

COPYRIGHT © 1993 SPMA
Southwest Parks and Monuments Association
Tucson, Arizona 85701
ISBN 0-911408-98-3
Library of Congress Number 91-60459

Written by: Dan Murphy
Editorial: Ron Foreman and Randolph Jorgen
Design: Lawrence Ormsby and Carole Thickstun



SETTLING DOWN

Somewhere in central Mexico, whether accidentally or deliberately, prehistoric people discovered how to cultivate and breed certain wild grasses to produce a plant with large, nutritious seeds. The resulting plant also held its seeds, instead of scattering them as most wild plants do. Today we call that human-produced plant corn, and it touched off an agricultural revolution in the Americas.

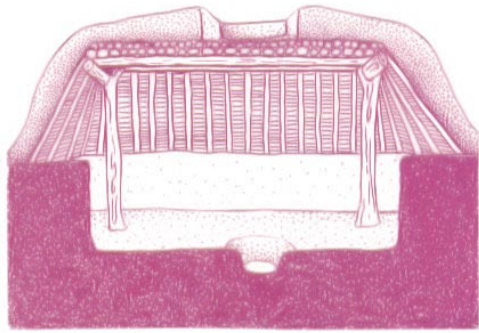
As revolutions go, it was a slow one. It took thousands of years, but the final results are plain in the record of the Estancia Basin. The culture of small, widely scattered hunter-gatherer bands eventually was transformed into the settled society of town-dwellers the Spaniards met. Corn was the catalyst for this fundamental change.

With the introduction of corn, people began to settle down. Corn was a reliable source of food that could be grown deliberately, and stored. But it had its price. Corn had to be planted because, unlike wild plants, it did not "volunteer" well. It behooved people to water the corn and protect it from birds and rodents.

Wandering bands began to leave members behind to tend these special plants, and later beans and squash, while the main parties walked on to find familiar wild food plants ripening somewhere else. The ones who stayed behind had to improvise shelter, instead of simply camping under the nearest bower or rock overhang. Deep in the archeological record of the Estancia Basin, about A.D. 600, pithouses appear.

The settling down of the people around the Estancia Basin was part of a very large trend in the desert Southwest. Traces of prehistoric pithouses are found throughout what is now northern New Mexico and Arizona, and southern Colorado and Utah. For a thousand years they were the principal type of dwelling.

Designs were not rigid. Pithouses could be shallow or quite deep. Usually they were round, but some were rectangular with rounded corners, and a few were just square. The superstructure could be as simple as brush stuck into the ground around the hole and tied over to make a dome. It might be made of interwoven branches covered with clay.



◦ *Left ... People of the Estancia Basin first began to build permanent pithouses about A.D. 600*

Some pithouses (left) were almost permanent, with a framework of posts and timbers to support the roof. Some were entered through a doorway, often through an antechamber, which gave the pithouse a figure-eight plan. Those with a firmer superstructure were entered through a hatchway in the roof, using a ladder. A hearth near the center of the floor supplied light and heat, and hollows dug into the floor provided storage.

Early pithouses were widely scattered, but later they were built in clusters to form pithouse villages. Eventually, regional architectural styles developed. At about the same time that pithouse villages were emerging in the Estancia Basin, the area's language pattern probably was set. People who spoke Tiwa, and who lived in the Rio Grande Valley near today's Albuquerque, apparently migrated in increasing numbers through the pass in Tijeras Canyon and occupied the northern part of the basin. Piro-speaking people living further south in the Rio Grande Valley, in the vicinity of Socorro, worked their way through Abo Pass and settled at the lower edge of the basin.

Five or six centuries after the time of Christ, people in the Estancia Basin began to produce pottery. Nomadic people did not develop pottery. It was too heavy and fragile to travel. But for people who settled in one place, pottery made it possible to develop new cooking techniques, collect water, and provide rodent-proof storage.

As with architecture, distinctive regional pottery styles also emerged. By studying the characteristics of pottery fragments, archeologists have been able to document how the interaction between the people of the Estancia Basin and distant villages changed over time.

One Estancia Basin archeological survey counted pieces of broken pottery at sites from the time of the pithouses, and found about sixty-six percent were brownwares, indicating either influence or actual trade from the time of the pithouse, and found about sixty-six percent were brownstones, indicating either influence or actual trade from the south. This evidence suggests that the people who first established permanent settlements in the Estancia Basin were influenced by the Mogollon (MUGGY-own) culture.

At sites occupied two centuries later, only seventeen percent of the potsherds found were brownwares, while the rest showed a definite shift to influence from a more advanced civilization centered on the Colorado Plateau to the north and west: the Anasazi.

Anasazi is a Navajo word that means, variously, "ancient people who are not us," "ancient ancestors" or "enemy of the old ones," depending on how the word is pronounced. The nomadic Navajo migrated onto the northwest Colorado Plateau shortly after prehistoric people had abandoned the area. The newcomers found spectacular village ruins in an empty land, and archeologists later used the Navajo term to refer to the prehistoric ancestors of all Puebloan people.

Change did not happen simultaneously throughout the Anasazi world. It would emerge in one area, then stall, go slowly somewhere else; or it could spread quickly. One example is the use of the "jacal" (hah-CALL) structure, a wicker wall of woven sticks filled and coated thoroughly with mud. Near the end of the "jacal period," Anasazi builders developed a hybrid masonry style, in which jacal walls were built on stone foundations and faced with stone slabs. An excellent example of this is visible at the Abo Ruins of Salinas Pueblo Mission National Monument.

The emergence of jacal construction was part of a larger change that occurred throughout the Anasazi world: the movement to above-ground living. Anasazi stone structures began to appear about A.D. 900. Apparently they were used for storage at first, but eventually people moved into them.

The transition to above-ground living was not instantaneous, nor even rapid. Likely there were seasonal changes. One easily imagines living in warmer pithouses in the winter and moving to airier jacals or even stone houses in the hot summer. Even after masonry architecture had achieved astonishing sophistication in the twelfth century, some people still chose to live alongside in ancient pithouses year round.

The Estancia Basin was hardly the center of Anasazi culture, and change evidently came more slowly out on the edge of Anasazi civilization. Through trade and travel, the people of the Estancia Basin must have learned about the astonishing accomplishments of their cultural cousins in Chaco Canyon, two hundred miles northwest. But while architecture, trade, art, and ceremonialism reached their apogee at Chaco during the tenth century, the Estancia Basin people still lived in pithouses exclusively. The Mesa Verde area bloomed shortly after A.D. 1150, and new pottery, tremendous buildings, and greater ceremonialism emerged from the cultural ferment. But not until about 1300, when Mesa Verde was abandoned, did stone towns begin to rise in the Estancia Basin.