



## Life Begins with Laughter

### Birth, Renewal, and Change Among the Diné

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD

I may have lost faith in the dominant narratives informing my own culture and cannot speak with any authority of the myths and traditions of others. Yet I have spent time with native elders, fascinated by richly textured worlds other than my own. Trying to listen. Trying to learn. Throughout the Colorado Plateau alternative beliefs about beginnings persist. Refined over millennia, these tales and customs form an indigenous genesis, a chronicle of gestation and change populated as much by natural forces as by humans and deities. Thus it is told: *In the beginning, First Man and First Woman—two Holy Beings—emerged into this world through a hole in the ground. With them came Coyote and animal people who had to leave four previous worlds because of evil and strife. Coyote helped shape this world before humans were a hazy thought in the minds of the gods. Trickster, demiurge, and archetype, buffoon and shape-shifter—like his disguises, his names are many. He is fickle, a stand-in for chaos and creation. At night, his laughter rises from the plains to the moon and the stars.*

#### BIRTH : LIFE BEGINS WITH LAUGHTER



*For traditional Diné, human life begins with a child's first laughter. After this spontaneous utterance, personality has "arrived," and a grandmother or other significant elder is asked to hold a naming ceremony. Until then, the newborn is only called "baby" or "child." The reasons for this practice are manifold. In the old days, infant mortality among the Navajo was high; at the same time there existed a taboo against mentioning the names of the dead. People were loath to get too attached to a newborn or to "waste" a name, which they could not use again if the baby died. Addressed with a general kinship term instead, the new arrival was embedded in the tight fabric of community from the very beginning.*

At the child's naming she is given a true or "war name." This she must keep secret, sometimes even from family members, mostly for fear of witchcraft. (The belief in magic spells and curses related to the knowledge of names has parallels in European traditions. Remember Rumpelstiltskin?) As the child grows, she accumulates nicknames, which Diné generally use to refer to an individual. For boys, in the old days, these often derived from first military exploits. Character traits provide further material. A lively child, for example, may be called "Running Girl." The succession of names throughout a lifetime reveals an interesting concept of change: we are reborn throughout, constantly re-inventing our selves, never stuck with a fixed personality.

After birth, the mother often buried a newborn's umbilical cord—in a beaded or otherwise adorned buckskin pouch—under a tree near the maternal hogan. In this way, the child was not only bound to its human relatives, but simultaneously to a specific home place, to which it would always return. A boy's mother might tie his umbilical cord to the tail or mane of a horse; it would remain there until it wore away. This would assure her son's mastery over horses.

One cannot fully understand the importance of laughter or speech for the Diné without the idea of *nilch'i* or "Holy Wind." This is the life force itself, entering a baby with its first cry. But part of it is also passed on from both parents. *Nilch'i* inflates bodies that otherwise would be only sacks of skin and bone, keeping them upright and centered between heaven and earth. This "Wind Soul" influences one's thoughts and behavior, determining the course of a life. If advice from the "wind within" is ignored, it weakens and finally dies. And so does its vessel. By means of healing ceremonies, the winds may be petitioned to restore the vitality of a patient. Upon death it departs, blowing onward, to lodge in another being, human or non-human.



## Infants in the Wild: Nature's Nursery

BY ROSE HOUK



*The quickening pulse of the radio transmitter was the first sign that something might be wrong. The transmitter was attached to Condor 305, the first California condor to hatch in the wild in nearly two decades. Number 305 was the poster-bird for the pioneering condor reintroduction program that began in 1996 in Arizona. This condor was born in Grand Canyon in the summer of 2003 and took his first exciting leap from the secluded cliffside nest in November.*

*Through 2004 the fledgling explored the vicinity of the nest, flying northward to the Vermilion Cliffs, the release site of captive-reared condors. By early 2005, his parents were chasing him on the wing, their not-so-subtle way to tell him it was time for independence from mom and dad.*

*Then on March 20, 2005, tracker Roger Benefield picked up accelerated beeps from 305's receiver—the "mortality" sound*

*that signaled prolonged lack of movement. Benefield started hiking toward the signal but was stopped by inaccessible terrain. He tried again from the rim, still without luck.*

