

Chapter Eleven

Harry Aleson To The Rescue

Dead Maimed and Missing

A mummified body or skeleton photographed a few days ago in the bottom of the Grand Canyon by a party on a Colorado River trip led by Harry Aleson, should be of interest to anyone who thinks travel through the 280 miles of canyon bottom is a Sunday school picnic...The unfortunate person may have died and then fallen into the fire. The skeletal remains of one of hands was charred.

—Elton M. Garrett, *Boulder City News*, July 1951

Harry Aleson Rescues Injured Woman On River Expedition, Brings Her Home

Another rescue performed by Harry Aleson was revealed today. The noted riverman brought back to civilization a woman with a broken shoulder and prevented her 78-year-old husband from trying to swim the rampaging Green River to bring aid to her.

Daily City News, July 21, 1947

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Crews Hunt Californian Missing in Green River

Special to The Tribune
PRICE—A search was launched Monday for a 21-year-old Californian believed missing in the Green River area, after his teen-age brother trekked out of the desolate region on foot

and told of their rubber raft overturning in rapids.

Carbon County Sheriff Albert Passic said Renny Summers, 19, Berkeley, Calif., arrived in Green River late Sunday and notified Wendell Wilcox about his missing brother.

Wild Waters

The brother, Perry, 21, disappeared in the wild waters of the Green River Thursday when a raft the two were riding from Ouray, Uintah County, to Green River tipped over in the rapids.

The younger man managed to get out of the swirling waters and made it to the Seldom Seen Ranch, 60 miles north of Green River. There, although no one was at the ranch, he obtained shoes and blankets for his trip to Green River.

No Life Jacketes

He told the sheriff neither he nor his brother were wearing life jackets.

Kenneth Slight, professional river-runner, who was taking a party through the river gorge, found Summers' raft about three miles down stream from where it turned over, the sheriff said.

Search Fails To Locate Lost Boater

Special to The Tribune
PRICE—An air search for a Californian feared drowned in the Green River was unsuccessful Tuesday.

Carbon County Sheriff Albert Passic said boat expeditions will begin Wednesday.

Perry Summers, 21, Berkeley, was reportedly hurled into the river Thursday while running Desolation Canyon rapids in a rubber raft.

Salt Lake Tribune, June, 1965

Dead Maimed and Missing

Unequivocally, Harry Aleson was more familiar with the canyon country of the Colorado River and its tributaries than anyone. He had a fascination for any mystery encountered, whether it be deciphering a Spanish explorer's name carved on a sandstone canyon wall, or a bottle that may have been tossed by a pioneer along the Hole in the Rock Mormon Trail, or if a shovel handle unearthed at a camp in Glen Canyon may have belonged to Neil Judd's archaeological diggings. Aleson sent such curiosities to the Smithsonian for identification, and for the most part, the institution returned them somewhat baffled by his interest.

It was a natural evolution for Harry to compile lists of drownings, suicides, rescues, and disappearances, and he had by now attained legendary status for keeping every scrap of paper pertaining to the river, and his meanderings through its canyons for over a quarter century. Those who had actually died on the river had one thing in common—none wore life jackets.¹

Aleson had an active imagination that teased him relentlessly. The “mummified body” he discovered in the Grand Canyon in the early 1950s (a story he lost no time in submitting to the *Boulder City News* for publicity) metamorphosed into a piece printed in the *Utah Historical Quarterly*, entitled “A Grand Canyon Mystery.” Aleson wrote that on a walk in the Lower Granite Gorge, he heard the rush of eagle wings “like the swish of a falling meteorite.” The stage was set. Aleson approached a fire-scared mesquite pit² to discover the skeletal remains of several humans which he graphically described. Like most of his “discoveries,” the location and cause of death remains unknown.

This encounter begins the chapter, followed by a story of an adventitious Hungarian Engineer named Charles Roemer, who launched his tiny rubber boat at Lees Ferry, October 19, 1946 with the intention to run the river down to Lake Mead. He was last seen five days later at Bright Angel Trail shirtless without a life Jacket—he had boasted he was a good swimmer) waving at two surprised hikers. He had no map, claiming to have “memorized the rapids.” The Canyon swallowed him.

The National Park Service contacted Aleson for assistance, and alone he launched a search on land and deep into Lower Granite Gorge. Through veteran river runner Art Greene (who discouraged Roemer). Aleson found that he hadn't taken near enough food (two loaves of bread, two Bermuda onions, and 7 five-cent packages of raisins) and type of boat he used may have been the cause of his demise. And after it was acknowledged that he had died, Aleson contacted Roemer's family in Hungary with the grim news. Harry felt it was his duty as guardian of the Colorado River and its tributaries to rescue those in peril.

With each encomium, Aleson was gaining considerable notoriety; however, there was one mystery that even he could not solve: the disappearance of Everett Ruess. While working as part of a seismograph party for Western Geophysical Explorations in 1938, Aleson read an article in *Desert Magazine* about a young wanderer who with his two burros vanished without a trace in 1934 in a remote canyon off the Escalante River. Ruess has become a worshiped wilderness icon inspired by his paintings, woodblock prints, and rhapsodic writing, but at the core, his love of wilderness and (like Harry) the

independence his wilderness wanderings gave him the greatest satisfaction. Everett's journeys to the vermilion wonderland of Arizona and Utah in 1931, '32 and '34 are condensed from myriad books by authors obsessed with the mystery, and from Aleson's correspondence with Ruesses' parents Christopher and Stella and, his brother Waldo. This background material is vital in understanding his disappearance and perhaps helps us understand why Harry Aleson identified so closely with his insatiable appetite to explore. In addition, Aleson and Everett's explorations also had a quixotic twist: they were both destined for hardship, and failure as perhaps measured by those who measure wilderness by taking only calculated risks.

In 1935 in an alcove, a search party discovered at the top of Davis Gulch (also a side canyon off of the Escalante) Everett's final word to the world: NEMO. In 1946, Aleson "stumbled" upon the inscription independently. This perked his interest in the case, and finding traces of Ruess became an obsession of Harry's for nearly a decade. He contacted Everett's parents and rekindled their hope by the intensity of his interest in the mystery.

In 1948, Aleson brought Stella Ruess to the alcove just below the head of Davis Canyon where her son had chiseled "NEMO 1934," and spent the night with her among the junipers on the canyon floor. The next morning on the rim of Davis Gulch, Stella reached into her pack for a bundle of flowers and with a payer of remembrance she dramatically let them go into the canyon.

Like those who had been involved for over a decade searching for traces, Aleson scoured the canyons. His speculations from the plausible to the impossible occasionally led to his wild, indeed hallucinatory conclusions, that blew the case wide open. The chapter concludes with Harry Aleson's last rescue effort searching for my brother, Terry Russell who was lost on the Green River through Desolation Canyon. By 1965 Harry was 66 years old and living peacefully in Teasdale, Utah with his wife Dottie. His wild years in the canyon country seemed behind him.

Then came a phone call from his neighbor Elizabeth Sprang. He must have listened in stunned silence while my aunt told him that Terry and I had launched a WW II 10-man boat on the Green River, June 11, 1965, planning to run it through Desolation and Gray Canyons. Our boat had gone over and my brother was missing. I walked 63 miles to the town of Green River, then hitchhiked to the Sprang ranch at the base of Boulder Mountain. Would Harry please help search for Terry? Correspondence between Aleson, Dottie, and river historian Otis Marston unravel and reveal the tragedy.

Our final trip together was a continuance of a quest for wilderness adventure that was as intense and powerful as Everett Ruess' and with the same tragic overtones. Just prior to Terry's untimely departure, we assembled our book *On the Loose*, matching our writing and collected quotations with photographs. Compelling and timeless, their book appeared at the dawn of the environmental movement during the early 1970s.

Like Everett's journals and woodblock prints, the book has meant many things to many people—to some revelatory for others it struck a nostalgic chord for wilderness now vanished. Though Terry never saw it in print, it sold over a million copies. It was their generation's take on wild places that bridged the gap between Edward Weston and Ansel Adams, and became an anthem for their generation. "Adventure is not in a guidebook and beauty is not on the map...Seek and ye shall find."

A Grand Canyon Mystery

By Harry Aleson *Utah Historical Quarterly*, July 19, 1943.

These notes were taken from the diary of Harry Aleson made while on a Colorado upriver expedition in 1953. Mr. Aleson adds the following comment: "It would require several days to hike to this uninhabited country. Unless someone has definite information of tragedy, it is better to let remains return completely to the desert."

Second cloudy day with sprinkles of rain...

This afternoon I went on a good stiff hike upon a high bench. For several miles I followed well-defined ancient foot trail for 2 hours.

Arriving at the remains of a fire-scared mescal pit I heard a strange sound like the swish of a falling meteorite [sic]. But when I looked overhead I saw a great eagle diving directly towards the Colorado River. A thousand feet decent later, he vanished over the rim of the Lower Granite Gorge. I wondered what he had seen.

I froze in my tracks when I saw a skeleton not far from the mescal pit. Though complete, it appeared to have been a long time out in the weather. The skull with its empty sockets, and full set of good teeth, had an eerie expression. The legs and chest were tough and leathery. The body had sustained a terrible twist. Several vertebrae were pulled out of place in the small of the back. The head and chest were facing directly backward. Animals and the weather had removed the vitals. But near the broken back, laying in what may have once been the stomach contents, a small object caught my eye. I picked up a bullet. It was a dum-dum [sic] or hollow-nosed one.

