

THE COLORADO CLIFF DWELLINGS ASSOCIATION

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The Colorado Cliff Dwellings Association was a group active from 1900 to 1930 which lobbied very actively for the commissioning of Montezuma Reserve, also known as Cliff Dweller Park, and, for a few years now, as Mesa Verde National Park. The story of the CCDA centers around one woman, Mary Virginia Donaghe McClurg.

Under the guidance of Mrs. McClurg the CCDA supported a lobbying campaign of letter-writing, speeches, publications, stereo-opticon presentations and on-site protection for the ruins of the Mesa Verde by leasing the land from the Utes on which the ruins stood in 1901. The initial goal of the CCDA was to gain a park status to protect the ruins found there.

How Mrs. McClurg came to know of the Indian ruins of the Mesa Verde is unknown to me, but she did journey there in 1882, taking the train to Durango from Colorado Springs through Alamosa and then riding a freight wagon to Mancos, paying for freighter passage by weight. She could not have known of the major ruins high in the Canons of the Mesa, they were yet to be discovered by Al and Richard Wetherill and Charles Mason in 1888, '89 and '90. One ruin they did not discover was the Brown Stone Front, or Balcony Front, known today as Balcony House. The discovery was made by Cassius Viets, a member of an exploring party organized by Mrs. McClurg in October, 1886. Obviously the purpose of this trip was to collect "relics". An interesting note here is the stated purpose of the Cliff Dwellings Association, to protect and preserve the Ruins and their Artifacts! But that came about a few years later.

Mrs. McClurg was the principal behind much of the interest in the ruins, creating interest that brought relic-hunters whom she so despised. For instance, H. Jay Smith, a flamboyant entrepreneur of the day, learned of the ruins from Mrs. McClurg. She was enough of a radical to seek unusual causes—lecturing for Women's Suffrage at the Unity Church in Denver in 1894. In 1893 she lectured at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago on Anthropology, most certainly based on her familiarity with the Mesa Verde ruins as she had no formal training in the Social Sciences or field Archaeology. In 1900 she was invited to address the Ethnological Congress at the Paris Exposition on the Cliff Dwellings. She was awarded the Gold Palm of the Order of Officier del' Instruction Pub~lique.

Both Mary Virginia Donaghe and Gilbert McClurg came west for their health in the late 1870's. They met in Colorado Springs and married in 1889. She was a prolific writer, writing for the *Valley Virginian* and the *New York Daily Graphic* as a correspondent. Later she worked for the *Daily Republic* in Colorado Springs for five years as a writer-editor. Together they wrote a *Quarto Centennial of Statehood*. She wrote a history of El Paso County; he wrote a history of Pueblo County. They published a magazine called *Mountain Sunshine*, highlighting the economic development of the Pikes Peak region, especially in heavy industry. She was recognized as a poet, winning a prize for an *Ode on Irrigation* presented at the 11th National Irrigation Congress in Ogden, Utah, in 1903.

Mrs. McClurg's involvement in the CCDA started from the first moment that a committee was established by the Colorado Federation of Woman's Clubs at their annual meeting, October, 1897, in Pueblo, Colorado, concerning itself with the preservation of the Mesa Verde Ruins. The following year the General Federation of Women's Clubs held their Biennial Meeting in Denver. The Committee established by the State



Mrs. Virginia Donaghe McClurg
-Tutt Library



Baron Gustav Nordenskiöld
-Cliff Dwellers of the Mesa Verde

Federation was recognized as a Standing Committee of the National group. It was this committee which ultimately incorporated, in Colorado, as the Colorado Cliff Dwellings Association in 1900 with Mrs. McClurg as the Regent General. She held this post until her death April 29, 1931.

