

The Chaco Canyon Thirty-Five Years Ago

The following extract is taken from a report made to the United States General land office, December 18, 1901, by S. J. Holsinger, special agent of the Land Office. It is the result of his investigation for the government to determine the policy relative to such private excavations on government lands. The final outcome of the whole thing was the law for "The Preservation of American Antiquities," enacted in 1906.

The report and especially this extract is of real interest at the present time in view of the recent excavations that the Museum and School are conducting in the Chaco. The "Hyde Exploring Expedition," which operated in the Chaco during 1897, 1898, 1899, 1900, opened up the first excavation to be carried on in that region at Pueblo Bonito. They also attempted, and with success, to commercialize the Navajo products on a grand scale. Enormous amounts of money were spent in the Chaco by the Hyde Brothers. Old Navajos still enjoy telling of the "good old days when" hundreds of Indians would gather at Pueblo Bonito on week ends to trade, buy supplies and gamble. A good account is given in the extract of the homestead acquired by Dick Wetherill. He tried to put one over on the government but didn't quite succeed. However, the boundaries of this homestead are still accusing any amount of trouble in the Chaco today. The B. T. Babbitt Hyde named in the report will be recognized as the well known "Uncle Benny" Hyde of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Attention is especially called to the fifth paragraph quoted here. An idea is given by this of the enormous quantities of priceless material which were taken from New Mexico in these early days. Of this material not a single piece remains in the state.

A photostat (sic) copy of the Holsinger report from which the following paragraphs were taken is available at the Survey Office of the State Museum and the School of American Research in Santa Fe. As far as it is known this is the only copy of the report other than the original in Washington.

Abstract from the Holsinger Report on the Chaco Canyon 1901.

“Although the existence of extensive Chaco ruins has been known to scientific men and others during the greater part of a century yet these venerable piles of masonry were not molested until 1896, when one Richard Wetherill, then a professional relic hunter, pitched his tent under the north wall of Pueblo Bonito. Up to that time not a single building in the entire group had been invaded or even prospected. Some excavations had been made in the county burial mounds but no systematic research had ever been inaugurated. Wetherill’s keen eye at once recognized this as a most promising field. He opened several rooms on the outside and north tier of Bonito during the summer. He was not only rewarded with a number of rare specimens but found perfect open rooms, which afforded comfortable quarters for himself and men. He became so impressed, according to his own story, with the magnitude of the building and its apparent resources that he began casting about for financial assistance. He believed that from this single ruin a collection could be secured, which in size and interest would rival any other prehistoric collection of a similar character in the world. The idea grew upon him, and to make this stupendous collection entire, became his one ambition. However, he well knew it would require large capital and a correspondence was accordingly opened with the Hyde Brothers of New York, for whom Wetherill had made several large collections in Utah and Colorado. During negotiations, Wetherill gave up work on Bonito and made a very valuable collection from ruins in Grand Gulch, Utah, for Baron Nordensjold of Stockholm, Sweden.

“After making an examination of the Chaco Ruins, the Hyde Brothers concluded to undertake the excavations of Pueblo Bonito, and in 1897, operations were commenced; Wetherill turning over to them all material discovered by his work. There being no trading stores nearer than 30 miles, and as about 100 Navajo Indians were employed, it became necessary to carry a considerable stock of provisions and this suggested the idea of a trading post at Bonito. The Indian men were paid good wages and the squaws high prices for their blankets, and the Navajos of the region were soon making long pilgrimages to the Bonito store, with their products. A private company was formed, known as the Hyde Exploration Expedition and soon other stores were established, until at the present time, the Expedition has twelve stores, aggregating a stock of merchandise, invoicing over \$100,000. The Hyde Exploration Expedition’s wagons are now encountered on every road in the Chaco region, hauling merchandise from the railroad to

the interior and returning laden with blankets, woven by the Navajos, wool and hides. Indians are employed wherever they can do the work. The company are, unquestionably, doing a great work for the Navajos. Blankets, for which the Indians never in the history of the country, obtained more than 50 cents per pound, now sell at from \$1.10 to \$1.25 per pound. This manner of dealing with the Indians promises to revolutionize the Navajo rug and blanket trade, and make this ingenious product as valuable and as much in demand as the famous rugs of Smyrna.

