

One summer, Dawna and I took a trip to Arizona to see the Grand Canyon and many of the sites in the state. We crossed the Navaho Indian Reservation, transversed the painted desert, peered down into Meteor Crater and four-wheeled across pothole roads to see Native American rock petroglyphs.

But the most memorable part of our trip was seeing the cliff dwellings of the Sinagua and Hopi Indians.

At Montezuma's Castle National Monument, is set of well-preserved Ancestral Pueblo cliff dwellings. The dwelling looks like a twenty room, 5 story, high rise apartment building. Built into limestone walls about 1100 AD, they are one of the best preserved prehistoric cliff dwellings in North America.

Though the Sinagua people are interesting, it is the Hopi Indians of Arizona I want to talk about this morning. For the Hopi are descendants of the Sinaguas and from the Mayans.

Dawna and I scanned our binoculars from the overlook...gazing across the curved walls of Walnut Canyon. Just as we had seen at the Grand Canyon, we saw natural geological features such as layered rocks, flattened plateaus and areas eroded by streams.

As we continued to look through our binoculars across to these walls, we spot something strange. It is not a natural part of the rocks...what is it that we see? Then we realize they are Hopi Indian pueblos, ancient homes carved into the side of the canyon walls.

The name Hopi is a shortened form of Hopituh Shi-nu-mumeaning "The Peaceful People" or "Peaceful Little Ones" because they were of short stature.

The Hopi Dictionary.....sorry Mariam-Webster....describe the Hopi as: one who is mannered, civilized, peaceable, polite, and who adheres to the Hopi way.

Civilized...peaceable....polite.....The Hopi Indians are not warriors. They are farmers who tend to live an isolated, sedentary lifestyle. Because they are not a tribe of warriors, we don't read about them in U.S. history class.

Our knowledge of Native American Indians seems to be in the form of Apaches, Cherokees, and other red-face warring tribes that we see on tv who are scalping the pale faces...who are attacking settlers and soldiers.

But not the Hopi, not the well mannered farmers. They were not warriors.

These farmers were thousands of years ahead of today's farmers. They were the first highly skilled micro or subsistence farmers.

And they developed what is called "Hopi Dry Land Farming". Today, some of their dry farming techniques are being taught across the world to arid countries, and even being taught right in our own backyard at Echo Farm to help solve hunger problems.

We leave the lookout area and visitor center and start a long upward hike. And I mean hike...and I mean up....Up the steep trails to view the cliff dwellings.

We are lucky because the national park service stills allows visitors to walk along ancient ledge paths...to walk in the footsteps of those who came more then 1000 years before.

As we walk and climb, we can see from our surroundings, that the Hopi are people who adapted to the land **and** the environment to survive and thrive.

Their entire surrounding country was a desert of shifting sand. But they thrived.

They were surrounded by flat plateaus with steep sides. Flat, dry lands. But they thrived.

There were not many dense forests teaming with deer. Only coyotes, cougars and ravens. So they were not big hunters. But they thrived.

They got water from small streams at the base of the plateaus so their crops of corn, beans, and squash could grow. Not an easy feat. But they thrived.

Being surrounded by sands and clay, they manufactured a fine variety of pottery. Archaeologists have found woven baskets, sandals, and mats made from crops and grasses. Weaving grasses, time consuming work. But they thrived.

This lifestyle that they lived, made them a gracious, spiritual and devoted tribe. Their religion is very complex. They have secret societies, an organized priesthood, and spectacular rituals.

They have a very developed belief system with many gods and spirits; this includes

- Earth Mother
- Sky Father
- the Sun
- the Moon
- Invisible spirits of life called kachinas
- and Maasaw, who is the world's guardian spirit and the ancient caretaker of the earth

Think about this....they live in an arid region...yet...they depend on agriculture to survive. Their land is their life, so naturally, they viewed their land as sacred.

Having sacred land meant that they prayed. And who did they pray to? They prayed to the rain gods...

But they don't get down on their knees and pray directly to the gods....
No no no....they pray through messengers. And these messengers are snakes.

