



EARL HALSTEAD MORRIS — 1889-1956

“Earl, in from Boulder, met me at the Denver station — khakis, leather leggings, stiff-brimmed Stetson — most dependable man the Lord ever made.” That from my diary of 1948.

Everyone, save those who knew him only in New York or Washington, will recognize that description; and everyone, East or West, who had to do with him, will echo the sentiment. For although no man’s character and work can be summed up in a single word, dependable comes most closely to doing just that as regards Morris: the man himself and the results of everything he did. One could rely implicitly on the accuracy of his observations, on his reporting and evaluation of data, on the strength and lastingness of whatever he built.

Morris was born October 24, 1889, in Chama, New Mexico, only son of Juliette Amanda Halstead and Scott N. Morris. Heredity, environment, his experiences as a child and young boy, combined to make him what he was. They were, he once told me, coercive; he couldn't help becoming an archaeologist. But he never dwelt on the odds he had to overcome to reach that goal. His early life is best told of by himself as part of a paper, "My Sixty Years in Archaeology," read last May at the State Historical Museum in Denver.

"My father came to Leadville from the Pennsylvania oil fields in the mid 1870's. Gradually he acquired the horses, wagons, plows, scrapers, and other paraphernalia for construction work on a fairly wide scale: building railway grades, roads, digging canals, and hauling freight when there was no other opening. The summer and fall of 1891 he spent bringing down ore from the rich silver mines near Rico, Colorado. When the first snows made roads in the high country no longer passable, he headed his outfit south toward the San Juan valley in north-west New Mexico. He had learned that the handful of settlers who had followed the San Juan deep into Navajo country were raising quantities of alfalfa, and that feed for wintering his stock could be had cheaply. Also, the grapevine had informed him that the San Juan valley was full of ancient ruins. That interested him almost as much as the alfalfa.

"Eventually, Father's caravan reached Farmington, New Mexico, then a cluster of half a dozen houses. Mormon colonists were opening an irrigation canal farther down the valley and he put his teams to work on that project under a foreman, so he was free to begin digging. In our dooryard there was a stony mound strewn with bits of broken pottery. For days Father dug, he later told me, without uncovering anything more than stubs of wall, an occasional firepit, and a few grinding stones. Then, one afternoon, just before sundown, he broke through a wall into a burial chamber. That night he took from the earth forty pottery vessels, most of them intact. By Spring, he had a large collection. This he put on exhibit at Durango and, on his return trip to the mines, sold it to Gilbert McClurgh of Colorado Springs, where it is now in the Taylor Museum.

"The Fall of 1892 saw us again in Farmington, my father busy gathering a second collection. There was a ruin close to the log cabin

we lived in that winter. One morning in March of 1893, Father handed me a worn-out pick, the handle of which he had shortened to my length, and said: 'Go dig in that hole where I worked yesterday, and you will be out of my way.' At my first stroke there rolled down a roundish, gray object that looked like a cobblestone, but when I turned it over, it proved to be the bowl of a black-on-white dipper. I ran to show it to my mother. She grabbed the kitchen butcher knife and hastened to the pit to uncover the skeleton with which it had been buried. Thus, at three and a half years of age there had happened the clinching event that was to make of me an ardent pot hunter, who later on was to acquire the more creditable, and I hope earned, classification as an archaeologist.

"1894 to 1900 Father's work took us elsewhere, but in 1902 he was back in Farmington occupied, as spare time offered, in amassing another collection of pottery. This had grown to considerable proportions by the time he was murdered in 1904."

Mr. Morris was shot while trying to get from a saloon one of his men who, he'd heard, was drunk and who he feared would be "rolled" by some local bad hombres. Both psychologically and practically, that shattering event and what it entailed, played, I am sure, a large part in bringing about Earl's deeply underlying grave, almost somber, outlook on life. This was never openly expressed, but perhaps because of it his happiness was the more intense when he was taken out of himself by some archaeological or constructional problem, the tougher the better; or when the trout were rising at some hard-to-reach little lake far up in the Rockies. I'm sure, though, that not even the biggest fish ever gave him such satisfaction as to brush the earth from the rim of a pottery bowl, preferably black-on-white ware, and find it unbroken.

Such uplifts as the unexpected find or the whacking great trout did not, of course, come to him until much later, for Mr. Morris died when Earl was but fifteen. Boys matured early in those days on the frontier and I imagine — he never talked to me of that period — he was charged with disposal of his father's outfit. His mother, I have gathered from others, was utterly prostrated and never completely recovered. So from then on — again this is guesswork, but I am certain of it — he was not only her sole support but put himself through school and college.