I turned directly behind me, and not forty feet away in the broken rock-flat lay another skeleton. It was generally in the same state of mummified preservation as the other, but one leg was gone, pulled away at the hip. Coyotes no doubt. There were no shoes or signs of shoe leather or clothing. Where the first skeleton had dark hair, this one was definitely redheaded. There was no bullet hole entry to the skull, though one tooth was missing and a stump of what remained of the ear, still clung to the skull. I discovered that the missing tooth that lay a few feet away not far. There were no tooth fillings, in fact, no decay, or traces of natural wear; [sic] sign of youth.

Again, I looked over my shoulder and there lay yet another skeleton! What? Had this been some sort of battlefield? This one lay on its side in an awkward position. It was as complete as the first, with the same leathery-drum-taught skin that had not been torn away by animals or birds. But the abdomen and thorax were empty. Black hair clung to the skull skin. All teeth were in place but the bones seemed older.

In searching outside this triangle of tragedy, no other skeletons were found, but the missing leg was located, complete, excepting flesh and skin. Protruding from beneath was a cartridge shell, partly crushed with indications of teeth marks. It read, RMC 31 and wondered when it was manufactured. I hurried away so to be in camp by nightfall...

Charles Roemer Vanishes

SEARCH ENDED ON COLORADO *Reno Evening Gazette*

RICHFIELD, Utah Dec. 10, 1946. "Weeks of searching along the treacherous Colorado River between Lee's Ferry, Ariz., and Lake Mead have failed to yield any clue to whether Charles Roemer successfully navigated the stream in October, veteran riverman Harry Aleson reported today. Aleson returned here recently after spending considerable time during October and November trying to find Roemer, who the riverman described as an 'adventurous Hungarian engineer.' He said Roemer had stayed at the Marble Canyon Lodge, Ariz., before he had shoved off from Lees Ferry Oct. 19 alone in a rubber boat, and was last seen at the foot of Bright Angel Trail."

Being on the pulse of all events out of the ordinary, Aleson got wind of the bizarre disappearance of Charles Roemer who, like himself, was an eccentric lone boatman but a total neophyte to the ways of the river. In 1946, no one had tried to run the entire length of the Grand Canyon in five years, and no solo attempt had been tried since Haldane "Buzz" Holmstorm in 1937. This may have been the lure that pulled Roemer downstream on the Colorado.

Charles Roemer emigrated from Hungary shortly after World War I, after abandoning his wife and children. A drifter and loner with no friends, he drifted west and had a wild idea that he could run the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon in a little "five man" inflatable boat, having no knowledge of the river other than "memorizing rapids" from a book. Since he boasted of being a "good swimmer," he may not have brought a life jacket.

With just two loaves of bread, two Bermuda onions and 7 five-cent packages of raisins purchased at the Marble Canyon Trading Post he was hardly prepared for a 277-mile, 10-day journey down the Colorado. Despite the warnings of veteran riverman Art Greene, owner of Marble Canyon Lodge, Roemer launched his boat at Lees Ferry, October 19, 1946.

On October 24, 88 miles down river at the Bright Angel Trail crossing, shirt off and in good spirits in the pleasant sunshine, Roemer smiled and waved to two surprised hikers. His raft drifted around the bend and Roemer was never seen again. A cryptic bureaucratic memo was issued by the National Park Service concluded: "The fate of this adventure is still unknown, but he is presumed to have perished in the treacherous rapids below Bright Angel Creek. This incident emphasizes the need for better control of river parties, although the mechanics of such control are uncertain."

On November 5, three National Park Service men drove up to Pierce Ferry, Arizona, looking for news or a trace of Roemer. Aleson was there making an anchor buoy for one of his boats for the winter. Always eager for an adventitious search, the next day he went up into Grand Canyon to MY HOME, Arizona. While at his camp, he had a flag out on the riverbank, and a note in his boat to Roemer.

Aleson wrote his river buddy, Ralph Badger on November 17, 1946:

Two days ago, I came in 100 miles to Boulder City to show motion pictures to about 100 people. Tomorrow, Nov. 18, I will go into the Grand Canyon again, in search of, and hoping to meet, the river man in the upper reaches of Lake Mead. The highest point I plan to go up the river current will be 119 ½ miles back of Boulder Dam, 126 miles below where the man was last seen.

At this time he was due nearly two weeks ago...If he does not show by Sunday, Nov. 28, he may be getting into a rough spot. I am setting a deadline of Thanksgiving Day for my search into the Grand Canyon. Would you consider joining me in this search for the all-important reason to find Roemer?

Not one to miss an opportunity for publicity, Aleson concludes, "On November, 18 or 19, a story over International News Service will originate in Boulder City. I have contacted the Newspaper there and it could make big news.

To Roemer's heirs in Europe, he concluded that "no one but God and Charles Roemer knows what he did or went thru after passing Bright Angel Creek...I find Horn Creek increases in difficulty with lower stages of water. I have fair support for the theory that it is extremely violent at low water. I believe it could have easily accounted for Roemer's death."

Aleson speculated that being on the big river for the first time, with less than the barest of essentials, Roemer might have easily over-inflated his light-material raft and carried it onto the shore where the sun's rays expanded and split it along the seams and he had no way to repair it. It is not likely that he was separated from his boat by capsizing or failing to regain it, and being drowned in drifting through a series of rapids.

"My best guess is that Charles Roemer, after weakening from lack of food, secured his boat under a ledge, tried to walk out a side canyon – got boxed in – returned to the river – tried another side canyon – finally weakening so much he was forced to lay down, and died there. Two unidentified skeletons have been found along the talus slopes in the inner gorges, in that deep section of the Colorado River since 1905. It might take 100 years to locate and identify Roemer's remains. Yet, the mystery could be solved by a river party this coming summer."

Everett Ruess

*I will never stop wandering and when it comes time to die,
I'll find the wildest, loneliest, most desolate spot there is.*

—Everett Ruess



F P O

Everett Ruess by Dorothy Lange, San Francisco, CA

Everett Ruess was born March 28, 1914, and his brother, Waldo, September 5, 1909— both in Oakland, California. Their father Christopher attended Harvard Divinity School and graduated *summa cum laude*. He served as a Unitarian minister and later took on odd jobs to care for Stella's sick father. Their mother, Stella Ruess, was a dancer, artist, and aesthete who worshiped her sons.

Some Everett Ruess scholars suggest that his vagabondage was due in part to his parent's overinvolvement in his private life to the point of intrusiveness. In an effort to capture Everett's character— quite different than his brother Waldo— Stella wrote: "May you look deep and wide and high your art all nature glorify..." Or was Christopher too demanding by insisting his sons maintain high moral and intellectual standards?

The Ruess family moved continuously as Christopher chased after jobs. One stop was Brooklyn where Everett wandered "old Indian trails" and developed a fascination with anything Native American. In 1923, when Everett was 9, Stella's father took a turn for the worst. She took her favorite son Everett with her on a cross-country trip to Los Angeles to care for her father while Waldo chased girls in Montana. They made a stop at the Grand Canyon where in one of his first journals, Everett noted that through a spy glass he could see the Colorado River. They traveled on to Yosemite Valley where they took long walks, and on one, Everett nearly drowned in the Merced River. This early contact with wilderness seeped into Everett's soul.

But his character dramatically took shape during the so-called “Valparaiso years,” 1924-28. During this time in Indiana he was more interested in insects and wildlife than people and was reprimanded by Christopher. “You need to observe *people* as you observe *things* and make friends.



The Ruess family

Everett preferred the company of animals to people

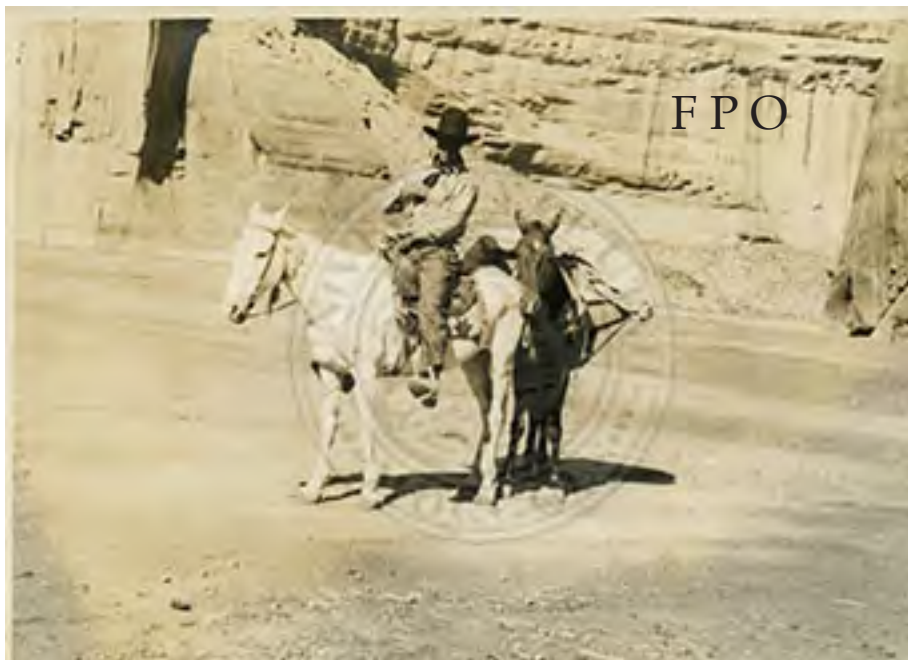
In 1930 the close knit family moved to Los Angeles (and Everett now desperate to escape his parents) embarked on his first solitary adventure. He hitchhiked north to Carmel determined to introduce himself to Edward Weston³ as a “fledging protégé” just as he would on Ansel Adams’, and Maynard Dixon’s doors in San Francisco in 1933. The 16-year-old Ruess must have made an impression. He was welcomed into the Weston household and spent several days playing with Edward’s kids, Neil and Cole and sleeping in the garage. Restless, Ruess backpacked into Big Sur country for three weeks, and craving wilder country, he pointed his boots towards Yosemite where he vanished on the trail into the high country of Tuolumne Meadows, climbed Glacier Point, pocketed obsidian arrowheads and though shy, seemed to enjoy occasional companionship by partaking in park activities, but confessed: “...after all, the lone trail is the best.”

