

# Into the Canyon Wilderness

*Daniel J. Basta*

*This is a story of a long-ago trip that most of our family and friends had heard about, but I doubt anyone ever knew the full story nor remembers much about it. Karen Davis, beloved wife, mother, sister and friend, who passed unexpectedly, she had loved to reminisce about this adventure. This holiday season – December 2025 – seemed like a good time to write about our adventure together and share it again with family and friends.*

More pictures have been taken, stories written, and books published about the Grand Canyon than perhaps any other natural place or wonder in North America. Some contend it stands high among a small handful of the world's most recognized places. But as recognizable as such places are each still hold secrets known only to a few. The Grand Canyon holds many such secret places. Individuals fortunate enough to get access to wilderness areas in the Canyon can re-discover some of these secrets for themselves. The journey to find them is not for everyone. The Canyon guards its secrets. This story is about how serendipity intervened on an ordinary hike to traverse the Grand Canyon, and we had found ourselves on an unexpected adventure into the wilderness hiking to Shangri-la!

Mention the words Grand Canyon to most people and a picture of a large jagged reddish-brown hole in the ground with a tiny blue strip running down its center forms in their minds. It conveys something of a pre-historic, ancient far distant past and might even be on another planet. Standing anywhere on the South Rim and looking northward bombards the eye with a sense of enormity, everyone feels it. Nearly 20 million years of planet Earth's geologic record is every moment before your eyes; it is almost too much for the brain to absorb without bursting. Standing on the South Rim forces the brain to process the view of the Canyon into a grand two-dimension pastel painting or picture. Viewing the Canyon in this manner is a worthwhile experience for anyone. But the full impact of the Canyon and hints about its secrets can only come to one by hiking through it. Once with in it the Grand Canyon is a world unto itself

## Background<sup>1</sup>

I first visited the Grand Canyon in 1969, viewing it from the South Rim, and had even walked an hour or so down the Bright Angel trail; I took a few grainy color photos and considered that I had seen the Grand Canyon. I was content, until about six years later when a close friend and colleague, Blair, an expert on the Grand Canyon, convinced me I needed to see it from the inside out to have even a hope of understanding it. Blair was a true Grand Canyon scholar and had plied me with more books and studies than I could possibly read. But then with Blairs indefatigable urging a six-member group was organized, a permit obtained from the Park Service, and in 1977 an eight-day trek had been undertaken that took us to the North Rim and back with a couple of side hikes. My companions hailed from Seattle, Washington, Glacier, Montana, Manchester, England, and Arlington Virginia. For all of my companions, except Blair, it was a once in a lifetime experience. It had been at the top of their “bucket lists.” I learned a great deal about the Canyon on this trek and Blair had been right – to see the Canyon from the inside out. We both agreed we would do another trip together and hike out to the Clear Creek Area, which was on Blair’s bucket list. We never did.

More than twenty years later, my brother-in-law, Rusty, and I were planning a trip into the Grand Canyon. Blair had been excited for us, but by then hiking the Canyon was beyond the old hiker’s ability. In his prime Blair would hike your legs off. I know he had done it to me more than once. We had worked together in Washington, DC, near Dupont Circle. Blair lived in Arlington across the river and had hiked to work everyday down the Spout Run creek bed, then across the Key Bridge over the Potomac, and though Georgetown to work. He had cut quite the figure in his old hiking clothes, boots, and poncho when it rained, with his backpack full of books striding mightily back and forth to work. It was no surprise he could walk your legs off. On this journey into the Canyon he would be with us only in spirit. It had been his idea we get to Clear Creek, and to also take a different route into the Canyon – the Hermit trail. Hermit trail was known to be a difficult and strenuous trail. Blair loved the trail and had last hiked it probably thirty years before;

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<sup>1</sup> Note: At the end of this story a short folio of pictures from our journey is included.

he assured us it was worth the effort. It turned out to be the most difficult part of the whole journey.

## Making a Plan

Rusty was also a seasoned backpacker and we both knew the key to a successful trip was in the planning. First was to plan a route and identify campsites in Grand Canyon National Park for which to apply for permits. There would be four of us: Rusty and his wife Karen, and me and my wife Arlene. Neither Karen nor Arlene had much backpacking



experience at this time. But both were fit and mostly prepared for the type of physical rigors it would take to hike, climb, and camp for eight days in the Grand Canyon. – we would be carrying everything to sustain us for the eight days!

On February 2, 1998, we received our Backcountry Use Permit for the campsites we had requested for May 4 to May 11. Putting a permit request in early is always a good thing, but even so I always thought we had gotten in just under the wire. The seven authorized campsites were based on the route we had planned with Blair – Hermit trail to the Granite Rapid campsite **(1)**; then along the Tonto Plateau to the Indian (Havasupai) Gardens campsites **(2)**; down the Bright Angel trail across the Colorado river to the Bright Angel campsites **(3)**, at the bottom of the canyon; then along the Clear Creek trail on the northside of the Colorado River to the Clear Creek campsites **(4)** at the end of the trail; back along the Clear Creek trail to the Bright Angel trail and to the Cotton Wood camp sites which would have been **(5)** , but had turned out to be closed, hence we had spent two nights at Clear Creek and never dashed to the North Rim; then back along the Clear Creek trail to the Bright Angel campsites **(6)**; Climb out of the Canyon back to the Indian (Havasupai) Gardens campsites **(7)**; and then a short hike back-up the Bright Angel trail to the South Rim.

We were pleased to get exactly what we had requested, and Blair was more than pleased we had followed his advice. Sometimes when backpacking, even in the Grand Canyon, however, unforeseen circumstances can intervene and change plans. Our plan changed and to our joy we had found ourselves on a “non-trail” hiking to Shangri-la!

### a lot of Stuff to Carry

All backpacking trips require many of the same items in one form or another. Hiking the Grand Canyon, however, presents a range of challenges to the long-range backpacker regarding what “stuff” to carry as well as how to prepare. It’s not like a two or three trip to a local National Park. The amount of stuff that can be safely carried, and the enjoyment of hiking in the Grand Canyon depends a lot on physical conditioning. Consequently, it was important to prepare our bodies for the rigors of hiking eight days in the Canyon. The rigors are similar to Alpine hiking – either always climbing up or climbing down long slopes and at times the trails are steep. We did a number of short hill hikes together in the time we could devote to getting ready. It was particularly important to experiment with our footwear. I hadn’t been very happy with the boots

I wore on my last trip into the canyon. This time we also brought light running shoes for walking around camp. It turned out we would need these shoes for our unexpected journey to Shangri-La.

