A Trip Report by Marian-Ortolf Bagley & Allan R. Brockway

The Crow Canyon Archaeological Center is “dedicated to understanding, teaching, and preserving the rich history of the ancestral Pueblo Indians (also called the Anasazi) who inhabited the canyons and mesas of the Mesa Verde region more than 700 years ago.” Toward that end, the Center conducts archaeological excavations and other research ventures as well as educational programs for adults and children—and tours of fascinating archaeological sites in the American Southwest and other parts of the world.

The fascinating archaeological areas to which we were led by Navajo professor Harry Walters and archaeologist R. Gwinn Vivian—Dinétah, the Jicarilla Apache Reservation, and the Jémez Pueblo—are all in northwest New Mexico and definitely off the beaten path.

Dinétah

The traditional Navajo ancestral home is the area encompassed by the four sacred mountains (in red on map below) but it’s “heart” is at Gobernador Knob, located near the north-east corner of the enlarged area of the map, where Changing Woman, a pivotal figure in the Navajo origin story, was found by First Man & First Woman as a baby. The sites we visited were in this heartland area of Dinétah, which is not within the present boundaries of the Navajo Nation. Few people live there and those who do live with natural gas wells and the busy, dusty roads that support them. The region is under the supervision of the Bureau of Land Management.

The general area of the Dinétah portion of the tour is indicated by the red box in the wide-area map and by the green outline on the detailed Indian Country map below.
Once the three Crow Canyon vans left the highway and ventured into the Dinétah itself, via Largo Canyon, they utilized roads populated largely by gas company vehicles. Rough dirt tracks cut through the wilderness, leaving great clouds of dust as we sped along at twenty to thirty miles an hour.

The land is bleak high desert, with cliffs and mesas that stretch to the horizon. The arroyos that cut across the landscape have a layer of fresh gray mud lines that gives evidence of recent rain. The arroyos, in turn, are lined with trees, clues to the existence of permanent water in this arid land.

Our little caravan rattled over the one-track roads that wind to destinations known only to our guides; sometimes even they needed to make two or three forays before ending in the right spot. Our destination that morning was the Largo Canyon area and, in particular, Delgadito Canyon and its rows of magnificent rock art panels.
Still in the Largo Canyon drainage area, Crow Canyon (no, not the namesake of the tour sponsor) contains a huge collection of petroglyphs and pictographs, mainly Navajo. Compared to the ancestors of present-day Pueblo people who lived at such places as Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde in the 9th to 12th centuries, Navajos were latecomers. Their rock art, as Harry Walters explains, dates from the 16th to the 18th centuries.
And, also at Tapacito Pueblito, Gwinn Vivian and Harry Walters explained what pueblitos were and the role they played in the Navajo historical drama.

Scattered about the canyons in northwest New Mexico are small stone structures set on boulders or nestled beneath cliff faces that are so inaccessible as to make one wonder why they were built. The obvious answer, of course, is defense—but built by whom as defense against whom?

At the time of the temporarily successful Pueblo Revolt in 1680, Pueblo people from the Rio Grande (among them Jémez Pueblo, which we visited on this trip) took refuge in the Dinétah and, along with the resident Navajos, began construction of pueblitos. Pueblitos never were needed for defense against the Spanish. Instead, they became fortresses during the Navajo struggle with the Utes, which lasted until the middle of the 18th century.

Tapacito Pueblito, unusually, is not in a defensive position and is somewhat larger than the average pueblo. Built in 1694, it may originally have been a refuge for people from Jémez.
On another day, the vans took us through Gobernador Canyon (check the map on page 2 above) to Three Corn Ruin (named for the petroglyph below) in San Rafael Canyon. Constructed in the 18th century, Three Corn Ruin may have been abandoned by its Navajo builders after a devastating Ute attack. The Utes definitely had their work cut out for them!
Close by Three Corn Ruin is Old Fort, overlooking Gobernador Canyon. It is another part of the 18th century Navajo defense system against Ute depravation. But, unlike Three Corn Ruin, set on the canyon edge, seems to have been an actual fort that was built on a site occupied long before the Navajos arrived. The structure has only one entrance, on the canyon side, that would have been easy to defend.

Old Fort has several “forked-stick hogans,” one of which has been re-erected. Originally the forked logs were covered with small branches and mud plaster that has long since washed away.
Crow Canyon Archaeological Center: Navajo Dinétah and Jémez Pueblo
September 14-20, 2008
The map on page 2 placed the four sacred Navajo mountains—Mt. Blanco (east), Mt. Hesperus (north), Mt. Taylor (south), and San Francisco Peak (west). Within the area encompassed by the four sacred mountains, two others are particularly important to the Navajo origin myth: Gobernador Knob and Huerfano Mountain.

The Crow Canyon vans stopped at Huerfano Mountain (find it at the bottom of the green outline on the map) where Harry Walters recounted the story in which this flat-topped mountain plays a significant role.

Navajos tell of the time when they lived in the First World. In the First World was First Woman, First Man, and other human-like beings who lived alongside the Insect People. The people (Diné) sinned and Frog, chief of the First World, caused a flood from which First Man led the Diné to the Second World where the Bird People lived. Again the Diné sinned and the chief of the Cliff Swallow People caused a great wind that forced First Man to lead them to the Third world, the domain of the Animal People. The story gets complicated at this point but, boiled down, the people sinned again and First Man led the way to the present Fourth World, emerging in the mountains of southern Colorado.