How he did this at first I do not know, but later in high school and at the University — this he did tell me — he worked as a mason, specializing on fireplaces and chimneys. He also told me, and it was the nearest thing to a boast I ever heard pass his lips, that no chimney he'd built had failed to draw and no fireplace of his had ever smoked. Knowing him and how he did things, I'll bet none did!

In "My Sixty Years" he says that he went on adding to his father's collection through his school days. In 1908 he entered the University of Colorado. In the Spring of 1912 he left college temporarily to join an archaeological expedition to the Maya ruins of Quirigua, Guatemala, directed by E. L. Hewett. Also of the party was Sylvanus Morley, who became a lifelong friend and in after years a close professional associate. That summer he was given funds to excavate in the high country east of the Mesa Verde, the first of many grants from the University of Colorado Museum.

He took his B.A. degree in 1914 and that winter he and Neil M. Judd, another lifelong friend, headed a group that made glue molds of the Quirigua monuments for the San Diego Exposition of 1915. His M.A. came in 1916.

Thanks to Livingston Farrand, then President of the University of Colorado, he was granted in 1905 a scholarship at Columbia. But he was too devoted to field work to put in the time necessary for the doctorate. The year in New York, however, had the important result of his becoming known to Clark Wissler of the American Museum of Natural History, who gave him what he calls his "first great opportunity." This was to direct the excavation of Aztec, one of the largest, best preserved, and archaeologically most rewarding of ancient Pueblo ruins.

Although Morris investigated many Southwestern sites of all periods, Aztec was closest to his heart. He was in charge of the work there from 1916 to 1924 and the resultant publications are among the classics of Southwestern archaeological literature. Aztec was not only thoroughly dug, but the magnificent masonry of its walls was painstakingly repaired and stabilized. Later, his services loaned to the National Park Service by Carnegie Institution, he accurately restored and reroofed Aztec's Great Kiva, a tall-columned, 50-foot subterranean ceremonial chamber into which one cannot descend without wonder at the power of the religion that inspired so splendid a struc-

ture. Nor can one fail to admire the devotion and the skill of the man responsible for its recreation.

A radical change of scene came in 1924, when Sylvanus Morley launched the Carnegie's program of excavation and restoration of some of the finest of the many buildings of Chichén Itzá in Yucatán. Earl was obviously the man for the job. Like Aztec, the Temple of the Warriors at Chichén is a monument to his skill. It also testifies to his engineering genius, for after that great structure had been cleared, the fallen parts of its walls rebuilt, and its 20 tall sculptured columns re-erected, the final work on its substructure revealed that beneath it were wonderfully preserved remains of an earlier building. Obviously, this too had not only to be excavated for study, but if possible its carved and brilliantly painted walls and columns be made permanently accessible. I was at Chichén at the time. I could not see how on earth this could be done. But it offered just the sort of challenge that Earl loved, as did his Norwegian disciple Gustav Stromsvik, who later did such admirable excavation and repair at Copan in Honduras. Nothing could stump that pair, nor did this seemingly hopeless problem. So that now the Warrior's Temple stands safely supported above; and below, in perfect preservation, is what the ancients had spared of the Temple of the Chac Mool.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, or rather Earl, because in 1923 he had married Ann Ax-tell, a vivid and brilliant girl, who after graduating from Smith had spent a season in France with the School of Prehistoric Research. At Chichén with Earl, she meticulously copied the paintings of the 2 temples, working with Jean Charlot and, during 2 long visits, with Joseph Lindon Smith. She and Charlot were coauthors with Earl of the splendid monograph, *The Temple of the Warriors*. She also wrote a charming popular book, *Digging in Yucatan*, to which she later added the equally delightful *Digging in the Southwest*.

Yucatán, however, could never take the place, for Earl, of the San Juan country. Being often at Chichén during his 5 years there, I sensed, and he finally told me, that he itched to pull out. Morley realized this and in 1929, with characteristic generosity, most regretfully let him. Thus, in 1929 Carnegie Institution entered the Southwestern field.

