

# Bright Angel Trail

by Rachel Dickinson

I watched as the older man approached a woman his age—probably his wife—who was standing on the front porch of the El Tovar Hotel, on the south rim of the Grand Canyon. They both held walking sticks—the metal kind you buy in an outdoors store—and wore smart-looking khaki shorts and floppy hats. They also had calves of steel. I overheard them tell a companion who joined them that they had just come up out of the canyon.

Damn, I thought. I don't look that good when I've just come from the grocery store, much less after hiking the Bright Angel Trail. Even though the 9.6-mile-long trail is known as the super-highway of the Grand Canyon, because it's wide and scenic and has rest stops with water, hiking the trail still involves going either downhill or going uphill, neither of which is easy when you're doing it for miles. My feet, shins, and calves ached from just thinking about the change in elevation.

Although the couple was a good twenty or thirty years older than me, I wanted their youthfulness, their *joie de vivre*, and their hiking attire. I looked down at my dowdy clothing, clogs, and

book-filled canvas tote, and thought, What the hell happened to me?

Thirty-five years earlier, I had been nineteen and traveling across the country with a boyfriend. We were geology majors together in college. The highlight was going to be a hike into the Grand Canyon. The thought of walking down through the layers of rock and moving back through time until we reached the pre-Cambrian era made me feel almost faint with anticipation.

It was January. We left upstate New York in a raging blizzard and drove as far as we could before pitching a tent in the inky black night at a campsite in Tennessee. We awoke to six inches of snow. Apparently we had dragged the storm behind us with our Land Cruiser.

As we made our way west, we thought only of the Grand Canyon. Graceland, the Mississippi River, the oil derricks of Oklahoma with their dinosaur-like heads rising and falling—all interesting, but none compared to the canyon's promise.

Somewhere around Pittsburgh, I began reading Major John Wesley Powell's account of his harrowing journey down the Colorado River through the then-unexplored canyon. The handsome, one-armed Civil War veteran embarked on his scientific expedition in 1869. Charged with mapping the area, Powell did much, much more, and his journal is filled with observations about natural history, geology, and the Indians he encountered.

I took to reading sections aloud as we drove across the vast landscape. "Just listen to this," I'd say, and begin quoting. The writing was beautiful and playful, and inspired a sense of awe for the region. In passages that are part adventure travel and part hyperbole, Powell first paints an oversized picture—as if he were floating above the mountains and streams and plateaus of the West—then zooms in to the specific, much like a person

does when he spots a distant bird through binoculars and then adjusts the focus. Until, finally, he brings us right down into the canyon with him.

When we finally reached the south rim, the temperature was about thirty degrees, and a couple inches of snow covered the ground. We didn't care. We pitched our tent, fired up the Coleman stove, and cooked up a pot of spaghetti. The campground restrooms and showers were a treat after days and nights spent washing up in disgusting gas station bathrooms—the kind of bathrooms reached by going around to the side of a garage and unlocking the door with a key attached to a wooden two-by-four with “GALS” scrawled on it in magic marker.

We planned to spend the first day exploring the canyon's rim. I made my way to the El Tovar Hotel, a building completed in 1905. I had never visited a national park before, so I'd only seen pictures of their grand hotels—the oversized lobbies, heavy wooden beams, and rock fireplaces. Yet at El Tovar, I was torn about entering. I knew places like this were built to lure rich people to the wilderness and entice them into seeing the canyon—which I'd grown to think of as *my* canyon—from the leisure of a rocking chair on a porch or a balcony. The wealthy could experience the canyon, taking in the wild Colorado Plateau and the Navajo Reservation, without walking down into it. But to my mind, you couldn't really know something if you hadn't actually experienced it.

Still, I couldn't resist the chance to see the hotel in real life. As I walked across the lobby, it was everything I hoped it would be: massive log beams and Navajo rugs and mission-style furniture. Feeling smug, I thought, what could these people possibly know about the canyon—John Wesley Powell's canyon? My canyon?

Later in the day, I found a little museum on the rim with a John Wesley Powell exhibit. And there it was! Powell's boat, the

one that ferried him through the canyon: a long wooden craft with two sets of oarlocks and enough room to accommodate three men and some supplies. It had withstood deadly rapids and drops over waterfalls. The Major—I now thought of him as simply The Major—and his men lugged that heavy-as-lead boat around dozens of waterfalls too high to plunge over without being smashed to smithereens.

That night, as we lay bundled in our little tent, we talked about what it would be like to go into the canyon, to wander down through the red and purple and orange rocks we'd seen at sunset that evening. I was so excited I could hardly sleep.

