Arizona History  
AZT Passage 38-Grand Canyon: Inner Gorge  
by Preston Sands

This passage of the Arizona Trail crosses the incomparable Grand Canyon, using the South Kaibab and North Kaibab Trails. The route it follows across the Grand Canyon indirectly owes its existence to Ralph Cameron, an early Grand Canyon resident, miner, entrepreneur, and one-term senator. Cameron had come to the Grand Canyon with his brother Niles in 1890, along with fellow prospector Peter Berry. Ralph Cameron settled at the Canyon’s edge, near the location of an old Havasupai trail that penetrated the cliffs below. The Havasupai’s trail had followed a fault-line break in the cliffs down to a lush environ of cottonwoods and running water known as Havasupai Gardens, where the Havasupai had once farmed. Cameron improved the old trail as far as the gardens in 1891, and extended the trail to the Colorado River ten years later. Cameron charged a $1 toll to those that traveled his improved Cameron Trail, catering to the growing tourist crowd. Later, the Cameron Trail would be renamed the Bright Angel Trail. Cameron viewed the arrival of the Santa Fe Railroad at his camp in 1901 as a threat, as the railroad was intent upon creating a tourist destination of its own. Cameron was tenacious, however, and attempted to thwart the Santa Fe’s plans by surrounding its land holdings in the area with bogus mining claims. As one might expect, the Santa Fe Railroad and the National Park Service challenged Cameron in court.

When Grand Canyon National Park was formed in 1919, the National Park Service attempted to purchase the Cameron Trail, or Bright Angel Toll Road as it was also known, in order to provide the public with a free travel route between the South Rim and the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Cameron’s astronomically high price tag was more than the Park Service was willing to spend, so it pursued another option. During the mid-1920’s, the Park Service began constructing their own trail, one that would provide a direct, snow-free route to the Colorado River, and one that the public could use free of charge. Their “Yaqui Trail” descended from the South Rim a few miles east of Grand Canyon Village, crossed the Colorado River, and then followed the course of Bright Angel Creek to the North Rim. The National Park Service later changed the name of the southern portion to the “South Kaibab Trail,” and the northern portion to the “North Kaibab Trail.” This passage of the Arizona Trail follows the South Kaibab and North Kaibab Trails through the Grand Canyon, along the route that the National Park Service created. Ironically, shortly after completing the South and North Kaibab Trails, Coconino County surrendered ownership of the Bright Angel Trail to Grand Canyon National Park, and Cameron lost the lucrative lease on the trail that he had fought so hard to keep for so many years. The Bright Angel Trail was now free to the public.

At the bottom of the Canyon on the South Kaibab Trail, the Arizona Trail crosses over the mighty, churning Colorado River on the Black Bridge. Arizona’s greatest river was greatly underestimated by its earliest European explorers. A member of Coronado’s famous 1540 expedition, García López de Cárdenas is credited with being the first European to lay eyes upon the Grand Canyon. Gazing into the Canyon’s abyss from the rim, Cárdenas believed
the Colorado River to be a mere six feet wide. Both Cárdenas’ Hopi guides and the scouts he dispatched into the Canyon’s depths assured him otherwise.

John Wesley Powell’s expedition is generally credited with being the first non-native to float the entire length of the Grand Canyon on the Colorado River. In 1869, Powell, an American Civil War veteran who had lost an arm in the Battle of Shiloh, embarked with his crew upon the Green River in Wyoming, using wooden boats. What Powell had envisioned as an exciting scientific expedition to map and survey the unknown depths of the Grand Canyon became an epic tale of survival. Boat wrecks, near drownings, supplies lost to the raging river, and internal strife greatly challenged Powell’s expedition. Three members abandoned the expedition in the depths of the Grand Canyon and attempted to hike out, but were never seen again. After several months of harrowing adventures on the Green and Colorado Rivers, Powell and his remaining crew emerged from the Grand Canyon. Powell would go on to repeat his journey three years later.

Glen and Bessie Hyde, a young married couple, attempted to become the first man and woman to float the entire length of the Grand Canyon in 1928. Refusing life jackets and a backup boat, the couple set off down the Colorado River. After passing the Hermit Trail, the Hydes were never seen again, but their boat was found downriver, intact. Decades later, a passenger on a Colorado River rafting trip claimed to be Bessie Hyde, and that she was forced to kill her husband in the Grand Canyon after he had become abusive toward her. Her claim has never been proven true. Most likely, both Glen and Bessie met their untimely end by drowning in the mighty Colorado River.

Once across the Colorado River, the Arizona Trail begins to follow the route of the North Kaibab Trail, and soon arrives at a popular overnight camping area known as Phantom Ranch. David Rust started a campground here in 1903, known as Rust’s Camp, where Bright Angel Creek empties into the Colorado River. Travelers could cross the raging Colorado on Rust’s cable car, which was suspended on a steel cable above the river. This also happened to be the only river crossing for many miles. The National Park Service later replaced Rust’s cable car with two bridges across the river. With the coming of the Park Service’s Kaibab Trail, the Santa Fe Railroad paid for the creation of a new overnight camp for tourists near Rust’s Camp. In 1922, Mary Colter, an architect who had designed southwestern-themed structures on other parts of the Grand Canyon’s South Rim, was hired to design Phantom Ranch. Colter’s architecture is still on display at the ranch, where hikers can find overnight lodging in cabins, or stay in a campground next to the cascading waters of Bright Angel Creek. During the 1930’s, the Civilian Conservation Corps had a work camp at Phantom Ranch, and completed a number of projects in the area, including the Clear Creek Trail, Bright Angel Campground, and a telephone line linking the North and South rims.

As the Arizona Trail winds its way up Bright Angel Canyon toward the North Rim, it passes beneath the canyon walls and soaring buttes that were once the domain of one of the Grand Canyon’s greatest explorers: Harvey Butchart. Butchart, a Grand Canyon legend, had accepted a job in Flagstaff as a mathematics professor in 1945, at what later became Northern Arizona University. Shortly after moving to Flagstaff, Harvey began a lifetime of
exploration in the Grand Canyon. Harvey discovered hundreds of routes through spectacularly rugged cliffs, made a number of first ascents, and explored countless side canyons, sometimes with partners or a hiking club that he led, but usually alone. Harvey wrote several Grand Canyon hiking guides, and continued hiking into his 80’s.

References


