdure . . . Far up this valley jets of steam arose, smoke-like, seeming to indicate habitations. The promise of a good camping-ground attracted us, and downward we wound with voices drowned at times by the crashing of stones started from their rocky beds by the feet of our animals as, sliding and stumbling, we followed our leader. At last, with joints aching, the detachment reached a glade near the banks of the river, which from our first lofty view had seemed a rivulet.

The next morning a cursory look over the ground decided the Lieutenant to break up his party in twos and threes for the purposes of scouting for possible trails of Indians who might have left their reservations without permission of the agents, and also to facilitate finding game for our own moving larder.

Innumerable streams fed the river in the valley or basin.

The plan pursued was to ascend the river for ten or fifteen miles

with the packs and a small guard, and establish camp, so as to allow the several detachments ample time to explore their respective routes and to rejoin the main body by sundown. The orders were given, and by seven o'clock the parties, provided with lunches, disappeared from sight. As the day's march was short no hurry was demanded on the part of those with the pack train; therefore we amused ourselves in searching for the sources of the smoke seen the previous day.

Ere long the shouts of one of the men drew us together at the location of a series of hot sulphur springs. Over some of these the decaying remains of "wicky-ups" indicated that the Indians had used the vapor baths for healing purposes. (Since then I have learned that hotels have been erected and a health resort established at this point).

The "wicky-up" is made of willow or other pliable rods, by embedding the butts in the ground on the circumference of a circle about six or more feet in diameter, drawing the ends together and fastening them so as to form a hut, shaped somewhat like a beehive, and four or five feet in height. Smaller withes of willow are then wattled to the frame, or the latter is covered with hides. These little shelters form the typical homes of the Apaches, and vary in dimensions with the size of the family.

[After lunch] we packed and moved slowly up the river. Several miles above our camping place the valley widened to nearly a mile. The vegetation had disappeared, evidently killed by shifting sand. The water was brackish and unfit to drink. Having improvidently exhausted my canteen supply, I longed for a mouthful of pure water, and noticing a mat of ivy growing against the southwestern wall of rocks permission was easily obtained to gratify my curiosity as to the presence of water — which might possibly be obtained, I thought, by removing the sand near the roots of the green veil. An orderly was directed to accompany me, while the remainder of the party pursued its way. The Lieutenant cautioned me to rejoin before nightfall, stating that the camp would be made within ten miles.

A brisk trot brought us to the base of the walls, where, dismounting and examining the vines, I discovered to my amazement that they screened a narrow opening. With hunting knife and hands

a passage was quickly made, and cautiously entering with revolver in hand, for fear of encountering some savage denizen of those regions, a few steps carried us to a point where the passage widened to fifteen or twenty yards, disclosing a crevice of the same width that extended, apparently, several hundred yards further. It was filled with a rich growth of trees and brush, and the earth was cushioned with decayed vegetation and fallen leaves.

About one hundred yards from the entrance I noticed a depression filled with moist leaves and surrounded by a mossy bank. This, undoubtedly, was a spring, and needing assistance to clear it, I hastened to enlarge the opening in the ivy so as to admit the horses. They were led in, tethered to trees and unsaddled. It did not take us long to clear the hollow, nor many moments for the water to flow and settle.

After years of journeying in the saddle from the Canadian to the Mexican borders, often actually suffering from thirst, I frequently revert to the delights of that silvery spring, so cool, sweet and refreshing.

In no hurry to leave so attractive a place, after assuaging our craving we settled down to a quiet contemplative use of the pipe . . . Behind us the mass of rock was reddish brown, basaltic; facing us, the other side shone white, as of limestone. Behind, the rock rose sheer; in front, a steep ramp showed the deposit made from the crumbling of the softer formation . . . Above the top of the grayish white slope appeared a ragged line, [possibly] a ledge.

My watch showed that two or three hours of leisure yet remained to me — ample time to gratify a natural curiosity by trying to gain that height and follow its trend to a more open view. After several ineffectual attempts, and much exertion — reinforced by forcible, if not elegant, use of the mother tongue as one or the other or both of us together slipped or rolled to the bottom of the steep incline — a strong grasp was at last obtained and a lodgement effected at about forty feet above the level of the spring.

Recovering breath and energy, a closer scrutiny of the ledge, which was about two feet in width, showed that it had been used as a pathway many decades before. The rock was worn several inches deep, and was slightly more elevated on its outer edge.

Leading along the outer face of the wall, the ledge bent to the

right, where the way was blocked by an immense boulder, under which dipped the trail through a small arched way about two feet high. This was now filled with drift and packed almost as hard as the surrounding rock.

It would not do to back out without inspecting the other side of the obstruction, or "prospecting," as the Westerner says. We evidently were on an old trail, but whether made by man or beast could not be determined. I made up my mind to see, as far as practicable, to what it led.

Leaning almost upright against the boulder, I directed my lighter and more agile companion to climb to my shoulders, thence to my up-stretched hands. A vigorous heave on my part and a spring on his, landed me on my back and sent the trooper to a firm grasp on a projecting point on the summit. A few moments more and his trained muscles enabled him to slowly gain a firm seat.