From Yosemite he sent his first letter home to Christopher and Stella asking for money to buy a new sleeping bag, or boots that he had walked the soles off of, and that “I would like a burro next time I start a hike...you can buy them for \$15 or less.” After just one summer of hitchhiking and following trails in the Sierras, Ruess prophesied that he was incapable of returning to a “normal life.”

On his 1931 ramble to Arizona, he seemed embarrassed by his financial dependence on his parents, but on September 18, 1932 wrote arrogantly, “don’t send Eusey’s jelly it tastes like glue...it’s been a long time since I’ve had cookies, and send Swedish bread, peanut butter and grape nuts, and soon I must buy new shirts, socks and shoes...” Also, he asked them to send immediately, a small library of books from Dostoevsky’s *The Brother’s Karamazov* to Voltaire’s *Candide*—and specifically books in the “Modern Library” series.

By 1934, his parents eventually felt resentment that they were subsidizing their prodigal son's wanderings from home as long as he pleased. To the disappointment of his parents who hoped Everett would attend college after graduating from Hollywood High School, on February 1931, Everett hitchhiked to Flagstaff, and then got a ride with an Indian mail carrier to one of the wildest places possible in the Southwest—the large blank spaces on the map around Kayenta, Arizona that he would crisscross for the next 10 months. For the next four years Everett planned to be a wandering artist supporting himself by selling his work, but the flame diminished as he recalled the bad experiences he had in the San Francisco galleries and studios and wrote: "...I have no desire for fame...I feel only a stir of distaste when I think of being called a 'well known author' or a 'great artist...'" But depending on his mood, he would regain hope that he could make a living as a vagabond artist.

Soon after arriving in Kayenta in an effort to distance himself from the person he had been in the city and from his parents, Everett changed his name to Lan Rameau, and would do so twice again as his personality metamorphosed. Uncomfortable with his identity and in an act of independence, Ruess chides Waldo for taking on meaningless jobs that his work was quite unnecessary, and he would rather "walk a whole day behind a burro than on a street car..." where on the endless open desert he found it hard to believe the rest of the word existed.⁴



Cowboy Everett digging up bones in Canyon de Chelly



Everett with a burro he named after himself, and Curly

Kayenta, Arizona, 1931

Just as he knocked on the door of Edward Weston's home in Californian, Everett knocked on the trading post door near Oljato ("Place of moonlight water") of legendary explorer of the four-corners area and Navaho country, "Hosteen" (Navaho word denoting respect) John Wetherill.⁵



John Wetherill in his element

For 40 years, Wetherill had pretty much cleaned out all artifacts from every major ruin in every side canyon in the area, but that didn't deter the 16 year old greenhorn Ruess. John, now in his early 60s, gladly shared his knowledge and mapped out a route for Everett's journey through Monument Valley, the Tsegi Canyon system and beyond. Both Everett and his burro that he bought from a Navajo, and named after himself, had challenging moments up what he called "Gloom Canyon" due to high winds, snow, and no water source.

Arriving at Tsegi Canyon, 10 miles west of Wetherill's trading post, he immediately began sifting through the rubble at Betatakin. He wrote his friend Bill Jacobs, "These days away from the city have been the happiest days of my life... it has been a beautiful dream." His first contact with true wilderness where he saw not a soul for two weeks, would mark his trail until the end.

In early May Everett left the Kayenta area and with the help of Wetherill's map, headed out for Canyon de Chelly that had just been designated as a National Monument. In Chinle, gateway to Canyon del Muerto, Ruess would spend nine days painting and exploring and looting a few of the more than 1,200 ruins.

Then on May 23 he headed out for Hopi country visiting Oraibi and Walpi, en route to the Grand Canyon. Ruess stopped along the way at the Deerwater Ranch to build fence and cut firewood and then stalled out at a sheep ranch earning badly needed cash branding lambs. Needing a new burro, Ruess traded a shotgun for another, Pericles, that would take him to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon where he spent two weeks before

venturing into its depths and wrote: "Recently I had the most terrific physical experiences of my life" but offered no details. Just as there was no grandiose evocations of the beauties of the Grand Canyon that may have turned his pen to butter.

What was constant in Ruess' writing and is found in Aleson's early letters, was his search for love and companionship that Aleson was able to find with Georgie White. But Everett's quest for "meaning," for "beauty," and for financial independence all but consumed him. After two more weeks exploring the inner gorge, and one week on the North Rim, he took a quick jaunt to Zion that brought him to the threshold of fall. He was in a quandary over whether to return to the confined spaces of the city and the Ruess' home, or head south to warmer environs in southern Arizona which is what he finally did.

Ruess wore out another burro and may have abandoned it. He hitched a ride to the mining town of Superior, and after a series of odd jobs along the way, arrived in Roosevelt, Arizona.

There he slowly unraveled as one scheme after another to make money with his art failed. He wrote "Not for god's sake or hell's sake can I sell my paintings..." Thanksgiving arrived and alone with frozen feet in his tent Ruess beseeched his best friend in Los Angeles, Bill Jacobs, to drive out to Arizona and pick him up. Jacobs declined.

So leaving his current burros with a "local Apache" Ruess hitchhiked to Los Angeles uncertain of his future. Though at 17 years old he had traveled alone over a thousand miles on foot, and for the most part had "seen more beauty than he could bear." After three months at home (about which Ruess aficionados know little) he was anxious to continue his pilgrimage—one that even Harry Aleson would have envied.

While Everett was vagabonding in 1931, Aleson climbed Mount Rainier and Glacier Peak on a 7-day hike, and was working as a geophysicist. He wrote, "To date, I have developed over sixteen thousand seismographic records."

F P O



Ruess wore out countless burros on treks following his muse



Betatakin Cliff Dwelling

1932 Ramble

In a Cloud of Despair

F P O



When Everett arrived in Roosevelt, Arizona on March 22, 1932, after hitching from Los Angeles, he discovered his burro had been stolen. This prompted a racist diatribe about Native Americans: "I have learned all Indians are children unable to attain to anything like white mans' intelligence, and what this Apache could not understand, he counted as nothing." The companionship Everett craved on his wanderings could not be satisfied by his old friend Bill Jacobs, and his friend Clark who he "dismissed." Ruess bought a horse, Pacer and headed north alone into the Great Unknown. His 1930, '31 and '34 diaries are lost, but in his letters at a time when he is probing most deeply into his psyche— he refrains.

It may be that since Everett was now passing through cattle ranching country that his journal entries were uninspired. His physical exhaustion he attributed to loneliness searching for nebulous companionship that he would never find. He headed northeast on the lookout for prehistoric ruins but was disappointed. He traded his old nag Pacer for a couple of burros in Young, Arizona and had the epiphany: why not ride one and pack the other?

Towards the end of May in an existential funk, Ruess found himself amid the towering pines of the Mogollon Rim. Not sure which direction to go, or even why, he steered his contrary burros east towards Holbrook and traded his burros again for a couple of horses and begins to learn the ways of a cowboy from local ranchers— spending more time sleeping in barns and ranch houses than camping. This was hardly the kind of adventure that had filled his soul the year before.

His writing is peppered with observations about himself: "I feel distinctly different from other people—like a freak...I can't help being different, but I get no joy from it...All common joys are forbidden me..." and "I've drifted too far away from other people." These confessions were the result of coming to terms with his destiny that seemed preordained. Ruess wrote down a quote by Edwin Arlington Robinson that resonated for him: "Who goes too far to find his grave mostly alone he goes."

Striking out after immersing himself socially in the Holbrook environs, Everett's disposition improved, and by the time he reached Chinle, July 11, he apparently had come to terms with his destiny. Rather than wander aimlessly, he set his sights on Mesa Verde that Wetherill had ransacked more than thirty years earlier—it would be the furthest east he would travel.

There are those who believe that when “pot hunters” enter a ruin and begin scraping and sifting for artifacts, there will be retribution from the spirits of the dead.⁶ After a brief stay in Chinle where he traded in his stock for more nags, Ruess headed up Canyon del Muerto as he did the previous year. After leaving a ruin Ruess wrote, “I felt drunken...reeled and swayed in the saddle and felt decidedly out of my usual nature...for some time I could hardly see...” Things deteriorated.⁷



Canyon de Chelly—White House Ruin

On July 22 at the head of Canyon del Mureto, he led his horses up a steep trail leading out of the canyon where the one he named Jon slipped and went end over end three times to its death. Consolidating supplies on his other horse, Nuflo, he topped out of the canyon at its source, crossed the Lukachukai Mountains and at a trading post in Tsaille, resupplied for the final push to Mesa Verde.

The violated spirits continued to work on Everett and the next day he admitted: “There was such a stiffness and sourness in my limbs as I have never known before...my thighs ached piercingly.” On July 26, Everett arrived at the New Mexico border, then went on to Shiprock.⁸ He confessed he was “filled with a violent desire to go home...” but on he marched into Colorado where he hoped to follow the Mancos River and enter Mesa Verde from the south, even though local traders hadn’t heard of a route. Oblivious, when he attempted to cross

the Mancos River, Nuflo slipped and when Ruess tried to pull the horse from the current, the neck strap broke, and the saddle and pack sacks fell into the river and he lost his “precious” blanket. Everything was thoroughly soaked, and his food reduced to mush. Developing photos from a camera that he carried throughout his 1934 travels would have possibly provided clues to his disappearance, but in a letter to his parents November 4 he wrote: “I sent back the Kodak because it has not been working well and is an expense and weight...”⁹



Everett Ruess' camera and saddle blanket

In a deep cloud of despair, Everett continued to search for a route to access the high plateau of Mesa Verde. “I am in no great rush to reach the park... it will mark the end of my wanderings, my independence. After half-heartedly joining tourists on guided tours to the major ruins, he began hitching back to Los Angeles without a clue as to what to do with his life any more than he had five months earlier in Roosevelt, Arizona.

