

# SAN JUAN BASIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Chapter of Colorado Archaeological Society



## FIELD TRIP REPORT

Date: **February 26, 2015**

Destination: **Behind the scenes at the Mesa Verde Visitor and Research Center and Anasazi Heritage Center**

Leader: **Tish Varney**

Number of Participants: **9**

Nine SJBAS members were treated to fantastic behind the scenes tours at the Mesa Verde Visitor and Research Center (VRC) and the Anasazi Heritage Center (AHC) on February 26. Both locations included extensive artifacts of Ancestral Puebloan and earlier people and face some of the same challenges of space and provenance.

Dr. Tara Travis, our guide at Mesa Verde, has a unique professional background to give her a broad perspective on the VRC building and collections in it. With her building architecture degree, she helped as liaison for the construction of the VRC, so discussed some of the special features we see. The sculpture on the sidewalk outside shows a Puebloan climbing down toeholds on a cliff, the sitting statue by the front door welcomes visitors with her bag of corn and inside the rotunda a storyteller beckons visitors to gaze at the native artwork and out a window to Point Lookout and the landscape of the ancients. Buff sandstone masonry walls from a quarry near Dove Creek recall the rich soil that made the Four Corners Region an agricultural mecca for so many individuals over time.

The VRC opened to visitors in December, 2012. Visitors can peruse the gift shop, view the dioramas featuring life-sized sculptures with faces created from masks of real people and get information and tickets to MV tours. In addition, windows allow for viewing the research library, special artifact preparation areas, and archive storage and display. Interactive computer programs allow the viewing of some of the three million objects in the collection. Mesa Verde holds the fourth largest collection in the Rocky Mountain region and is currently photographing not only archaeological artifacts but plant and fossil items for their website.

With her Ph.D. in Public History, Dr. Travis is the supervisory museum curator. Curators oversee all aspects of the acquisition, documentation, preservation, and use of park collections. Dr. Travis led the packing and moving of the museum collections from the sometimes substandard old facilities on Chapin Mesa to the fire proof, climate controlled and state-of-the-art location within the VRC. Our tour took us from the delivery door for artifacts all the way to the drawers and display shelves used to house the collections. Procedures for incoming items include a three-stage freezing cycle to kill insects such as beetles and silverfish and the conservation room feature vents and gloves help to protect staff from possible contamination from heavy metals or viruses - i.e. hanta virus - on excavated items where mice were present.

After the artifacts arrived in the new building, National Park conservators worked to evaluate the condition of the items. The collection is grouped by material type, not location. A *conservator* cares for cultural collections by applying scientific methods to preserve and restore artifacts and is a specialist in a specific material (ceramic, textile, etc.). When

necessary, ceramics glued together in the past with cellulose nitrate need to be stabilized with newer adhesives. How much restoration an item receives is a difficult trade-off between an original and reworked look.

One of the most fascinating artifact groups is Mary Colter's collection. Mary was an architect at the Grand Canyon and a well-known figure in the southwest. She purchased many items from local tribes during her residence and bequeathed these to the Mesa Verde Museum in the 1920s.

The group stopped for lunch in Cortez at the Pepperhead Restaurant before traveling to the Anasazi Heritage Center (AHC) near Dolores.

The AHC was originally built to house the artifacts and associated records recovered from the Dolores Archaeological Program (DAP), a massive project to salvage the research value of a large archaeological area in southwest Colorado, once densely settled with thousands of home sites, before construction of McPhee Dam and Reservoir. The AHC is one of three federal archaeological repositories operated by the Bureau of Land Management. It stores and protects over 3.5 million artifacts recovered from public lands in Southwest Colorado. Prehistoric pottery, woven fiber items, and stone tools are among the fragile items permanently preserved for research.

Curator Bridget Ambler greeted the group and ushered us into an educational display room to view a variety of black on white ceramic artifacts. These included a ladle showing wear from scooping from one side. A beautiful ceramic pot that originally had the bottom broken showed the care its owners took by making holes for twine to strap it back together. The holes were made with tiny awls of stone.

The AHC museum faces many of the same challenges as Mesa Verde in the questions of stabilization of artifacts. They will accept well documented collections from individuals. However, a conundrum surfaces when stolen items are recovered from thieves who plunder sites and steal artifacts for drug money. By Federal mandate, the museum cannot sell the items, but the lack of provenience of the items and lack of space make it difficult to store them indefinitely.

The Puebloan communities around Mesa Verde area worked together. There were 21 contemporary tribes that had their own styles. Fiber ware included yucca sandals whose weaving pattern was unique to a clan. In addition, AHC holds the archives of the Wetherill's - early ranchers who first excavated in the area. One of the treasures from the Wetherill's collection is a quiver with projectile points secured on the outside. The sheath holds arrow shafts which are time consuming to construct, so are used many times over.

SJBAS is fortunate to have such a rich archaeological treasure house in southwest Colorado. Stewardship and respect go hand in hand with our educational purpose. Our members can help protect the historical and archaeological resources by volunteering our time with these valuable museums.

- Prepared by: Tish Varney