

The Lost People of Mesa Verde

by Elsa Marston

READING SKILLS: SUPPORTED AND UNSUPPORTED INFERENCES

In the yard a cat meows suddenly, races into the house, and dives under the sofa. Outside you can hear the furious barking of a large dog. Can you infer that

- (A) the cat is eager for a nap, or
- (B) the cat has been frightened by a large dog?

If you chose A, your **inference**, or guess, is unsupported: The facts don't indicate that the cat is tired or that the cat likes to nap under the sofa. If you chose B, your inference is supported: The facts seem to add up to that conclusion.

As you read "The Lost People of Mesa Verde," check to see if the writer's inferences about the Anasazi and their disappearance are supported or unsupported.

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT: PREVIEW SELECTION VOCABULARY

Study these vocabulary words before you begin to read.

archaeologists (är'kē-äl'ə-jists) *n.*: scientists who study ancient peoples and their cultures.

Archaeologists studied Mesa Verde to determine why the Anasazi abandoned it.

erosion (ē-rō'zhən) *n.*: process of being worn away.

The erosion of soil on the mesa made farming difficult.

dwindled (dwin'dəld) *v.*: became less; shrunk.

People suffered from hunger as food sources dwindled.

quarreled (kwôr'əld) *v.*: disagreed angrily; argued.

Faced with hunger and illness, the Anasazi might have quarreled.

mingled (mɪŋ'gəld) *v.*: mixed; joined.

Once the Anasazi mingled with other peoples, they lost their distinct identity.

SKILLS
FOCUS

Reading Skills

Analyze supported and unsupported inferences.

The Lost People of Mesa Verde

Elsa Marston

TEXT STRUCTURE

The first two sentences, which are set apart from the rest of the text, introduce the article's topic. How do these sentences help you understand who the "lost people" of the title are?

WORD STUDY

Alcoves (line 12) in a building are small rooms located off larger rooms. In this context the word *alcoves* refers to small caves.

INFER

Pause at line 22. Underline the details that help you infer that the Anasazi were skilled craftspeople.

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The Anasazi lived peacefully on the mesa for 800 years. Then they disappeared.

In the dry land of southwestern Colorado a beautiful plateau¹ rises. It has so many trees that early Spanish explorers called it Mesa Verde, which means "green table." For about eight hundred years Native Americans called the Anasazi lived on this mesa. And then they left. Ever since the cliff houses were first discovered a hundred years ago, scientists and historians have wondered why.

10 Anasazi is a Navajo word meaning "the ancient ones." When they first settled there, around 500 A.D., the Anasazi lived in alcoves in the walls of the high canyons. Later they moved to the level land on top, where they built houses of stone and mud mortar. As time passed, they constructed

more elaborate houses, like apartment buildings, with several families living close together.

The Anasazi made beautiful pottery, turquoise jewelry, fine sashes of woven hair, and baskets woven tightly enough to hold water. They lived by hunting and by growing corn and squash. Their way of life went on peacefully for several hundred years.



20 The Collection of the Newark Museum. Purchase 1970 Louis Bamberger Bequest Fund/Art Resource, NY

Effigy figure. Anasazi, c. 10th–13th c. Pottery. 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ " h. Collection of The Newark Museum. Inv.: 70.10.

1. plateau (pla-tō') n.: elevated, flat stretch of land.

Then around 1200 A.D., something strange happened, for which the reasons are not quite clear. Most of the people moved from the level plateau back down into alcoves in the cliffs. The move must have made their lives difficult because they had to climb back up to the plateau to do the farming. But it seems the Anasazi planned to stay in the canyon walls, for they soon filled the alcoves with amazing cliff dwellings. “Cliff Palace,” the most famous of these, had more than two hundred rooms.

30

For all the hard work that went into building these new homes, the Anasazi did not live in them long. By 1300 A.D. the cliff dwellings were empty. Mesa Verde was deserted and remained a

CLARIFY

Re-read lines 26–37. How long did the Anasazi live in the alcoves after moving back into them?



A building in Mesa Verde National Park.

IDENTIFY

Underline the answer to the question asked in lines 38–39.

VOCABULARY

archaeologists (är'kē-äl'ə-jists) *n.*: scientists who study ancient peoples and their cultures.

What context clues help you figure out the meaning of *archaeologists*?

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 54. Underline the effects of the Anasazi population growth.

VOCABULARY

erosion (ē-rō'zhən) *n.*: process of being worn away.

dwindled (dwin'dəld) *v.*: became less; shrunk.