During the next nine months there exist only scraps of material that indicate that Everett enrolled at UCLA but dropped out after one semester. With his head in the clouds, Everett wrote Bill Jacobs, “How could a lofty, unconquerable soul like mine remain imprisoned in that academic backwater, wherein all but the most docile wallow in hopeless slough, though I have been on several Bacchic [*sic*] revels and musical orgies...”

When spring rolled around Everett's wander lust returned, and he couldn't resist the pull of the Sierras or ignore his parents stifling meddling in his affairs. He was still tied to them by his sense of entitlement that they must support his wanderings.

Soaring and Crashing

The Sierras, 1933

I do not wish to withdraw from life by entering college. You can be ashamed of me if you like, but you can not make me ashamed of myself... I have tasted your cake, and prefer your unbuttered bread.

—Everett Ruess

Everett pointed his boots toward the Sierras where for four and a half months in 1933 they were home. Waldo dropped him off in Sequoia where he lost no time buying a couple of burros he named Black and Gray. The mundane names were appropriate and in sync with his pitiful and uninspired journal entries, and the congested trails he hiked. One can only imagine this strange youth hiking among the redwoods singing Dvorak melodies at full volume, punctuated by fragments of Brahms and Beethoven.

His mood swings were predictable: soaring then crashing as he continued to search for meaning and companionship. As the high-country snow melted, Ruess climbed Mt. Whitney the highest peak in the continental U.S. where from 14,505 feet one can view the Salton Sea—the lowest point at 225 feet below sea level. Like the Grand Canyon, Mt. Whitney left Everett speechless, unable to match words to the enormity and grandeur of these wonders. From the towering summit with its granite spires, Ruess took on the John Muir Trail that snakes through the backbone of the Range 220 miles from Mt. Whitney to Yosemite National Park. Rather than read the compelling work of John Muir, Ruess read R. Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights* and Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*. One can visualize him reciting lines at the top of his lungs as he passed through Evolution Basin, perhaps oblivious of where he was... "Come, fill the cup, and in the fire of spring... your winter-garment of repentance fling. The bird of time has but a little way to flutter—and the bird is on the Wing."

On September 29, Everett arrived in Yosemite, climbed Half Dome, hung out with tourists at the park headquarters, lamented, scarcely painted, and seldom left the trail to explore. He had not found his elusive "soul mate." Visions of vermillion cliffs,

red earth, mesas, canyons, and open county that had captured his soul teased him, and he vowed to return them the following year in 1934. But not before he gave San Francisco another visit that might lead to selling his art and his financial independence, and so Everett plotted his course to San Francisco. Selling yet another depleted pair of burros, he got a ride to Merced, hopped a freight to San Francisco and got off in Oakland.

After renting a dingy garret, Everett tried to sell his block prints with limited success. He reveled in the cultural life of San Francisco, attended lectures by Lincoln Steffens and artist and explorer Rockwell Kent, and was able to open doors at the homes of renowned oil painter Maynard Dixon and the iconic photographer, Ansel Adams. Maynard gave Everett a painting lesson and his wife and photo journalist, Dorothy Lang, captured Everett's essence with her large format field camera, still considered the best images ever taken of him.

In the shadow of such dynamic and successful artists, it became obvious to Ruess that he would never be able to make a living as an artist, and remain entirely dependent on money from his parents. Correspondence reveals Christopher's frustration over Everett's refusal to continue attending college. Everett wrote, "I do not wish to withdraw from life to college... you can be ashamed of me if you like, but you cannot make me ashamed of myself... I have tasted your cake, and I prefer your unbuttered bread..."

On March 2, Everett sold a painting that allowed him to buy a ticket home, and after a month, he packed for his last journey across the Southwest that he dearly loved. Waldo would drive him there.

Wandering into Eternity—1934

While Harry Aleson continued work as a geophysicist in Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas, and was making plans for a parachute drop onto Mt. Everest (which never came to pass), Ruess arrived in Kayenta, April 4, 1934. Everett haggled with a Navaho acquiring two burros and headed out on familiar ground, proclaiming: “Always I will scorn the worlds I’ve known like half-burnt candles when the sun is rising...and sally forth to others now unknown...” He marched 170 miles to Chinle and on to Canyon de Chelly over the Lukachukai Mountains and instead of heading to Shiprock as he had in 1932, he pointed his burros’ ears west to explore the Carrizo Mountains, completing the loop of 170 miles a month later.

Though Everett kept a diary, it would vanish mysteriously but intriguing bits of information survived in his letters. His writing surpasses the banal journal entries the year before. As author David Roberts noted: the writing would “soar into the metaphysical realm as he strove to match the beauty of the landscape with carefully crafted prose.” Or at least his writing began that way. To follow his route today would be impossible as no list of quotidian events were recorded. With his head in the clouds and his feet barely touching the ground, Everett drifting toward the end. Everett wrote: “The absorbing passion of any highly sensitive person is to forget himself, whether by drinking or by agonizing love, by furious work or play, or by submerging himself in the creative arts...But the pretense can not endure, and unless he can find another as highly strung as himself with whom to share the murderous pain of living, he will surely go insane...”

After his sojourn loop, Everett felt the pull of Navajo Mountain, gateway to Rainbow Bridge. Located close to the Arizona-Utah border the mountain rises to 10,348 feet, above the desert floor like a giant whale’s back, and is considered a sacred place from time immemorial among the Diné. Rather than follow John Wetherill’s bridge trail that traversed the northern slopes of the mountain, Ruess choose to follow his instincts, so he clawed his way up brush-choked gullies to the high shoulder of the mountain. This was by far the most remote and difficult traverse of Everett’s forays; he failed to mention the intensity of the climb in his diary. Like other natural wonders of immense proportions and beauty, the arc of Rainbow Bridge was not mentioned in Everett’s diary either. He was more interested in the damselflies and the “friendly rocks to lean against.”



Ruess followed the Wetherill tradition of grave robbing

Back in Kayenta Ruess fell in with a team called the Rainbow Bridge-Monument Valley Expedition which surveyed all the Anasazi ruins from Monument Valley through the Tsegi Canyon system and across the Rainbow Plateau, a survey that eventually led to the creation of new parks and monuments. Everett was hired by H. Claiborne Lockett to cook and as a packer, and over the next few weeks Ruess observed serious archaeologists at work, rather than his previous experiences of unearthing artifacts and jaw bones etc. to send home.

Though Ruess admired Lockett, it was not reciprocated. Lockett believed Everett's interest in archaeology was minimal and one wonders how many artifacts he pocketed. He would spend most of his free time, which was considerable, in gazing out at the landscape. In Bud Rusho's *A Vagabond for Beauty*, he mentions that Wetherill was "put off" by Everett, and that "he had little respect for Ruess, that he considered him a "pest" who would simply hang around the trading post for days seeking information and conversation, but would buy nothing."

It was now early August and Everett who was plainly a "prisoner of himself," had been drifting for four months. He had an itch to visit the Hopi villages perhaps to discover something deeper than what he had a couple of years before. Attending the Snake Dance in Hotevilla on the Third Mesa and participating in the Antelope Dance in Mishongnovi on Second Mesa turned the young man's head around, and he seemed to enjoy sketching and playing with curious young children who gathered around this strange nomad. Ruess' evocations dwindled in proportion to his energy, and his laconic letters home were few.

The exiled Everett packed up and the next we hear of him was his arrival at Desert View, a tourist destination at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, some 142 miles distant by road from Second Mesa. On a little side jaunt en route to the overlook, Everett walked down the trail to the Little Colorado River working another burro to death. There is no record of his travels in the Grand Canyon between the end of August and the middle of October. After

a brief trip to Oak Creek Canyon, Ruess found himself back at Desert View. It was now late September and the aspens were in full color. In a letter to brother Waldo, we get a glimmer that Everett was flirting with death, going deeper into wilderness, and taking more chances. "I have seen more wild than on any previous trip. I almost lost one burro in the quicksand—he was up to his neck... And in another letter to his friend Ned Frisius: "In my wanderings this year I have taken more chances than ever before..."

Leaving the Grand Canyon for good in mid-October, drifter Ruess headed north on what is now Highway 89, crossed over the Colorado at Navajo Bridge, and onward to Utah via the Kaibab Plateau and into Bryce Canyon National Park. As if to clear his karmic slate, knowing perhaps that the end was nigh, he took great pride in writing Christopher and Stella to tell them to stop sending him money—that he was doing well selling "a number of paintings." Or was he simply distancing himself from his parents?

There is no indication that Everett intended to cease his wandering and return to Los Angeles for the winter as he had done after past expeditions. In the Mormon enclave of Tropic he hung out with the locals and admitted having "great fun" with the locals. With a ranger Ruess discussed his proposed plan to pass through Escalante, thirty miles east of Tropic, then on to the Hole-in-the-Rock Trail to the Colorado River. In Escalante he camped by the river, hunted arrowheads, and rode horses with the local boys who he treated to venison and potatoes around his campfire. He wrote his last letter to his brother Waldo the 8th of November.