By the aid of our belts fastened together I was assisted to his side. Looking down, we perceived that the trail continued, partially hidden by the overhanging rocks.

Slipping down, and leading the way around another slight bend, I was startled by seeing what appeared to be a one-storied house set in the face of the cliff, twenty or thirty feet above us. The walls were of flat stones set in some kind of mortar. A few small loop-holes appeared in the outer face, while the ends of rafters projected over the top.

There were no means of reaching this, therefore, we pushed along with the hope of finding more such, and a place of ingress. We were not disappointed; quite a long line of houses appeared, slightly nearer our level, and a pine pole lay on the trail. Placing this against the rock wall, and clumsily emulating the simian traits of our Darwinian ancestors, we struggled to a foothold at the base of one of the houses. Our progress thence was very easy.

Along the front of the cliff-cave were the dwelling-rooms, opening into one another by narrow apertures that barely admitted my bulk. The unthatched rafters were as sound as when they were first placed, as also were the doorposts of pine. . . Under the first layer of soil, or debris, were the remains of dried grasses and reeds. Pieces of pottery and a few arrow-heads were also revealed by digging here and there with our hunting-knives. A rude sort of decoration

had been attempted on the pottery, by a peculiar and uniform system of lines and lozenges.

The winds and occasional storms had been assisted by the hand of man in hollowing out of the soft limestone this great cave, which was about one hundred and fifty feet deep in parts, and several hundred in length.

Further along in the line of the houses was a recess plainly designed as a store-room or granary. Here were found a large quantity of maize cobs in a good state of preservation.

The number of rooms enabled me to make a rough estimate of the population who had occupied the village. I cannot recall the number, but it was in the hundreds.

Near the granary was a gloomy area, used as a shelter for domestic animals. There must have been an egress, practicable for at least sheep or goats, and ere long a call from the trooper told me that one was found. An inclined passage or tunnel about four feet in height had been hollowed through the rock, and was partially filled with debris but sufficiently clear to admit of our crawling through on our stomachs. Emerging, we found ourselves about two hundred yards from our point of entry.

The first house encountered was separated from the main settlement. Its rooms were larger and it was better lighted; evidently it was the abode of the chief.

As my eyes became accustomed to the light I examined the face of the cliff. At a point forty feet below the crest, and about one hundred feet above the top of the cave, was another small house set like a nest in the face of the wall. This overlooked the opposite crest and must have been intended and used for a lookout station, the sentinels being lowered by rope-vines from the summit. No way could be found to reach the top of the limestone formation. It seemed inaccessible at the time, and probably the path to the summit had crumbled away ages ago.

It was high time to think of reaching camp. Retracing our steps, instead of descending to the spring we followed the ledge, which, winding downward, led us to the open ground outside of the cunningly hidden home of the Cliff Dwellers...

The following morning found all hands eagerly anticipating a pleasant diversion in exploring the newly found "Cliff Dwellings"

... After fastening the horses in the cañon, we ascended by the narrow trail and soon reached the ledge and passed the obstructing boulder. I led the party to the tunnel and started to crawl in; my passage was not more than half made when a terrific roar sent my heart to my throat in fright. Feeling the transit of a large body over my head carrying in its flight my hat, I instinctively drew my revolver and fired it upwards, the bullet bringing down a shower of pulverized rock about my ears. Hastily backing out, I heard shouts and shots — while far up towards the head of the cañon was seen the tawny back and greyish white belly of a large puma, or American lion . . . We returned, and entered the cave . . .

A few specimen pieces of pottery, arrow-heads, and the like, with one bowl in a perfect state of preservation, were gathered. Nothing further was found that gave a hint as to when the colony ceased to exist. Nor will certitude ever be reached on this subject. How can we expect it, when we ponder over the ruins of cities evincing a high state of civilization whose peoples have been obliterated, leaving no records for the students among those who followed?

Such incidents as our discovery tend to make men thoughtful, ruminative. The camp was not full of the usual laughter and noises, that night . . .

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Mr. W. B. Cox, well-known Portales citizen, has presented to the Historical Society of New Mexico a part of his extensive and historically important collection of specimens of barbed wire fencing. Most of these were obtained by Mr. Cox during his travels through the ranch-lands of New Mexico, Texas and other Southwestern states. The nuclear portion of the collection has been a featured exhibit in the Roosevelt County Museum, Eastern New Mexico College, in Portales, while the entire assemblage has formed the subject of numerous articles in newspapers and national magazines. A recognized authority on the development and history of barbed wire, Mr. Cox is regularly called upon to lecture on this unusual topic. He states that more than 1300 types of barbed wire are registered in the U.S. Patent Office.

Included in the collection given to the Historical Society are forty specimens from such famous Southwestern ranches as the Chisum, XIT, Maxwell, Casey and King. Mr. Cox's donation will be shown in an exhibition illustrative of New Mexico history for the period from 1880 to 1912, to be installed in the Palace of the Governors within the coming year.