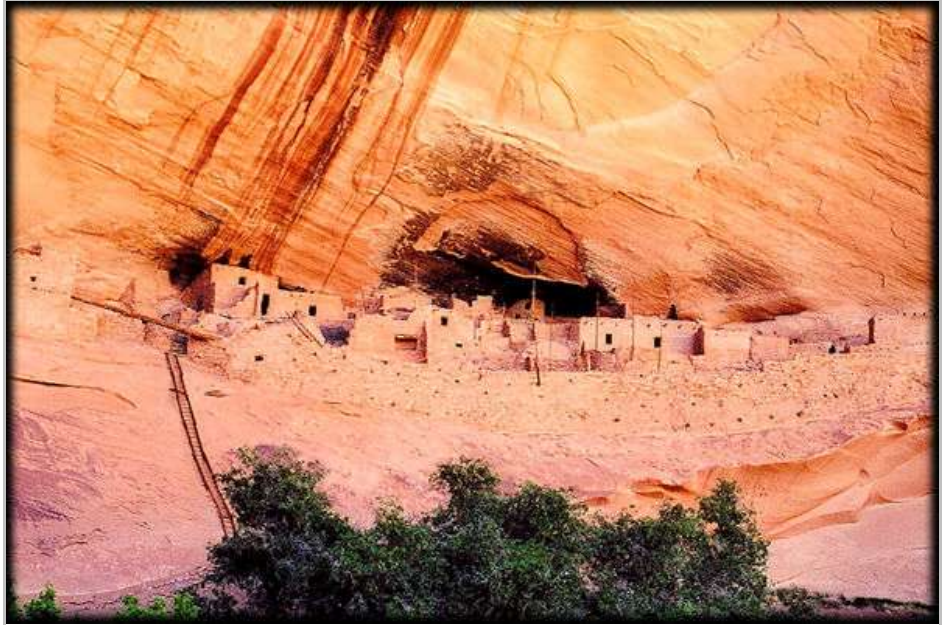


“ Name Game ”

“Just three more miles,” I remember thinking to myself. “Only another three miles. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other, and soon you’ll be there.” This was after having already walked, or I should say trudged, over five miles through the intense mid-day sun of a blazing pre-solstice June day. It was well over a hundred degrees in the sun. There was no point in thinking about the temperature in the shade—there wasn’t much of that to be seen.

Though I was exhausted, I persisted anxiously, for at the end of that long slog lay *Keet Seel*, the most spectacular set of cliff dwellings in Arizona, and in the country second in size only to those of *Cliff Palace*, not far away inside the Colorado angle of the Four Corners. One minute I was grumbling under my breath, cursing the National Park Service for making me walk all the way to the ruins; in the next moment I was thankful for that. Were it not for the necessary, grueling hike, the ruins would surely be overwhelmed by tourists and ill-intentioned visitors. And then I would not have had this chance to know them intimately, to feel their serene presence.

I was plodding through Keet Seel Canyon, as my mind randomly wandered through aimless thoughts and recollections—anything to help pass the time. Winding back and forth across the murky creek in its bottom, the trail seemed endless. Fields of fresh-smelling cow-pies, the buzzing of deer flies and mosquitoes, and an occasional patch of quicksand made for brief train-of-thought interruptions. Towering above on both sides of this baking scene were sheer walls of orange Navajo Sandstone, itself also looking as



Talastima (aka Keet Seel), in northern Arizona.

parched as its geohistory suggests: ancient wind-blown sands of a vast Sahara-like desert that offered little hope or refuge to the denizens of its time: monstrous lizards, gigantic insects, and other Jurassic wanderers.

Then, around a bend, up and over a rise in the crumbly alluvium of the stream bench, through a leafy gap in the old oak trees, and there it was! More inspiring than I had imagined, and set into an awesome hollow in the canyon wall, were the remains of an ancient village only discovered in 1895. No doubt Keet Seel looked no different now from how it appeared to its discoverers. Or to its one-time inhabitants who abandoned it around 700 years ago. Except for a long ladder leading up and into the ruins (put there by the Park Service), it is pretty much untouched.

As with other ruins I’ve explored in the Southwest, here was one more mystery to be unraveled. The people who last occupied Keet Seel—*wait*—let’s stop right here and talk about its name. Keet Seel is derived from the *Navajo* “remains of a square house”, and to be sure, many of the rooms there are squared-off. But the Navajo did not build this place. They didn’t have anything to do with it.

Long before the Indians we call the Navajo entered the region, ancient peoples of the Colorado Plateau built this structure and others in an area of mostly arid, rugged mesas and maze-like canyons. We call those people the *Anasazi*, but that is a Navajo word for something like “ancestral enemies”. The descendants of those cliff-dwellers are the *Hopi* and *Zuni* tribes of northern Arizona, not the Navajo, and they call their ancestors *Hisatsinom*, which means “the old ones”. And they call this magnificent walled city *Talastima*, which means something like “Place of the Corn Tassel”. It must have been a place of fertility – a place where crops grew easily along the stream, a place which offered life, sanctuary, and security.