When Everett spoke with ranchers about his travel plans, he was met with a wall of skepticism. That night high-roller Ruess treated the boys to a movie and the next day rode off down the Hole-in-the-Rock Trail. A week later and 50 miles down the trail, Ruess camped with a couple of sheepherders at the head of Soda Gulch. When they offered him a hind-quarter, Ruess declined. On November 21 he packed his gear onto his burros Cackleburrs and Cocolatero, and said goodbye. This was the last time Everett Ruess was seen...

"I don't think I could ever settle down...I have known too much of the depths of life already and would prefer anything to an anti-climax...I have not tired of the wilderness; rather I enjoy its beauty and the vagrant life I lead, more keenly all the time...it will be a month or two before I have a post office, for I am exploring southward to the Colorado where no one lives..."

Everett's hunger for the intangible led him to explore beyond the next rise. It's been said that our strengths are our greatest weaknesses, and perhaps it was that insatiable hunger that led to his demise. After nearly 4 years of wandering, he had created a larger than life character for himself. His death was inevitable, as he was determined to push deeper and deeper into the canyons until something stopped him... And "out there" it's just a matter of time until something will.

Illustration

Everett's Ghost Haunted Aleson



Aleson on Everett's trail

My dear Stella And Christopher, Outside of your own family, I believe I have given more thought to Everett's disappearance than any other man. I know in your hearts you have 'set Everett free.' But to me, the mystery will not be quieted. I have now been in the area where Everett disappeared in Davis Canyon seven times and by air twice. Last month I spent three days on a lone 31-day trip down Glen Canyon in search of clues.

—Harry Aleson, November 27, 1950

Nineteen and fourty-eight had been an intense year for Aleson. He began a partnership with Charles Larabee, launching Western River Tours, completed the first traverse of the Escalante River with Georgie White, May 24, 1946, and in late Fall the same year with White attempted a hike from Lees Ferry, Arizona to Santa Fe, following the footsteps of Escalante and Dominguez. For the next decade, Aleson was in contact with the Ruess' keeping them abreast with his search for Everett.

By 1950 the Ruess cult had gained momentum, and Everett was well on his way to becoming an iconic symbol for those who envied the life of this free-spirited artist wanderer. The allure is all the more appealing because the wilderness that neutered Everett (indeed that killed him) is all but gone, and few have the fiber and mental mindset to believe that beauty is not optional, that it is at the very core of our being, indeed our survival, and that we need to be willing to die to preserve it.

Christopher and Stella Ruess had not entirely accepted that they would never see their son again and held tight to any shred of evidence that he was still alive. Their perhaps unrealistic optimism made them targets for unscrupulous opportunists and those wanting to capitalize on the mystery.

Speculating about Ruess' disappearance has been the focus of conversations around campfires and on trails for decades and will no doubt continue. Both John Wetherill and Ken Sleight believe he died in a fall. Sleight contends that the 1935 search for Ruess was haphazard; that it was done on horseback entirely and not on foot up narrow slot canyons where his remains would be more likely found. He wrote: "They didn't understand the mechanics of searching for one thing...I could have gone down there right after and I know damn well

I could have found him." Was Everett murdered by ranchers in the Escalante area, and his body thrown in the Colorado River? Or did sheepherders Addlin Lay and Clayton Porter who last saw Everett at the head of Soda Gulch murder him for his possessions?

Did Ruess swim the Colorado River and melt into the Navaho reservation and marry a Navaho woman, or did he travel to South America? Many of Ruess' letters had Nietzschean overtones and made frequent references to his disdain for the "common masses," and Thoreau's "Most men live their lives in quiet desperation." Often he gloated in the arcane knowledge that his life was superior compared to "The wretched lives of the suffering greedy, grumbling humanity which is the natural outcome of a failed imagination and sedentary torpor." Ruess would feel "roaring drunk with the lust for life and adventure and unbearable beauty" and then this feeling would invariably come tumbling down like a house of cards, and he would careen toward the misanthropic.

This perceived dichotomy between his constrained family life in the city, and his life in wilderness may have become unbearable and short-circuited him. He may have found a crack in the sandstone where he knew he'd never be found, and jumped. Strong evidence points that way. Ruess wrote his brother in October 1931 of the beauty he'd seen that was a "priceless experience" and concluded, "What I would have missed if I had ended it last Fall..."

Or, as one who was legendary for taking chances while following the faint carved steps of the Moki up nearly vertical cliffs, had he fallen and his remains not yet been found? To Waldo on May 3, 1934 Ruess wrote: "I had many thrills when I trusted my life to crumbling sandstone and angles little short of perpendicular in search of water holes and cliff dwellings. Often I was surprised myself when I came out alive at the top..." And to friend Edward Gardner he wrote: "Yesterday I did some marvelous climbing on a nearly vertical cliff...one way or another I have been flirting with death, the old clown..."

Speculation reached a fever pitch when in January, 2009 a skeleton was discovered in a burial crevice at Comb Ridge, Utah. Ruess devotees rejoiced that the mystery had been solved after DNA tests declared it so. However, by October 21, another test ruled out the possibility. Theories and conjectures abound and as the Spanish proverb reminds us, *Todo es segun el color del cristal con qui se mira*: "Everything partakes of the color of the crystal through which it is seen."

Christopher Ruess got Aleson up to speed after fourteen years of disappointments.

Dear Mr. Aleson: Engineer Donald McLain in Altadena, Cal., a friend of our son Everett, gave me a memo of your "Vacation of a Lifetime" horseback trip from Escalante April 15 to May 7. It may be that your group will keep an eye out for traces of Everett, of whom you may know. (See enclosures). If you wish me to loan you a copy of the book, *Desert Trails*, (now out of print) tell me and I will mail you a copy.

Mr. Syrett of Ruby's Inn thought Everett might have fallen to his death in the many declivities in S E Utah near Hole in the Wall or near the Moki Cave where he inscribed NEMO. If so, the body would mummify as there are no insects even in the dry air and foodless places at the foot of the cliffs, of which he said there were very many. At that time and since it has been perhaps quite unexplored, and few would run the risks that Everett ran as John Wetherill told us when we saw him at Kayenta in 1935.

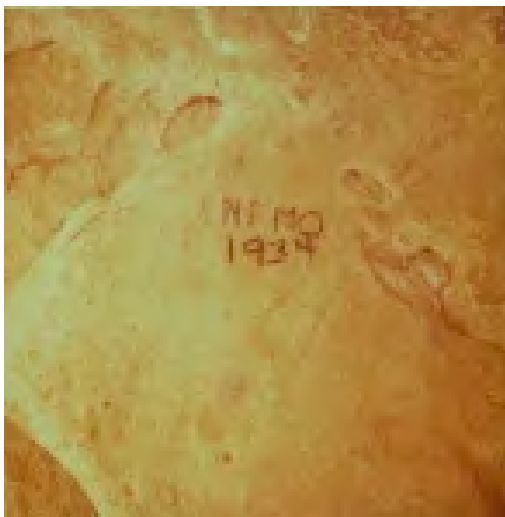
It may be that Everett met his end in such a fall, it may be that he drowned crossing the Colorado. It maybe he was killed by the Indians for his gear (unlikely) he may have fallen and suffered

amnesia, forgetting his identity, or may be he planned to disappear without a trace and lose himself among the natives and he maybe in Central or South America or mid Mexico now. For all these theories there have been believers. Mr. H. J. Allen of Escalante and his wife know all about Everett, having talked to him before his leaving Escalante on his journey. Everett vanished in 1934, now 14 years ago. No sure word from or about him has ever come, but many guesses and rumors. With best wishes for you on your Journado. Cordially yours, Christopher Ruess.

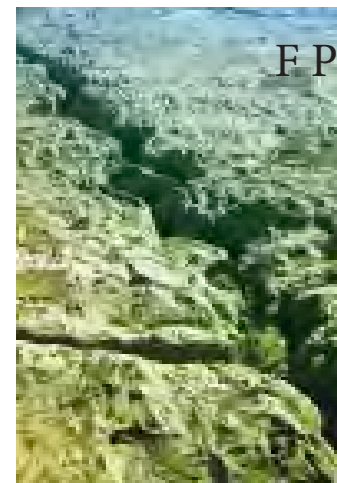
Aleson got on the trail like a private eye and held on like a pit bull. In a letter to Dock Marston he recalls that he came onto a pile of large potsherds hidden under a rock up Davis Gulch, and guessed that they may have been gathered by Ruess. Aleson wrote:

There is a stretch of about 200 feet of Moki Steps, diagonally up the slickrock – maybe 2 miles above the Whiteman's cut step trail into Davis. I defy anyone to climb them –up or down today. A wrong slip would land the climber in a huge water tank, impossible to climb out alone...I've thought of siphoning this tank. Everett had been quite a daredevil among the young folk in Monument Valley, I've heard, and would climb places no one would follow.

I've had some doubts about the Escalante people giving any warning about not going alone. They knew Ruess often traveled alone. A young sheepherder employed by Ken Griffin had directed him so well that he found the near-blind trail that led to the cut steps at the last pitch into the floor of Davis Gulch. Everett had been advised he would find water there for his burros. If our Mar-Apr hiking group goes into Davis this Spring, I'm hoping to stumble onto some clue.



Nemo Inscription by Ruess, located on left side of Davis Gulch about 3 miles from the Escalante River



Up Davis Gulch

Harry Aleson received a letter from Stella Ruess, July 9, 1952 thanking him for a clipping by Norris Leap from the *Los Angeles Times* the previous month entitled “Canyon’s Veiling Ruess Mystery.” Aleson wrote back: “His article is very nicely done, knowing much careful thot [*sic*] in preparation. I am glad to find another man with a continuing interest in Everett’s disappearance...” Dick Sprang suggested that he and Aleson “check around” for Everett on the other side of the Colorado River on Wilson Mesa— the most westerly plateau lying between the Colorado and San Juan. “Just recently pilot Joe Moser and I flew over the confluence of the two rivers – and I spotted a route from the river onto the high country. Let us hope we may carry out the plan this year, searching for a record by Everett.”