In the Grand Canyon, the hiker is always exposed to the sun, which can be brutal. The sun and dry air make staying hydrated a priority. The majority of rescues the Park Service deals with within the Canyon are in one way or another related to dehydrated visitors, even accidents such as falling or tripping injuries. Individuals often fail to notice the symptoms of dehydration because they sweat very little in the very dry air in the Canyon and the deeper you go into the Canyon the hotter it gets. The body is sweating but rather than forming moisture on the skin, the moisture evaporates so fast it is often said to sublime – go directly to a gaseous state. Water is life in the Grand Canyon. Consequently, carrying and drinking enough water is always a concern and water is heavy to carry. Even so, when hiking in the Grand Canyon the old axiom: “light is right” is especially important to keep in mind regarding the stuff to bring along.

### Our stuff

When we began planning in earnest we identified most of the stuff, we would carry by considering each couple as a “buddy team.” Each couple was responsible for their camping equipment and personal items. The food, however, we planned together for the group, preparing and sharing meals for the eight days. Once we got to the Canyon, each of us would also hand carry one or two single quart plastic milk cartons, or a collapsible one-gallon jug filled with water, in addition to two one-quart canteens each.

Early on in food planning, Rusty and I had considered gathering up assorted freeze-dried food packages and power bars. All we had to do was get enough and all would be well, perhaps a guy thing. However, our wives had overruled us and took over the food planning – it was good thing. Karen and Arlene developed a menu plan for each day which included: breakfast, mid-morning snack, lunch, afternoon snack, and dinner; tasty electrolyte mixes were also included to enhance our water and much more. They researched the calories we would likely need, the food

resources available, and Karen even made “special” high protein cakes to fill out and augment our needs. Cooking, such as for the freeze-dried foods, was done in small coffee pots heated on two white gas stoves, which Rusty and I carried. No fires are permitted in the Grand Canyon. The stoves fitted perfectly inside the small coffee pots. They weighed and calculated everything. It would have been a less enjoyable and probably a hungry trip except for their efforts. Leaving it to them was the best decision we made getting ready for the trip.

With the planning completed and everything gathered, the last step was to distribute everything among us, especially the food items. The food supplies were comparatively light and organized into individual daily packets. Karen and Arlene had done a great job. Most of these could be fit into their backpacks and keep their loads between 30 and 35 pounds. Rusty and I fitted everything else into or on top of our backpacks, including the tents, which came in at about 55 pounds each. We loaded up our backpacks and walked around with them a little to check our balance and made sure each of us could handle their load, plus two canteens and plastic milk containers of water.

### Hermit trail was an eye Opener

The first day of a hike into the Grand Canyon is always an eye opener, both with respect to the rigors of the trail, regardless of which trail is taken, and the phenomenal panorama of the Canyon before you with every step. The rigors of the Hermit Trail however were a different matter.

The night before entering the Canyon and bidding goodbye to the South Rim we stayed in the Inn near the start of the Bright Angel Trail. It is prudent to get a good night’s sleep and a hearty breakfast before heading in the Canyon. We also wanted to get an early start because going in by way of the Hermit Trail would take us down the Canyon to the west and then we would hike back east on the Tonto Plateau to our first camp at Granite Rapids. It would then take another day to get to Indian (Now Havasupi) Gardens, which was only a few hours down the Bright Angel Trail from where we had slept at the Inn. It was going to be a long first day – more than 10 miles from the trail head to the Granite Rapids campsite.

## THE HERMIT TRAIL

Listening to Blair, we had thought it was a short walk to the trailhead. We were quickly advised it would be better to take a bus since it was about an eight-mile drive! We took the bus. The Hermit trail itself had once been a well know and trafficked trail up until the early 1930s.



Since then mother nature had not been kind to it and the inevitable erosion and landslides that take place in Canyon had made it a very challenging trail. This was especially the case for the upper reaches of the trail, which drops about 2,000 ft. in the first 2.5 miles.

The first 2.5 miles was more than a wake-up call. Going downhill is hard enough on the legs but climbing over and around the boulders and landslides that block the trail made it really hard, especially carrying fully loaded backpacks. The body works hard trying to maintain your

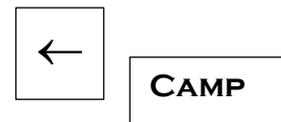
balance as you are tipping this way or that and propelling yourself up and over things. I don't think any of us thought it would be that hard. More than once I felt I had to say,

“Don't worry the rest of the Canyon is not like this!”

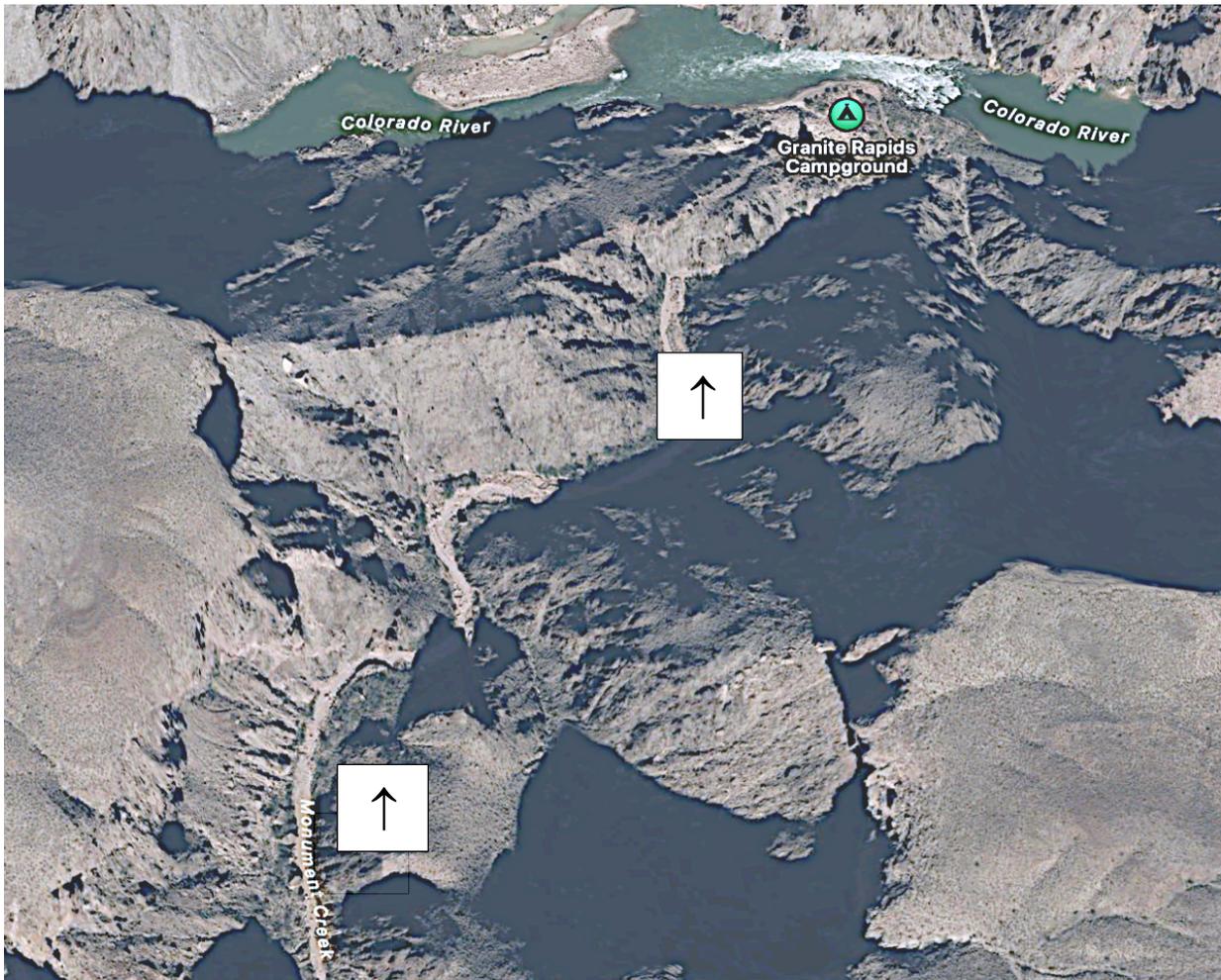
The views of course were spectacular. The next five miles were more reasonable and took us down to the junction with the West Tonto trail on the Tonto Plateau. We had descended nearly 3,500 ft. from the trailhead.

