A Good Place To Camp . . .
For Twelve Hundred Years

Richard Binggeli

Those who participate in the archaeology dig have almost a mania for finding out about the past. They are those who are captured by the mystery of early peoples, the bond with kinsfolk gone before, the enchantment of seeing in the mind’s eye the continuity of human life in a given site over the millennia. As Gordon Page said in his Ghost Ranch Journal article on rock art, “There is something awesome and mystical about seeing the handiwork and creativity of those here before us . . . the spirits of earlier people are also a part of Ghost Ranch.”

There was, however, an aura of depression concerning the continuity of the archaeology program at Ghost Ranch when it became clear that Florence Ellis (now deceased), who led the seminar for 16 years and started the anthropology museum at Ghost Ranch, could no longer continue. Previous programs reached far from the ranch in monumental excavations of stone villages with large, uniformly styled houses. The focus had been upon those houses as organizing structures for analysis and interpretation. More limited now, we began in 1990 surveying the close by, on the ranch itself. Gone were the times of towering mesas with stone villages dotting their crests. Missing also were the huge broken cliff faces that formed natural hollows for cliff dwellings. Here we were out in the open, with only small rock scarps and shallow ravines interrupting the sparse grasslands. We were dismayed to find merely scraps of sherds and stone fragments, scattered in a seemingly wide and meaningless pattern. Only the eye of the practiced Southwestern archaeologist can see the potential for human habitation in the apparently featureless terrain.

Concentrations of these few messy artifacts, however, began to suggest centers of human activity. Soon a few campsites began to emerge from our survey: one around a waterfall, three against a cliff, and two on plateaus, all within a quarter mile of each other on what we now call the Bull Canyon drainage of the East Pasture of Ghost Ranch. Reluctantly, somewhat grumpy teams set out to explore these sites, mapping and recording, gridplotting and excavating. Like exploratory oil drilling, most of this excavation revealed little, hitting sterile earth, striking bed rock or sand lenses. The sites did, however, begin to tell, in a general way, the pattern of hunting campsites but without the rich details of features and dates.

One site, however, hit a gusher. It was called “GR-2,” for Ghost Ranch Archaeological Site Number 2. It was in an area that Dart Shibley had said more than a decade earlier appeared promising. In the beginning it looked like a simple crude shelter up against a south-facing cliff site. A small, irregularly constructed stone wall with a vertical wooden post against a short cliff face suggested a recent, historical use as a campsite or perhaps a sheep pen. Rock-scratched graffiti on the cliff proclaimed “Nicolas Lovato, Avril 1916” and set one culture-
time boundary. Like the other sites, this location was laid out in a grid, four by ten meters, and carefully excavated in depths of ten centimeters (four inches) at a time. All of the artifacts were recorded and stored at the museum, and all of the soil removed was sifted through quarter-inch screen.

Over the next four years of seminars, a pattern of multiple levels of habitation began to emerge through the excavation. First, a floor of fitted flagstone was found a few centimeters below the modern surface—not likely for a sheep pen! Below that a layer of burned wood was found, consistent in direction and dimension with a pole roof that had burned and collapsed, probably within historic times. Below that another flagstone floor was found and still lower, a meter below the surface, a stone-lined fire hearth. Pottery sherds turned up were analyzed by Hayward Franklin (an archaeologist who does ceramic analysis) and found to be organized, with the oldest found deepest. First was San Juan Red-on-tan pottery, made between A.D. 1700 and 1900. Next was Potsuwi'í Gray pottery, which dates from 1500 to 1650, and finally Bandelier Black-on-gray (Biscuit B) pottery, which dates from A.D. 1400 to 1550. These span Tewa cultural traditions from historical time backward to the Pajarito Plateau cultures. The prehistoric Tewa people occupied this part of the Chama Valley, and their descendants live at San Juan, San Ildefonso, and Santa Clara pueblos.


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Thus, pottery typing alone within one meter below the surface provided us with a layering through time to prehistoric cultures. Much before that time, pottery was not manufactured in this region of the Southwest, and no sherds have been found below this depth. We had to turn to other materials to date our finds as we dug deeper.

Lithics, or rocks shaped by hand, included projectile points and tools such as scrapers, drills, gravers, hammerstones, cobbles, manos, and metates, along with the debris from their manufacture. The projectile points (spear points and arrowheads) were composed primarily of obsidian and chert from mountains to the south like Obsidian Ridge, Polvadera Peak, and Cerro Pedernal. Obsidian can be dated because it chemically combines with water, forming a hydrate. When obsidian is broken, as in making an arrowhead, this “hydration” starts and proceeds at an even rate through time and can be measured.

Thirteen samples of obsidian points were submitted to the Archaeological Service Consultants in Ohio for hydration dating. The service reported that two points from the upper levels of excavation were made in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Three obsidian points, from the area of the slab-lined fire hearth, are clustered in age from the early thirteenth century to the mid-fourteenth century. These dates correspond with the pottery type found at this level and provide us with a tentative date for the time

Faith Rockenstein draws and records fire hearth in test trench away from the rock shelter.
when early people cooked and warmed themselves around this hearth.

Still deeper below the surface, stone tools were culturally shaped in the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries (A.D. 794, 825, and 909 are the specific estimates), the maximum estimated age for the rock shelter we have at the present time. But obsidian samples from still greater depths are in analysis now and may push back the dates of habitation to much earlier times.

This humble south-facing shelter in an inconspicuous cliff overhang, with cover from the north wind, warmth from the southern sun, and a good view of migrating herds downslope, has been, therefore, a good site for camping for well over a thousand years. Once this realization sets in, one cannot walk over any patch of ground on this continent without contemplating that perhaps hundreds of generations have walked here before us. And at Ghost Ranch, in particular, that realization brings a special communion.

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