

Sampson, Michael P.

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Dolores Archaeological Project
Rural Route 1
17219 CR 26
Dolores, CO 81323

Historic Archaeology on the Dolores
Archaeological Project, Dolores, Colorado

by

Michael P. Sampson

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Mexico.

It was my pleasure this past summer and fall to have been affiliated with the Dolores Archaeological Program, headquartered in Dolores, Colorado. The project is directed by David A. Breternitz of the University of Colorado, and funded through a contract to that school from the Water and Power Resources Service. This agency will be constructing a reservoir in a valley of the Dolores River, contiguous to the town of Dolores.

The historic studies crew of the Dolores Archaeological Program was small, while a large amount of land had to be investigated (which was to be impacted in 1980). We, therefore, concentrated our efforts on the fieldwork; the major portion of this research was accomplished before any substantive data from oral history interviews had been compiled. The field work focused on an area of the river valley designated as the first year impact zone; construction of the dam is scheduled to begin in the spring of this year.

During the past summer and fall, field research in the project area by the historic studies crew centered around an inventory of all evidence for historic period activity. (We can say that the historic period began with a Spanish expedition which spent one night in the area in the mid-1700s. Though, actual white settlements, that is, non-Native American, came late to the Dolores River Valley, around 1877; they were sheep and cattle ranchers.) This evidence was recorded either as a site or isolated find. A site is defined as any evidence of human activity which can stand alone as a phenomenon of historical significance--either local, statewide, or nationwide. An isolated find may be defined as evidence of human activity which is

incomplete (or incon^cclusive) without reference to some other evidence. Thus, isolated foot^bbridges, stock ponds, dumps, or farm machinery do warrant recording, but lack significance without reference to a site (which may be a canal through the valley, or a cattle ranch, etc.).

Since destruction of all sites in the area stands imminent (no sites will be saved), the historic studies crew felt it was imperative to complete an inventory of all sites and isolated finds while also recording them in detail.

To record a site or isolated find, the historic studies crew mapped and measured all features, noted all architectural details, and took a large number of photographs. To accomplish these tasks, the crew followed a standardized procedure:

- (1) Items mapped by transit at any one site, include:
 - a) all structures and other evidence of use.
 - b) significant topographic features.
 - c) water sources, including nearby irrigation works, streams, springs, etc. (in addition to on-site wells and cisterns).
 - d) vegetation communities--we were most interested in plotting sources of wood (many structures in the project area are log), and disturbance contexts which may be indicative of activity areas.
 - e) roads, pathways.
- (2) Structures and all other evidence were measured; distances between site features were noted.

From the mapping and measuring, we produced a site map. One that adequately recorded the evidence that was present, as well as indicating intra-site associations. I felt that such information (when derived from farm and ranch sites) would aid in our analysis of agricultural practices in the river valley. These are always practical reasons to explain the lay-out of a farm or ranch.

- (3) Architectural details for all standing structures and structural remains, were recorded. We aided in this task by two small publications: one booklet was an Architectural Description Guide put out by the Washington State Historic Preservation Office, and another was the Procedural

Guide for Historic Resources Inventory put out by the California Department of Parks and Recreation. The crew found that both booklets were easy to use, helpful in organizing our recording procedure, and easy to pack in the field.

(4) All sites and isolated finds were photographed from several different angles and lighting conditions; at farms and ranches, all standing structures were shot from various angles. I have found photography to be an indispensable tool in my research, particularly in a situation like at the Dolores Archaeological Program, where all the sites will be destroyed soon. The use of photography as a research tool must not be underestimated.

During the past field season, 58 sites and 36 isolated finds were recorded. A large portion of this evidence dates from the 1930s, 40s, and 50s; this may be an artifact of modern land use in the river valley which does destroy evidence of earlier use.

The Dolores Archaeological Program's historic site inventory was the first major research on historic data in the region. Prior to our work, the only field research on historic sites in the project area consisted of a short-term survey, in which 14 sites were minimally recorded. At that time, no oral history interviews were conducted.

I would now like to present slides taken during this past season's field work, which give you an indication of what the project area looks like, and the type of evidence we found.

SLIDE #1 - As you see from this slide, the project area lies in the southwestern corner of Colorado, near the Four Corners region of the American Southwest.

SLIDE #2 - The wide expanse of land depicted here is an area called Sagehen Flats. A large number of farms and ranches recorded in the project

area lie on Sagehen Flats. The rectangular body of water is the remnant of a log pond. The lumber mill town of McPhee once stood on the flat at the bottom of the slide, operating from 1924 until the mid-1940s. In its day, it was the largest lumber mill in Colorado.

