

Trials
and
Tribulations
in the
Grand Canyon

Part I

From events in March 1983

Preface

On this 38th anniversary (this month), of our fateful “last” hiking trip to the Grand Canyon, I share with you this TWO PART poignant story of love, betrayal, struggle, and ultimately, triumph (also stupidity, perseverance, ingenuity, persistence, hope, and, as John would say, ADVENTURE !!).



Our quest starts out as a love story with a tender moment at the trail head of the Bass backcountry trail. The Canyon is in the background; we're hiking all the way to the river in a week long camping/trek.

Note the absence of snow. More on that later...

Young love, there's nothing quite like it 😁



Already, the love story angle of this account is heading downhill (a little Canyon hiking pun 😂), and it's only the first day. CLEARLY a foreshadowing of the events to come. This is part way down (about a third of the way to the bottom/river) and shows the view looking back up at the trailhead and the South Rim.

Was it something I said, Barb? 🤪 (Yup, it most certainly was...)



This is the view looking further down into the Canyon. The trail traverses the left side of the gorge and doubles back to the head of the gorge (can't be seen in this view), then follows the lower part of the gorge to the next "layer".

Speaking of "layers", the vertical section is known as the "redwall" (limestone stained red from iron deposits in the layer above it), and is usually one of the most challenging parts of the descent.



Base camp. This was about three fourths of the way to the river. Note the small glimpse of the “redwall” in the upper center of the picture, compared to the perspective in the previous photo.

We took a lot of “scrambles” or day hikes from this camp. It’s really wonderful to explore without a 50 pound pack on your back.

Your knees can only take SO MUCH !!



Gene and John at the river during one of the “scrambles”. As I said, it’s great to explore without the pack. Everything one needs for the week long trip, except water, is packed “in” (bed, tent, food, clothes, snacks) and all trash is packed “out”.

Water is “found” in small streams or the muddy Colorado River, and must be filtered and boiled. Water in the Canyon is a precious commodity !!



This is a boat abandoned by Russell and Tadge in 1915; Colorado River is in the background. It's chained to the rocks so it wouldn't be carried away in floods. I can't imagine floating down this river in a boat like that; these were brave explorers.

FYI, in March, the average temp in the bottom of the Canyon ranges from 30-40 degrees overnight TO 50-70 degrees during the day in the lower levels of the Canyon. Contrast that with Summer daytime temps HALFWAY down that are 110-130 degrees IN THE SHADE.



The hike out at the end of the week. The plan was to go from base camp to the rim, pack up the cars, and drive the 25 miles in backcountry roads back to “civilization”.👍 Little did we know...



When we started out, we saw what we thought was fog on the rim. It was actually snow. And ended up being a foot of snow. 😬



Footing was treacherous in places. We were not prepared for this; no coats, gloves, etc. as we didn't **expect** snow. We also didn't have extra rations so we just had the spare food left that we didn't eat on the trip *and* the snacks we left in the cars. 🤪



The cars got stuck in the mud/snow immediately. We hiked to an abandoned ranger station about a mile away and slept in the barn that night. The next day, we got into the ranger house (picture above) ***You can just SEE the joy in our faces!!!*** cleaned it up (it was Mouse City 🤒) and started a fire in a pot belly stove; our first warmth since hiking out. 🔥

As we didn't have a hatchet, we threw huge rocks at large branches to break them up; luckily no one was injured when those rocks bounced off branches that refused to break. 😞

We later moved back to the (cold) barn when a large group of college students "took over" the ranger station house. 😬



The next morning, we formed a plan to have John strike out with some other hikers, with the rest of the group following (moving slower as we had kids along), to get back to the main Grand Canyon Lodge. We could see from our geological survey maps that the trail ended on a road that was two to three miles from the lodge. The hike out down the snow covered trail was about 18 miles.

John arranged transportation from the end of the 18 mile trail to the lodge and waited for us to arrive. Here we see the happy hikers stating their 18 mile death march, er, I mean, joyous hike in the freezing cold with wet, cold feet wearing light jackets.



Mile after mile of the 18 mile hike; at least the trail was straight!!

Who knew it snowed in the desert? It wasn't until later that we realized that the South Rim of the Canyon had an altitude of 7000 feet. Lessons for this part of the story:

- 1) Be prepared – extra food, proper clothing, etc.
- 2) Understand your terrain, altitude, temperatures
- 3) Don't take Jeep roads with passenger cars **KEY POINT**
- 4) Never listen to Al when he says “Barb, let's go hiking !!”



John made progress markers every 5 miles (estimated) by making footprints in the snow. This was the 10 mile maker (note the elated look on my face – over halfway there !! – or so we thought...).

Imagine the horror when we passed the 18 mile marker, it was getting dark, and the trail end was nowhere in sight. Morale hit an all-time low, and everyone stopped to rest. Barb's faith in me also hit an all-time low (to say the least).

I began to fear we'd have to camp (unprepared) in the snow overnight. Worse, as we just had hiking boots and everyone's feet were wet, I started to worry about frostbite if we did an overnight camp.



Happily, the trail ended a few hundred feet farther, John was waiting with help and transportation, and we were driven back to the Lodge.

Everyone made it out safe and unscathed, except for my credibility, which has NEVER been restored.

The picture above shows the North Rim with a nice view of the “snow line”. Beautiful. Unless you’re hiking in it. With cold feet.

I’ll post Part II of this drama soon, entitled “Back Into The Jaws Of The Beast, To Retrieve Our Cars”. Stay tuned...

