Women to the Rescue
Creating Mesa Verde National Park

By Duane A. Smith
The June 1972 *Arizona Highways* enticed readers to come to Colorado in an article by Joyce Rockwood entitled, "What's Up in Colorado."

A ten-day safari into southwestern Colorado can be an eye-opener if this is your first visit, a welcome refresher if you have gone before. The route, arrayed as the old saying prescribes for the bride, offers "something old" in jewel-like, ancient cities built centuries ago; "something new" with ski resorts as fresh as last night's powder snow . . .

This is a story about those ancient cities that intrigued so many writers long before Rockwood's article appeared. Those earlier authors, too, tried to find words to describe the scenery and those "jewel-like" cities.

Denver newspaperwoman Margaret Keating tackled the problem back in the October 1907 issue of *The Modern World*, when Mesa Verde National Park was moving into its second year. Keating's article opened with a poem by Lida Frowe.

Cliffs of the Mancos, frowning and sullen
Deep in thy hollows strange secrets abide;
Once thou wert home for a long-buried people
Now in thy fastness the wild beasts abide.

Then Keating eulogized:

The story of an extinct people is written upon the walls of the deserted dwellings of Mesa Verde, but we have failed to interpret the handwriting. The Mesa Verde, immortalized by the relics of its unknown inhabitants, is a region of international interest, and the revelations of its secrets are of deep import in the world of science and letters, touching, as they do, the history of an ancient race.

Appropriately, women wrote all of these words, because Mesa Verde's early history is the saga of turn-of-the-century women who ventured forth to save the remains of an epoch in American history.

This national park became a national and a world treasure, and its history has been told numerous times. Yet in that telling, not all the people involved have received their fair share of credit. Women led the fight to educate the public and to preserve the wonderful treasures that became Mesa Verde National Park. They did this at a time when women were supposed to stay at home and not venture beyond their families. History has not been kind to them, and too often their contributions have received only a passing acknowledgment.

Keating knew and appreciated what the women did. She hailed their efforts—they "neither slumbered nor slept," and they gave of their time, talents, strength, and money. Still a sadness is inherent in all this, for it was not posterity that pushed these women to the historical sidelines. The women themselves carry most
of the blame. This, then, is their story, the story of the preservation and creation of Mesa Verde National Park.

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As usual my wife Gay worked with me and encouraged me throughout in the process of turning ideas into words. Her love and support are the keystone in all my literary efforts.
he visitor to Mesa Verde National Park, unless well-informed or a careful student of everything she or he sees and reads, will not know why or how the park came into existence. Neither will park visitors gain an understanding of who motivated and guided the movement to save what modern visitors so appreciate and are grateful to see. Who preserved and protected this fascinating cultural heritage? We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to these nearly forgotten people. It is a sad commentary on the times and, unfortunately, on the "movers" themselves, that women have been virtually neglected in the history of the park and their fight forgotten.

Betty Friedan asked in the 1960s, "Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves?" In a sense, Margaret Mead later answered that question: "Women have a special contribution to make to any group enterprise, and I feel it is up to them to contribute the kinds of awareness that relatively few men . . . have incorporated through their education."

Two women answered Friedan’s question and supported Mead’s assertion nearly seventy-five years before either of them wrote. In the late nineteenth century, Virginia Donaghe McClurg and Lucy Peabody, along with the women they recruited and gathered together, showed that determination, dedication, perseverance, ability, and a never-say-die spirit could overcome a variety of obstacles and lead to success. Their accomplishments? They preserved the ruins at Mesa Verde and were instrumental in creating a national park—the first park in the world to preserve a cultural heritage.

Elizabeth Dole expressed a further desire: "Women share with men the need for personal success, even the taste for power, and no longer are willing to satisfy those needs through the achievement of surrogates, whether husbands, children or merely role models." McClurg and Peabody clearly displayed that need and proved without question to have the capability, fortitude, and motivation to succeed with a daunting project filled with a minefield of troubles and trials.

One might not have expected such effort from McClurg and Peabody,
considering their typical middle-class, Protestant, Victorian backgrounds. Neither woman, however, should be considered a typical Victorian woman in the sense of limiting herself to being a wife and mother confined to the home.

Mary Virginia Donaghe McClurg was born in New York City in 1858 and was educated in Virginia. "Such irregular education as she ever received—though the dull drudgery of the school-room was never for her." Like so many she came West, arriving in Colorado in 1879 as a teacher at a private school and a correspondent for several newspapers. Fairly quickly, she dropped the names Mary and M. Donaghe, and settled on Virginia Donaghe.