The slide points up a major problem in recording the historic evidence in the Dolores River Valley, for little of McPhee remains. Here, old photographs, records, and oral history interviews are proving invaluable.

SLIDE #3 - This is a view of the south end of the project area. The Dolores River is in the middle, to the right are gravel pits. Gravel quarrying is a principal economic pursuit in the river valley around the town of Dolores today.

Because the river valley is narrow, usable land on many of the farms and ranches in the project area was limited. Many people living in the river valley grew their cash crops on the mesa tops overlooking the river, as is shown here. The most important cash crops in the area were pinto beans, wheat, and (secondarily) potatoes; all are dry land crops, well-adapted to the climate of SW Colorado.

SLIDE #4 - While on the subject of farming and crops, I thought a slide of abandoned farm machines would be appropriate. Abandoned farm equipment and miscellaneous tools provide an excellent source of information during our field research. These data allowed us to predict at least one principal economic pursuit at a site, i.e., farming. Since certain types of farm machinery are adapted to a particular crop, we could accurately suggest what types of crops had been grown on a farm.

SLIDE #5 - This two storey, cement block house (5MT4566) is unique for the area and one of the more dramatic structures. The historic studies crew feels confident that the construction plans, building material and hardware for the house were ordered from the Sears Roebuck & Co. catalog.

The plans and materials noted in a reprint of the 1908 Sears catalog are identical to those of this house; the date stone over the front door reads "1908".

SLIDE #6 - This hewn log and wood plank house (5MT5172) was built by two brothers^S who migrated to the Dolores River Valley from Central Texas in 1925. These men obviously made do with what building materials were most easily available. At this site, it included cottonwood logs, crudely hewn by adze, and rough-cut wood planks probably acquired from the McPhee lumber mill; the roof being composed of scavenged pieces of corrugated sheet metal, and flattened tin from cans and stove pipe. Most typically, structures in the project area were made from easily available, inexpensive raw materials. It was hard^A times financially in the early decades of the 1900s for rural America, when most of the farms and ranches in the river valley were settled. People who migrated to the area had few resources at their command, except those acquired by their own labor. Structures found around the project area reflect this condition.

SLIDE #7 - This is the shell of a large four-room house (5MT5069), last occupied in 1952. The house was scavenged by hunters and other illegal squatters in subsequent years. Many architectural details were impossible to record, due to destruction sustained on the walls and roof. Other sites were similarly affected, for long-abandoned structures are susceptible to this damage. Our work was hindered in some cases, because of these incidents.

SLIDE #8 - The remains of a cement house foundation (5MT5077) are depicted here. The damage to the foundation, found on other structural remains in the project area, are characteristic of structures which have been jacked up on blocks to allow for removal of the structure by trailer.

SLIDE #9 - The same house (5MT5077) being moved; some structures were salvaged by locals under our noses, so to speak.

SLIDE #10 - Many structures encountered in the project area had collapsed, as is the case in this slide (5MT5057). Here, the roof and, at least one wall, has fallen onto the flooring. Probably, as a result of salvaging wood from the house, subsequent to its abandonment.

SLIDE #11 - Some structures in the project area were represented by foundations, only. Under these circumstances, site survey data is inadequate for our research; information from local informants proved invaluable for accurately recording the sites.

These slides point up the need for oral history interviews to complement data from field investigations. Though, I feel much information can be derived from field work. Our work in the Dolores River Valley provided an opportunity to test the predictive power of archaeological site survey observations on a specific data base, 20th Century American agricultural communities, given the availability of numerous knowledgeable local informants and public documents to provide confirming or contradictory evidence.

In hypothesizing on site function and past activities at a site during our field research, the historic studies crew relied on various "clues" which typically could be found at farms and ranches around the project area. The use of abandoned farm equipment in our field research was discussed previously. The types of buildings present on a site proved to be an interpretable source of information concerning types of animals maintained, crops grown (if any), and other activities performed. The orientation of the buildings suggest methods used for adapting to the environment, which is as aid to the formulation of hypotheses on historic period land use.

This information and multitudinous data on other site phenomenon (e.g., fences, dumps, etc.) must be collected; I feel they can help provide detailed descriptions of past behavior on (historic) agricultural sites. I am confident that a body of theory dealing with form and function of American

farms and ranches can be generated, which in the future should enhance the power of archaeological field observations on this data base. This is important, for we must face the reality that agricultural land is disappearing at an alarming rate, due to the construction of new dams, subdivisions, even changes in the business of agriculture (for example, in California alone, as estimated 50,000 or more acres of land are developed each year). The archaeological community must be prepared to handle the job of recording the cultural resources on these lands expeditiously, so that the memory of this life style is not lost forever.