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Part II

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Preface

Welcome to another exciting episode of “How stupid are you, anyway?” In this thrilling episode, our “heroes” will show you the reason why women live longer, and mostly shake their heads at men, saying “What WERE you thinking?”. And never, **never ever**, let us forget any foolish things we’ve done.

So strap in, for the exciting conclusion of this two part trilogy !!

WATCH THIS INTRO VIDEO – IT PUTS EVERYTHING IN PERSPECTIVE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfeW0-evfAM>



So. We were out safe, our families were secure and healing (Barb had some frostbite on her toes), but we had no transportation home. Gene and I started looking into options about what to do with the cars that were stranded and hopelessly stuck, 25 miles from any paved roads.

Worse, the water makes the red clay into a slippery, greasy substance nearly impossible to drive on. Here is a movie clip from “My Cousin Vinny” that illustrates this point:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLD5PKESCeQ>

Lucky for us, the Citations were early GM front wheel drive cars, so we had an advantage over rear wheel drive vehicles from that era, but not over high clearance 4 wheel drive vehicles.



When we began to inquire about our options, we always received the same response (see photo above). I had AAA towing, but they refused to do off road towing. Other garages and gas stations with tow trucks also refused. Many told us that people usually leave the keys in the car, and the first local to find the car in the Spring would drive them out. As both Gene and I couldn't do without a car that long, and the thought of renting a temporary vehicle for 2-3 months was unappealing, we seemed to be “stuck”, both literally and figuratively.

A couple of young guys heard us talking and made a proposal.



They said they had a high clearance 4 wheel drive truck that they were willing to drive back to the cars and help pull them out. They said it would cost a mere \$500. A piece. Faced with other *far* more expensive options, Gene and I agreed and signed on. The following morning they picked us up at the lodge, and the four of us, squeezed into the front seat of the pickup, headed back into the wilderness.

We were flying down the road at 30-40 mph, bouncing, skidding sideways; mud, rocks, water, and snow flying everywhere. The two kept looking at each other and laughing. When we inquired as to what was so humorous, they told us that it wasn't THEIR truck. They had "borrowed" it from the wife of the owner, and he had NO IDEA where his truck was headed. 😂



We finally got to the cars, and started the process of returning to civilization. The truck would hook up the lead car, and drag it out to a place where the car could drive on its own (no deep ruts or standing water). That person would drive forward on the road until they got stuck again, then wait for the truck to catch up.

Meanwhile, the truck went back to repeat the same process for the rear car. This process was repeated dozens of times that day. Slowly, mile by mile, we worked our way towards the paved road, and **freedom** !!



In this shot, you can see that the car was “hung up” on the snow/mud/rocks under the car. Close examination of the front shows that the front spoiler on the car made an excellent mini snow plow.

Isn't the snow on the desert plants beautiful ?? 🤔



This shot, from the back, shows the perfectly smooth mud, sculpted into a nearly flawless flat surface, much like chocolate frosting on a cake.

It also illustrates why the cars got stuck so often; in many places we were literally dragging the entire bottom of the car on the ground, creating enough friction to eventually stop the vehicle.

Amazingly, neither car suffered any engine, transmission, or rear end damage; nor any oil pan or transmission pan damage/punctures.

They don't make cars like THIS anymore. Most likely because these days, nobody would be stupid or crazy enough to try this !!



About three fourths of the way back, and about two hours before sunset, the truck was running low on gas, so the guys left us while they drove back to fill up the truck.

They seemed to be gone for a long time, and we began to wonder if they gave up and weren't coming back. Happily, they hadn't been paid yet 😁

Eventually they returned and the rescue continued as darkness began to close in.



As we had time to kill, waiting for their return, we found this sign, and Gene started clowning around. The sign read:

Limited Use Road – Not suited for wet weather or low clearance vehicles.

As Gene and I were striving for perfection, we met BOTH criteria. We also ignored **all those warning signs** all the way out to the trailhead.



On the trip out, the road was dry but had deep ruts. We avoided the ruts on the road by “driving on the brims”; that is, one wheel in the middle of the road and one on the side/shoulder.

As trees and brush encroached on the road on different sides in different places along the roadway, we were constantly moving from one side of the road to the other, artfully avoiding the ruts and **never got stuck a single time** on the trip out.



Worse, Gene and I **both** thought **all the way out** to the trailhead that this was a bad idea, too treacherous and risky to attempt.

Sadly, we were playing a game of “bad-road chicken”, a “hold my beer” moment. Each would have stopped if the other would have said something. BUT, both of us, at the *same time* not wanting to “chicken out” by suggesting to the other that we should stop.

Bottom line: We both thought it was a bad idea but were waiting for the “other guy” to say something or “chicken out”.

So we carried forward, like the “Charge of the Light Brigade”; “Into the valley of death rode the 600...”. Except we were 8. In Chevy Citations. Doesn’t sound as dramatic. But it was...



Here we are finally victorious, the following morning, packing up to get the heck out of this crazy state !! And this is proof that we didn't just unload the cars, abandon them, and tell the police (and the bank) that the cars were stolen.

Two happy endings, in the same week, both that started out as disastrous situations with no apparent way out. Not bad.

The moral of the story? "Experience is what you get when you don't get what you expected." Well, we didn't get what we expected. And we had an *experience* !!

Epilog

Until the day I traded this car, every time I went into a do-it-yourself car wash, there would be piles of red dirt and rocks under the car when I pulled away. Despite how many times I sprayed and cleaned under the car, the dirt and rocks NEVER stopped coming. I've always wondered what the next owner of the car thought when he saw the dirt and rocks. 😳 😏