The Tonto Plateau is one of my favorite parts of the Canyon. It is easy to walk along on its undulating terrain, and the spectacular canyon is all around enveloping your every step. Previously I have seen the wild mules roaming the plateau. We hiked along the Tonto Trail for about two miles to pick up the Monument Creek Trail which finally led us to the cut-off to the Grand Rapids camp. It was dark when we finally got there, pretty exhausted. We had hiked about 10.5 miles and dropped over 4,300 ft. into the Canyon. I remember it was easy to miss the campsites in the dim light. It looked as if most of the permitted sites were occupied. It was our first night and camp in the Grand Canyon.

Although tired out, setting up our first camp in the Canyon had gone pretty quicky; at the night sky and trying to take-in the dark shapes around us the tents were up, bedding laid out, a light fare for dinner was had **TRAIL TO GRAND RAPIDS CAMP** ren were out for the count.



Rusty and I lingered for a while looking at the night sky and trying to take-in the dark shapes



around us.

The Grand Rapids camp sites seemed to be deep in a tight canyon, but we would have to wait till morning to actually see where we were. As we sat there, unfamiliar animal sounds came from the tops of the ridges around us. We could also hear people talking in low tones in a nearby camp. One of them saw us and came over to ask about our day, apparently, we had been the last to enter the camp that night. It's amazing how easily people connect on the trail in the wilderness. When we asked about the animal sounds from above, our new friend told us they were from mountain sheep. There must have been a lot of them up on the ridges that night. For the rest of the trip we looked for the mountain sheep every day. We thought we occasionally heard them

but never did see any. At Clear Creek days later we discovered what was really making those sounds. Just before crashing and turning in, I turned toward Rusty to put a final note on the day,

“Whew, it felt like we ran a Marathon today.”

He gave me a big smile I could feel through the darkness paused and said,

“I think it was at least two marathons.”

With that we joined our wives in the tents to immediately fall off into a deep sleep as our muscles began stiffening.

### A Typical Day on the Trail

We rose that first morning pretty stiff from the hike in on the Hermit trail, slowly came to life, and were amazed at the beauty of the Granit Rapids camp site as the sun came up. We were indeed in a small canyon between two ridges. It looked so different than when we had come in the night before. The camp routine we followed was to be generally the same for most days in Canyon. First things first, fill our two coffee pots with water, put them on our Sevea stoves and get water boiling for coffee and breakfast. A good cup of coffee every morning got us moving. Karen and Arlene would find the breakfast and food packet for the day and began to organize the breakfast as Rusty, and I started to take down the tents. Breakfast on most days consisted of oatmeal with fruit, either blueberries, apples or strawberries. Sometimes we supplemented breakfast with peanut butter and molasses on a cracker or Wasa crisp bread. We always had Tang with our meals.

At breakfast we talked over the hike and the trail ahead for the day. The hike back east and up to Indian Gardens was another strenuous day, but after the first two days our legs came back to us, and we were in the rhythm of the Canyon. The hike down to the Colorado river and across to the Bright Angel campsites seemed tame compared to the previous two days and our

boots and loads were becoming part of us. As we walked along the Colorado River a group running the river on large zodiac rubber boats glided by and waved vigorously to us. It looked so easy, and we waved back. Rafting the Colorado river to see the Grand Canyon is an entirely different experience from what we were doing – sweating and trudging up and down. We were experiencing the Canyon in a way the rafters could only image as they floated by. I must admit that at that moment we felt a little superior to them in boats. They could never know the joy of the Canyon we were experiencing which had to be earned the hard way. Although we agreed they were having their own adventures.

### Bright Angel Campsite

Bright Angel had been crowded, and we found a campsite a little way up the canyon. All the times I have been to the Bright Angel campsite it had always seemed a bit crowded. Most hikers into the canyon simply go down to Bright Angel and then back up to the South Rim or stop at Bright Angel before heading up to the north rim or elsewhere in Canyon. Phantom Ranch and a cold beer were also nearby; all the mule trains that descend from the South Rim terminate at Phantom Ranch, which also has accommodations for the mule riders. There are, therefore, always people around to share the news of the day and discuss the Canyon. Two events had really gotten our attention that day, and one changed the entire plan and tenor for the trip.

We had gotten into Bright Angel early in the afternoon. The hike down from Indian Gardens had been pretty easy and we had taken our time. After setting up camp we had had plenty of time to wander around and talk with other hikers, especially since we planned to have dinner and a cold beer at Phantom Ranch. There was a sudden commotion in the campsite and a distant “whop whop” could be heard. It was a rescue helicopter coming from the South Rim. It looked like an insect in the distant. Rusty and I had been talking with a Park Ranger, when Karen and Arlene had come up and interrupted us, they had been elsewhere visiting in the campsite,

“Hey, that helicopter is coming here, a woman a couple of campsites over has burned herself badly and has to be medevacked out of the Canyon.” The Ranger then chimed in,

“That’s a \$ 5,000 dollar helicopter ride. A lot of times tired and “blistered” hikers who make it down here, and even mule riders with sore backsides, want to be medevacked out of the Canyon; that is until they hear the price!”

