

THE LOST PEOPLE OF MESA VERDE

by Elsa Marston

*The Anasazi lived peacefully on the mesa for 800 years.
Then they disappeared.*

In the dry land of southwestern Colorado a beautiful plateau rises. It has so many trees that early Spanish explorers called it Mesa Verde, which means "green table." For about eight hundred years Native Americans called the Anasazi lived on this mesa. And then they left. Ever since the cliff houses were first discovered a hundred years ago, scientists and historians have wondered why.

Anasazi is a Navajo word meaning "the ancient ones." When they first settled there, around 500 A. D., the Anasazi lived in alcoves in the walls of the high canyons. Later they moved to the level land on top, where they built houses of stone and mud mortar. As time passed, they constructed more elaborate houses, like apartment buildings, with several families living close together.

The Anasazi made beautiful pottery, turquoise jewelry, fine sashes of woven hair, and baskets woven tightly enough to hold water. They lived by hunting and by growing corn and squash. Their way of life went on peacefully for several hundred years.

Then around 1200 A.D. something strange happened, for which the reasons are not quite clear. Most of the people moved from the level plateau back down into alcoves in the cliffs. The move must have made their lives difficult because they had to climb back up to the plateau to do the farming. But it seems the Anasazi planned to stay in the canyon walls, for they soon filled the alcoves with amazing cliff dwellings. "Cliff Palace," the most famous of these, had more than two hundred rooms.

For all the hard work that went into building these new homes, the Anasazi did not live in them long. By 1300 A.D. the cliff dwellings were empty. Mesa Verde was deserted and remained a ghost country for almost six hundred years. Were the people driven out of their homes by enemies? No sign of attack or fighting, or even the presence of other tribes, has been found.

Archaeologists who have studied the place now believe there are other reasons. Mesa Verde, the beautiful green table, was no longer a good place to live. For one thing, in the second half of the thirteenth century there were long periods of cold, and very little rain fell—or else it came at the wrong time of year. Scientists know this from examining the wood used in the cliff dwellings. The growth rings in trees show good and bad growing seasons. But the people had survived drought and bad weather before, so there must have been another reason.

As the population grew, more land on the mesa top had to be farmed in order to feed the people. That meant that trees had to be cut to clear the land and also to use for houses and fuel. Without the forests, the rain began to wash away the mesa top.

How do we know about erosion problems that happened about eight hundred years ago? The Anasazi built many low dams across the smaller valleys on the mesa to slow down rain runoff. Even so, good soil washed away, and the people could no

longer raise enough food. As the forests dwindled, the animals, already over-hunted, left the mesa for mountainous areas with more trees.