“The company, according to the sworn testimony of members of the concern, consists of Frederick E. Hyde, Jr., B. T. Babbett, Hyde & Richard Wetherill. Mr. Wetherill has the field management of the concern and Frederick E. Hyde, Jr., a general supervision, together with the special duty of introducing the Indian blanket as an article of merchandise in the East. This is accomplished by giving free, public lectures in connection with what is known as ‘The Fair’ in Chicago and “Wanamaker’s’ Store in New York and Philadelphia. All kinds of products of the Indian loom are displayed with the added attraction of Navajo women with their primitive implements weaving blankets. This is followed from day to day, by blanket sales, the proprietor of the house receiving a percentage of the proceeds.

“The members of the company declare that at these sales only modern curios and Indian blankets are sold and that in no instance has a single specimen of pre-historic origin been made an article of merchandise.

The company declined to furnish an itemized list of the relics obtained from the Chaco Canyon Ruins. However, in the sworn testimony of Messrs. Hyde and Wetherill, hereto attached, they approximate the amount of material secured from Pueblo Bonito at 50,000 pieces of turquoise, 10,000 vases or pieces of pottery, 5,000 stone implements, 1,000 wood and bone implements, a few fabrics, 14 skeletons, a few copper bells and a jewelled (sic) frog.

“All of these articles were, it said, donated to the Museum of Natural History of Central Park, New York City. Mr. Hyde declares that every effort has been made to make the collection entire, not a single specimen of any character having been retained, not even a

souvenir by any member for the company or their families. He testifies that the excavations were made at an individual expense, to his brother and himself, of \$25,000, and that all of the collection was donated to the Museum with many other valuable additions purchased from Wetherill, who secured them in Colorado and Utah. That his only object in engaging in merchandising and the blanket trade was to improve the condition of the Navajo Indians and to reimburse themselves, in some measure, for the large amount spent in making excavations.'

"The southwest corner of Bonito was made the initial point of excavation. Work was commenced and carried on in the first or outside tier of rooms. Each pit excavated was numbered, and the total number of these opened was 185. Sometimes this pit represented several rooms, it being from two to three stories deep and the ground floor being often subdivided into two or more rooms. In some instances the roofs were removed, in order to facilitate the work, but the company asserts that this was never done where the roof was in a perfect or tolerable state of preservation. This may be true but many sound timbers were cut off by them flush with the walls and removed. When the outside tier was explored, work was begun in the second and then the third tiers, the detritus being thrown from the unexplored into the excavated rooms. This it is claimed, was done for two purposes. First, to protect the wall of the rooms excavated and, second, economy of labor, in carrying on the excavation, as otherwise the material would have to be carried a considerable distance, in order to free the building from it.

"In photograph 1, page 1, the line of excavation may easily be traced. The material thrown out of the rooms has completely covered the outside walls of the building on the east and west, only a portion of the high, northern wall being now visible.

"Five hundred rooms have been excavated and all the relics found in them removed. Several rooms, which were found in a perfect state of preservation, have also been removed and shipped to the Museum. Every stone and timber of these rooms were so marked and packed that they may be perfectly restored at the Museum. From an examination of the photograph, it will be seen that at no place was excavation extended into the interior further than the third tier, and this only in a few places. Very few excavations have been made in the interior. The estimate of 700 unexplored rooms is a

very conservative one. Excavation may reveal many more than that number, as the underground rooms are all in the interior and at present their extent is unknown. Five interior kivas were excavated but no estufas.

“The excavation of 500 rooms in Bonito, a kiva, 200 feet northeast of the building, which exposes the masonry and timbering of the cliff and a few shafts showing the formation of the canyon floor, upon which the ruin stands, completes the work done by the Hyde Exploration Expedition. Excavations were made also in many small burial places.

“Navajo Indians were employed in making all of the excavations. The top or rough material was loosened with picks and thrown out with the hand and with shovels. Upon the slightest indication of the presence of relics, hand trowels were used to loosen the accumulated debris. Inch by inch the great mass of material was carefully worked over and examined for small and large specimens and the refuse was thrown out with a shovel when it was again examined. In this manner thousands of tons of fine detritus were removed and the excavation accomplished without losing or breaking specimens. The work could only be carried on during the summer months and the system followed prevented rapid progress. Excavations were conducted during the summers of 1897, 98, 99 and 1900, or during four years. No work has been done during the present year by reason of Government interference. The members of the company are now devoting their time to merchandising and traffic in Indian blankets and curios. Since my examination was made their headquarters, which were then at Bonito, have been removed to Thoreau, N. M., a railroad station on the Santa Fe Pacific R. R. The store is still maintained at Bonito but Thoreau is now the distributing point.

