

IX

▮ Pecos Pueblo ▮

Pecos Pueblo was the mightiest of the Indian towns of our region until the nineteenth century, when it suddenly declined and suffered abandonment. In its latter days, it held a huge population of Spaniards, Pueblo Indians, Apaches and even Comanche, who had previously hounded its walls like Huns. When we visited it recently, stubs of ruins still wore the look of defeat. A Japanese wedding was taking place in the picturesque shell of the Dominican mission church.

We dutifully visited the Visitors Center first, which had a film on a perpetual loop with the affected voice of Grier Garson. This '50s leading lady once owned the vast Jane Fonda ranch outside Pecos. Much of the area burned but enjoyed a gardener's delight of rehabilitation in the past few years with lots of sprayed-on greenery and planted pinions. Nearby is the Glorieta conference center, a modest bungalow of approximately 25,000 square feet.

While we wondered what the shades of Popé, the magician leader of the 1680 Pueblo revolt, would think of the new visitors center and its exhibits, or the barren hill overlooking the Glorieta Mesa today, we soon put such thoughts out of our mind.

Pecos Pueblo went under about the time the Ghost Dance Movement was gathering steam among the remnants of the Indian nations. Starting with the Cherokee in about 1810, this religious awakening swept west until a Paiute medicine man and Methodist minister named Wovoka spread it to the Utes, Pueblos, and Plains tribes. Indians dressed like ghosts and swore not to use or accept any of the white man's innovations. The result for the Lakota Sioux was the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1892 (and the reenactment of Wounded Knee with members of the American Indian Movement in 1972).

Much is reconstructed at Pecos. A Kidder of Kidder-Peabody investment brokers went at the site with a passion in the early twentieth century. His efforts left things in good accounting practice but charmless, biased toward the Europeans. We kept wishing Barbarella would appear, something at least unexpected and out of the ordinary.

Perhaps the drunken ghosts of Civil War soldiers would limp over from nearby Glorieta Pass? What was going on here? Thirty thousand years of history in New Mexico and the historic commission puts its best efforts into fleeting, marginal Civil War monuments while the wonders of the ancient world are glossed over like indigestion.

Modern-day anthropological science will venerate the discovery of a stray Civil War carbine in the desert and ignore the mystery of the enduring civilizations of Mesa Verde, Pecos Pueblo, and Cochiti.

Go, then, to Pecos, but do not expect to meet the proud, enduring spirits of Native Americans there, for they have all fled, along with the last of the hold-outs in the 1820s. The once-renowned city is not only in ruins but in disguise.



View of mission church at Pecos Pueblo.

X

▮ Mesa Verde ▮

Mesa Verde, an ancient and mysterious cliff-dwelling town just over the border in Colorado, is one of the anchors of the Four Corners area. It is listed on National Geographic's 50 must-see sites in the world. In a word, it is fabulous.

We set forth a few weeks ago to pay our respects to this 800-year-old complex of apartment buildings built by the Ancestral Pueblo people. The cottonwoods were ablaze with a psychedelic golden glow. It was one of the last pleasant days in fall to make the trek, for Mesa Verde itself lies twenty-five miles within the park's entrance, and the perilous road is often closed when it freezes.

A rattlesnake could meet itself on the winding hairpins. We go up and up. Finally, we emerge on the mesa top. A fire caused by a lightning strike in 2001 burnt most of the surrounding hillsides. What was once a verdant expanse of spruce and piñon is now a blackened and depressing canvas as far as the eye can see.

Allow easily half a day for all the sights of Mesa Verde—and an hour for the entry road. We had only a few hours and had to rush through Spruce House, a mile's walk from the visitors center on a descending asphalt path. We skipped most of the reconstructed houses you can drive up to on the loop road above, learning later that 5,000 such sites have been identified just on that mesa. They document the learning process and evolution of engineering and housing design, from pit houses and great houses to the slick, sophisticated towers and rambling chambers of the Cliff Palace.