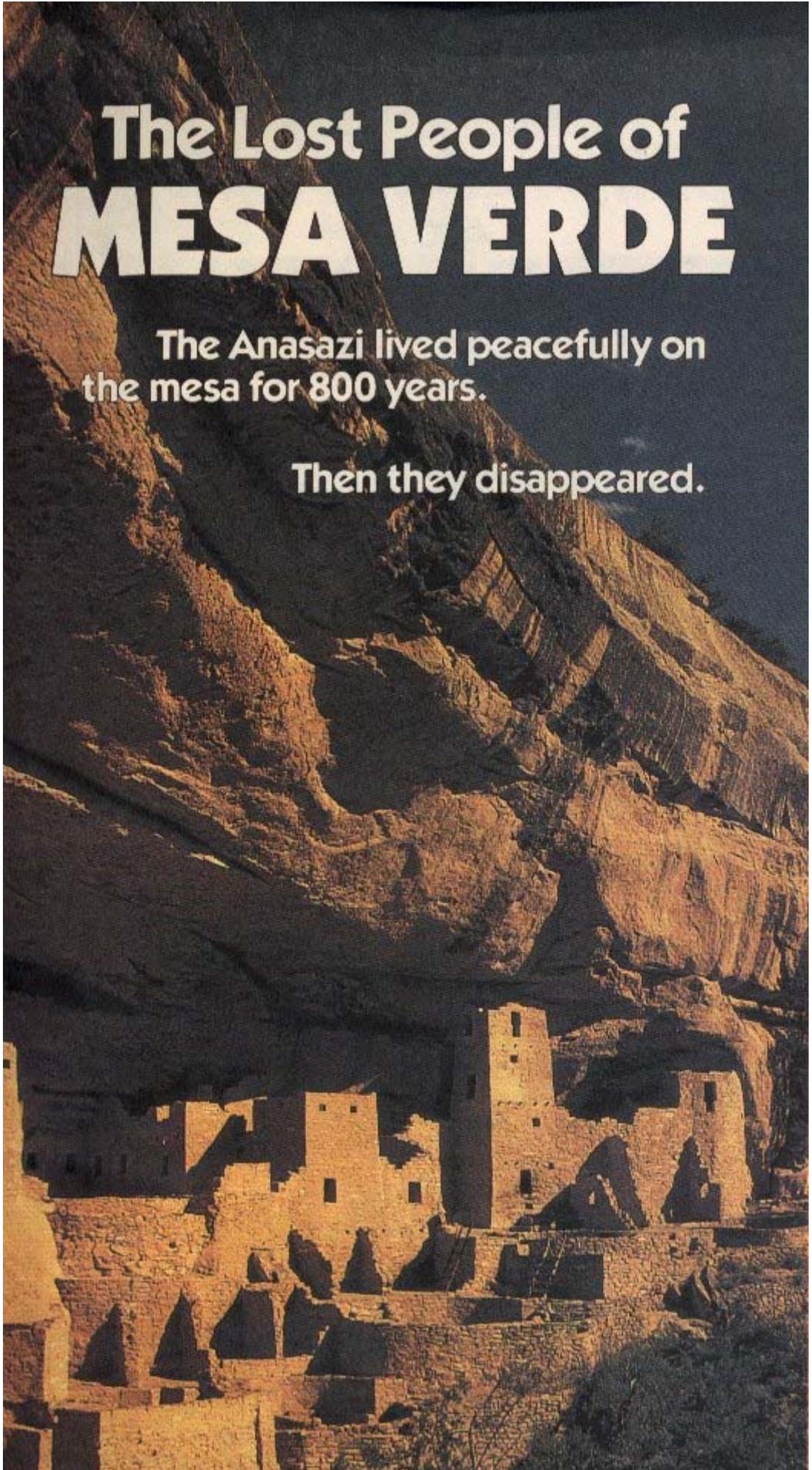
And as the mesa "wore out," so did the people. It appears that the Anasazi were not healthy. Scientists can learn a lot about ancient people's health by studying the bones and teeth found in burials. The mesa dwellers had arthritis, and their teeth were worn down by the grit in corn meal, a main part of their diet.

As food became scarce, people grew weaker. Not many lived beyond their twenties. Women died very young, and few babies survived. Living so close together in the cliff houses, where everyone was hungry and worried, the people must have suffered from emotional strain. They probably quarreled often.

In the end the Anasazi must have given up hope that things would get better. Families packed up and went away. Of course, the "ancient ones" did not simply disappear. They moved southeast to another area and mingled with other peoples. After a while their heritage as the people of the Mesa Verde was forgotten.

In time the trees grew back and the plateau became green once more. But, for the Anasazi it was too late. Although they respected nature and tried to farm wisely, land that was used too hard could not support them forever.