At this point in the letter to Stella, Aleson enters the realm of the metaphysical. Stella has pursued all logical explanations for her son’s disappearance. She wrote Aleson that she had heard of “The Prophet Glendora Man” who she believed could solve the mystery. This was just the kind of wild lead upon which Aleson thrived and that may have been overlooked by Everett Ruess scholars as not having an iota of validity. Aleson wrote Stella:

I just cannot accept the story told by the ‘Glendora Man’ entirely tho it shouldn’t be discounted 100%. There is no reasonable basis for ‘changed personality’; ‘something disgraceful’; ‘argument with father’; ‘influence of very evil Indian. Those of us who believe we rationalize normally, will try to explain any mystery that confronts us. Perhaps, those who rationalize sub-normally [*sic*] will indulge in figments of imagination... If you do write to the Glendora Prophet, re: “TRAILS” I hope you ask him a few questions:

Do they live much on the wild mountain sheep, and leave bones beside their campfire, or destroy the bones by fire? Do they keep women and children in camp to guard them while asleep, or warn them of approaching strangers? Has Everett’s changed personality taken him into the mystic realms of the PIUTE medicine men, practicing voodooism of a disgraceful and shameful sort? Does he “see” Everett in Piute Canyon with a Piute Medicine man? Is the hideout in the head, middle or mouth of Piute Canyon? Do they generally hide in the corn patches or cane breaks? What wild animals do they generally guard against? Do they have a secret hide-away in Moki Canyon. I am interested in “the prophet’s” replies. I shall continue to search this winter. On so many occasions I bring up a mystery, here and there, hoping there will be some new clue. In my search for Everett I will take my power wagon out of Monument Valley, going into Piute Canyon as far as practical in search of The Glendora Man.

Illustration

To stir things up further, Aleson circulated his wildest Ruess theory yet, with a few close friends, assuring them that they alone were the only ones he trusted with his findings. Dock Marston was one of the recipients. Harry wrote on December 4, 1952:

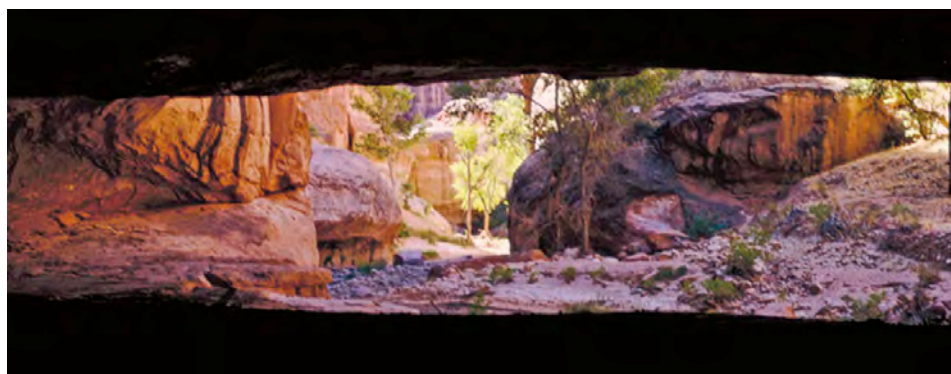
After fourteen years of continued interest, considerable questioning, prowling in the area of the disappearance, hearing a great deal about the affair by Escalante and Boulder folk— I heard first hand on Pearl Harbor Day this year, some startling statements— from a man of that area, pretty much ‘in his chips.’ “The boy was shot. Killer was named to me. Killer died seven years later. Two others threw the body in the Colorado R. Both are living. One served time in Utah Pen for rustling. I’ve been seeing and talking to him off and on for several years. For some weeks now, he kept a room here. Not more than 20 feet between our beds. Presently, the murder could not be proved in court. While the parents, whom I know, are living, I’m inclined to say nothing— let the secret of ER disappearance die with them. What would you do with this knowledge? I shall write RH (Randall Henderson) about it, in confidence.

Aleson also wrote Christopher and Stella about his findings—real or imagined. Would they be emotionally able to hear “the truth?” Christopher wrote back on March 20, 1953 thanking him for his letters and Everett clippings, and that in ‘49 he began to see the “vain gloriousness” of news stories about his son. “I’m tired of falling dead timber...” From what we have already learned we can guess what a death-bed confession might bring forth about Everett. Yes, we would want to know everything, but we hate the idea on general publicity.”

Oddly, Christopher was hesitant to allow articles go to print that would circuitously cause others to venture onto Indian land and perhaps meet the same fate as Everett’s. He must have assumed that all Navajo’s disliked Anglos. Awash with speculations, Christopher was guessing that Everett swam the Colorado River, and melted into the Navajo Reservation. “Everett probably realized that he was taking his life in his own hands, but took this risk as he took risks climbing to cliff-dwellings, knowing that Fate, the old Duffer, would someday get him, as it gets us each and all. Everett spoke of the ‘grim humor of it all.’ Let us know when you come to Los Angeles so we can come hear your talk with latest films so that we can join your audience.”

At the bottom on the page, Stella wrote her innermost thoughts from a grieving parent worn down by years of hope and disappointment: “Dear Harry, I want to know everything there is to know about Everett, no matter how distressing it may be. We are not wishing for punishment for anyone. Can’t the papers state that matter is closed?”

Terry Tempest Williams wrote, “I have to tell you, every time I walk in areas where he walked I keep an eye out for him... as I say that I just get chills...I believe in Everett Ruesses’ spirit...It still circulates in these canyons like the wind.”



Davis Gulch, 1962

The Russell Brothers

I phoned Sheriff Passic in Price, Utah, as the capsizes had been in Carbon County, and got things going. I then phoned office of the Utah State Aeronautics, Harlon Bement and they stood ready to help if called by the sheriff...I then phoned Jim Hurst at Green River and learned that he could fly Renny and myself to search for Terry up from Green River to Steer Ridge Rapid — just above the Seldom Seen Ranch...I asked him how soon he could pick us up, and he said in an hour.

—Harry Aleson



Terry and Renny Russell, South Pasadena, CA., 1951

About the time Aleson was swimming the monstrous rapids in the lower Granite Gorge of the Colorado River, and a decade after Everett Ruess vanished in the lower canyons of the Escalante River, two brothers were born. On April 23, 1944, Terry Russell was born in Rochester, Minnesota, and Renny Russell on July 31, 1946 in Pasadena, California.

When my father, Harvey Finkelson, was in the Army, he accidentally shot his hand while cleaning his pistol, and my mother, Phoebe Russell, worked as a nurse. They met in the hospital and they fell in love. But not for long. Two years later after a frigid winter in Jackson Hole, Wyoming in a primitive log cabin at Elk Springs Ranch on the Snake River, their marriage unraveled. With her eldest son Terry (and pregnant with Renny), she fled back to Pasadena, California to be with her mother, Alice Russell. She had had enough of cowboy horse-wrangler Harvey and of Wyoming winters.

Phoebe was a photographer, painter, writer, avid rock climber, and backcountry skier, who instilled in us a strong wilderness ethic. She befriended David Brower (prior to him becoming executive director of the Sierra Club) and spent summers working and rock climbing in Yosemite National Park. She introduced her sons to photographers Ansel Adams, Philip Hyde, and Cedric Wright who would powerfully influence us and our work. She was a restless eccentric who moved the family every few years, running from the imagined phantoms that plagued her. Consequently, Terry and I grew up in remote regions of the West, from Lucerne Valley in the Mohave Desert, to the red rock country in Capital Reef Monument, to the Rocky coast of Northern California.



Terry and Renny Russell incognito, 1963



Phoebe Sumner in Yosemite

Our grandmother, Alice Russell wrote children's stories for *John Martin's Book* and was best known for her book *Strangers in the Desert*. Her library with its vast collection of leather bound books (from Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Self Reliance* to a complete set of Mark Twain's works) was a signpost for us on how to live an authentic life, and would be the foundation for our book, *On the Loose*.

Our aunt, Elizabeth Lewis Sprang, was also an artist who spoke to her family of Siamese cats that prowled through her studio among the massive lithographic stones she was preparing for printing. She was an accomplished horsewoman and took us on wild rides through the rolling hills behind her sprawling mansion, "Sage Hill," in Altadena, California.

As we grew, so did our appetite for wilderness. We poured over maps searching for blank open spaces, and read everything from Aldo Leopold to Bernard DeVoto, from H. G. Wells to Walter De La Mare, and from Peter Matthiessen to David Thoreau. Doors opened when we acquired a 1947 Willies Jeep truck that we pointed towards distant horizons.

Free at last from parental bondage, we explored the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming, the Cascades in Washington, hiked the John Muir Trail in record time, walked the length of Death Valley, stood in awe at the power of the Colorado River at Hermit Rapid, and the unfathomable grandeur of the Grand Canyon. We wrote, "Everybody goes about it differently, of course, but I don't guess we'd trade any of it. It's meant a lot of good humor...it's meant a few flashes of almost unbearable beauty which we call religious experiences..."

What's striking in early photographs of us is the brotherly love and connection (that is mostly absent these days) showing us with arms around one another—smiling and glowing with innocent rapture. It was a bond that would soon shatter when Terry left for Carlton College, dismayed that he wasn't accepted to Harvard or Yale.



*Renny, pickin' that high lonesome sound,
Salmon River, Idaho, 1962*



Renny slogging down the Escalante River, 1963



On the Loose in the Mojave Desert, CA 1964



Terry and Renny on Mount Whitney, Sierra Nevada, 1962

Besides ventures into wilderness during school reprieves, it was not until three years later that we were reunited in Berkeley, California. Terry began his senior year pursuing an English major at the University of California, and I entered the San Francisco Art Institute. While Terry dove deep into academia, I ventured into uncharted territory—swept along in the vortex of the counterculture movement of the mid-60s.

