

Scott Thompson...

(continued)

hand-to-hand combat; these had not been quiet deaths.” (pp. 157-158.)

Archaeologist Scott Ortman elucidates: “...violence [in greater Mesa Verde] appears to have involved entire villages, as exemplified by the evidence of massacres at Castle Rock and Sand Canyon pueblos...Violence during the final decades of pueblo occupation, then, appears to have involved inter-village warfare and factional conflict...social conflict was endemic, and...most of the population was concerned for their safety...There is also no clear evidence to suggest that the aggressors were anyone other than Pueblo people...the conflict may well have been internecine in nature.”

I worked my way along the rubble, the successive heaps of bright tan stones, toward the head of the canyon. When I got close I turned and gazed down the slender canyon, my view framed by green boughs and twisted limbs of juniper. The canyon walls, coated with Pinyon pine and juniper, juked out to the right, then back sharply to the left. Within the narrow “V” of the canyon walls there was a pale, creamy blue mountain range, somewhere out in Utah.

The Hisatsinom who selected this site did so with great care, seeking a place where their beloved people could live amid beauty, hoping they would also feel protected and safe.

But alas.

The loveliness of this canyon is haunted by sorrow. The terror and anguish of the innocently slaughtered seems to hang in the air. Maybe it was just my own emotional state when I was present there, but I swear I could feel their anguished energy suspended all around me. I’ll bet many others who have come here have felt it, too.

Late in the week we saw one of the motel’s owners, call her Shirley, walking across the parking lot toward us as we stood by our door. She looked to be in her mid-forties, busy with the unceasing stream of tasks and conundrums involved operating a motel. Yes, we told her, we were happy with our stay and yes, we’d gladly recommend the motel to others on a travel website.

We stood at the edge of the parking lot, chatting. She was trying to get her adult daughter to help her run the place several days a week instead of now and then. Gail and I nodded, wishing her the best of luck with that. Shirley was one of those alert, kind, stressed-out, good-hearted small town business people you so often find.

She and her husband and children had moved here fifteen years ago. When we asked what had brought them here she glanced skyward, her face softening as she talked about riding horses out on the long trails.

Gail drove first on our way back to the Albuquerque airport, across the plateau south of Durango, Colorado, on U.S. 550. It’s the sparse, spread-out country before you descend into Aztec, New Mexico. A good place for me to ponder on what we’d seen.

The Pueblo Indians insist that their ancestors did not “abandon” Mesa Verde and the Great Sage Plain. For them these ancient villages remain ancestral lands. It’s important to respect that, but it’s nevertheless fact that the Hisatsinom did physically walk out of the entire territory en masse. On this point Lekson leaves no doubt: “When the last villagers left the Mesa Verde area, sometime after 1280, the homelands were truly empty. If anyone stayed behind, we can’t see them archaeologically. The totality and finality of the evacuations suggest to me political rather than environmental processes. Complete depopulation is unusual in history...The disaster that ended Chaco and Aztec

was at least in part, and I think largely, man-made: failure of the political system.”

Why political failure in particular? Because the mega drought of 1275-1300 wasn’t awful enough on its own to have driven everyone out. Lekson says, “But here’s the kicker: our most advanced environmental modeling...shows us that they didn’t all have to leave. Even the worst periods of the Great Drought could have supported substantial numbers of people...”

This remarkable phenomenon, a true exodus, dovetails with a persuasive argument by Scott Ortman in his 2010 dissertation that many of the people comprising the Tewa Pueblos along the Rio Grande River in northern New Mexico are descended from ancestral Puebloans who migrated there from greater Mesa Verde.



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I suspect that in walking away from their homeland – voting with their feet, to borrow another of Lekson’s expressions – many had reached two conclusions about their society based on the series of disastrous experiences: that those who seek power are the least fit to exercise it and that factional conflict, once it crosses a certain threshold, is incendiary to all. I also suspect they were thinking about how to utilize the intricate religious rituals and other cultural tools they knew, traditions that had once bolstered the elites of Chaco Canyon, to suppress power-seeking and promote egalitarianism. In other words, to turn their culture upside down.

