In the Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado, one of the most amazing sights in the United States is dug into the side of a mountain. Sandy-colored towers, walls and rooms sit there, overlooking the park. They have no roofs, but the structures are protected by the overhanging cliff. Eight centuries after their construction, they are in excellent condition—and remain one of the most intriguing archaeological sites in the country.

Who built these fabulous dwellings? Why did they choose to dig them into the face of the rock itself? When did they live, and how did their civilization fade?

Although not all of those questions have definite answers, archeologists have discovered much about these long-ago Native Americans. The largest of their dwellings, Cliff Palace, was discovered on December 18, 1888, by a pair of Colorado cowboys who were riding the mesa in search of missing cattle. They spied the crumbling structures through the driving snow and rode their horses toward one of the most intriguing finds in archeological history.

Cliff Palace and the other cliff dwellings were constructed by the Ancestral Pueblo people, a group comprised of several Native American tribes whose descendants include the Hopi, Zuni and Acoma people. The Ancestral Pueblo people lived in and around the American Southwest and their history goes back to as early as 100 A.D., during a period known as "Late Basketmaker II," due to the fine woven baskets produced during this period.
Over the next thousand years, the people of the Southwest settled down gradually. They stopped living in caves and shallow pits, and began building homes. They moved from a strictly hunter-gatherer culture to one increasingly dependent on agriculture, growing beans and domesticating animals like turkeys. The more they farmed, the more water they needed, and they built dams, walls and other basic irrigation systems.

Their civilization continued advancing, and by the period known as "Pueblo I," the Ancestral Pueblo people began building large stone communities. These sprawling dwellings, some of which had as many as 100 rooms, were the forerunner to the later cliff dwellings. As agricultural life began to be more centered on recently-introduced cotton, and the communities' artisans became more advanced in pottery, the cultural life of the community focused around the kivas.

What is a kiva? It is an underground circular chamber used for ceremonial purposes, and the largest Ancestral Pueblo dwellings had many of them. In the photo of Cliff Palace on the first page, you can see the kivas in the front of the picture: the low, round pits around which most of the towers were built. It is easy to imagine the people of Cliff Palace gathering in these kivas to carry out social ceremonies around the campfire.

By 1200 A.D., the Ancestral Pueblo people began building their homes into the cliffs. No one knows precisely why they moved into the hills, but it’s possible that the shift was to make their homes easier to defend in times of war. Many of the cliff dwellings in Mesa Verde National Park are accessible only by rope-ladder, which would have made them very easy to defend against a potential attacker.

Most of the dwellings in Mesa Verde are built in shallow parts of the rock, and are able to hold only two or three rooms. But Cliff Palace, which was built up over the course of the 1200s, is much larger. It contains over 150 individual rooms and more than 20 kivas. At its peak, it could have provided shelter for more than 100 people.

One of the most intriguing features of the dwellings is the size of the doorways, which are much smaller than the ones we have today. This would not have bothered the people of Cliff Palace, because they were much shorter than the people of the 21st Century. The men were around 5 feet 5 inches tall, and the women around 5 feet tall. Their apartments, which were accessed by climbing tall wooden ladders, averaged about 6 feet 8 inches tall—a much lower ceiling than you are probably used to!
Just as no one is quite sure why the Ancestral Pueblo people began building dwellings like Cliff Palace, no one knows exactly why they eventually abandoned them. A theory is connected with what happened in 1276, when just as Cliff Palace was reaching its height, the region was struck by the "Great Drought." For 23 years, rainfall was sparse, a catastrophe that would continue to plague the region off-and-on until around 1450. As agriculture became more and more difficult, the Ancestral Pueblo people were perhaps forced to move to better farmland—and Cliff Palace had to be left behind.
1. What is Mesa Verde National Park famous for?
   A. beautiful waterfalls
   B. Native American cliff dwellings
   C. an endangered species of bird
   D. a collection of Native American baskets

2. What does the author describe in the passage?
   A. why the Ancestral Pueblo people transitioned to an agricultural lifestyle
   B. the development of pottery in Ancestral Pueblo culture
   C. Cliff Palace, the largest of the cliff dwellings built by the Ancestral Pueblo people
   D. basket weaving techniques from the “Late Basketmaker II” period

3. Archeologists believe that the Ancestral Pueblo people began building their homes in cliffs to defend themselves in times of war. What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?
   A. Many of the cliff dwellings are accessible only by rope ladder.
   B. Most of the towers were built around kivas.
   C. Cliff Palace could have provided shelter for over 100 people.
   D. Ancestral Pueblo people built dams, walls and other basic irrigation systems.

4. The Ancestral Pueblo people moved from a strictly hunter-gatherer culture to one increasingly dependent on agriculture, growing beans and domesticating animals like turkeys. What effect did this have on their lifestyle?
   A. They started living in caves and shallow pits.
   B. They stopped building stone communities.
   C. Their cultural life began to focus less on ceremonial gatherings.
   D. Their cultural life began to focus on ceremonial gatherings.

5. What is this passage mostly about?
   A. cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde National Park and the people who built them
   B. tribal warfare between Ancestral Pueblo peoples
   C. the “Late Basketmaker II” period
   D. the importance of the kiva in Ancestral Pueblo culture
6. Read the following sentences: “Who built these fabulous dwellings? Why did they choose to dig them into the face of the rock itself? When did they live, and how did their civilization fade?”

Why does the author pose these questions?

A to let students know what they will be quizzed on  
B to ask rhetorical questions that won’t be answered  
C to ask the reader a direct question  
D to set up points that the passage will address

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Ancestral Pueblo people were much shorter than 21st Century humans; __________, the doorways in Cliff Palace are much smaller than modern doorways.

A ultimately  
B thus  
C notable  
D such as

8. What makes Cliff Palace different from the other cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde National Park?

______________________________________________________________________  
______________________________________________________________________  
______________________________________________________________________  
______________________________________________________________________
9. What is a kiva and what was it used for?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

10. Describe two things the Ancestral Pueblo people valued based on the way they built their cliff dwellings. Use evidence from the passage to support your answer.

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
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8. What makes Cliff Palace different from the other cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde National Park?

Suggested answer: Cliff Palace is much larger than the other dwellings; while most of the cliff dwellings had two or three rooms, Cliff Palace had 150 rooms. Cliff Palace was also built deeper into the cliff rock, while the other dwellings were built in the shallow parts of the rock.

9. What is a kiva and what was it used for?

Suggested answer: A kiva is an underground circular chamber used for ceremonial purposes by the Ancestral Pueblo people.

10. Describe two things the Ancestral Pueblo people valued based on the way they built their cliff dwellings. Use evidence from the passage to support your answer.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary and should be supported by the passage. For example, students may explain that the Ancestral Pueblo people valued social ceremonies and gatherings because they built kivas in their cliff dwellings where the gatherings were held. Students may also explain that the Ancestral people valued safety as many of the cliff dwellings in Mesa Verde National Park are accessible only by rope-ladder, making the dwellings easy to defend against potential attackers.