The woman a few campsites over, however, had been horribly burned. She had boiled water to mix with a frizz dried meal in a pouch and had accidentally spilled the entire pot of boiling water into her lap. She was wearing light running shorts and a t-shirt. We went down to where the Helicopter landed to see her off. At the helicopter landing a small crowd had gathered. As implied by the Park ranger, several people were trying to hitch a ride out on the helicopter. Such can be the torment of those who are unprepared to travel the Canyon. As the helicopter droned off in the distance Rusty remarked,

“Look you can barely see the “spec” of the helicopter against the South Rim. Wow, it lets you know how really big this place is.”

That had ended the Grand Canyon adventure for our neighbor and her companions. We made a mental note to be especially careful with boiling water.

Rusty and I had hit it off with the Park Ranger we had been talking with and after the helicopter departed began to talk with him again. This is when we learned that the Cottonwood Campsites between the Bright Angle Campsites and the North Rim were closed, due to high water damage. It was a blow to our plans, since we had planned to camp there and make a dash to the North Rim, as I had done before. The Park Ranger turned out to be a temporary or seasonal Ranger named Sjors, who at that time had been working and living on and off in the Canyon for about 12 years. Sjors was extraordinarily knowledgeable about the Grand Canyon. We had hit it off with him after trading yarns and discovered we had a lot of in common wilderness experiences. On top of that I had told him that we were going to Clear Creek partly because Blair

and I had run out of time after the returning from North Rim and hadn't made it all the way to Clear Creek my last time in the Canyon.

Sjors could feel our disappointment and then he did two extraordinary things, and said,

"You know Clear Creek is in the "Wilderness" area of the park and we allow only limited visitation, it's not safe for most hikers. But you guys aren't the ordinary hiker visiting the Park. So if you want, I will change your permit to authorize two nights at Clear Creek and let you in on a secret."

Rusty and I couldn't help but beam, even without knowing the secret,

"We're in and are sure our wives are too; they're pretty darn tough. So, what's the secret?"

Sjors then went on,

"Do you guys know about "Cheyava Falls," you can see it this year from the South Rim off to northwest. It's a hundred-year precipitation event this year and the Falls shoot right out of a cliff face."

"Yeah, they made a big deal about it on the South Rim and we had glassed it. It was faraway and you could hardly see them with the naked eye."

"Well there's a way to get to the Falls from the Clear Creek campsites, but it's not for everyone and we don't advertise it. It's difficult to find your way because there isn't a trail and it's rough going in spots. You have to cross-over a creek maybe two dozen times and follow the cairns we left. But you guys should be able to make it up and back in less than day. There is also a small cliff dwelling along the way, it's back from the creek bed, but you have to look hard to spot it. We also don't show this dwelling on maps, so it remains the

way we found it. I can make you a “special map” showing how to get to the Falls, but you can’t share it with anyone, not anyone. What do you think?”

Of course we were all in and it sounded almost too good to be true. When Sjor’s described the notch in the rock face that we had to find and go through to get started, it sounded like the passage to Shangri-La. Sjor’s also made it clear that getting injured out there could be really bad. There was no way to contact anyone for help, and if you couldn’t make it out, then someone would have to get back to Bright Angle and pass the word, then the only way out would be by helicopter. Sjors then said,

“Okay, then let me go modify your permit and make you a map <sup>2</sup> (shown below). I’ll bring it by your campsite, and we can discuss it further.

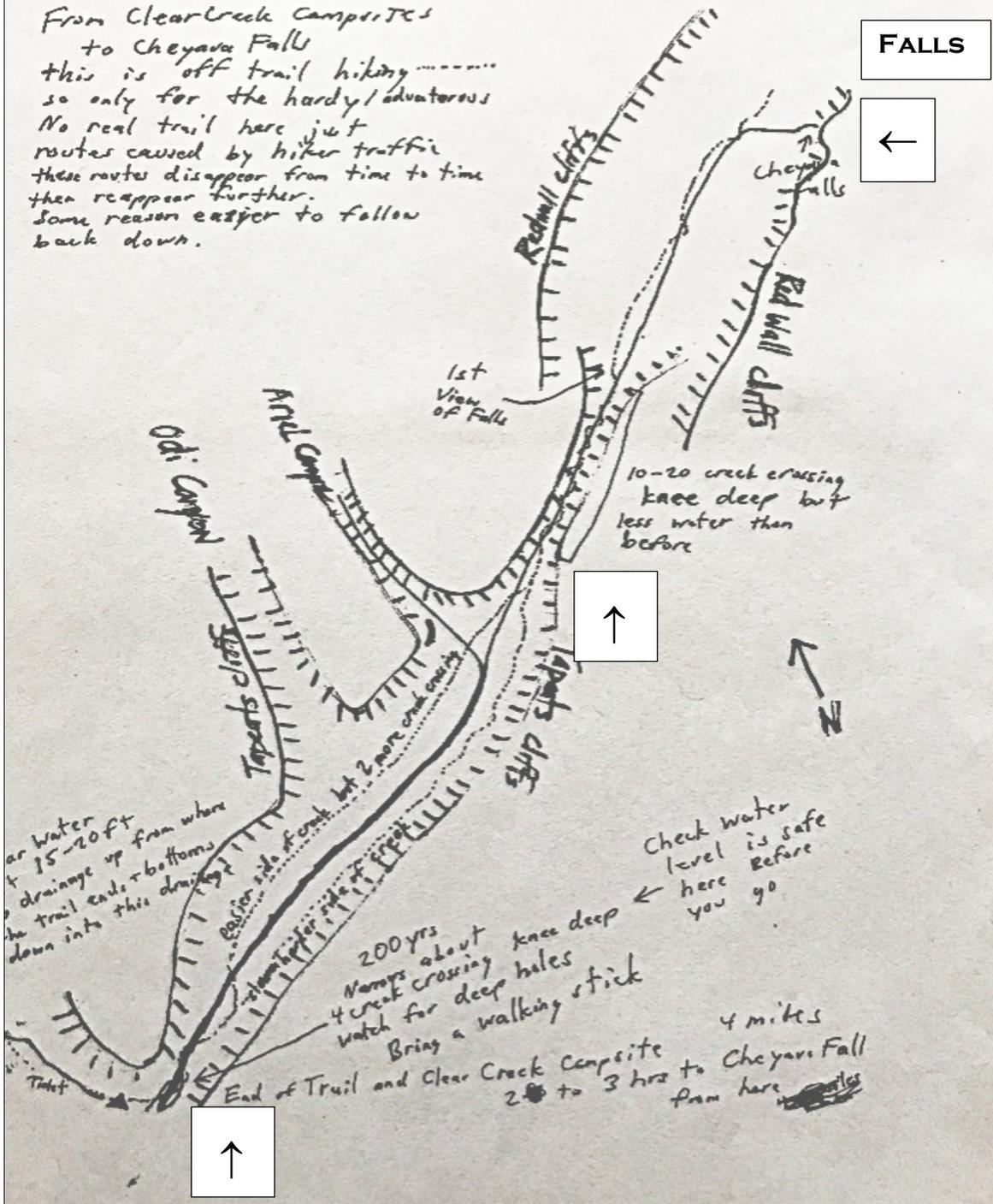
So there it was an unexpected adventure within and the adventure of hiking the Grand Canyon. We talked it over with Karen and Arlene and after a few days in the Canyon, it hadn’t taken any convincing. The next morning we broke camp early to avoid the morning sun and climbed out of Bright Angle to the trail to Clear Creek. I think we all felt a higher level of excitement.