“When excavations were begun by Wetherill and later by the Hyde Exploration Co., the land upon which Pueblo Bonito stands was a part of the unappropriated public domain. The ruin is situated on the East $\frac{1}{2}$ of the South $\frac{1}{2}$ of the Southwest $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 12 Tp. 21 N, 11W, N. M. P. M. This land remained unappropriated and unclaimed by settlers, notwithstanding that the company had erected several buildings upon it, until the 26th day of November, 1900. On May 14th, 1900, Richard Wetherill filed a homestead entry upon the Northwest $\frac{1}{4}$ of Sec. 30, Tp. 21 N., R. 11 W. In November of the same year application was made to change the entry to the South $\frac{1}{2}$ of the South $\frac{1}{2}$ of section 12 of

this same township, the land embracing, not only the valuable ruins of Bonito, but Chetro Kelt (sic) and Arroyo. All of the material secured from Bonito by the company was removed prior to the amended filing of Wetherill and almost all of it before the date of the original entry.

“The claimant in his application for change of entry alleged that the South of the South of Sec. 12 was in fact the land occupied by him and was the land filed upon as a homestead and described as Lots 1 and 2 and the East of the Northwest of Sec. 30 in said township; and that this fact was revealed by a resurvey of the land and by this means the discovery, by him, of the original Government survey.

“It is difficult to understand how Mr. Wetherill could have made not only an error of six miles in locality, but should have applied for a piece of land in the form of one-half square mile, and then found that it in fact was in the form of a parallelogram, one mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. It is also a curious coincidence that upon the land first applied for there is located a valuable ruin and that it is of much more value for agricultural purposes than that in Section 12. The land now claimed by Wetherill is of strictly desert character and of no value whatsoever for agricultural purposes until reclaimed by some artificial system of irrigation. It is occupied and used for purposes of trade and not as a homestead. The entryman claims the building in which he resides, though it was constructed with the Hyde Bros. capital. The large company store is conducted under the same roof and the claimant is its manager. Four other stone buildings, constructed and owned by the company are located on the homestead, including a boarding house, employes' (sic) quarters, stables, warehouse and blacksmith shop, all at the approximate value of \$10,000.

“Frederick E. Hyde, Jr., has filed a homestead claim upon the East of the East of Sec. 14 in the township and range mentioned. This land is now used for a horse pasture and settlement has never been made upon it by the claimant. The only structure upon the land approaching the semblance of a house is a large Hogan built for Navajo festivities but now used as a pest-house for small pox patients.

“Both Frederick E. Hyde, Jr., and Richard Wetherill took frequent occasion, during the investigation to avow good faith and disclaim any intent to defraud the Government, either in making the homestead entries or in removing relics from public land. The first statement made by Wetherill was to the effect that he was simply an employee of the company, acting in the capacity of manager. Later Mr. Hyde testified that Wetherill was a member of the firm and it was then that Mr. Wetherill asked the privilege of changing his statement. His explanation was that this was characteristic of the business methods of the Hyde Bros., and that he did not know that he was, in fact, a member of the company until he heard the testimony of Mr. Hyde read. These gentlemen assert that the Hyde Bros., having practically unlimited means (commercial rating \$10,000,000), acted purely upon philanthropical impulses. That for many years they had been much interested in ethnology and archaeology and it was through a desire to add to scientific research in these lines, that they undertook the excavations in question. They further declare that they have donated this large and valuable collection, with others, to the Museum of Natural History; purely in the interest of science and with no promise or hope of financial remuneration, and that in accomplishing this they have expended, approximately, \$40,000. They informed me that every specimen taken from the Bonito Ruins was in the hands of the Museum, together with written descriptions and photographs of the relics in site and systematic measurements of the rooms excavated. He further avers that this collection in its entirety will soon be on exhibition and open to the public. The company expressed a strong desire to continue the excavations and Wetherill submitted a proposition, in writing, offering to relinquish all claim, upon the ruins, on section 12 and to deed to the Government sections 11 and 13, purchased from the Santa Fe Railway Co., and upon which are situated two large ruins; so conditioned that the company or the Museum of Natural History be granted a permit to complete the excavation of Bonito and place upon free exhibition, in Central Park, a complete collection from this wonderful communal house.”

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