Luckily, it was beginning to rain. I say "luckily," because our guided group to the Cliff Palace numbered only 15 persons. Usually there is a crowd of 70 or more.

The young woman who acted as our docent was part telemarketer, part psychic. She had a script from which she never strayed and asked only leading questions. "How many of you have been here before?" No one. "Why would you think they would build something here?" We waited to hear. "Does anybody know anything about the constellations?" What was she getting at?

She pointed out a tower at the edge of the village. Was it an observatory (the sighting windows lined up with Orion on the equinox, like the Pyramids of Geza, she said), a watchtower (but it had its own kiva inside), a shrine?

"The Zuñi elders have been here," she said. "They told us their people once lived here; they were able to explain a lot." She went on to recount how modern-day Pueblo people visit Mesa Verde as a sacred shrine, burning sage and asking permission of the spirits before entering. Her voice dropped to a ghostly whisper. "Some of them pray that when their soul leaves their body it comes to live here."

We were both grateful and slightly annoyed with the park service's information. Much of the tour was superficial. The closest visitors can come to entering any of the ruins is to stick their head through a window at one point. Craning upward one can see . . . forget it. Fifteen years ago it was still possible to climb around in the rooms.

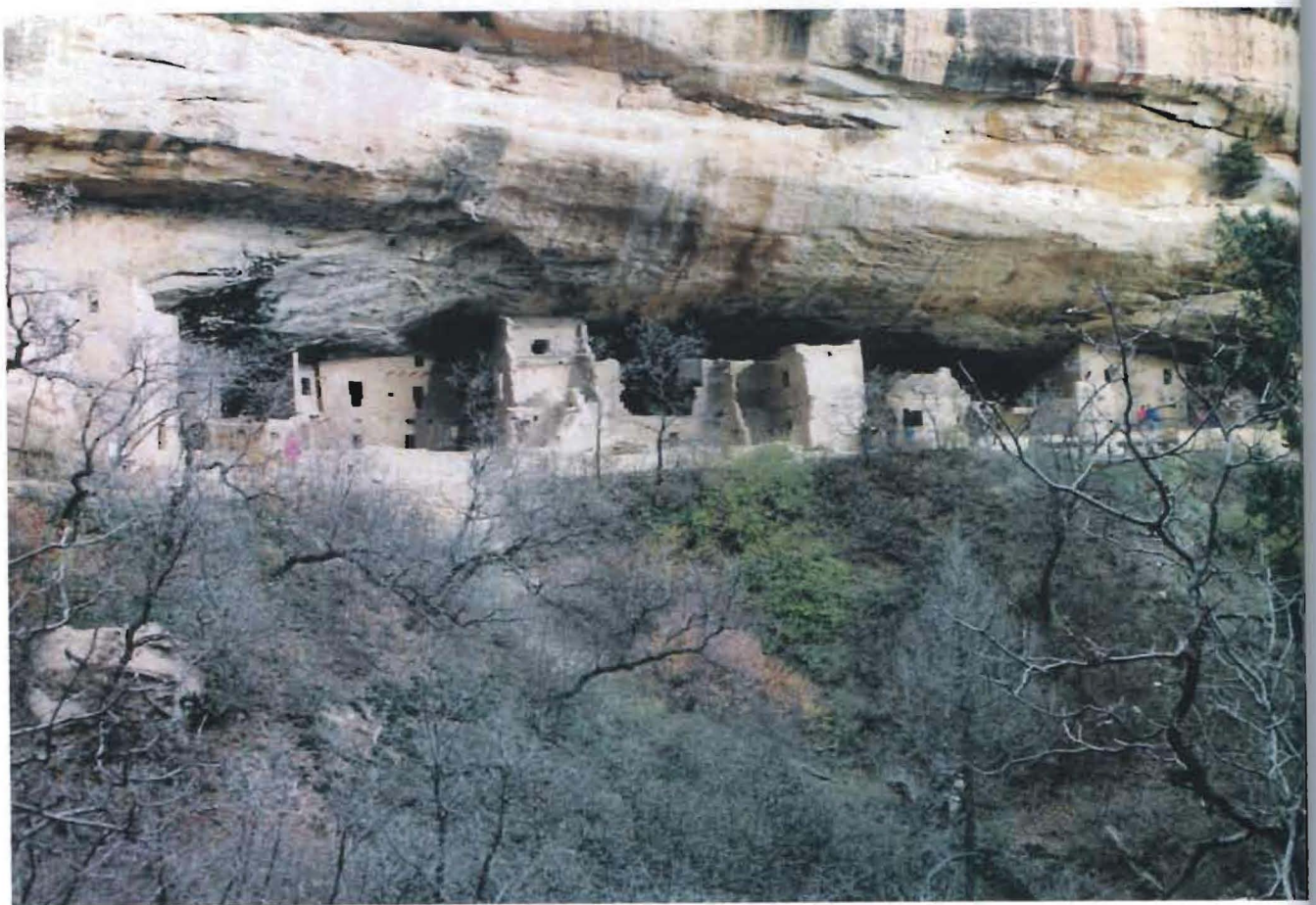
Don't miss Mesa Verde, and if you've been there before, return the first chance you get. It is one of the world's last wonders not yet explained away. Bring oodles of film and an open mind.