As a matter of fact, Earl had never lost touch with it, for each summer the Carnegie was glad to have him spend such time as he could spare from reports, on excavations for the University of Colorado and the American Museum in the caves of Canyon del Muerto and in surface ruins in the La Plata valley. And when the Warriors monograph was off his hands, he was free to devote himself entirely to the reasoned attack on Anasazi (Basketmaker-Pueblo) prehistory that occupied him for the rest of his life. His program was based on the great amounts of information for certain areas and periods already gathered by himself and others. These data, however, were patchy and uncorrelated. Chronology, too, was uncertain, both absolute and as regards the relative ages of the many cultures and subcultures represented.

Morris' interest in the latter problem had early been aroused by N. C. Nelson's stratigraphic work in the Galisteo Basin and his own similarly established determination that the Chacoan builders of Aztec had been succeeded there by Mesa Verde people. But most appealing to him, because it could yield dates accurate to the year, was dendrochronology. Clark Wissler, the first anthropologist, I believe, to grasp the great potential value for Southwestern archaeology of A. E. Douglass' discovery, wrote Earl of it in 1917. Shortly after, Douglass himself appeared at Aztec. Earl says: "I had a good sized stack of timbers too short for re-use. I turned him loose on that woodpile and he was busy as a beaver all day. That evening, by lantern light in my small room in the ruin, he spread out samplings he had taken and explained how he was building up a sequence of overlapping tree-ring patterns. I could see he was working on something big and from that day I became an ardent collector of wood." His scores of specimens, gathered through the years, have been a highly important contribution to the materials for dendrochronological research. Those from early cave sites in Canyon del Muerto and Durango, Colorado, have enabled Douglass to build back his sequence unbroken to 49 B.C. From Durango also came a "floating" series that may carry precise dating considerably further back.

Morris' special concern with chronology stemmed from his lifelong preoccupation with the history of Anasazi culture, which he believed, I am sure rightly, to have developed its characteristic traits in, and to have exerted potent in-

fluences widely outward from, the San Juan drainage. In almost all parts of this vast area he had explored and dug. His greatest contributions were based on work in the La Plata and Animas valleys, twin northern tributaries of the San Juan. That was bred-in-the-bone country, his first little pot having come from close to the mouth of the Animas. Higher up that stream lies the great Aztec ruin; above Durango, still farther up, his last excavations brought to light the only early Basketmaker dwellings so far known. The La Plata was equally productive. Part or all of 8 field sessions he devoted there to selected sites typical of each major stage, from Late Basketmaker to terminal Mesa Verde. He thus covered the entire life of the pottery-making San Juan peoples. His La Plata monograph treats every type of artifact in detail, as well as burials and La Plata architecture, from what he aptly terms *protokiva* pit houses to fully matured pueblos. His masterly introduction sets forth graphically the rise, development, and culmination of the local Anasazi culture. The story, centuries long, ends only with the devastating drought of 1276 to 1299. The La Plata ruins, however, were unprotected from rain or the water of melting snow and therefore yielded only objects not subject, or highly resistant, to decay. The same is true of nearly all Animas sites. So, to complete his picture, Morris had early turned to the bone-dry caves of Canyon del Muerto and later to those of the Prayer Rock district. From these could be recovered, often in astonishingly perfect preservation, sandals, basketry, textiles, wooden implements, foodstuffs, and the countless other perishables that bring an ancient culture so vividly to life. The caves rewarded him richly with such materials of all periods.

Throughout his career, Morris was doubly motivated. First, of course, by the urge to trace the course and discern the causes of historical events and cultural developments. Secondly, by an exceptionally ardent wish to make evident to the world of today the achievements of the past. Back of this was his own admiration for and striving to preserve all ancient things that were beautiful and soundly made. I think he may also have felt, perhaps subconsciously, an obligation to repay, by rescuing their work from oblivion, the men and women of long ago whose artistry and manual skills gave him such keen and lasting pleasure.

Both aims were served by his untiring field activity: on the one hand to gather factual data; on the other, to salvage material evidence of fine workmanship of every sort. One aspect of such salvage was his effective effort to give permanence to the best of Anasazi architecture. To that end he labored long on the stabilization of Aztec's walls and that he capped by his wonderful restoration of the Great Kiva. With the aid of J. A. Lancaster, who still carries on at Mesa Verde, he skillfully strengthened several seriously threatened parts of Cliff Palace. He did the same for the tall central building in Mummy Cave, Canyon del Muerto; and in de Chelly, by a long wing-dam and judicious planting, he protected from further flood erosion the lower structure of White House.