*Six days later, hoping desperately that the transmitter had simply fallen from the young bird, park rangers and biologists helicoptered in and rappelled a hundred feet toward the sound. Chad Olson, Thom Lord, and Paul Austin found Condor 305, transmitter intact, motionless on a talus slope. The bird's body was sent to the San Diego Zoo, where specialists said starvation and dehydration were likely the cause of death. The brief life of 305 highlights the precarious nature of efforts to restore endangered species in their native habitat. And it points more generally to the vulnerability of any newborn in the wild land of the Colorado Plateau.*

**Above right:** Condor 305, the first California condor to hatch in the wild in two decades. For more information on the California Condor reintroduction program in Northern Arizona please visit [peregrinefund.org](http://peregrinefund.org) on the World Wide Web. Photo by Chris Parish /The Peregrine Fund.  
**Left:** Black bear caption







## Every Magic Mile

### Railroads and Renewal

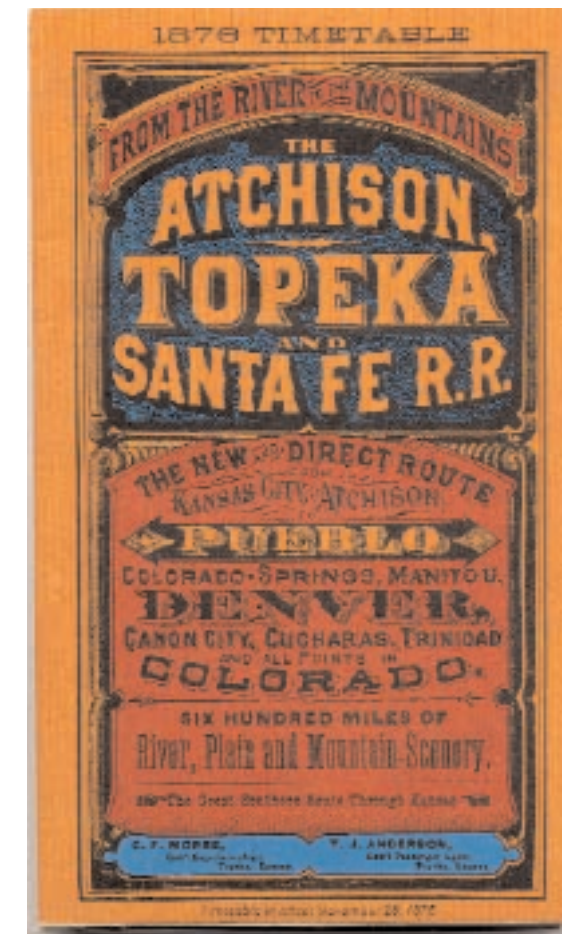
BY ALFRED RUNTE

*It is the expansion of transport without a corresponding growth of perception that threatens us with qualitative bankruptcy of the recreational process. Recreational development is a job not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind.*

— Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 1949

Long a commercial artist for the Santa Fe Railway, Hernando Villa created this brilliant portrait, facing, in 1929 for a magazine advertisement publicizing the railroad's crack limited, the *Chief*. Collection of the author.

An 1876 timetable for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad listed the scheduled routes passing through "six hundred miles of River, Plain and Mountain Scenery." A detailed map inside bore a large legend that read "Up the Valley of the Great Arkansas! Lovely Scenery, Sublime Views, Recreation, Health, Pure Mountain Air, Trout, Game, Antelope, Buffalo, Elk, the Foot Hills, Mountains and Canons. Courtesy of Dennis Reason.



Heading east out of Kingman, Arizona, historic Route 66 runs straight and flat for fifteen miles. Finally it tops a gentle rise, levels briefly, and dips toward a wall of distant hills. This marks the entrance to Truxton and Crozier Canyons, a magic land of mesas and mounded rock, and the meeting place of two great physiographic provinces—the Basin and Range and the Colorado Plateau. At sunset, the mounds seem virtually to billow upward from the earth, stirring in a rich mixture of desert colors, and the rails of the historic Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe glint as they snake carefully between the cliffs. Only the highway, widened to three lanes in places, scoured this scenery for the straightest path and came barreling through it. Eventually, even 66 proved too serpentine. Now Interstate 40 cleaves directly through the mountains farther south.