Cliff Palace complex at Mesa Verde National Park near Cortez, Colorado.



Two kivas.



Spruce Tree House.



XI

III Inscription Rock III

We were not very excited about it, but one bright spring Sunday we headed out of town to Inscription Rock, the imposing *cuesta* between Acoma and Zuñi containing all the boastful conquistador graffiti one could ever hope to see in one place. On the way, we puzzled at a highway sign that said ZERO VISIBILITY POSSIBLE.

Passed by here the Governor Don Juan de Onate, from the discovery of the Sea of the South on the 16th of April of 1605. A fair cross-section of history's no-goodniks had passed by the bluff, refreshed themselves from the cooling pool of green water at its foot and left a record of their visit with a flourish on its soft sandstone.

Among Methodist ministers and Indian fighters, feckless friars and forgotten gold seekers, the last signature we expected to find was the first that leapt out at us. We were more interested in the Indian petroglyphs than Spanish and English defacements of the site. Signs of Indians were in small evidence among the Planet Hollywood gallery of great

men's autographs, but what struck us as bedrock were the specimens in a script that we least expected to find here—ogham.

In a past column in these pages, we described our surprise at deciphering an inscription of this type at Bandelier, marking Quetzalcoatl's tomb. That was a lonely erratic, one for which we later searched in vain through thirty or more volumes of excavation reports in the Museum of Anthropology and Archeology in Santa Fe. Here at Inscription Rock, however, were dozens.

Ogham is stick writing, originally based on finger signs, used all across the ancient world, from Egypt to Ireland. Although first studied on Irish stone markers, it also occurs in abundance in America. Most examples, however, have been discovered in the eastern U.S.

The academic establishment does not believe in American ogham. The reason is that Indians (defined as America's aboriginal inhabitants) could not write, so anything that resembles writing in the pre-Columbian world isn't. We pondered these paradoxes as we read in our tour guide that Inscription Rock was called by the Indians "Place of the Strange Writings." This was before the first Spaniard scrawled his name on it.