On our second day, my boyfriend and I headed down the Bright Angel Trail with packs on our backs and a geology guidebook in our hands. As we descended, we stopped often to look at the rock formations: Toroweap Limestone, Coconino Sandstone, Vishnu Schist. The romantic-sounding names made me wonder about their origins. Although I was already far away from the dirt-poor dairy farm in upstate New York where I grew up, Vishnu Schist took me to an even more distant land.

I grew up thinking the canyon was an impossibly deep gash in the earth, with sheer vertical walls that dropped straight down from the rim to the Colorado River. What I found instead delighted me. Sure, there were steep parts where the well-worn path made tight switchbacks, but then the topography would level off into a path meandering along a broad plateau that marked the beginning of another rock formation.

The deeper we hiked, the warmer the temperature. Soon we were peeling off layers of clothing and stuffing them into our packs. We passed through a number of bioclimatic zones as we headed toward the river. (In terms of climate, it was like traveling from Canada to Mexico.) On some level this felt all wrong.

Midwinter meant swirling cold, exactly the snowy, windswept conditions we'd found at the south rim. To be heading into a temperate climate by descending into the earth—heading toward its hot molten core—and in January, was almost unimaginable to me.

At the bottom of the trail lay The Major's river, a huge, powerful, muddy torrent. The Colorado was the natural force that worked against the quickly rising Colorado Plateau, cutting down through the layers of rock, down to those ancient strata holding blue-green algae, the oldest surviving life-form.

As I sat near the river and picked up rounded pebbles, smoothed by eons of the water's tumbling, I tried to imagine The Major's wild ride with his men one hundred years earlier. They didn't know what waited around each bend.

I felt giddy, overwhelmed by the power of geology and history. Then it dawned on me that this feeling was in fact my brain registering the pain shooting through my shins. No one had told me that walking downhill was going to hurt. I had no experience with hiking and, in this pre-fitness-crazed era, certainly hadn't trained for the walk, a descent of more than 4,300 feet.

Within half an hour, my legs hurt so badly I could hardly move. I kept thinking, How the hell am I going to climb out of this canyon tomorrow? How the hell will I make it to that campsite one hundred yards down the path?

My memory of the rest of the evening is a blur—probably because of the pain—but after we made camp, I do remember hearing and watching a couple of ring-tailed cats (*Bassariscus astutus*) try to undo my pack in search of food. As I shined my flashlight toward the rustling, one of the creatures froze in the beam and stared at me with its protruding black eyes. Take it all, I thought, it'll be less I have to carry when I climb out of here tomorrow.

Every step back up that trail was torturous. My boyfriend tried to humor me—tried to engage me in conversation—but I couldn't have cared less about the rocks, the flowers, The Major, or the canyon. I took to staring at my feet and singing a line from the chorus of "Love Machine" by the Miracles ("I'm just a love machine, and I won't work for nobody but you. . ."), just so one foot would put itself in front of the other in time to the music. Every time a mule train passed, I hated the mules and the people who rode them. Lazy slobs, I thought, even as I fantasized about a fainting act that might win me a ride out.

After a while, my interest in geologic formations returned, this time as a way to track how far we had left to go. Bright Angel Shale—only six miles left. Hermit Shale—halfway to the rim. Then, finally, we were walking through Kaibab Limestone—the final formation.

When I saw that we were approaching the edge of the rim, I began to cry. I tripped a few minutes later, then sat down by the side of the trail and sobbed even harder. My boyfriend, who was also exhausted, couldn't bear to stop and kept walking, saying he'd see me in the bar. Eventually I wiped my eyes with the backs of my hands, smearing dirt onto my face, and wondered why I had been seduced by the stories of the one-armed Civil War major.

It occurred to me that while some of us are intrepid and brave, most of us aren't. We just get seduced by a good story, and, in our arrogance, believe we can live through a story just like it. A profound sadness washed over me when I realized I could never have done what The Major accomplished. Up to that point, I had been told by everyone that I could do anything, and I always assumed that my own lack of imagination was my only limit. At that moment, however, I knew there were real barriers to

accomplishing certain things, that it wasn't a lack of imagination that held me back, but rather, a lack of courage, a lack of strength, and sheer inertia.

Thirty-five years later, as I watched the older couple with their great calves, I remembered that sadness and how I didn't experience the euphoric moment of finishing the hike. Instead, I had left a kind of innocence behind on the Bright Angel Trail, which a generation of hikers and mules had since ground into hard-packed dirt. And as I sat in a rocker on the porch of El Tovar with my tote bag of books on my lap, and looked across the canyon to the north rim and the Colorado Plateau, I wondered how many others had grown up just a little bit while crawling toward the rim. ■ ■ ■