FLUENCY

Practice reading the boxed passage aloud. Use the punctuation to help you read with expression and convey the passage's meaning clearly.

ghost country for almost six hundred years. Were the people driven out of their homes by enemies? No sign of attack or fighting, or even the presence of other tribes, has been found.

40 **Archaeologists** who have studied the place now believe there are other reasons. Mesa Verde, the beautiful green table, was no longer a good place to live. For one thing, in the second half of the thirteenth century there were long periods of cold, and very little rain fell—or else it came at the wrong time of year. Scientists know this from examining the wood used in the cliff dwellings. The growth rings in trees² show good and bad growing seasons. But the people had survived drought and bad weather before, so there must have been another reason.

50 As the population grew, more land on the mesa top had to be farmed in order to feed the people. That meant that trees had to be cut to clear the land and also to use for houses and fuel. Without the forests, the rain began to wash away the mesa top.

60 How do we know about **erosion** problems that happened about eight hundred years ago? The Anasazi built many low dams across the smaller valleys on the mesa to slow down rain runoff. Even so, good soil washed away, and the people could no longer raise enough food. As the forests **dwindled**, the animals, already over-hunted, left the mesa for mountainous areas with more trees.

And as the mesa “wore out,” so did the people. It appears that the Anasazi were not healthy. Scientists can learn a lot about ancient people’s health by studying the bones and teeth found in burials. The mesa dwellers had arthritis, and their teeth were worn down by the grit in corn meal, a main part of their diet.

As food became scarce, people grew weaker. Not many lived beyond their twenties. Women died very young, and few

2. **growth rings in trees:** rings that are visible in the cross section of a tree. Growth rings are often used to determine the age of a tree.

70 babies survived. Living so close together in the cliff houses, where everyone was hungry and worried, the people must have suffered from emotional strain. They probably **quarreled** often.

In the end the Anasazi must have given up hope that things would get better. Families packed up and went away. Of course, the “ancient ones” did not simply disappear. They moved southeast to another area and **mingled** with other peoples. After a while their heritage as the people of the Mesa Verde was forgotten.

80 In time the trees grew back and the plateau became green once more. But, for the Anasazi it was too late. Although they respected nature and tried to farm wisely, land that was used too hard could not support them forever.

Yet in their cliff houses and crafts the “ancient ones” left us a superb monument. It is truly one of the most fascinating pictures of America’s past.

VOCABULARY

quarreled (kwôr'æld) v.: disagreed angrily; argued.

mingled (mĩŋ'gæld) v.: mixed; joined.

ANALYZE

Is the statement “They probably quarreled often” a **supported** or an **unsupported inference**? Explain.

ANALYZE

Do you think the facts provided in this article support the author’s statement that the Anasazi “respected nature and tried to farm wisely” (line 81)? Explain.

ANALYZE

In the final sentence, is the writer stating a fact or an opinion? Explain.

The Lost People of Mesa Verde

**SKILLS
FOCUS**

**Reading
Skills**

Analyze supported and unsupported inferences.

Inferences Chart In “The Lost People of Mesa Verde,” the writer makes inferences about the Anasazi and why they left Mesa Verde. In the chart below, record some of the writer’s inferences. Then, list facts that show whether each inference is supported or unsupported in the right-hand column.

Writer's Inference	Supported by Facts?

Skills Review

The Lost People of Mesa Verde

VOCABULARY AND COMPREHENSION

A. Selection Vocabulary Write the Word Bank words on the blanks to complete this paragraph. Use each word only once.

When we visited Mesa Verde National Park, I (1) _____ with my brother about what happened to the Anasazi, who lived there long ago. He thought they must have been scared away by other tribes, but I knew that (2) _____ who studied the site didn't think so. My guide book said that bad weather, drought, and soil (3) _____ made farming more difficult. As a result the Anasazi mixed and (4) _____ with other peoples in the Southeast. After I showed my brother the book, his willingness to debate (5) _____ in a hurry!

Word Bank

archaeologists
erosion
dwindled
quarreled
mingled

B. Reading Comprehension Answer each question below.

1. When did the Anasazi first begin to settle at Mesa Verde? Where did they live when they first arrived? _____

2. Why don't archaeologists think the Anasazi were driven from Mesa Verde by other Native American tribes? _____

3. Why did the Anasazi cut down the trees on the top of the mesa? _____

4. What were the consequences of soil erosion for the Anasazi? _____