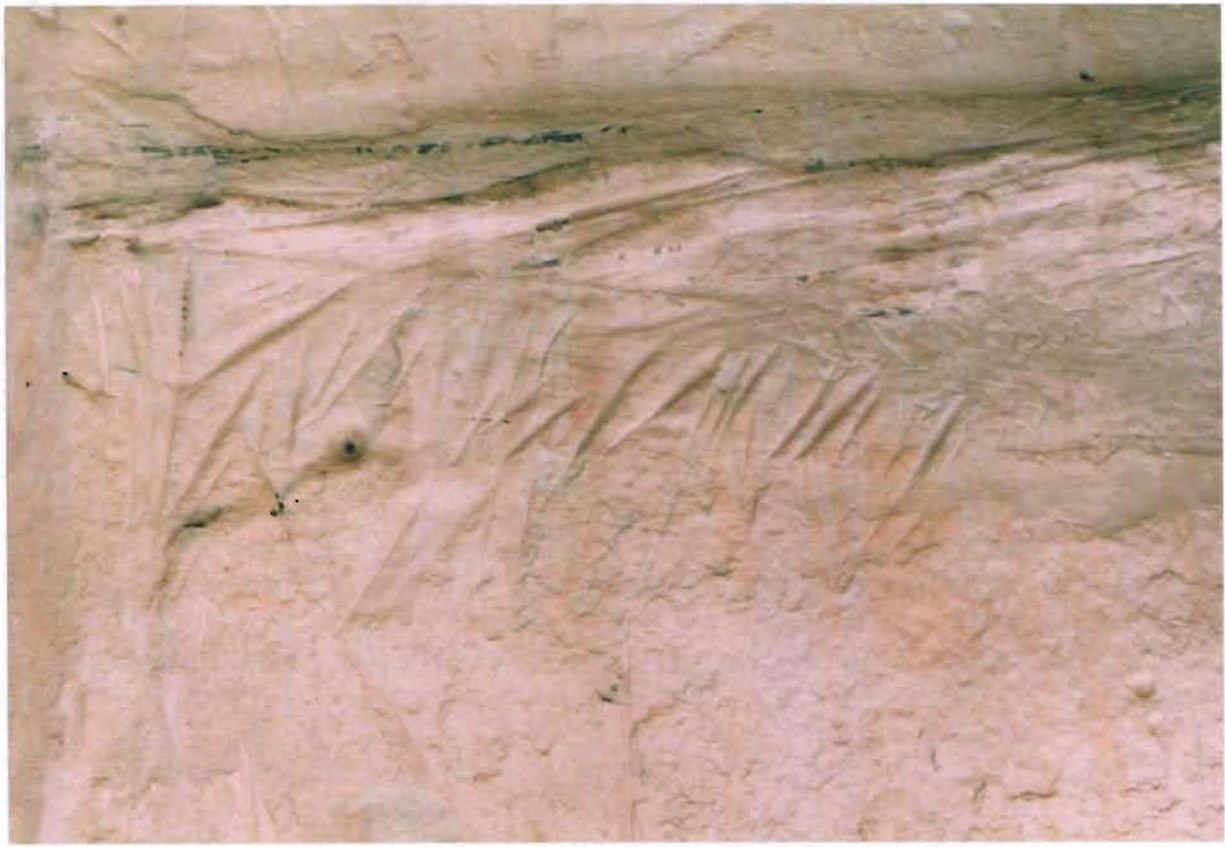
Just for the fun of it, we copied one of these ogham inscriptions and showed it to a friend, who is by way of being an expert in this non-existent, extremely disapproved field. To the untrained eye, the marks might look like accidental hatchet scratches, made perhaps by someone who had it in for the world. An acquaintance who will not be identified swore they were "places where the Indians sharpened their arrows." Our professor friend, however, *mirabile dictu*, read the marks as spelling, from right to left,

B-M-B-W-H-I. This he translated from the Arabic as "In devotion." We had noticed that the inscription happened to be next to a cup offering carved out of the rock face.

If you are going to check out these things for yourself, just take I-40 west from Albuquerque for about an hour before turning south on Highway 53 about 50 miles to El Morro National Monument. You may wish to lunch at the Kiva Restaurant in the immediate exit beyond Grants. Best to avoid the latter town with its unending row of closed businesses. No kidding, but there is an establishment there called the Uranium Café. Apropos, you will pass repeatedly through the Malpais National Wilderness Area. The word means badlands, and you will see why as you drive through the dust storms. Even the goshawk we greeted that fled away over thwarted creosote and parched one-seeded junipers seemed reluctant to be there.