After Terry was arrested for his role in the Free Speech Movement and I for marijuana possession, we sought peace at Point Reyes National Seashore where a good dose of wildness put things in perspective. City life had become unbearable. It may have been during our hike down Bear Valley to the sea that we masterminded our book *On the Loose*. We paired our photographs with our writing along with select quotations from H. G. Wells to Steve McQueen, from Homer to Aldo Leopold.

As Terry neared graduation in May, 1965, he hand lettered the final pages of the book, and I attached the photographs with a mounting press at the University of California. We then brought the manuscript to a local bindery and had it bound in leather.

Once bound, we knocked on conservation icon Dave Brower's door to show him the book written by a couple of goof-ball kids with a lot of love for wild places and concern for its demise. It took tenacity for us to approach Brower who was working on a series of compelling coffee table books celebrating wilderness and calling the alarm for its preservation. Before he had finished reading our offering he said, "The Sierra Club has to publish this..." This was the last time Terry saw the book. It was published by the Sierra Club in 1969, at the dawn of the environmental movement, and has been told that it became a touchstone for a generation.

Aleson was aware of our book. As copies flew out the door, he was plainly anachronistic. He sent a satirical cartoon to Dock Marston by Lou Grant, clipped from the *Los Angeles Times*. It depicted a plant with the large letters LSD on it. On the top of the flower is a bearded hippie playing a guitar. His companions below in ragged cloths and wearing peace symbols are free-falling off the flower. The caption asked the rhetorical question, "Flower of

our Youth?" This was a quintessential point in time separating generations.

The Russell brothers were overflowing with youthful exuberance and infinite possibilities, when we approached the warehouse of the American River Touring Association in Oakland, California. We asked owner Lou Elliott, if he had a boat he might sell us. He leaped at the chance to unload a soggy worn out WW II 10-man neoprene assault raft—a boat that may have contributed to our unraveling.

In memory, I imagine constructing a rowing frame to accommodate a chair like John Wesley Powell used on his 1869 trip down the Colorado River. I visualize my brother sitting cross-legged among piles of gear going over supply lists. There were no river permits required then; we didn't know if running the Green River through Desolation Canyon was possible; we had no maps, and drank from the silty river. We were already making plans to re-supply in the town of Green River and run the Colorado River through Grand Canyon, and why not keep going down to the Gulf of California?

In letters from Aleson to Dock Marston, it's apparent we hadn't brought a repair kit either. Close by, I imagine our Land Rover that would take us to the put in at Ouray, Utah where we would begin our Green River adventure. Little did we know what fate had in store for us.



Green River, Desolation Canyon, Mile 102

A Green River Tragedy



Gray Canyon on the Green River above Swasey's Rapid

The Russell brothers aunt, Elizabeth Sprang, wrote to Harry Aleson September 9, 1965, “Enclosed is the “official” account of Renny and Terry’s boat capsized that he dictated to me. You may want it for your records...If Renny makes a write-up from his point of view, we’d like to see it...” Sprang’s account reads more like a police blotter than of a 18-year old who just lost his brother. Nonetheless, Harry Aleson rallied when a family was fragmented and helped them pick up the pieces.

My brother Terry and I drove from California, June 10, 1965 arriving at the river at Ouray, Utah the next day. This was our first river trip on our own, though we had been on Sierra Club trips down Glen Canyon and the Middle Fork of the Salmon in Idaho. This was to be the first of many trips that summer to celebrate my brother graduating from UC Berkeley and the completion of our book *On the Loose*.

On June 12 we put on the river planning to take 10 days to reach the town of Green River, Utah. The river turned out to be higher than it had been in years. We traveled fast. We got out and inspected nearly every rapid before running it. The weather was beautiful except for a storm the first night. We had no trouble, and it was fun. We had life jackets but didn’t wear them all the time.

About halfway through the trip around noon on the sixth day, June 17, we hit some bad rapids—more like sand waves. The boat was under-inflated, purposely, because of a bad experience we had on the Escalante River when we blew up our boat that was left in the sun in the noontday heat...

The boat began to pitch more and more heavily with each successive wave. I had to let go of the oars and hang on. Then the bow went up so high the boat buckled in half and sandwiched over on top of us, spilling everything out. I was hit in the head by an object in the boat.

We were both strong swimmers, but I was going under and shouted to Terry for help... He swam over and held me up trying to drag me to shore, but the current was too strong. He shouted to grab onto a black waterproof bag. Terry drifted ahead of me and that was the last time I saw him... After a while I found myself moving upstream in an eddy on the west side of the river. I pulled myself out of the water, and lay on the shore half unconscious for maybe twenty minutes. I vomited. My eyes wouldn't focus. When I got my strength back, I hunted up and down the shore calling for Terry.

I was barefoot and wearing nothing but swim trunks. Everything we had was lost with the boat but the black bag saved my life. I opened it and it was full of water so I don't know how it had floated. I found a shirt, socks, and pants but no shoes. I didn't know whether Terry had been carried down past me while I lay on the bank. I recalled there were ranches further down river and started walking, calling for my brother. I had to do some climbing to get past a cliff. As it was getting dark I arrived at a ranch by a creek (Rock Creek by the deserted Seldom Seen Ranch). In an old orchard I ate apples and berries. I knocked and there was no answer. I entered and in the kitchen I found a jar of peanut butter, a few dried prunes, a blanket and a pair of boots. I spent the night there though I didn't sleep much.

Next morning I stuffed rags in the boots, took the blanket and food and continued down river climbing steep canyon walls, and over talus. Often I had to hike way up a side canyon to the head, then go cross-country to get back to the river. I lost track of time but I think it took three and a half days to get to Green River...

I had no idea where I was and no boats passed. Once I climbed high to a mesa. It was rough going. Thought if I could get to the top I could maybe see where I was going. It took forever to get up there. The river was out of sight. I dropped my bedroll. The food rolled on the ground. I sat down with my head in my hands and thought, what the hell am I doing here?

After maybe 75 miles, the canyon opened up and I found a road, and was slogging along when I saw two people. Their figures seemed strange and unreal. I was in my old ragged clothes soaked by the river and slept in. The couple hesitated as I approached. The women stepped behind the man. I asked, "How far it was to Green River?" The man said "about two miles." Then he asked what had happened. I said, "There's been a boat wreck," and told him what happened...Immediately he seemed concerned and gave me a ride to Green River. I told my story at a gas station but no one believed me and then to a Deputy Sheriff. He was a stupid cop...He cross-examined me asking questions like, "What are you doing here?" etc. Finally said he'd send a helicopter up river to search. He lied, there were no helicopters available and he did nothing to begin a search.

A man at the gas station collected some money to buy me a hamburger, which was kind...The couple that picked me up (Mr. & Mrs. Jim Smith) drove me all the way into Wayne County— to Fish Creek Ranch. I expected my mother and aunt to be there as planned, but the house was dark. Mr. Smith was worried about leaving me, but I said I'd be all right. They left and I curled up in my blanket on the lawn. This was a low point. At 9:00 pm a neighbor LaVell Morrill who spent nights there while my aunt and uncle were gone arrived. At first I was too exhausted to

get up. I went to the door and knocked. The lights went on. Because of my ragged condition he didn't recognize me and didn't want to let me in... I explained what happened and he left me alone that night. In the morning he came and got me and wanted to hear more about the accident and fed me a tremendous breakfast: I ate six eggs and a dozen pieces of bacon, four pieces of toast and coffee. Later that morning, June 21, about 11:00 my mother and aunt drove in.

Courtesy of the Utah Historical Society: Harry Aleson Collection. Notation [Received 14 Sept. 1965 from: Elizabeth Sprang 25 Sept. Documents to Dock Marston.]



My family immediately phoned their old river friend Harry Aleson who had settled in Teasdale, Utah and said he'd be over in an hour. He brought the 1918-1922 USGS maps given to him by Bert Loper and Renny pin-pointed where their boat went over. The search was delayed three days because no one in the town of Green River comprehend the magnitude of the accident and/or didn't believe my story. In 1965 few people ran the river. Aleson concluded that the young man at the gas station "lacked experience and was a do nothing." Harry wrote:

I phoned Sheriff Passic in Price, Utah, as the capsized had been in Carbon County, and got things going. I then phoned office of the Utah State Aeronautics, Harlon Bement and they stood ready to help if called by the sheriff...I then phoned Jim Hurst at Green River and learned that he could fly Renny and myself to search for Terry up from Green River to Steer Ridge Rapid— just above the Seldom Seen Ranch. AKA Seamontan. I asked him how soon he could pick us up, and he said in an hour.



Seldom Seen Ranch, Mile 54

Harry and I assembled items for a possible air-drop: juices, matches, canned goods, a plastic ground cloth, can opener, etc. The food was rolled in a large sleeping bag—all wrapped in a sheet attached to a rope. We then rushed to the Torrey airstrip and chased Jim Hurst's plane that had just landed. Aleson recalled:

Within minutes we were airborne, and headed directly for Green River, and Hurst flew almost down to the water in a straight stretch about Mile 50, and we began our search flying 50-75-100 plus feet above the river. On quiet water, you could have seen a 5 inch long twig. At Mile 52, left bank, we shot over the boat—maybe wingspans below us. (Ken Sleight's party had found it there and camped a night by it.) At mile 56.5. Renny recognized the upset rapid (Steer Ridge) and the plane crawled out.