People were interested in the Cliff Dwellings primarily due to the "relics" to be found there. The buildings were recognized as Puebloan structures, Indian-made and very old. Ruins in the Dolores and Mancos Valleys were reported as early as 1859 by a government exploring party led by Captain J. N. Macomb. A geologist in the party, Professor J. S. Newberry, climbed the Mesa to report of its mineral wealth. W. H. Jackson photographed some of the minor ruins of the region while part of the Hayden Survey in 1874. A geologist in the Hayden party wrote an extensive report about the ruins.

The most famous explorer of the Mesa would probably be Baron Gustav Nordenskiold, who made the first extensive report and analysis of the ruins in his book *Cliff Dwellings of the Mesa Verde*, published in Stockholm in 1893. He collected with the Wetherill brothers, Al and Richard, in 1890. Nordenskiold did as much for encouraging the restriction of "relic-hunters" as any could by the fact that he was a Norwegian. The thought that something truly American was being removed from the area and the country was simply untenable to most people the least bit interested in the ruins, and even many who did not know them at all! He was characterized as stealing a National Resource. Of course he was not stealing anything that was not being removed by the local citizenry for sale to the highest bidder. The primary complaint was that he was a Foreigner and he was taking something American out of America. The fact that his work was the first attempt to perform actual Archaeologic study in the ruins is handily overlooked.

Many collections of "relics" were made. Mrs. McClurg made at least two, consisting of pottery and woven goods, the first in 1886, the second sometime after "the Danes and Norwegians took many of the best speci-



Cliff Palace—from *Cliff Dwellers of the Mesa Verde*

mens of pottery and other things." She considered hers fully justified however.

The Wetherill brothers, Richard, Alfred, Clayton and John and their brother-in-law Charles Mason, are accused of removing hundreds of "relics". To my knowledge they made four major collections on the Mesa: the first went to the State Historical and Natural History Society in Denver, the second was for the H. Jay Smith Exploring Company for the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1892 and eventually went to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, the third was for Baron Nordenskiöld and the fourth was made for the State of Colorado for the Columbian Exposition. This last collection also went to the State Historical Society. Mrs. McClurg sanctioned the State's collection but she criticized the H. Jay Smith collection because he used it as a side-show. It was said that Smith dug up a Hopi not three weeks dead and exhibited him as a Cliff Dweller Mummy.

Archaeology in America was still a budding science in the late 19th century. A great many people were aware of the value of artifacts left in-situ, but the wealth of material available encouraged removal of objects for sale. Even the Smithsonian had a representative, a Professor J. Herkomer Prentice, come to Denver in 1899 to buy "relics" of the Cliff Dwellers. This encouraged the removal of objects of course. A few scholars visited the Mesa, in 1891 a Dr. W. R. Birdsall, also in '91 Baron Nordenskiöld, in 1901 J. W. Fewkes was the guest of the CCDA and in 1904 J. A. Jeancon worked on the Mesa. Fewkes would become the first official Archaeologist under the Department of the Interior in 1908.

The first intent of the CCDA was to protect the ruins. They accomplished this in two ways, first by discouraging the collection and sale of "relics" and second by leasing the land from the Ute Indians in 1901 and hiring a man to watch over the area. Mrs. McClurg received authorization from the Department of the Interior to act as an agent to the Utes for the CCDA. The lease nearly died of Bureaucracy as the Interior Department *rewrote* the lease after it had been signed. The copy of the lease in the Pioneers Museum of Colorado Springs has a Joseph O. Smith recorded as the agent acting for the Utes. But on the CCDA copy, Joseph O. Smith *never signed*. I assume he signed the one that went to the Interior Department. Once the CCDA had a legal hold on the land they proceeded to build a wagon road up to the Mesa. The ranchers in the Mancos Valley all wanted the road to pass their property. It was the CCDA which funded the first major stabilization and restoration of a ruin in the proposed park by contracting with the Interior Department for J. W. Fewkes to do the work on Balcony House in 1901.