To leave you with a final thought, on our way to Inscription Rock we passed several signs that said WIND GUSTS MAY EXIST. This was like ZERO VISIBILITY . . . or the plausibility of the existence of God, or evil, or the future of the Democratic Party.

You may prove to be a believer or non-believer, but don't miss this adventure into true grit New Mexico.



Ogham writing.



Inscription Rock.

XII

III Doorway to Mimbres III

Mimbres—the word conjures mystery, deserts and the incomprehensible. The Mimbrenos were the Etruscans of the ancient Southwest. They appeared meteorically around 1000 C.E. and disappeared equally suddenly about 1300. During those 300 years they left prized funerary bowls (most broken, or “killed,” with a hole to the center) that rival anything produced by the hand of Phidias or Praxiteles.

When the first masterpieces began to be hawked to the Heyes of the art world by pot hunters in the early twentieth century, a legion of bulldozers descended on New Mexico's Gila Wilderness the likes of which its father, Aldo Leopold, could hardly have imagined. Never had there been such blatant rapine of a cultural legacy since the assault on Maya ceramics, which has contributed, in its own way, to the mystery, or better said, lack of understanding, of Mexico's indigenous civilizations.

So who were they, and why did they settle in this forbidding mountain wilderness, one passed over even by Apache raiders, Spanish explorers and modern-day strip miners? We decided to find out by visiting the Gila Cliff Dwelling National Monument.

About all we knew before taking our life into our hands on the switchbacks of SR 15 out of Silver City was the Mimbrenos painted strange things on their pots - whales, dolphins, apes, and insects. How did whales get to the desert? They also painted half-men, half-coatis with gigantic penises that swirled around the rims of the pots. A scholar suggested for this reason it was women who were in charge of pottery in the Mimbres culture.

If you're going to take your dog (and who wouldn't) you must leave Pooch in a kennel at the trail head. The loop is about half a mile up at an easy grade through a ravine, and half a mile back, overlooking a fork of the parched Gila River.

The first thing that struck us when we panted up to the six "caveate" hollows containing more than 50 rooms of masonry was a T-shaped doorway. Reached by log ladder as all the other dwellings were reached, here was a striking entryway into the world of the Mimbrenos. We had seen similar doorways at Aztec Ruins and Chaco. It was the signature of a culture, as much as fat, top-heavy columns were for the Minoans, or subtle entasis for the builders of the Parthenon.

"So what about the 64,000-dollar question," we asked the well-informed tour guide. "Why are the doorways shaped like that?"

The ranger was equal to the challenge. He referred to the various theories—symbolic shape, ceremonial use—then trotted out his own. "I think these people were

fundamentally practical people," he said. "They made doorways with a wide part at top so they wouldn't have to turn on the ladder carrying a load of wood up or body of a deer into the dwelling."

What authority credited Indians with practicality? If they had been practical they wouldn't have built their homes on a cliff.

In thinking about it, I arrived at a different theory. What if the Indians made a ledge on each side like that so that something could be rested midway on the doorway, say, a pole? That would create a barrier of privacy, maybe even protection if matting were attached, and leave the top open for ventilation. That seemed truly practical, a bit like a Dutch door.

Or maybe it is just a mystery and should remain so.

Defy all odds like the man in the flying machine and drive out through the dead man's curves of the Gila Mountains and go to the Cliff Dwellings, one of only a handful of national monuments in New Mexico.

Report back and tell us what all those little round dents are on a flat boulder there toward the end of the tour. And let us know if you hear the whisper of the Mimbrenos in the howl of the winds, up-canyon from the desiccated river.