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<sup>2</sup> Given it has been many years since Sjors made his “Special Map,” it’s probably okay to now reveal it.

# Sjors special map to falls-

From ClearCreek Campsite  
to Cheyave Falls  
this is off trail hiking-----  
so only for the hardy/adventurous  
No real trail here just  
routes caused by higher traffic  
these routes disappear from time to time  
then reappear further.  
Some reason easier to follow  
back down.



## On the Clear Creek Trail

The Clear Creek trail is on the north side of the Colorado river and opposite the Tonto Plateau. But unlike the broad Tonto plateau south of the river, the northside is very narrow and the Clear Creek trail winds around the rock faces and small canyons that emanate in places out of the steep cliffs above the trail. Blair and I had only gotten about two thirds to Clear Creek when we had to turn around and hustle back to Bright Angle to join our party for the hike out. At that time I hadn't even heard of Clear Creek, it had been on Blair's bucket list. He never did get to see it, and we promised to take lots of pictures and give him the lowdown when we got back. But I am sure he had never dreamt about going to Shangri-La from Clear Creek as we were about to do.

Once up on the trail the hiking was actually pretty easy as the Colorado glistened deep blue below and views of the Tonto Plateau and the South Rim accompanied us on every step. I recall seeing only one person on the trail coming from Clear Creek and no one ahead or behind us. It seemed as if we had the entire Canyon to ourselves. Karen and Arlene are especially fast walkers and would usually get a head of Rusty and I as we trudged along with our heavy loads. It was this way on the Clear Creek Trail; however, this trail was much less traveled than others in the Canyon, was faint in some places and had equally faint game trails crossing it. Quick and speedy Karen with Arlene close behind had taken the lead. I think Karen had said she could easily follow the trail. Rusty and I had just followed along far behind. Then it happened, Karen and Arlene stopped abruptly and waited for us to catch-up. They were lost and had led us into a deep box canyon. It was actually a funny moment when Karen had begun blaming Rusty for distracting her when she went off the trail. We all had a good laugh. Rusty and I then dropped our packs, climbed a little onto the edges of the box canyon and found the right trail in about ten minutes.

There are lots of rattle snakes in the Grand Canyon. One species, the "Pink" rattle snake is said to be found only in the Grand Canyon. Me and a colleague had accidentally walked into a nest of rattlers while exploring around the Cottonwood Campsites area on the last trip. It had taken a few tense minutes to back out of the nest. The point is that rattle snakes are everywhere and we

would see at least one on most days when hiking. Arlene, in particular, was pretty anxious any time we had seen one, while her brother, Rusty, was always fascinated to observe them.

As we were nearing the end of the Clear Creek Trail, Arlene had gotten into the lead. As she walked along, she approached a small bush on the uphill side of the trail. A sharp screech broke the silence surrounding each of us. It was Arlene, she was airborne and her legs were churning in thin air, as she went over the bush and hit the ground running. Then came “rattlesnake, rattlesnake!” A rattlesnake had been cooling itself under the bush and had hissed at Arlene. Karen, Rusty, and I had burst out laughing after Arlene had landed and was obviously okay. She had looked like a cartoon character who could run on air. Rusty found a stick and moved the rattlesnake off the trail. There are rattlesnakes everywhere in the Canyon. I am sure some unlucky hikers must have gotten bit, although I haven’t heard of any.