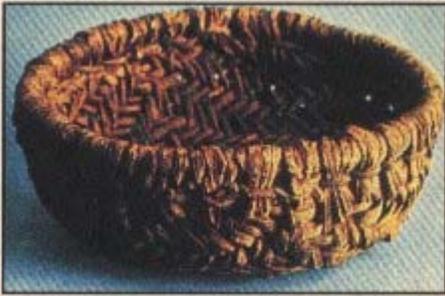
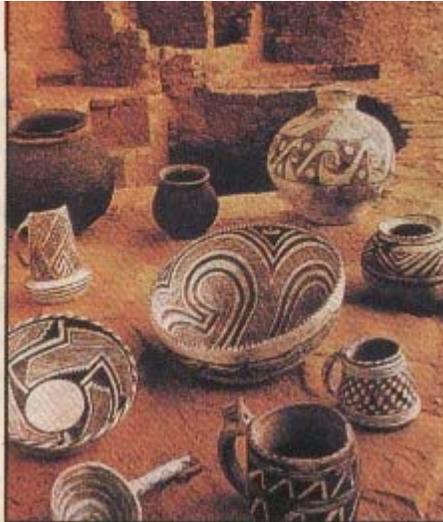
Yet in their cliff houses and crafts the "ancient ones" left us a superb monument. It is truly one of the most fascinating pictures of America's past.



The Lost People of **MESA VERDE**

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the mesa for 800 years.

Then they disappeared.



The sturdy baskets, woven sandals, and beautiful pottery left behind by the Anasazi may be 1,000 years old.



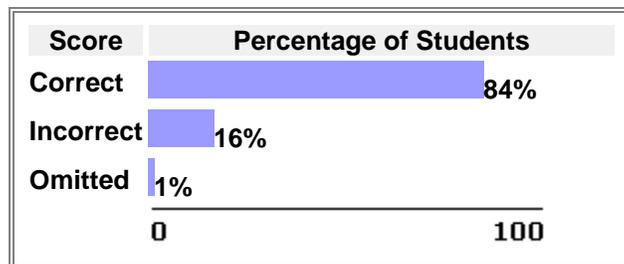
. The title and photograph on the first page of the article are probably meant to make the disappearance of the Anasazi seem to be

- A) a personal tragedy
- B) a terrible mistake
- C) an unsolved mystery
- D) an important political event

Key

1. The title and photograph on the first page of the article are probably meant to make the disappearance of the Anasazi seem to be
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1994 National Performance Results



Note:

- These results are for public and nonpublic school students.
- Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Contexts for Reading: *Reading for Information*
Aspects of Reading: *Developing Interpretation*

Contexts for Reading

Reading for Information

- Involves the engagement of the reader with aspects of the real world

Reading for information is most commonly associated with textbooks, primary and secondary sources, newspaper and magazine articles, essays, and speeches. Some features that distinguish informational text from literary text are organization and the way information is presented. Informational text is organized by topic and supporting details, whereas literary text is organized by the structure of a story, poem, or drama. Informational texts may have boldface headings, graphics, illustrations, and captions that signal importance in the text. However, some commonalities exist between literary and informational text and the skills and strategies required for reading each. Both require people to critically analyze the text, reflect on it, and draw conclusions.

When reading for information, readers need to know the specific text patterns, or forms of organization (e.g., cause and effect, sequential order, comparison/contrast, opinion and supporting arguments), to develop understanding. People frequently have different purposes for reading text of this nature—for example, to find specific pieces of information, answer a question, or get some general information when glancing through a magazine article. Reading informational text calls for orientations to the text that differ from those used in reading for literary experience because readers are specifically focused on acquiring information. When people read for information, they may select parts of the text they need, rather than reading from beginning to end.

Aspects of Reading

Developing Interpretation

To develop an interpretation, the reader must extend initial impressions to develop a more complete understanding of what was read. This process involves linking information across parts of a text as well as focusing on specific information. Questions that assess this aspect of reading include drawing inferences about the relationship of two pieces of information and providing evidence to determine the reason for an action. Questions that assess this aspect of reading include the following:

- What event marked a change in the plot or situation?
- What caused the character to _____?
- What caused this event?
- What is the meaning of _____?
- What type of person is this character? Explain.
- What does this idea imply?
- In what ways are these ideas important to the topic or theme?
- What will be the result of this step in the directions?
- What does this character think about _____?