In the Fourth World, as a result of sin in the Third World, women gave birth to strange-looking babies who became monsters that preyed on the Diné. Fortunately, First Man (along with some cooperative Gods) found a baby on Gobernador Knob. That baby was Changing Woman (who changed with the seasons). Changing Woman had an affair with the Sun, the result of which was the birth, on Huerfano Mountain, of Monster Slayer and Born-For-Water. The Twins secured permission from their father, the Sun, to kill the monsters and the story goes on from there.
The second part of the Crow Canyon itinerary took us to Dulce, New Mexico, headquarters of the Jicarilla Apache Nation. Our stay in Dulce was at a Jicarilla-owned hotel-cum-casino that featured fantastic horses constructed from sheet metal. But, as was the case with the other over-night hostels on this trip, we didn’t tarry long at our accommodations. It was off to watch an Apache basket maker at work—and to watch some of us try a hand at it, too.

In the yard of her house, locally well-known artist, Mollie Pesata, showed us how to start a basket by peeling fresh willow branches. During her leisurely demonstration she answered questions about the process. Her mother, who had passed her knowledge and skill on to Mollie, watched as her daughter conducted the demonstration.

Examples of the artist’s pottery in the Apache tradition and a few baskets were for sale. An outdoor fireplace, which filled the yard with smoke, was readied for grilling after we left.
There is historical logic, apart from the obvious geographical logic, to following a visit in the Navajo Dinétah with a visit to an Apache reservation. Both Navajos and Apaches were Athapaskan speakers who had originated in Canada and gradually migrated into southern Colorado and northern New Mexico, becoming clearly visible in the archaeological record by the 15th century. They share, thus, a linguistic and cultural history that is different from that of the now nearby Pueblo people, who originated in the Chaco and Mesa Verde regions centuries earlier.

The group met with the director of the tribe’s Cultural Affairs Office in Dulce and heard a presentation on Apache history and culture during which an elderly Apache man expressed a bitterness that many Indians feel toward the foreigners who have taken their land and in other ways dispossessed them. It is something that we European Americans know about but seldom actually hear.

Just outside of Dulce the vans stopped for us to walk a few steps to see a weathered Navajo shamanistic shield and accompanying hand prints.
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The principal archeological location scheduled for our visitation in the Jicarilla Apache Nation was the La Jara site in the southern reaches of the reservation. Unfortunately, the climb proved too hazardous for us, so we were left, with a few others, to watch the group climb to the kivas and towers on top of the rocks.

But all was not lost. When the group reassembled, we were led to a series of pithouses (below, left) that archaeologists had begun reconstructing in the 1980s for an interpretative exhibit, an effort that was abandoned when graves were discovered at the site, perhaps in this kiva (below, right).
Until Jémez Springs, the Crow Canyon group was housed in standard you-see-one-you’ve-seen’m-all motels. But in Jémez Springs we slept in two Bed-and-Breakfasts and ate in interesting restaurants nearby.

Those of us who slept in the B&B with the blue trimming joined the others for breakfast in the larger of the hostels, where we appreciated the displays of pottery and basketry in the lounge area.
The experience at Jémez was of a different order than the earlier part of the trip, not only because the lodging was interesting but because of an event in which few tourists, such as ourselves, have ever had an opportunity to be involved. For here, at the Walatowa Visitor Center, we were privileged to watch a gathering of Jémez Elders discuss their oral history as it intersected with that of the Diné.

Harry Walters, our Navajo guide, sat among them as they energetically spoke in Towa, a language that is unique to the people of Jémez and which neither we nor Harry understood. Occasionally, one of the Elders stopped to summarize their discussion in English. Marian got out her sketch pad and made notes.

At noon a traditional lunch, which included staples of the Pueblo diet—beans and fry bread—was prepared for us by a member of the Jémez Pueblo.
Back in the Crow Canyon vans the next morning, we set out, shepherded by our hosts from the Jémez Pueblo, toward the mountains north of the Walatowa Visitor Center. The destination was an ancestral pueblo set among the tall ponderosa pines of the Santa Fe National Forest.

But before we got there the vans came to a stop at the side of the narrow mountain road and we all piled out to view an unusual group of natural “standing stones” that had, like many such formations, sacred value for the Jémez and other Pueblo peoples.

Then it was on to Say-Shu-Kwa (Eagle-Dwelling Place), the ruins of what was once an immense pueblo that thrived during the 1500s. At nearly 8000-feet elevation in the forest, it probably was invisible to the Spanish, whose invasion of Pueblo territory began with the Coronado expedition of 1540.

It was almost invisible to us, too, for its 1000 or more rooms, some of which originally formed walls three stories tall, today are little more than piles of rubble that have been repeatedly dug over by pot hunters.

While members of the group scrambled over the ruin, trying to discern the outlines of the pueblo, Marian, finding her sketch pad, remembered that someone had called the site “Pumpkin Place,” which may mean that it has significance for a clan or moiety of the Jémez people.
Twelve miles south of Jémez Springs, the Jémez State Monument presented us with the archaeological evidence of the conflict between two cultures: (1) Giusewa, one of the original Jémez pueblos, where people began to live in the early 16th century, and (2) the Franciscan fathers who “missionized” the inhabitants of Giusewa and built a large church and monastery in the 17th century. They used, of course, the labor of their Indian converts.

Not much is left of Giusewa save some piles of rubble; one kiva that has been reconstructed is open to visitors. But the remains of the Iglesia de San José de los Jémez, which was originally built in 1621, are extensive.

The people of Giusewa and other Jémez pueblos were major players in the 1680 Pueblo Revolt against Spanish rule and, again, in 1696, after the Spanish Reconquista, they killed the monks before fleeing to the mountains. Fray Francisco Casañas de Jesús María, who was struck down here at Giusewa, may never have known that the revolts were a result of Franciscan pillaging of the sacred kivas.

Today, 400 years later, one of the staples of the Puebloan diet—and (surely without doubt) of the Franciscan monks—is still grown on the grounds of the ancient pueblo and the Spanish church.