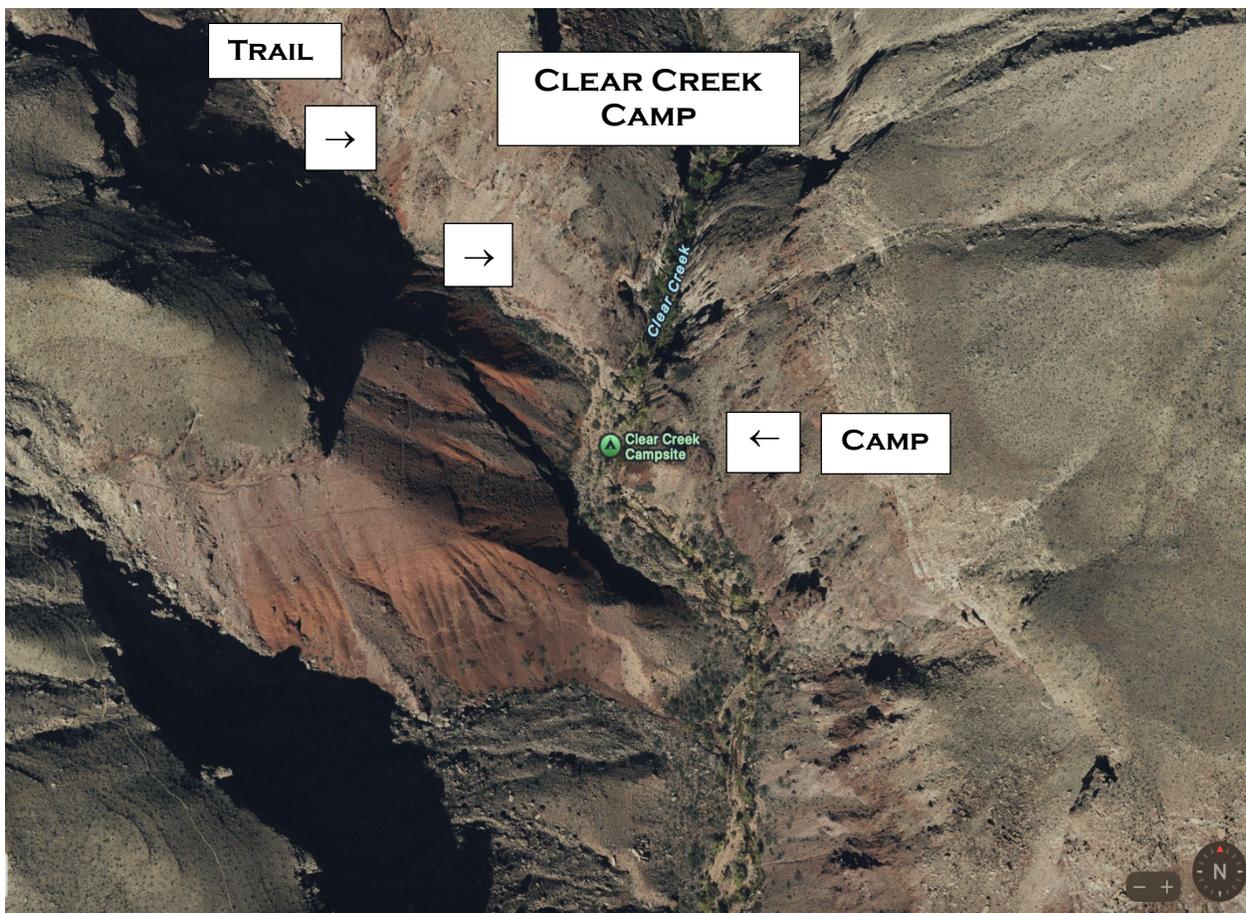
#### Clear Creek Camp

The approach to the Clear Creek Campsites was a little dicey as we had to hike down a very narrow foot path along a steep scree slope. One false move and you could tumble a hundred feet or more down the rocky scree slope. We had had to be especially careful given our backpack loads. When we hiked out of Clear Creek two days later, we all had cut walking sticks to help balance us on the narrow path.

The campsites were scattered along the small canyon floor formed by Clear Creek itself and another small stream at the top of the canyon as both streams made their way to the Colorado river. It was a rocky area, but the campsites were on flat ground, and a dry toilet was located in the area. The area did not look as well used as others. The nearest portable water point was back at Bright Angle, and we used the water purifying

pumps we carried to make safe drinking water. It was a chore to do this given the amount of water we used and took turns going upstream to find a place to pump water.

When we arrived at Clear Creek there was only one small group of three or four men occupying a campsite. After we had set up our camp, we went over to yarn with them. They were firemen, I think from Chicago, who had come to Clear Creek to find a way to Cheyava Falls. They hadn't made it and one of them had broken his leg in the process. At least that was what they told us. I suspect it was a hairline fracture because they planned to hike out the next day back to Bright Angle. They appeared to be very capable and experienced and probably had heavy duty painkillers with them to



administer. They hadn't had a map! They were gone early the next day before we began our journey to Shangri-La. Later two other people made it to Clear Creek, a man and a woman who were ultramarathon runners. They were traveling really light, not particularly friendly, and thought they could just run up to Cheyava falls. They never made it and had gotten lost in a maze

of side canyons. They also didn't have a map. In both cases we had been careful not to violate Sjor's confidence and reveal his special map.

## Journey to Shangri-La

We rose early the next morning as usual but took time to have a hearty breakfast and prepare for the journey. It would take all day to get up to Cheyava Falls and back following Sjor's map. We decided to go really light. First thing was to abandon our hiking boots for sneakers. According to Sjors we were going to make almost two dozen stream crossings and our feet would be wet most of the time. We took only one small daypack, which Rusty carried, and provisioned ourselves with snacks, power bars, and one of our lunch packets. Water wasn't going to be problem because we would be in and out of the creek and brought along one of our purification pumps, as well as a good first-aid kit. Lastly, we had cut four sturdy walking sticks, as Sjors had recommended, to help us across the creek and navigate the rocks – there was no trail. We buttoned up our camp and headed in the direction of the “opening” to the way to Shangri-la.

We were startled at first when we followed the creek to the starting point on Sjor's map. The creek flowed out from a small opening in the high cliff faces that bounded that side of our canyon. There was nowhere to walk as the creek flowed from side to side in the opening and trees had grown in the creek bed itself. Sjors had told us about this and had said,

“Just get into the creek and walk up it, in about two hundred yards you can find some dry walking and really begin the hike. The water might be knee deep.”

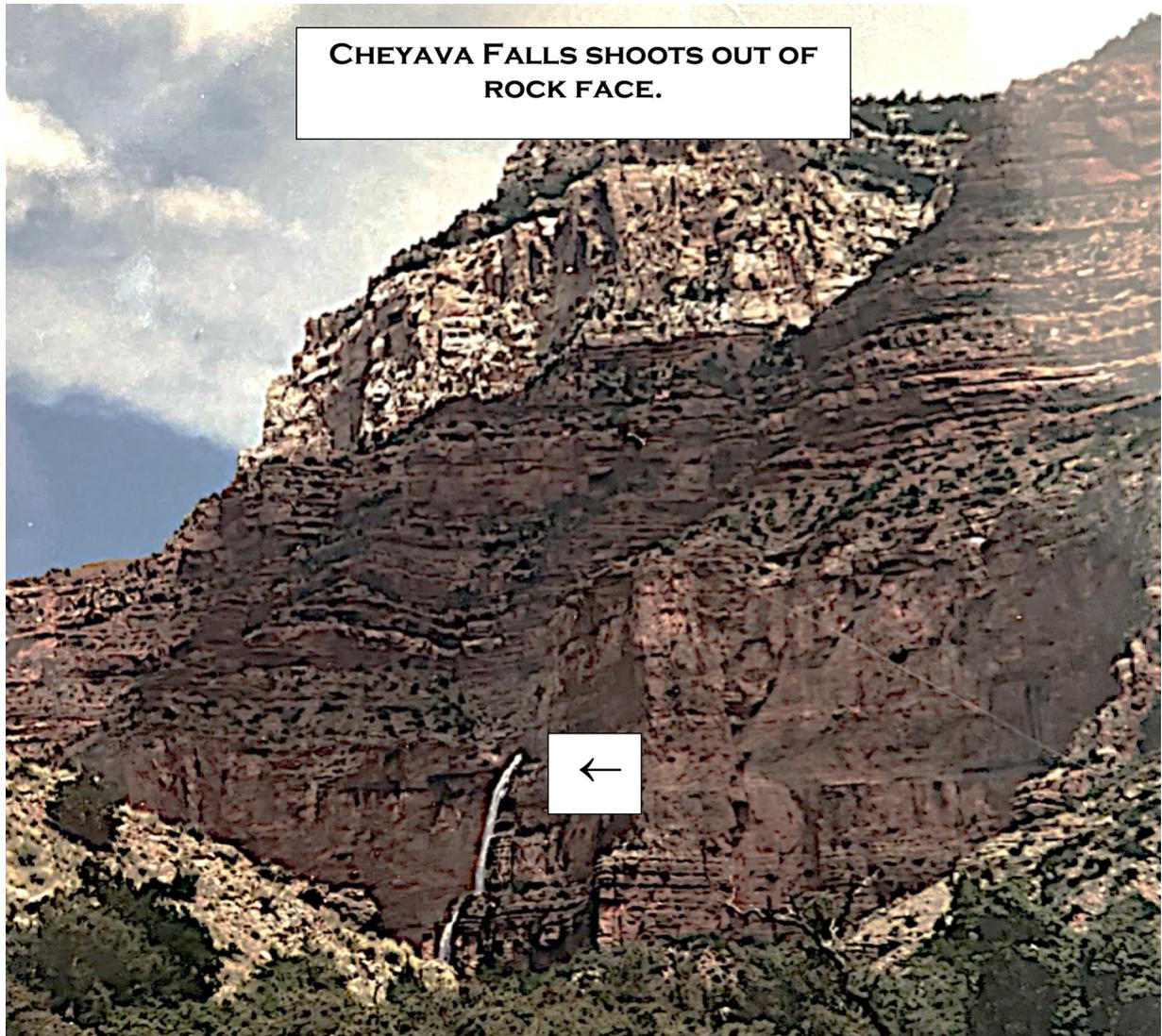
It was surreal as we moved up the middle of the creek surrounded by the high cliffs. It felt as if we had discovered some long ago forgotten “door” to a mysterious place – a hidden secret of the Grand Canyon.

