



Early Visitors to Tonto Cliff Dwellings

This passage is from “A Frontier Teacher in Tonto Basin: The 1880 Diary of Angeline Mitchell.”

Edited by Stanley C. Brown (Chapter 18, p. 115- 124)

Dec 12th [Sunday] We ate breakfast long before day and went well on our way at sunrise. I rode ‘Salim’, a horse of Mr. Armer’s. Melinda rode Brownie, the one I got from Hook, as he is not quite as gentle as Salim and Melinda is a first class rider while I’m not of late years. We went 5 ½ miles or so to the foot of Ute Mountain in which the ‘caves’ are located. We fastened our horses to brush and climbed the mountain, which was by no means an easy task as it is covered with debris from the ruined walls. One slides back a good deal like the ‘frog in the well’ who jumped ‘two feet forward & then fell back three.’ But we finally reached the dwellings. It was far superior to that I had anticipated & worth the trouble.

The dwelling is built of small rocks laid in cement and is cemented inside and out and sets well back beneath an overhanging rock. The rock is, I should think, about 200 feet high and curves something like this. We found traces of a 33 rooms and some 18 of them are in fair preservation. It has been seven or eight stories high, or perhaps more, I should think from the poles still clinging high up to the rock. There was originally an opening in the outer wall but the dwellers in the house climbed up a ladder of some sort and went in at the second story, as the Zunis and kindred tribes do yet! One room is walled up solidly without any door opening into it. Of course one can enter is now from above for the ceiling is partly fallen in. Another had a door originally but for some reason the people living there decided to close that room also and so smoothly and well was the work done that not a trace of any doorway having ever been there can be seen from outside the room. But inside of it one can easily see the rocks filling in the doorway, laid up in cement but not cemented over on the inside. When the ceiling of this room was intact, after the door was walled up, it must have been nearly air tight and one wonders why it was done. It is located in a rather central situation in the second story. One can conjecture several reasons. It may have been to hide treasure, to hide a crime, to punish or for several other reasons.

In one room in the first story a Mr. Danforth (I think is the name) two years ago this winter found the skeleton of an infant in the wall about 5 ft from the floor, or possibly a little less. I saw the place today. The child was wrapped in many folds of a silky looking cotton cloth, like some we found in the same room. Tom says (and he was here when the child was found) the material had a kind of drawn pattern in small diamonds and stars, and had shredded bark in its mouths and ears like a mummy, and sandals of yucca fiber on its feet made like a pair we dug from another part of the ruin only very much smaller. Then there were some turquoise and red pipe-clay beads, clay toys, a doll and dog, and bone ornaments with it. Also a number of other trifles. The place in which it lay was hallowed out of the wall and cemented inside smoothly. Then the tiny corpse was laid in and a few rocks laid up in cement hid it forever from its parents, and then outside was smoothly cemented till it could not be distinguished from the rest of the wall.

Another room has on its eastern wall a hieroglyphic representing probably the sun and some other lines that might be anything. In several places are prints of fingers or of the hand complete and perfect as the days ages ago when the hands were pressed into the plastic clay. There is not much to be seen in the building that I’ve not time to speak of. One ought to stay a week to explore it if they hope to satisfy their curiosity.

A second cliff house is separated from the first by a gulch...It is the most perfect I have ever seen, with traces of 22 rooms. 16 are in fair order, 3 of them and a hall are as perfect as the day they were finished. The hall is a narrow space between two rooms and has a short flight of steps leading to a tiny landing on the upper floor. The stairs are quite wide but very low, not more than 3 ¼ to 4 ¼ inches I should think in height, from one step to the next, and so worn by the myriad feet that ascended and descended them as to be hollow troughs in the center.

We were rambling around one of the upper story rooms exclaiming on the extremely fine state of preservation it was in, when Clara saw something in the dark corner she wanted to look at and started toward it. The floor was covered with various sorts of trash several inches deep and she 'waded' towards the corner. Suddenly there was a scream and the place where Clara had stood was vacant but certainly not silent for heartrending cries came from below. For a minute we stood nearly petrified with fright and then I flew out of the room and down the stairs to a room opening from the landing on the east side. Poking my candle in, I beheld Clara, hysterical from her scare, sitting in an immense heap of chollas that filled the room half way to the ceiling & were evidently stored there by rats, tho for what purpose I'm sure I can't guess. Truly this was appalling! But when Clara saw that she could reach the door by crawling thro' that agonizing pile of thorns she bravely stopped crying and started. The only aid any one could give her was to hold the candle so she could see and that I did. If we had had a rope we might have lowered it down the aperture she fell through and pull her up. It would have been less painful. But there was not rope, so she crawled out and if we had not been frightened at the consequences of so many cholla thorns in the poor child's tender flesh we would certainly have laughed for a more ridiculous object was never seen.

The chollas were all over her clothes, her limbs and her hair and piled up 8 and 10 deep till she was a walking stack of them. Well, we took her and pulled off all the big ones till we reached inner layer, which was attached principally to her skin. And then trouble for us and agony for her began in earnest. Of course the cruel, hooked barbs broke from the cholla rather than let go the flesh and after we finally got the last whole cholla off she still had scores of those thorns all over her, excepting her face. Then we girls half led, half carried her to an empty room, one where there was not much debris, though dust of course. Spread my big waterproof down on the floor, stripped her and two of us, Alice & I, picked and cut and pulled out all the cholla we could while Melinda got all the thorns possible out of her clothes. We had part of a bottle of milk left from lunch as we rubbed her with that. It eased the pain a little. She dressed and we took her to a cozy corner outside under some mesquite, rolled her up snugly in our cloaks and she sobbed herself to sleep. Melinda, who had made several trips to the cave, so to whom it was an old story, offered to stay with her while Alice and I continued exploring. So we returned to the ruins and after spending another half hour getting the cholla out of our hands, we began (exploring) where we left off. Tom & Frank & Bud had examined the upper room and the place Clara fell thro' was an opening for a trap door. Probably there used to be a ladder extending to the lower floor. Our cholla incident had taken a long two hours, so we hurried our inspection. We found many finger prints here too, and a room that evidently had been a kitchen. The floor is formed partly by a big rock (which also forms part of the side) and in this rock were ½ a dozen mutates hallowed out of it and varying in size, depth & shade. This rock wall and the ceiling above were black with smoke and there was a quantity of aches etc. in it.