Which they accomplished. Impressively.

I believe we can learn from the Hisatsinom and today’s Pueblo Indian cultures, assuming we have the humility to accept that in certain crucial respects they have been innovative and successful whereas the mainstream American culture remains mired in an outdated, self-destructive paradigm.

Note – Hisatsinom is the Hopi word for the ancestral Pueblo Indians, which I have chosen instead of Anasazi. The latter is a Navajo-derived archaeological term not favored by Pueblo Indians of today.

(Sources: see Stephen H. Lekson, A History of the Ancient Southwest, 2008, pp. 125-131, 139, 153-156, 158-166, 182-189, 194-200, 225-251, including footnotes; Scott G. Ortman, Genes, Language and Culture in Tewa Ethnogenesis, A.D. 1150-1400, Dissertation at Arizona State University, May, 2010, pp. 168, 183, 479-489, 614-624; David E. Stuart, Pueblo Peoples on the Pajarito Plateau, 2010, pp. 58-75, 120-121.)

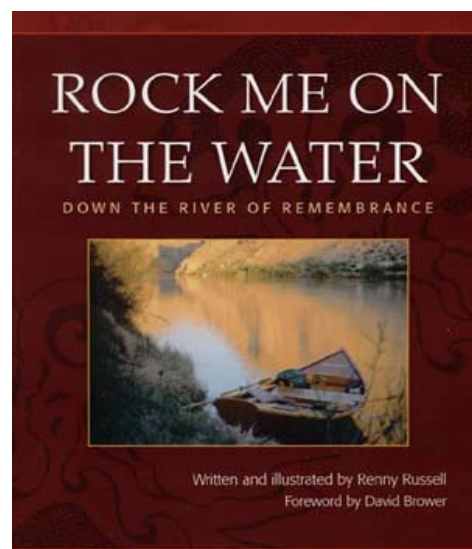
SCOTT THOMPSON is a regular Zephyr contributor.

“Renny Russell’s *Rock Me on the Water* is at its heart courageous. To return to the same power of nature that took his brother thirty years previous—to be with it, to confront it, to take solace in it, and to be inspired and healed by it—is remarkable in itself. His book is, as well, a testament to the evocative rhythms of the wilds. In this complicated dance, this profoundly personal journey, Renny Russell also gives us an amazingly spirited tour of one of the truly great landscapes of the American West and a keen understanding of its power to shape a life.”

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From Renny Russell,
the author of...





GLEN CANYON DAM...UNDER CONSTRUCTION



Before construction on the dam itself could begin, a coffer dam had to be built upstream from the site and diversion tunnels built around it. The work took a couple years. This photograph, from 1959, was taken from the new bridge that was also required to connect the two sides of the project. Note the cables traversing the canyon--materials were moved back and forth in this fashion. At the very bottom of the picture is the coffer dam.

HERB RINGER made so many trips to the desert Southwest, he could barely count them all. From 1956 to 1963, Glen canyon Dam was under construction on the Utah/Arizona border.

Herb checked in from time to time to monitor the progress...



The new dam starts to take shape. By 1961, the bottom sections of the dam had been poured and the project moved quickly, despite a strike in 1961. By January 1963, the dam had been constructed to a sufficient height to close the diversion gates and to stop the river's flow.

On March 13, 1963, the Colorado River ceased to flow in Glen Canyon.

Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of this most tragic event.

JS

HERB RINGER came West from his home in New Jersey in 1939. Camera in hand, Herb captured the American West, from the Canadian Border to the Rio Grande and from the Big Sur coast to the High Plains.

We believe Herb's collection of Life in the West is one of the finest. His work has been published in The Zephyr for 20 years. I am pleased finally, to offer Herb's photographs in color. We are also building a new 'album' of his work, elsewhere on this site.

My dear friend died on December 11, 1998...JS