Today, dirt roads radiate across the floors of Truxton and Crozier, several gouging high into the cliffs. To be sure, these are mining roads, not meant for scenery, meant to strip the formations bare. One by one, the rocks are being plucked from their ancient pedestals, loaded onto trucks, and carted off for desert landscaping. Waterless Las Vegas grinds them up and spreads them out as gravel lawns.

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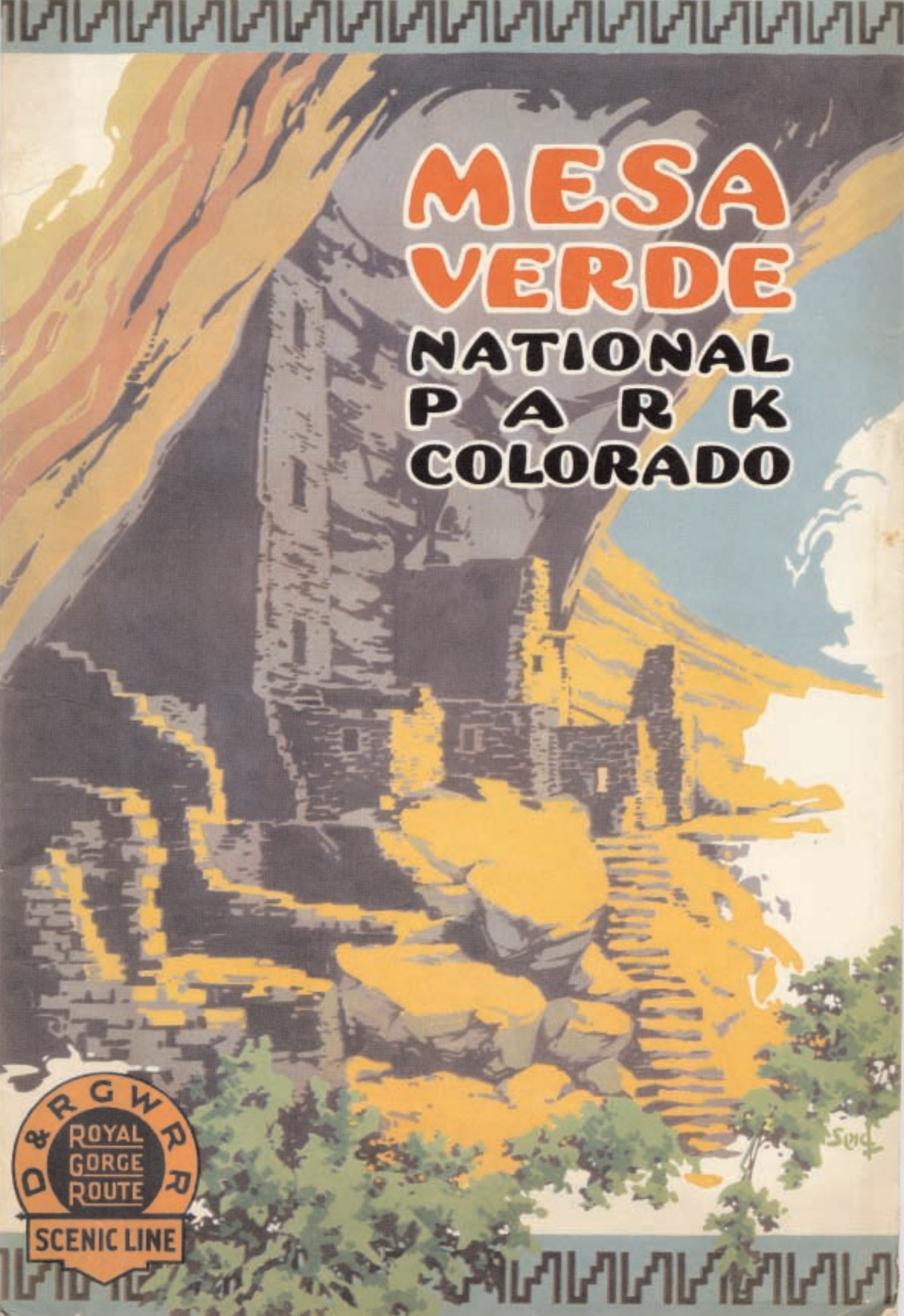
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## Mothers of Mesa Verde

BY DUANE A. SMITH

*Nearly a thousand years ago the echoes of a thriving native culture faded from the canyons of southwestern Colorado. Glorious and enigmatic traces of that ancient culture rested in the rocky folds of the cliffs that once had sheltered it, unknown and undisturbed until the late nineteenth century. Thanks to a small but determined band of women who refused to stand by while those rare sites were plundered, Mesa Verde now celebrates its hundredth anniversary as a national park and a world treasure.*



Virginia McClurg, ca. 1888.