After crossing back and forth across the creek three or four times, the canyon opened up a bit, and we hiked along the northwest side of the creek for a while, the creek bed was much

wider on that side, and we only had to make another two crossings on this part of the journey. The scenery was just as spectacular as anywhere in the Grand Canyon, and directly to the north of us, and very close were massive, red canyons and cliffs, strewn with boulders and rock piles. These must be the Canyons the two ultramarathon runners had gotten lost in. We could see how tempting it might have been for them to think a path went up either of those canyons, rather than straight ahead up the creek bed, where the canyon once again got so narrow it didn't look like anyone could continue that way.

It was hot for sure but going back and forth across the creek had kept us comfortable. We walked through several shaded groves along the banks of the creek; and thought it would be great to camp in one of them and spend a couple days exploring. When we got to the opening to Ariel Canyon, the walls closed in on the creek bed, we had gotten to the point where we had to zig zag back and cross the creek almost 20 times, following the cairns left by the Park Rangers to find their way, to get on patches of solid ground to continue up towards the Falls. At last we got to a point where we could see the Falls shooting out of a cliff like a massive fire hose (*shown below*). The record snow melt and rain on top of the mesa had driven an immense amount of water into the ground and crevices creating tremendous hydraulic forces. It was less than a mile to the falls and we made our way to the base of the falls themselves. The force of water showering down was awe inspiring and the misting clouds cooled us. We ate our lunches and laid on large flat rocks and sunned ourselves. I don't know how many people had made it to Cheyava falls. But we certainly had the falls and the creek trail all to ourselves that day.

We packed up our lunch wrappings and headed back down to the camp at Clear Creek. The four-mile hike back seemed to go faster, but the creek crossings were just as wet and slippery as on the way up. Then at the opening to Ariel canyon we spotted the ruins Sjors had told us about. It was only maybe 75 yards from the creek, and we went to explore. And there it was the cave dwellings of an ancient people who had inhabited this small canyon in the distant past.



It must have been a small community which inhabited this place. Perhaps one or more families or a clan had lived here. There weren't many rooms, and only a few signs of mud brick walls. Lots of broken pottery shards were scattered around the site. There were also a few well preserved "manos" among the debris. A mano is a shaped stone that is held in one or both hands

and moved back and forth against a larger stone to grind seeds, nuts, and other hard materials. We speculated that the little flat ground between the dwellings and the creek and along the creek could not have supported many inhabitants; and that they probably had had to range far and wide from their canyon to subsist there, or to trade with other bands living in the Canyon. In times of troubles the Grand Canyon could be a great place to hide. In the last several decades archeologists have been peeling back the history of these early people throughout the Southwest. Stumbling on these ruins had given us a first-hand appreciation of the human history of the Grand Canyon. Before the journey to Clear Creek I hadn't given much thought to the human history of the Grand Canyon, it had just been a great place to hike.

When we walked back down the center of the creek the last 200 yards, around the trees, and emerged between the cliffs into the canyon of our campsite, it was as if the gates to Shangri-la had shut behind us. We paused and savored the moment as if a dream had ended. But we couldn't linger very long because there were camp chores to do and food to prepare before night settled around us. It had been a very special day.

Before finally turning in there was one more chore to do and it was Rusty's and my turn to go up the creek and fill our water bottles and jugs for the hike back to Bright Angel the next day. It was absolutely pitch black and we were on alert because mountain lions had been reported in the area. We found a good spot and made a little pool in the sand and had begun to pump water with our purifiers when there it was, and it startled us – the braying sounds of the mountain sheep and they were very close, practically right on top of us. Since day one at our first campsite at Grand Rapids when we had been told these sounds were from the mountain sheep above the canyon we were camped in, we had periodically heard the mountain sheep braying but never had seen one. We then had both turned our head lamps toward sound before us and there was nothing in the bright glare of the lamps, then the braying again and we looked down. Rusty at first whispered,

“What the hell, do you see what I see.”

And as we looked the braying began again. I looked over to Rusty almost in disbelief,

“Why those are toads!”

We stared at them for a moment and then we began to laugh, mostly at ourselves. Either the camper that first night was a tenderfoot, or maybe a Wiley old camper putting it over on two very tired hikers. It was dark that night and we never saw his face. He could have been smiling when he had said the “braying” was mountain sheep. There never where mountain sheep just toads and they were the source of the so-called braying mountain sheep we had been hearing. At any rate, we had believed him up until that moment in the dark pumping water at Clear Creek. When we got back to camp with the water, Karen and Arlene had a good laugh at us – the experienced mountain men.

### Final Legs of the Journal

The next morning we were totally alone at Clear Creek when we broke camp. It felt good leaving Clear Creek to itself, as if we had conquered or bested something. Climbing out on the steep scree path hadn't seemed as daunting as the way in had been, this time we used the walking sticks we had cut for the journey to the falls. The hike back to Bright Angle now seemed pretty tame to us and we didn't see any one the entire way. We were in the groove or zone for the next couple of days until we got back to the South Rim. Back at Bright Angle we saw a lot of new faces who were in the Canyon for the first time. Mostly hikers who were hiking to Bright Angel and back, some maybe along the Tonto Plateau to the Kaibab trail and out. The North Rim was still closed. No one we spoke to had come in on the Hermit Trail, they knew better I guess, and no one was headed to Clear Creek. We four were now even tighter and mostly smiled a lot when we spoke with others but didn't say much of our adventure to Shangri-la, only that we had been out in the wilderness area at Clear Creek. It had felt good to be accepted as serious hikers at Bright Angel. We had checked in with the Park Rangers to find Sjors, to tell him of our wonderful

adventure, but he was elsewhere in the Park. We never saw him again but did correspond back and forth for a few years. He had made our trip special!