His love of fine pottery led to the gradual building up of a unique personal collection of notable examples of nearly every principal Southwestern ware. Each piece had to be bought or swapped for, because during his whole career he was a staff member of one scientific institution or another, to which of course went whatever he unearthed. But exceptional vessels kept becoming available: washed out by earth-hungry arroyos, hit upon in public or private works, dug by pot hunters. Whenever he learned of such a piece he went after it. One he showed me with great pride he'd had his eye on, he said, for 20 years.

After his death, these specially selected vessels, as well as his library, were acquired by the University of Colorado, whose museum was already in possession of the results of a number of his most fruitful excavations. Additional important Morris collections are in various museums: at Aztec National Monument, Mesa Verde National Park, the Arizona State Museum, Laboratory of Tree-ring Research, and the American Museum of Natural History.

During the first years at Aztec Morris worked much of the time alone or with a single helper. And later, when such economy was no longer necessary, his excavations were always made with the smallest possible number of men adequate for what he had in mind to do. This enabled him to keep close tabs on what was going on and also, I suspect, allowed him to take a hand in the digging, for wielding shovel or axe gave him the greatest pleasure. I've never seen cleaner or surer chopping and his digging was pure artistry. He'd studied the handling of the long handled shovel as a pro-

fessional golfer studies his swing. Only Ole Owens and Oscar Tatman, devoted assistants year after year, came near being his equals as earth movers.

After his final diggings of 1940 below Durango, he possessed extraordinarily full information, in very large part of his own gathering, on the archaeology of the San Juan. This he set himself to make ready for publication, a tremendous task, because of his many years of work in one of the richest archaeological areas of the Southwest. Furthermore, his wife underwent a long and crippling illness, only ended by her death in 1945. Through those years he cared for her tirelessly. He also had responsibility for 2 young daughters, Elizabeth Ann and Sarah Lane, born in the early 30's. Concern on that score was mercifully taken from his shoulders by his marriage to Lucile Bowman, the most perfect companion and helper. To her, the wise and understanding principal of their primary school, the girls were already devoted.

With all domestic worries over, able to profit from the faithful and intelligent collaboration of Robert F. Burgh, as well as the extraordinary skill of Jean Ziegler in the delicate dissection and beautiful drafting of the incredibly complex weaves of the "cloth" sandals, it seemed that Earl could hope to complete his program. But a ruptured vertebral disc, which caused agonizing sciatica, necessitated a serious operation in 1949 and long confinement in a trying cast.

He was never, I think, really well again. Nevertheless he kept courageously at work, completing with Burgh the monograph on the Durango Basketmaker sites. Much, too, had been done on the sandal monograph and those on Late Basketmaker houses and pottery. Some part of this invaluable material is to be prepared by his daughter Elizabeth, a graduate student under Emil W. Haury at Arizona. Joe Ben Wheat of the University of Colorado has likewise offered his help and can also be counted on to make available others of Morris' large collections. But no other can produce the final work he had planned and of which we often talked. It was to bring the beloved Anasazi back to life in the stupendous country that was theirs — and his. He was a never failing master of exactly the right word. One can catch between the lines of all his writings a hint of what he could have done. Only a single essay, "Exploring in the Canyon of Death,"

allows his light to shine a little through an ingrained reticence and for those who have known the canyons, the note he there tells of drawing from the long-silent Basketmaker flute can never quite fade away.

Of Earl's interests and professional accomplishments, I have spoken. His scientific career will be more fully treated by Robert Burgh in *The American Anthropologist*. But his real greatness was of the spirit: gentleness, true humility, unflinching readiness to help, utter sincerity, innate appreciation of quality in people and things. One realizes the loss his passing has caused to our never too great stock of first-rate minds. But that is overshadowed, to those who lived and worked with him, by the loss of a friend on whom they could unquestioningly rely.

At Aztec, his ashes are to be scattered over the walls he rendered so time-defying. They will become one with the bit of earth that in life was always so much a part of himself.

A. V. KIDDER

DEGREES AND HONORS

University of Colorado, B.A. 1914; M.A. 1916; Sc.D. *honoris causa*, 1942; Alumni Norlin medal for Distinguished Achievement, 1931.

American Anthropological Association, the Alfred Vincent Kidder Award for achievement in American archaeology, 1953.

The Earl H. Morris Scholarship Fund for Archaeology, University of Colorado, established posthumously in his memory.

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ADDENDUM

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