The "secretive" Snake Society initiates the celebrated "Snake Dance" which is done to bring rain upon the crops.

The dancers wear elaborate masks of mythological significance. The priests carry live, hissing, venomous snakes in their mouths and descend ladders down into a Kiva.

The Hopi hold their traditional ceremonies for the benefit of the entire world to see but hold the ritual part of the ceremonies in secret....in underground chambers known as kivas.

The kiva is literally a dug out hole in the ground with a ladder that you climb down. At the floor of the kiva is a small hole. This hole symbolizes the path to the underworld and the ladder coming out of the kiva symbolizes the way to the upper world.

At the end of the Snake Dance, the priests emerge from the Kiva and release the snakes so that they can slither away to spread the messages to the Gods.

The Hopis also believe that they are the Earth's caretakers, and that they need to perform a successful cycle of ceremonies in order to keep the world in balance, to appease the gods and for the rains to come.

We have arrived at the top of the plateau and can see an ancient Kiva. We descend the ladder deep into the hole. I can only picture the priests with the snakes in their mouths. I look around, hoping not to see a rattler in the dark abyss.

From the plateau we start to go down the walls of the Walnut canyon to see the ancient cliff homes. As we approach the first dwelling, we can already picture the sights and sounds of the Hopi Indians who once lived here.

The homes are dug out from the side of the canyon walls, the clay bricks make a solid wall that encloses the front of the home. The top of the outside wall is open. Ladders go up the wall and you climb down into the room.

This is one way to protect them from attacks. Also, by having solid walls and not doors, it keeps heat in and cold out. With openings at the top, it allows for smoke to exit the chambers.

Most of the walls have since decayed or fallen off the cliff side. So you can see directly into the dwelling.

What was it like to live in 700 AD, where your primary source of water ran in a creek hundreds of feet beneath you. Your gardens struggled on the plateau, hundreds of feet above. Your neighbors consisted not only of warring tribes, but also of wild animals.

I am talking to a ranger about how difficult it was to live here, high on these cliffs. They lugged their crops down from above, carried them along very narrow paths, and heaved them over the walls to put them inside these chambers.

Though there is no documentation, the ranger is sure many Indians fell off the cliffs, especially the wet cliffs during the monsoon season.

She tells me that women were an integral part of the tribes. We could have guessed that. Hopi society holds monogamy of great importance.

A new husband becomes part of his mother-in-law's household. I don't think there were a lot of mother-in-law jokes back then, not with him having to live with her.

The women play an important role in marriage by helping select the partner for their daughters. They have strict rules that forbid marrying within your own clan in order to prevent poor genetics and interbreeding.

She brings me inside a room and points to something on the mud lined walls. A handprint of a woman's hand. It was the Hopi women who plastered mud on the walls of the caves to make them smooth and for insulation.

Here, in front of my eyes, are not only her handprint, but also her fingerprints. So clear, so vivid, you can see the rings of her fingerprint. Wow! Thousands of years old.

I place my hand above hers, just air between our hands. You can feel her strength, her resolve, her determination. At the same time, I can feel her struggles, her harsh life.

It is like our souls have crossed over the centuries and we are one. I can imagine if she was alive today, she would have marched yesterday for her rights and those of her children.

The Hopi abandoned their cliff dwellings about the 14th century. Researchers have not been able to determine the reason, but they think the Indian's water sources dried up and forced them away.

Ancient prophecies of the Hopi have stated that when the Blue Star Kachina makes its appearance in the heavens, the day of purification has arrived.

They believe that humankind has disregarded Earth Mother.
Cataclysmic events in the natural world are due to negative human actions.

The dire signs of the “End Times” are everywhere. Humans have lost touch with Nature.

We can not hear the wind in the trees.
We do not notice how the birds and trees talk to us.
We take from Nature and do not give anything back....not even appreciation for the food we eat.

Earth Mother has been generous. She has forgiven and overlooked the evil in humans.

But there is a point when Earth Mother will see the evil in us and there will be no further forgiveness.