The consensus of opinion regarding protecting the ruins was that the only practical way to keep them accessible to the public over a long period of time was to make the area a State or Federal Park. As early as 1894

Senator E. O. Wolcott carried a petition signed at the dedication of Coburn Library in Colorado Springs to Washington encouraging the commissioning of the area as a National Park. Colorado Governor Charles S. Thomas was charged by the State Historical and Natural History Society to write Senators Wolcott and Teller and Representatives Shafroth and Bell in 1900 suggesting that the Park be held under Federal control to keep it out of local politics. A minor point was alluded to regarding the cost of developing and maintaining the area. Senator H. M. Teller was against the Park idea supposedly because he did not wish to see arable land tied up in Government hands. A negative hint was there about placing state lands under Federal control. Generally, most opinions favored a Federal Park.

Representative John F. Shafroth attempted to write a bill creating a Park in 1899, but the lack of a legal description prevented this. A map had been obtained from Civil Engineer Harper in Durango but it was not based on an actual survey. A better description was provided by the CCDA to Representative Shafroth, including a map, who wrote a House Bill entitled *Creating the Colorado Cliff Dwellings National Park*. It was never acted upon.

There was a growing awareness in the Federal Government about the considerable number of natural wonders and prehistoric artifacts that needed government protection. C. C. Goodale of the Interior Department wrote to Mrs. McClurg January 30, 1900, seeking information about the Mesa Verde. The letter requested information about "tracts of land on the Public domain, which, for their scenic beauty, natural wonders or curiosities, ancient ruins or relics, or other objects of scientific or historic interest, or springs of medicinal or other properties, should be protected and utilized in the interest of the public, recommending that the same should be set apart and reserved". Goodale went on to inquire about the ruins in southwestern Colorado and about "some organization" that had an interest in the area. This letter was only a hint of the forthcoming legislation introduced by Congressman Lacey of Iowa that is known today as the Federal Antiquities Act of 1906. The Antiquities Act does reserve, protect and restrain any activity that would disturb a historic site until a proper survey has been made. But the Mesa Verde National Park was not initiated by this act.

Prior to the Lacey Conservation Bills, a Representative Hogg introduced a bill in the House creating the new National Park. Realizing that this was initiated at the same moment that the Antiquities Act was being legislated it is no surprise that both Mrs. McClurg and Representative Francis E. Leupp, a former Commissioner of Indian Affairs, were rather negative towards the Hogg Bill. Representative Leupp stated his view of the Hogg Bill calling it "a perfectly unnecessary bit of legislation".

Nevertheless, the Hogg Bill came up for a final vote. When it was discovered that the boundaries contained in the description of the area

were of the Mesa but did *not* include any of the major ruins, an amendment was attached, the Brooks-Leupp Amendment, which corrected the boundaries to be set aside. So it came about that on June 29, 1906, the Mesa Verde National Park was commissioned by an Act of Congress.

The CCDA and Mrs. McClurg's involvement did not end with the commissioning of the Park, she continued to encourage interest and generate support, voicing her complaints about government "red tape" slowing development of the Park and lecturing about the Cliff Dwellings. She continued to be active in a number of organizations including the CCDA, the DAR, the Society of Mayflower Descendants, Descendants of Colonial governors and several others. In September, 1917, she staged an Indian Legend at Spruce Tree House, the *Pageant of the Marriage of the Dawn and the Moon*. "She dramatized, set to music, costumed and personally conducted with 24 actors. . ." this "Cliff Dwelling Legend". How Mrs. McClurg learned of, or recognized this as a cliff dwelling legend I don't know. It was claimed to have been performed for "several hundred spectators".

Mrs. McClurg died April 29, 1931, and was interred at Stonington, Connecticut where she and Gilbert had a second home. The Colorado Springs Chapter of the CCDA had grown old also and only survived her 4½ months, disbanding September 18, 1931.

Postscript

The demise of the parent group notwithstanding, the California Chapter of the CCDA was still active in 1944.

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