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XIII

Ш Sky City Ш

For Mother's Day we decided to take a trip to what many consider the mother pueblo, at least the oldest one, though the title is disputed. On the basis of tree rings in timbers, archeologists have set the date of the founding of Acoma to about the twelfth century. But the inhabitants of Sky City, as it is called, claim their village is much, much older.

We drove through the badlands west of Albuquerque under a strangely overcast sky that promised rain any minute but held out all day. Taking State Highway 23, we entered a magical landscape of buttes and hoodoos. Suddenly Enchanted Mesa loomed into sight, with Acoma like a fortress just beyond it.

The following weekend marked the grand opening of Acoma's new cultural center. We found the parking lot already half full and the center bustling with activity. Without a guide, visitors are not allowed beyond a certain point. For \$10 a head, you can ride up in

an airport-style van and be taken through the sights of the pueblo by a local guide. Ours was friendly, well spoken, and well informed, and possessed of a deadpan wit.

She pointed out a small hole in the adobe wall of the kiva complex. "That's where they would warn those inside if any Spaniards were around, so the men could stop their ceremonies until they passed and not get caught," she explained. "Later on, it became the women's intercom," she continued. "Whenever they needed a man (which was not often), they would yell through the hole." Kivas were only for men, of course, and she joked that today there was a widescreen TV inside and the place was jammed on Super Sunday.

The guide first took us to the mission church of San Esteban. Without cracking a smile, she looked over at a decrepit confessional booth. "It's not used anymore," she said, "because our people ran out of sins." She speaks of ancient Franciscan priests as though they died yesterday, and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 as a recent event. Huge paintings presented by various kings of Spain looked new. Nineteenth century lithographs of the Stations of the Cross were neither wrinkled nor faded, even though they were not protected by glass.

The village is divided into six zones. During tourist season, there are tables set up outside the battered walls of houses, and it is here that artisans display intricate painted bowls and other wares. One man sold motivational lithographs, including an Escher-like optical illusion of the sky and sun. "You can see it as mostly black or mostly white," he said. This artist took credit cards, which are useful since a souvenir pot the size of a pincushion can cost \$40. Others said they would take a personal check, however.

Everywhere there were people about, children running, babies being admired, old men on benches in the shade. It was apparent that the townspeople were the product of a huge gene pool. Some had classic European faces, others Asiatic features, still others more of an almost African look.

The story goes that there were two boys who came down from Enchanted Mesa, the basalt tower left by a million-year-old volcano opposite Acoma. They yelled "Ha'aku-u-u" until they heard an echo. They knew then that where the echo originated was the promised site where they should settle. Ha'aku is the name of Acoma in the Keresan language spoken there. It is said to mean "the intended place." Like many Indian names, however, the word cannot be analyzed.

Could it be from a foreign language? That is actually the case of the tribal name "Cherokee," which is Greek. Anthropologists have long noticed puzzling elements of Greek religion in Puebloan ceremonies, though none has been crazy enough to suggest a real connection between the two.

We raised the question with our traveling companions: Could Ha'aku be related to the Greek words Echo and *aku* ("listen, hear," as in "acoustics")?

But what would ancient Greeks be doing over here? Maybe the same thing as ancient Arabs? Or ancient Egyptians? Or ancient Libyans? Or ancient Hebrews? Traces of all have been detected in the Southwest.

Go to Acoma and judge for yourself. The place is literally out of this world.



Laguna Pueblo.



Enchanted Mesa.



Acoma Pueblo.

Acoma Pueblo.



