

# SAN JUAN BASIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Chapter of Colorado Archaeological Society



## FIELD TRIP REPORT

Date: **October 15, 2016** Destination: **Eastern Puelitos of the Dinetah**

Leader: **Robert Powell** Number of Participants: **3**

We left Santa Rita Park at 8:00 am on Saturday morning, October 15, drove south on US 550 and stopped in Aztec for a quick break. From there we drove east on US 64 to the Largo Canyon side road east of Blanco and stopped to discuss some general aspects of our trip. Weather was perfect: clear skies, cool weather and almost no wind. I described the general geology of the area that allowed construction of flagstone buildings; the ecology that provided some farmland and plant food for numerous pronghorns, deer and elk; and the history that caused Pueblo peoples to join Navajos and form a bicultural society for two or three generations. We continued 27 miles east on US 64, past abandoned Navajo City, part way up Gobernador Valley to NM 527, where we turned north. It was a beautiful drive with clear blue skies, green meadows, multiple red cliffs and golden cottonwoods. We drove north to MP 11 on NM 527 that is paved between potholes.

It was time to shift into 4-wheel drive; the one-mile road up onto Francis Mesa is rough and steep. It is not passable, for me anyway, if it is wet or ungraded. Road contractors funded by gas companies had graded the rough road two days earlier; it is not a county road. Up on the mesa the roads were smoother and leveler, but had multiple junctions where one could make the wrong turn. I supplied the others with a road guide that they could use if they wanted to go back later. After another 2 1/2 miles on the mesa we arrived at the parking lot for Francis Canyon Pueblito. The walk to the site is level and short, only about 250 yards.

The site is located at the edge of a small cliff near the north rim of Francis Canyon Rincon. Its elevation is 6795 feet. The local habitat is open pinyon/juniper forest with a few sage/grass meadows. Some of the beams in the structures are from Douglas Fir, but those trees do not live nearby any longer. Two small seeps are in the cliff faces below the pueblito and 200 yards to the northeast. Suitable farmland is in the bottomlands about a mile away.

The Francis Canyon Pueblito is one of the largest, farthest east and closest to and north of the San Juan River. It was haphazardly arranged and did not occupy a fortified location. It was a 40-unit complex of rooms including a three-story,



two-room tower and 12 additional rooms and storage bins. It is classified as Gobernador Phase with tree-ring dates of 1715–1745. Most of the smaller rooms no longer have standing walls, only foundation stones. It was unusual in having two Spanish-style corner fireplaces. The cooking area was separated from the main structure. Two courtyards were among the buildings. Grinding basins were in the bedrock near the main building. Apparent fork-stick structures were nearby. The site was clearly multicultural with classic Navajo units, Pueblo-style stone structures and Spanish-style fireplaces. It is certainly one of the most interesting of all pueblitos.

After we finished viewing the site, we ate lunch at the trailhead and discussed the site. We did not return on the road that we had come up earlier; we drove 4.5 miles northwest on Francis Mesa, then dropped down and southwest 3 miles to paved NM 539. Along the way, we had interesting views of Gobernador Valley. We later drove along the top of Navajo Dam, turned 180° onto NM 173 and headed to the parking lot for Simon Canyon Tower. It was later in the day, at lower elevation and much warmer.



I walked with the group until a steep hill, but could not safely go farther in the heat. I waited in the shade of cottonwood trees while they continued to the tower that is on a small bench above Simon Wash at an elevation of 5840 feet. This site is in a deep canyon with cottonwoods, oak, thick sage and scattered pinyon and junipers. There is a small spring below the site. Water in the wash often has too much dissolved calcite to be drinkable. The site is a simple one-room tower perched on a large boulder with no nearby living quarters. It is also classified as Gobernador Phase. Access to the tower was by a ladder and by hand- and toe-holds in the face of the rock. It is not at all obvious why it was built north of the San Juan River and so far from the other sites.

When the others returned, I changed the trip plan and decided to provide a bit of variety to the day's visits. Instead of driving directly back to Aztec, we headed north up Caballo Canyon on a gravel road. We stopped and walked a short distance to look at some natural arches. We later drove by, but did not walk to, a larger arch. We then drove northwest in and out of canyons with multiple side roads to a road that used to lead to a site that I wanted to visit. It is now closed. I did not drive that road last summer and the Google Earth photo that I had is out of date. After two miss-tries I headed back toward Aztec on Hart Canyon Road. After a mile, we saw a newly constructed road and tried it. It was much better than the former road. We went to the outstanding Natural Bridge in Arch Rock wash. Well worth the side trip! From there we drove northwest on a badly rutted and pot-holed road to Cedar Hill and US 550 and arrived back at Santa Rita Park in late afternoon.

- Submitted by Bob Powell

Participants: Bob Powell, Rusty Chamberlain, and Diane Skinner