

Nearing the top of the Redwall, I stopped and looked up at the tree-covered North Rim, still four miles away. To get back to the South Rim by dark, I should have turned around long ago, but I wanted to keep walking. Now I felt my momentum ebb, the way the force of water flowing downhill takes it only so far up the other side. I reversed direction and backtracked to Phantom Ranch, once more descending to the canyon floor.

The tired snort of a mule echoed from the cliffs as I walked past the corral in the fading light. At the river, I tossed off my pack and slumped down on

THE FALLING WATER EXPLODES IN SPRAY AS IT HITS THE DEEP BLUE-GREEN POOL; CURRENTS OF AIR, CHURNED BY THE FALLS, SEND SWALLOWS SWIRLING.

the sandy beach. Night filled the inner canyon, flooding all but the upper cliffs, still burning red. I wouldn't make it back to the rim until long after dark.

Most backpackers spend a night or two at Bright Angel Campground before hiking out by the Bright Angel Trail, longer than the South Kaibab but less steep. I opted for the shorter trail, recrossing the Colorado in the dark.

LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT THE FIRST HUNTERS TO VENTURE INTO THE Grand Canyon 3000 to 4000 years ago. They climbed into caves and left ritual offerings — willow twigs bent into shapes resembling bighorn sheep, sometimes with spearlike sticks piercing their sides.

Another clue to the ceremonial lives of these early Indians turned up a few years ago. A cowboy and former trapper named Gordon Smith stumbled across a cliff wall, in a remote corner of the Grand Canyon, covered with images painted at least 3000 years ago. A few weeks before this most recent hike, I asked Smith to take me to the place, called Shamans' Gallery.

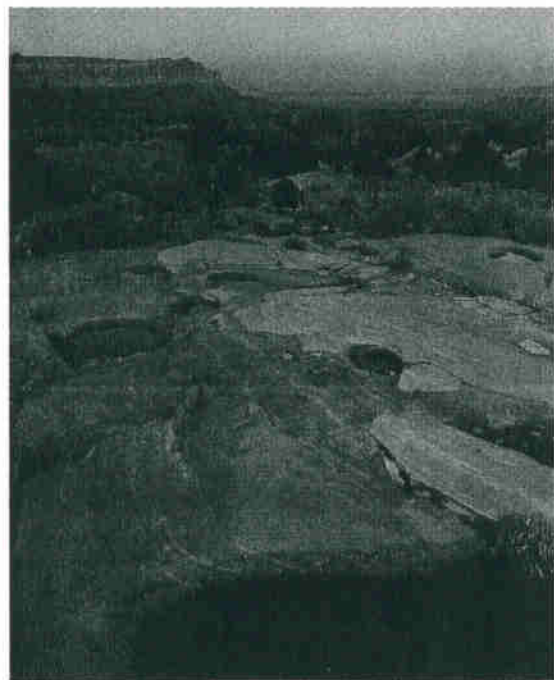
Driving across sagebrush flats, we headed toward the brink of the western canyon. Smith put on a pair of dark glasses as I angled the truck into the sun. The 32-year-old mule packer from Beaver, Utah, wore a trophy rodeo buckle on a tooled-leather belt and a blue silk scarf around his neck. A baseball cap from the Renegade Lounge covered all but a tuft of red hair.

The western canyon has a different feel to it. The lines are simpler — a band of outer cliffs falls 1500 feet to a prominent bench called the Esplanade, several miles wide in places. Then it drops again into a sheer inner gorge thousands of feet deep.

We grabbed our packs and began walking. The trail followed a good descent route to the Esplanade. Gordon mentioned he'd led a string of mules down here several times. "It can be a real lonely place when you're by yourself," he said with a rounded Utah drawl. "But I need to be on my own to find things. Most people don't know where to look. I know this country. To find things, you have to think like an Indian."

Finding a break in the lip of the Esplanade, we reached a ledge running halfway along a cliff of red sandstone. It dropped 50 feet to a dry wash bordered by a few clumps of scrub oak. We followed the shelf as the cliff flared above.

Painted figures spread for 60 feet across the rough back wall. Mythical beings stretched up the rock face, long and narrow. Ghost figures as tall as a man crowded together with geometric shapes and antlered animals.



The Esplanade bench, extending for miles in the western canyon

One image held my attention longer than the others: a painted face with a black band across the eyes, topped with a feather and balanced on the back of a green animal with red claws. Farther along, two green suns floated above a spectral figure, outlined in the color of dried blood. Red and yellow designs overlapped those in whites, blacks and greens. Superimposed images added depth — visionary figures appeared to emerge from deep within the rock, rising to the surface for a moment before sinking back.

The first time Smith came here, he almost missed them. "It was getting dark," he said, "and I was right under the spooky figures before I seen anything. It scared me. I thought I was seeing things."

He paused a moment as the deep quiet of the place returned. "I don't know what they mean. But I'll tell you what, I wouldn't be caught camping here alone."

The prehistoric site was unknown to park-service archaeologists until Smith reported it. He then guided rock-art specialist Polly Schaafsma to the panel: She reported that archaic hunter-gatherers had used the ritual site to communicate with the supernatural.

The mule packer and I sat on the ledge and dug out our food. I offered him part of a sandwich, but he preferred his cowboy grub — beef stew, cold out of the can. Resting beneath the pictographs, Gordon told me about another find of his — a place whose location he'd kept secret.

Seven years ago, he said, he was exploring the country north of the canyon on his mule. He had stopped to smoke a cigarette and felt air blowing from between some rocks. Clearing them away, he found a cave entrance and crawled inside with a flashlight in hand. The passageway opened into a chamber. He swung the dim beam of his light around the room and stopped. Laid out before him were a couple of bodies. Scared, he left without exploring the rest of the cave. "It's spooky in there all by yourself," he said. "You wonder if one of the bodies is going to start moving."

Resealing the entrance, he left the area and didn't return for five years, he told me. When he did go back, he searched the entire cave and found more than two dozen bodies, each covered with a blanket. Masks inlaid with precious stones leaned on the wall with a number of wooden canisters — one filled with feathers, another with leather scrolls. And, naturally, treasure.

As the cowboy told his story, he wove into it tales of lost tribes and the legend of Montezuma's hidden treasure. Smith said he planned to show the world someday but was in no rush. "I don't care if anybody believes me," he said. "I know it's true. I've sat on it for seven years. I can sit on it the rest of my life if I have to."

CLIMBING UP FROM THE RIVER IN THE DARK, I followed the trail up the Inner Gorge, heading for the Tonto Plateau. At night the canyon exerts a presence as powerful as it does during the day — its raw beauty darkened but intact. As I picked my way up the trail, I wondered about those who spend their lives searching for hidden treasure when it lies all about them, wide open, even at night.

Too tired to keep going, I found a place to stretch out. The night grew colder as I watched Orion step over the rim, advancing slowly across the dark field. The air held still.

I must have drifted asleep. When I awoke, winds were gusting across the Tonto, shaking the stiff branches of the blackbrush next to me. Orion had moved high above the horizon. Nearby, a trail scar cut across the dark talus slope, past rock forms reshaped by starlight. Too cold to sleep and drawn by the beauty of the night canyon, I got up and began walking again.