

SAN JUAN BASIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Chapter of Colorado Archaeological Society



FIELD TRIP REPORT

Date: **October 15, 2011**

Destination: **Chacoan North Road and Pierre's Complex**

Leader: **Rhonda Raffo and Jim Mueller**

Number of Participants: **19**

Senior archaeologist Jim Copeland from the Farmington BLM office, a recent SJBAS speaker, served as a very capable guide for 19 members of the SJBAS on this trip. After driving us out to the middle of nowhere, he provided us with colored copies of LIDAR images of the North road, shown at a recent SJBAS meeting. Centuries of weathering and vegetation growth make it difficult to see the road with the naked eye, but the LIDAR images show cuts (depressions) on the topographic highs that can be seen once you know what you are looking for. Leading from Pueblo Alto, near the north rim of Chaco Canyon, the North Road runs in a straight line, almost due north until it descends into the Kutz Canyon Badlands, about 50 km north. One of the most interesting features of the road is its straightness. It doesn't attempt the easiest way around and over the topography. It is also wide, around 9 meters, for a culture that didn't have horses or the wheel for carts. Its straight line leaves one to wonder if the road was for something other than transport.

Jim Copeland suggested that since so many of the Chacoan structures have an astronomic basis, maybe the North Road was an earthly representation of the Milky Way, something that would really stand out in the unlit Chacoan night sky. He added that the North Road was littered with ceramic pieces, but they weren't from dropped pots. Mostly unrelated and scattered, the pieces might have been placed to represent stars. Jim took the drivers around to a pickup location, with the rest of us hiking the North Road for about a mile to get a feel for what the Chacoans did. After we were picked up, we drove to Pierre's complex, an unusual grouping of small buildings alongside the road, situated on a very small butte. Another structure is at the base of a pinnacle, which evidenced multiple burns on the top and is thought by some to have been a signal fire or beacon.

Our last stop was overlooking Kutz Canyon and its badlands, where the North Road descends to the valley floor. Although there are structural features from here to the Salmon and Aztec ruins that would indicate that the North Road continues to those locations, there are no signs of the North Road itself. Another speculation is that the canyon was considered the sipapu from which the Chacoans ascended to this world and this is where the road ends (begins?). By the way, Pierre's Complex was named after a graduate student who found the place around 1970 (if I remember correctly). It's amazing this complex was found so recently, considering the North Road has been known for some time. But the road and this feature are out in the middle of nowhere. That brings us back to where we started.

- Prepared by Rich Robinson

Participants: Rhonda Raffo and Jim Mueller, Irene Wanner, Janice and Brooks Taylor, Jerri Lincoln, Letha and Bill Cagle, Jim Shadell, Linda and Richard Robinson, Barbara Lawson, Georgeanne and Dick Reitz, John Sanders, Eliane and John Viner, Bob Danielson, Bob Estes