Her goal as a reporter became covering southwestern Colorado—Durango and Mancos because of their nearness to the cliff ruins—and the buildings of the "ancient" peoples about whom she had heard. Already fascinated by what she had read, McClurg became captivated by the ruins that had been found in Mancos Canyon. She wrote about what she saw (as she described them, "Colorado's wonderful buried cities and lost homes"), as well as writing other western stories. The enthusiastic Coloradan contributed articles to, among others, Review of Reviews, Cosmopolitan, and Century, and she also wrote for a Colorado Springs newspaper. McClurg additionally wrote poetry and published a book of illustrated poems, Seven Sonnets of Sculpture, as well as pamphlets eulogizing the "scenic West" and Colorado. The homes of the ancient people, however, became her lifelong passion. She had found a cause.

Her most detailed accounts appeared in a series of 1889 articles in the Great Divide, published in Denver. James MacCarthy, or as he was better known to his readers, "Fitz-Mac," described McClurg in a sketch as belonging to "our gang," a "clever and accomplished journalist." Further, "She is an incomparable cook and housekeeper, and can make a pot-pie as well as a poem. Her energy is tireless." Fitz-Mac concluded about his obvious friend: "In her home she receives a circle of friends with all that easy charm and distinction of presence which in the last generation marked the hospitalities of the old McClurg aristocracy."

Although she used fictitious characters to tell her story, as Fitz-Mac told his readers, McClurg's enthusiasm and excitement came through abundantly. To her, exploring southwestern Colorado was like going into the "frontier," which was "fast passing away." This "picturesque region" included Durango, "our outfitting point, [which] is, as one of its pioneers has left on record with charming candor, 'the most unrelieady place on the globe.' With flowery Victorian prose, McClurg chronicled her own (she is the "Enthusiast") and "her friends" adventures. It seems more logical, however, that she used "fictitious" names for real people, not fictitious people:
"To our dust-dried throats it was nectar [claret mixed with sugar, lemon juice, and "muddy Rio" Mancos water]. We partook and chatted and rested and eventually writing our names on a piece of paper inserted it in the [claret] bottle and buried the latter deeply in a locality we had christened the 'goat corral.'

"The afternoon was wearing away when galloping hoofs announced friends or foes, and half a dozen cowboys with cartridge belts and jingling spurs draw rein and stare with unaffected surprise at the ladies. The [Cliff Dwellers'] decoration is simple, chaste and artistic, and everyone of the circling, parallel lines is clear and true. 'The Enthusiast' forgot her ailing, aching body . . . She rises, reels, staggers over Mrs. Van's corner [who had just found a 'perfect' jar], and throwing herself down by the rubbish pile essays to dig.

"[The Enthusiast also enjoyed describing the scenery.] When the perils are over, and the canon widens into a vista of sun-flecked verdant, arches, where 'blue aisles of heaven laugh between,' . . . "But however mysteriously harassed and even denied a foothold on the earth, till they perched in eagle-like eyries—their religion, their superstition—term it as you will, demanded that the state estufa tower should rise with undiminished proportions, its stones nearly laid to the curve, and wherether they could [build] a home they must also rear a temple."

After her marriage to Gilbert McClurg in 1889, the couple resided in Colorado Springs. He proved very supportive, encouraging her interests and activities in southwestern Colorado. Both of them became well-known in the city as writers, lecturers, and historians—she more than he. Her crusade to save the Mesa Verde ruins brought her recognition statewide and
nationally. McClurg's organizational abilities, her passion for the "ancient" peoples, and her writing and speaking expertise proved invaluable to the cause.

Lucy Peabody, born in Cincinnati in 1863, was educated there and in Washington, D.C. While in the nation's capital, Peabody became interested in ethnology. She worked as a secretarial assistant at the Bureau of American Ethnology for nine years and became an advocate for and involved in the movement to preserve ancient cliff ruins. Her affiliation with the Bureau and its officials paid huge dividends during the "struggle." Not all her time was spent researching and working. She met and fell in love with her future husband, Major William Peabody, while he was stationed in Washington. After he retired from the army, they moved to his home state of Colorado in the 1880s and established residence in the state's capital city, Denver. His brother, Canon City merchant James Peabody, later was Colorado's controversial governor during an apex of labor troubles in 1903-04, turmoil that coincided with the last years of the fight to save Mesa Verde.

"Gifted and charming," Peabody knew her way around Washington's politics, a valued asset in the decade-long struggle over what to do with the Mesa Verde cliff dwellings. Described as a "cultured woman," who "has made extensive research into archaeology and anthropology," she would work and lobby untringly in both Denver and Washington. She "gave her time, strength, and money" to preserve Mesa Verde.