Our last camp was at Indian Gardens before heading up to the South Rim and out. While there we had taken the short hike to Plateau Point, where most tourists in the Canyon go to take pictures and see the blue Colorado well below. The mule trains always make a stop at Plateau Point. Unfortunately, the day before a woman who had rode a mule down to the Point had gotten too close the edge and fallen to her death. The speculation was that she had been dehydrated and her legs wobbly from the mule ride. It's never advertised but each year the Grand Canyon claims ten or twelve visitors. I am also sure that there are many injuries in the Canyon that don't get report. On my previous trip to the Canyon a hiker had fallen to this death off a steep and narrow path halfway to the North Rim. He and his companions were hiking up in the dark to avoid the heat, and he had walked over the edge. They had camped with us at Cottonwood Campsite and had left in the middle of the night. When we had caught up with them, around midmorning, a helicopter was already hovering to remove the body. The Grand Canyon is marvelous and a wonder to behold and to hike but is also a place to be aware of the dangers it presents.

At Indian Gardens we had two surprises. Arlene, known only to Karen, had carried a bottle of wine in the bottom of her pack to open on our last night. She had lugged that bottle down the Hermit trail and all the way to Clear Creek and never said a thing. I know she had struggled at times, but it had never entered her mind to jettison the bottle of wine. And it was with great delight she pulled the bottle from her pack and set in on the table at Indian Gardens. We filled our camp cups, from which we had eaten most of our food, etc., and had a touching toast to cap our adventure together.

Coffee was very important to us, and we had nurtured our supply to have a final cup before the last short hike from Indian Gardens to the Rim. Karen had quickly organized breakfast that morning as we were breaking camp. The last grains of coffee were placed in our cups. Both stoves were going boiling water for breakfast and that last cup of coffee. Somehow Karen had

gotten things mixed up in her haste. As I went to relish that last special cup of coffee, brought it to my lips and began to drink – ugh and with a reflex action spit it out. Karen, Rusty, and Arlene looked at me wanting to say, “what the heck are you doing.” I blurted out,

“It’s not coffee, someone taste this.”

Rusty had then said,

“Let me taste it.”

And after a small gulp he looked at Karen.

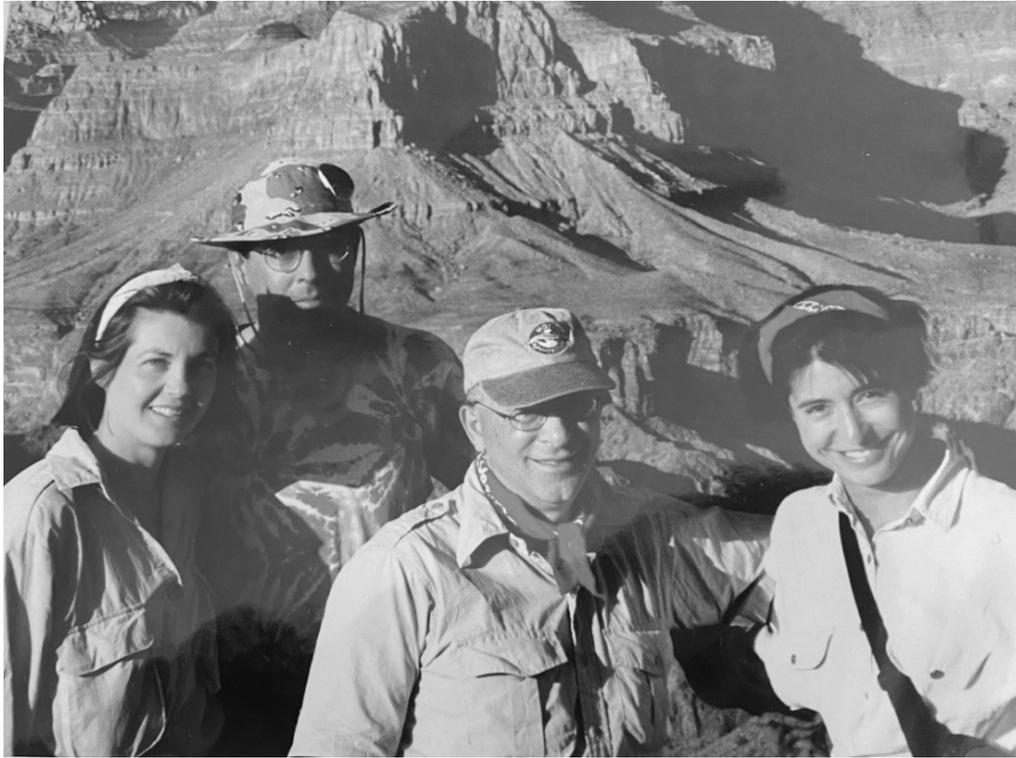
“It not coffee, I think you put Tang in with the coffee.”

Karen, of course looked at Rusty in disbelief and uttered,

“Let me taste that.” And then giggled and said,

“Oops I guess I did.” Then she began to laugh and snort as she laughed and then we all laughed.

So much for the final cup of coffee in the Canyon. (*Below: back on the South Rim*)



The final leg of the journey up to the South Rim had gone pretty quickly. I think we were of two minds, one was the impulse to get to real coffee and take showers on the South Rim, while the other was to want to linger a little longer to still feel the Grand Canyon – the trail under foot, the always present dust, the smells, and our sense of togetherness. It had taken many quarters at the public showers on the South Rim to rinse off eight days of hiking in the Grand Canyon. It was a trip we never forgot and once in a while reminisced about and told friends stories of hiking for eight days in the Canyon. But even the best story telling could not convey what it had really been like hiking to Shangri-la. Hopefully this short story has filled the blanks. Karen had loved this trip and always cherished the adventure to Shangri-La

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When we traveled together out to the Grand Canyon, we had made a stop in Dallas, Texas, to drop off Karen and Rusty's one year old daughter, Eva, to stay with her aunt Trish, while we

hiked the Grand Canyon. On their way back home from Phoenix, Karen and Rusty again stopped in Dallas to pick up one year old Eva, and they had had a big surprise – Eva was now potty trained! And so their lingering thoughts of the journey to Shangri-la had met its match before they had even gotten home!

## A short Folio



Karen Underwood DAVIS 1964 - 2023



BACKPACKS



DAN



RUSTY



KAREN LOADED DOWN



ARLENE



THE COLORADO BELOW



ARLENE ON THE TRAIL



ENTRANCE TO SHANGRILA



CAMP AT CLEAR CREEK



RUINS



MORE RUINS



RESTING IN THE SUN



APPROACHING THE FALLS



THE FALLS UPCLOSE