XIV

III Fossil Corn at Jémez III

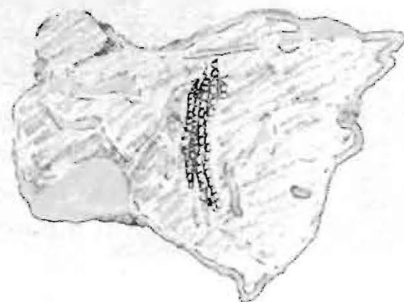
Not quite realizing it was Memorial Day weekend, we headed into the Jémez Mountains to visit the Valles Caldera preserve, a gigantic volcano that blew about 1.3 million years ago. Erratic boulders the size of a house still lie where they landed or rolled after being catapulted into the atmosphere. The now eroded and evergreen-forested crater is supposedly so large that its unblinking goggle shape can be seen from outer space. Yet you can enter only a fraction of it on ground level because of the paucity of roads and trails. This is the Jémez Wilderness. Nor can you set foot in the Valle Grande itself except with a special permit. Formerly a private ranch, this huge expanse of golf course quality turf today is trodden by cattle rather than roamed by buffalo, but you can squint your eyes and imagine the herds still moving across it like a stampede of black beads in a shallow bowl.

We hurried on ahead, since the trailheads alongside Highway 4 had the appearance of a football game, with tailgating parties, weenie roasts and blaring radios.

Our destination was Jémez Springs, a crazy-quilt little hamlet that combines a Wild West saloon and New York-style delicatessen, art galleries (always art galleries) and VW bus junkyards (average vintage 1974), a nunnery of the contemplative order of the Handmaids of the Precious Blood and bath houses (yes, bath houses). After a hot-as-magma enchilada at the saloon, soothed down by Roswell Alien Amber Ale (brewed in New Mexico), we turned to the main attraction in town, at least for us, Jemez State Monument.

Ancestors of the present day people of Jémez (Walatowa) Pueblo constructed a large pueblo in the narrow San Diego Canyon and called it Giusewa, a Towa word that refers to the hot springs found nearby. We were delighted to find admission is free for New Mexico residents on Sundays and dogs are allowed (on a leash, of course). Many trails in the Jemez Mountains do not permit pets, for reasons we have never been able to fathom.

Fossil corn.





Giusewa.



Valles Caldera National Preserve.

The ruins are dominated by the crumbling hulk of a mission church flanked by priests' quarters resembling melting mud cages built for absent zoo animals. San José de los Jémez was abandoned by 1640 through a lack of interest on the natives' part in supporting the numerous Franciscan friars sent to them for their salvation, and the town itself was deserted in the Pueblo War, when its inhabitants moved to higher ground for defensive purposes.

It's a small site, but very beautiful. We strolled about the seven acres, took innumerable photographs (freely allowed, no permit required), and obeyed the only sign, which urged us to stay on the paths and respect the rattlesnakes' right to privacy. The small museum was most enjoyable, and we marveled throughout at the impeccable courtesy of the curator, a Jémez Pueblo man.

After Giusewa, we dropped in on a flea market in Jémez Pueblo proper, and that's where it happened. By "it," I refer to the sharp lump of smashed chert on the ground that spoke to me, saying, "Pick me up." I did and discovered a fossil, to all intents and purposes exactly like baby corn (see drawing). The kernels were all in a row, though they were tiny, each about half the diameter of a seed bead. I later showed it to a number of people, who all agreed, "Yep, that's corn alright."

In researching my find back at home, I was surprised to discover that everything scientists thought they knew about the origin of corn has now fallen into disfavor. Four or more theories have replaced the formerly ensconced notion that maize or Indian corn (*Zea mays*) was the result of a hybridization event between an unknown wild maize and a species of *Tripsacum*, a gama grass similar to wheat and barley. The former reigning hypothesis was dethroned by genetics, but the four or more upstart theories are still

feuding for legitimacy. The only thing they have in common is the supposition that even "primitive" corn, which evolved, almost everyone agrees, in Mexico, does not predate the tiny archeological specimens found in caves from roughly 6,000 B.C.E.

So how to account for a fossilized ear of baby corn that had to be at least 1.3 million years old, contemporary with the Valles Calde volcano or older? Are the scientists wrong about that date, too?

We don't know the answer to this riddle. Sacred places have many mysteries. You will just have to make a trip to the Jémez Mountains yourself to investigate.