**Facing:** Cover of a promotional booklet on the story of Mesa Verde National Park produced by the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad. It was intended for tourists traveling to the park by rail—or those dreaming of such a sojourn. Collection of Alfred Runte.

IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY, southwestern Colorado remained *terra incognita* to all but the Ute Indians, who had arrived a century or so after the original inhabitants of the mesas, canyons, and river valleys had moved on.

Travelers through the region had reported seeing ancient rubble-strewn dwellings—Escalante in his 1776 journal, fur trapper William Becknell in an 1825 letter to a Missouri newspaper—but the area sat far from any modern settlement. In 1859, a gold rush lured in prospectors, miners, and a flood of other folks, but the onrush of the Civil War brought a quick end to early mining efforts. Prospectors returned a decade later to form the small enclave of Parrott City, from which it was an easy jaunt to the Mancos Valley, and settlements sprang up in Mancos and Durango. When the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad chugged into Durango in August of 1881, the speed, convenience, and comfort of travel into the region increased exponentially. The ancient cliff dwellings of what today we call the Four Corners were now within striking distance of “civilization.”

Still, silence reigned in the canyons of the Mesa Verde, buried deep within the Ute reservation. Then, in the winter of 1887-88, a lone cowboy named Al Wetherill followed some wayward cows into a finger canyon and got his first glimpse of Cliff Palace. A year later, Al’s brother Richard and his brother-in-law Charlie Mason spotted the palace while dogging stray cows on the mesa. Charlie described what they saw that cold December afternoon:

*From the rim of the cañon we had our first view of Cliff Palace. . . . To me this is the grandest view of all among the ancient ruins of the Southwest. We rode around the head of the cañon and found a way down over the cliffs to the level of the building. We spent several hours going from room to room and picked up several articles of interest. . . .*

The Wetherills gathered souvenirs, organized them into collections, and exhibited them in Durango before traveling with them to Denver, where they were purchased for the Colorado Historical Society. It became clear the public would pay to see these fascinating things. The brothers (and others) also learned that visitors would pay to be guided into Mesa Verde. For the isolated and economically hard-pressed settlers during the devastating depression of the 1890s, this proved an unexpected blessing. That collections and “souvenirs” continued to disappear did not seem particularly troubling.





## Deep Time

### The Long and Extraordinary Life of the Colorado Plateau

BY CHRISTA SADLER

A fossil is time itself embossed on the visible world. Carol Haralson



“The future holds great promise,” seems like an odd statement coming from a man whose work is concerned with a very ancient past buried deep in time. Alan Titus, the paleontologist at Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument, doesn’t use these words lightly. He uses them enthusiastically, expansively, to describe the state of paleontology in Utah. In truth, he could be speaking of paleontology throughout the Colorado Plateau, where a renaissance of sorts is taking place. The focus has shifted from the “trophy hunting” of years past to deeper analysis and assessment of such questions as biodiversity through time, evolutionary relationships, climatic shift, and environmental change. The Plateau is recognized as one of the finest earth science laboratories in the world. Discoveries here are answering questions, solving mysteries, and making connections that help us understand the history of life worldwide.

#### Fish on a Mountaintop

*A little over a billion years ago Earth’s earliest life forms grew in layered mats in an ancient seascape of protected bays and calm shorelines.* Primitive fossils preserved in Grand Canyon’s Precambrian sediments (laid down 4.6 billion to 544 million years ago) are the first sign of life in the region. For hundreds of millions of years seas advanced and receded across the Colorado Plateau while the organisms living in them became more complex. By half a billion years ago, the watery geography of the early plateau teemed with an astonishing variety of these more evolved multicellular organisms: brachiopods and corals, bryozoans, sponges, and crinoids—all indicating warm and clear, light-filled conditions. By around 375 million years ago, sharks and fish appeared in these waters as well, although their fragile remains are difficult to find in all but a few places.