"No woman in the country has a more thorough and profound knowledge of Archaeology, Anthropology and Ethnology than this earnest, able, enthusiastic student of scientific research," wrote one ardent admirer. Nor was this praise alone. After the creation of the park, the American Anthropological Association passed its first public vote of thanks "ever tendered anyone" to Lucy Peabody for her "exceptionally noteworthy service to science." It continued, the "accomplishment of this object was due in great measure to [her] untiring effort."

Peabody not only wrote articles advocating the cause. She contributed two important elements to the crusade—her interest in and enthusiasm for ethnology and cliff dwellings and her Washington experience. Peabody left "no stone unturned to make the work of the Association successful." Not stopping there, she was secretary of the Archaeological Society and also served as a member of the Archaeological Institute of America's legislative committee. Ever modest, she disclaimed being a "scientist" or archaeologist, but as her friends noted, she was "well versed in cliff-dwelling lore."

Notwithstanding being involved in the struggle to preserve Mesa Verde, Peabody remained active in other "crusades." This "quiet little woman," as newspaper reporter Lillian Hartman described her, "never yet met defeat in any of the measures she has started out to champion."

She fought for and succeeded in getting passed through the legislature a
bill creating a Traveling Library Commission. This was "the first bill that the women of Colorado ever got through the legislature carrying an appropriation with it. They asked for $2,000, but secured $1,000 a year." She also worked as deputy registrar in the State Land Office both during and after her involvement with the creation of the park.

"In the same year [1903], Lincoln's birthday was made a legal holiday in the state, largely through the efforts of Mrs. Peabody, who secured the measure as an amendment to a bill making the holidays of the West uniform." Colorado thus became the ninth state to make that day a holiday. Lincoln was apparently a great favorite of Peabody's: "One of the most valuable collections in the United States of Lincoln data is owned by Mrs. Peabody." She began as a young girl collecting books, pictures, and "relics of great value."

Peabody later worked on behalf of juvenile court bills; thanks to reformer Ben Lindsey and supporters like Peabody, Colorado led the nation in establishing juvenile courts. Hartman complimented her with this observation: "The women of Colorado owe much to Mrs. Peabody for the work she did to get the child labor law through the legislature."

Hartman continued, "In a quiet but effective way she has co-operated with fellow workers in pushing many another piece of good legislation, but always from the obscurity of the wings rather than before the footlights."

Another of her fans said Peabody always brought "interest and intelligence" to bear upon "all that relates to any questions or matters with which she concerns herself. She is never superficial in anything she undertakes."

Peabody and McClurg made a formidable team.

These two active women represented the new woman of turn-of-the-century America. Providentially, Peabody and McClurg lived in the two communities, Denver and Colorado Springs, that dominated the state in the 1890s. As the product of the 1858-1859 Pike's Peak gold rush, Denver had long been the political, economic, transportation, and financial hub of Colorado, whereas Colorado Springs was initially developed, in the 1870s, by the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad as a health and tourist center. Its mineral springs (really next door in Manitou Springs), Garden of the Gods, Pike's Peak, and other attractions drew people, particularly some well-to-do Englishmen who had invested in the railroad or came because of the western setting. These men and their families turned Colorado Springs into a social and cultural rival of Denver. Denver benefited from Leadville's silver bonanza in the 1870s and 1880s, and Colorado Springs came of age in the 1890s, with Cripple Creek's gold in its back yard.

The two towns emerged as Colorado's leading social and cultural centers and attracted most of the state's socially prominent elite and wealthy families. They provided the perfect basis for gathering women to join the cause, women who had money and time to contribute and were willing and able
to work outside the home. At the same time, a danger quietly lurked under the surface. The communities were rivals over a variety of matters. One needed to tread carefully not to arouse civic passions.

Both women became known as "the Mother of Mesa Verde National Park," a conflicting claim if there ever was one. Both of these talented, motivated activists and atypical Victorian women worked passionately to fulfill their dream of saving Mesa Verde. Their story is one of accomplishment, success, and later, personal anguish that led to a cloud that nearly obscured their achievements.

The story of McClurg, Peabody, and their colleagues has much to say about the role of women in turn-of-the-century America. They and others faced an uphill struggle to convince men of their abilities and to break out of the mold in which women had been confined for centuries. They were not alone. Women were actively involving themselves in a fascinating variety of arenas, from suffrage to athletics.

As Eleanor Roosevelt stated a generation later: "I gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which I must stop and look fear in the face.... I say to myself, I’ve lived through this and can take the next thing that comes along. We must do the things we think we cannot do." The women of Mesa Verde did that and helped pave the way for those who came after them.
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