The Hopi do not like the fact that places of their heritage have Navajo names, and they like even less that the Navajo now occupy most of their ancestral homeland. There is not much to be done about that now. But from what I’ve seen

in Park Service documents, there is a movement to call these special places also by the Hopi names that probably reflect the real *intent* of the builders. Those who walked away from Talastima in approximately 1300 CE (Current Era) may have meant to return. Maybe they knew they were leaving forever. We'll never know which, or why they left. The *abandonment*, as it is called by archaeologists, remains one of the greatest mysteries of North American prehistory. Across the Southwest, including the heartland of the *Hohokam* people who lived in the Valley of the Sun around Phoenix, something happened – something which caused all there to just walk away, or maybe run.



Ruins of kivas and homes at Talastima, near the Four Corners.

Climbing up the narrow ladder into the ruins, I couldn't help thinking about how determined the builders of this place had been—determined to live there, right *there*, in that giant opening in the rock—especially since much easier places on which to build were situated just below it, nearer the stream.

Place names have always interested me. The name of a place, be it a mountain, a valley, or a city, can come from a *special feature*, *power*, or *influence*. Examples? Think of *Great Falls*, Montana, with its roaring cascades; *Death Valley*, California, with its “killer” climate; or *Phoenix*, Arizona, site of a “reborn” city, and named after the mythical bird. Indians were particularly good at framing the essence of a place in its name. For some reason, European-Americans seem to be hung-up on the distinctly unimaginative method of naming places after people, many times those who had nothing to do with the place. Consider *Denali* (North America's highest mountain, from the *Athapaskan* “the Great One”) versus *Mt. McKinley* (whoever McKinley was—yes, I know who he was, and he never set foot in Alaska).

A name can also *confer* special power, or influence. What has always stopped me cold in a moment of realization when visiting abandoned sites such as Talastima, is the question of *what its creators called it*. All over today's Southwest are ruins of forlorn cities, pueblos, and cliff dwellings, and yet we don't know what any of them were called by their inhabitants. The

names of today are what *we* call them, or what the *modern-day Indians* call *them*. We will never know what the families of Talastima named their “village with a view”.

Whatever they called it, it had to be a special place to them, too. Was it supposed to be this well-hidden back then? Did the natives intend it to be so hard to find? Did the location possess some spirituality? Or did they just like the panorama? These questions and more ran through my mind as I stood at the top of the ladder (making sure I didn't step backwards), and looked around.

Consisting of some 160 rooms and kivas (sunken ceremonial structures), and built in several phases between 950 CE and 1286 CE, perhaps 150 people at a time lived here. While the Great Khan's armies were ravaging Eastern Europe, and Christian armies were battling Muslim armies over the Holy Land, the builders of Talastima were putting finishing touches on their homes. The structures are made of stones, timbers, sticks, and mud, and because of the dry climate and protection afforded by the overhang of the cave, they still look much like they must have looked to the residents. Only a few years after the last construction episode, the occupants left. Scattered around even now, all over, are hundreds of pot shards (fragments of ceramic pottery), and even dried up corn cobs, which amazingly enough are those left behind by the villagers.

Whatever crisis they faced at about the end of our Thirteenth Century, they at least had the time, or *took the time*, to stock some of the rooms with

supplies (mostly dried corn), and seal them off. When discovered by nineteenth century ranchers, the storehouses were relatively intact. When they left, were they leaving for good, leaving offerings to higher powers, and saying goodbye to home? Or were they planning on coming back, leaving a stockpile in place so that the return would be an easy one?

I paused there, these thoughts echoing in my mind. The Park Service Ranger I was with had his own thoughts, too, as does everyone, I imagine, who makes it here and stands in this spot, looking around in awe. "Why would people put so much work into such a place," I thought to myself, "and then just go away?" And how could such an abandonment have happened across so much of the land, that ruins now are to be found from the Rocky Mountains to the Grand Canyon, from the gorges of Utah to the Sierra Madre of Mexico?

I know, that if we knew the real name of this place—not *Talastima*, or *Keet Seel*—we would know *why* they built there. We would know what they intended when they hauled tons of stone, timber, and earth up an almost sheer face of sandstone (no ladder back then—only some hand holds and narrow footholds) to create this place of now tranquil, sublime beauty. Knowing that name, we might even know *why they left*.

Talastima (Keet Seel) lies within Navajo National Monument, near the Four Corners in northern Arizona, and can be visited only between Memorial Day and Labor Day, by permit. It is a seventeen mile hike, round trip.

To learn more about Arizona's natural wonders, including the Phoenix area's engaging rock formations and prehistory, visit www.gemland.com, and go to the "GeoScenery" section. Click on any name on the map to begin a series of images. There are geologic explanations available in pop-up windows, and you can send any web scene to your friends as an E-postcard for FREE!

----- *Richard Allen*

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