

SAN JUAN BASIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Chapter of Colorado Archaeological Society



FIELD TRIP REPORT

Date: **May 27 - 29, 2015**

Destination: **Keet Seel Backpack**

Leaders: **Barb and Lyle Hancock**

Number of Participants: **13**

Thirteen adventurous SJBAS members participated in this field trip to Navajo National Monument; ten backpacked into the Keet Seel cliff dwelling and two enjoyed a tour of the Betatakin site. We stopped at the Shiloh Bakery in Cortez for fresh baked cinnamon rolls, had lunch at the Anasazi Inn café in Tsegi, AZ, and arrived at Navajo National Monument just in time for our 3:00 p.m. Keet Seel orientation. Then we set up camp at the Canyon View campground. Everyone went all out providing delicious treats for happy hour. Joan took us to see a mysterious arrowhead-shaped etching in the sandstone near camp, but we could not identify its origins.

We started hiking at 8:30 a.m. the next morning with the goal of reaching Keet Seel before 2:30. The first 2.5 miles were a descent of several hundred feet into the canyon; the remainder of the 8.5-mile hike was generally on flat terrain in the wash bottom. Our shoes got wet, but it was not as difficult as expected. We set up camp in a designated backcountry campsite near Keet Seel and walked over to the site for our tours.



Our Keet Seel tour guide was Steve Hayden, whose grandfather, Irwin Hayden, was the first professionally trained archaeologist to excavate and do stabilization work at Keet Seel. In 1933 and 1934, Irwin worked side by side with John Wetherill, and Steve's father was one of the site excavation assistants. The excerpts below are from "Navajo National Monument: A Place and Its People" by Hal Rothman - 1991, An Administrative History.

"During the 1930s, two of the three major ruins in the monument received attention from the NPS. Judd's stabilization work at Betatakin in 1917 had held up well. In the early 1930s, there seemed no need for additional work. Keet Seel faced greater threats. Little work had been done in the ruin since the era of Wetherill and Cummings, and it

needed stabilization. For this purpose, the Museum of Northern Arizona sponsored a project funded through the Civil Works Administration. Archeologist Irwin Hayden took charge of the project, which worked at Keet Seel and Turkey Cave in 1933 and 1934."

“Hayden's CWA project performed work similar in character to Judd's project in 1917. At Keet Seel, Hayden's crew cleared unexamined areas, removed the dirt from backfilled ruins, recorded architectural details, and rebuilt collapsed walls. Hayden also re-excavated and stabilized two kivas in Turkey Cave, according to John Wetherill, finding much that Kidder had overlooked in 1923. The work was done well, earning Keet Seel the reputation as one of the best-preserved ruins in the Southwest.”

“Keet Seel also yielded some interesting discoveries. Early in 1934, Irwin Hayden and Milton Wetherill uncovered the skeleton of a child in a trash midden at Keet Seel. With the skeleton were two pieces of Pueblo II type pottery, far older than the ruin itself. Other finds followed, including what appeared to be the skeleton of a parrot. Such unexpected results showed that the "down-and-dirty" emphasis of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archeologists on collecting left many hidden treasures.”

As one hikes up the canyon, it is hard to imagine how the Anasazi of Keet Seel grew enough food to sustain the population of the large village. As we learned from Steve, when Keet Seel was flourishing, the valley was wide and a meandering stream provided plenty of water for marshland, crops, and small lakes. At some point during the last occupation, a significant hydrologic event caused a sand dam at the mouth of the canyon to break and subsequent down cutting of the flat valley significantly reduced the amount of land available for farming. Photos from 1909 show this down cutting to have reached Keet Seel. Since then a huge channel at least 100 feet deep in some parts is all of what remains of the once fertile agricultural landscape.

Our group enjoyed a beautiful evening at camp and headed out early the next morning for a cool walk back to the trailhead.

For all the information about Navajo National Monument you could ever want and the early days of archaeology in the Southwest, please follow this link to “Navajo National Monument: A Place and Its People” by Hal Rothman - 1991, An Administrative History.pdf. This is an amazing article with an incredible amount of information.

Prepared by: Lyle Hancock

Participants: MaryAnne Nelson, Susan Whitfield, Cathy and Jim Callahan, Barb and Lyle Hancock, Byron and Joan Kellogg, Rhonda Raffo, Jim Mueller, Bill Cagle, Sherry Suenram, and Sue Agranoff