Less than two miles up river they swung about in the canyon mouth and headed down river searching every foot of the silted river bar: the bank, bushes, ledges, then circled the abandoned buildings at the McPherson Ranch, but not a trace of Terry Sumner...Aleson wrote: "It was really rough flying down deep inside Desolation and Gray Canyons...My eyeglasses jumped out of my pocket and landed in my lap." After 60 miles of searching right over the water, we arrived at the Green River Dam, Mile 8, and swung away from the river and landed in Green River town. Aleson and Sumner walked two blocks to the Uranium Motel for the night. The sheriff from Price, Colonel Hiatt of the Utah State Patrol, Evans, and Christopherson of the Green River Highway Patrol descended on the motel to talk with me. They were hard, clueless cops. Their plane had flown the river twice that day, so by now there was a total of six searches within 24 hours— but four or five days after the capsizing. Aleson wrote, the following day that Sheriff's deputies with Ouray Indians would launch a boat at McPherson ranch and search upstream... another boat would be launched at Sand Creek (AKA Sand Wash) mile 95.6 and motor down stream possibly by Hatch Expeditions and sheriffs' men.

Ken Sleight, had spent the night in a motel less than a week before with a party of five preparing to take on Cataract Canyon. He had pulled our boat out of the river (Aleson guessed it was the 19th). Sleight was aware there had been an accident but did not bother to report it to the Sheriff. Aleson was at his wits end trying to get a hold of Sleight who might provide clues. Aleson to Dock Marston: "At Price, Sheriff Passic mentioned a cut on Terry's head. This may have come from flying luggage. Also, the boys were carrying motion picture camera and film in war surplus ammunition boxes – metal. While overnight in Green River, Ken Sleight told of finding the upper tub deflated. Renny knew why. It had been broken or damaged, and the boys had used 'a plug.' "



Russells' WW II 10-man boat found by Ken Sleight at Mile 54

JUNE 22. Aleson and I met Jim Hurst in the morning for a flight back to Torrey. He wrote, "The mother and Mrs. Sprang are holding up most courageously..."

JUNE 24. "Renny left today with Elmer Johnson for Land Rover at Ouray."

JUNE 25. A search party found Terry Sumner's body in a calm stretch of the river at Mile 39, just above where Florence Creek enters the Green River. There may have been a cosmic resistance to his untimely departure. Aleson keeps Dock Marston up to date:

The search party that brought Terry's body out by outboard rafts—a 10-man and a 7-man Neoprene-were not river folk. A BLM man carried some maps but not the best ones. Before they realized it, they were mid river, on the brink of the 8-foot Green River Dam-towing the body on the 7-man and, over. The outboard motor was not raised- so the lower unit was wrecked. I did not ask, but no doubt the body was lashed securely...

—Harry Aleson

Patrol at Green River Finds Body of Drowning Victim

Special to The Tribune was found near the conflux of
PRICE — The body of Terry Florence Creek and the Green
Summers, 21, Berkeley, Calif., River about 10 miles north of
who drowned in the Green River Range Creek.

June 17 when the rubber raft he Sheriff Passic and the search
and his brother were riding in party planned to bring the body
overturned, was recovered out through the rough country
Friday. Friday night.

It was recovered about 9 a.m.
by a group led by Carbon Coun-
ty Sheriff Albert Passic.

Lt. Lyle Hyatt, Utah Highway
Patrol, flying with Capt. Don
Christofferson, said he contacted
Sheriff Passic about 9 a.m. 10

Lt. Hyatt reported the body

Salt Lake Tribune, June 23, 1965

JUNE 26. Aleson, known for keeping cool under duress, drove to Price, UT and made arrangements for my brothers' cremation in Ogden, Utah.

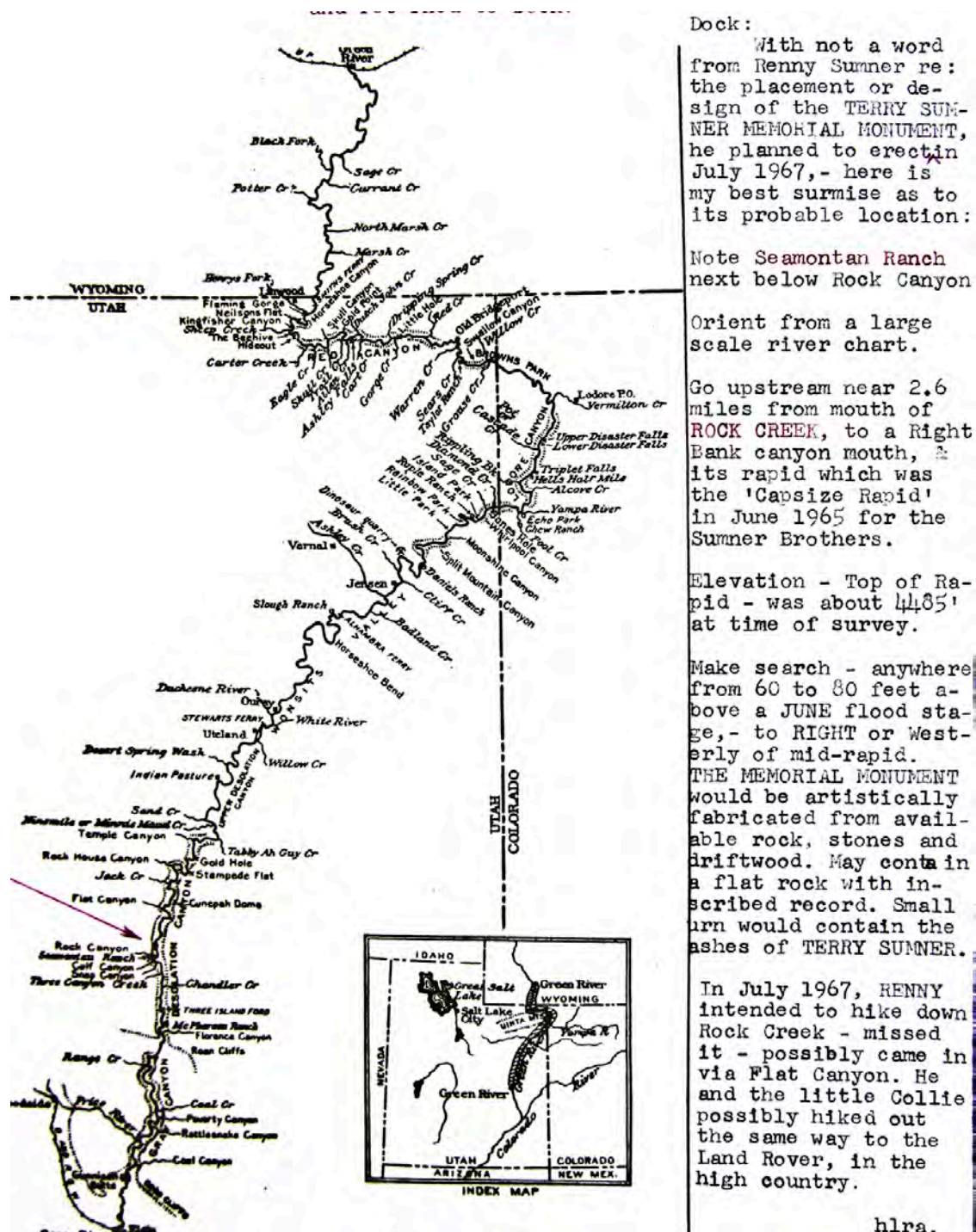
JUNE 28. Aleson's notes: "Renny left today to Price for his boat and northward to receive his brother's ashes.

The same day, Aleson sent me a caring and compassionate letter:

Renny, your thought to open an art school for the Navajo is really wonderful and most commendable...I know a teacher of many years at Navajo Mountain Post Trading Post School that I will write and ask for suggestions. Renny, after you are back home will you write me a letter to tell me if you think I'm on the right track, and if you want me to help you in making contacts with people on the Navajo Reservation?

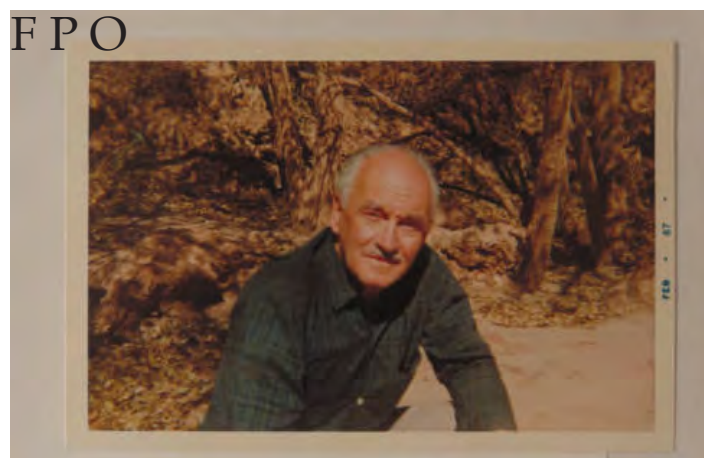
Two years later: Phoebe Sumner who had settled in Mill Valley, California, wrote Aleson May 1, 1967:

Dear Harry, I have another request to make of you who have already done so much for me...The matter of what to do with Terry's ashes has been long on my mind, and I have finally reached a decision...It was you who told me of others who had lost their lives on the river, and had been buried there on the river bank...It would be what Terry would want...Is there a chance you would be able to take the time to locate the right rapid and bury the ashes on the shore...You are the only one I can turn to, you know the river so well...



Aleson wrote back that he would help. "I will locate the head of the canyon where the trail leads down to the old ranch where Renny found the pair of shoes, and backpack up the Green River to the right rapid, and place the ashes as you request...I would prefer to hike alone. I would carry food, water, camera and just one bed sheet for camping on sand..."

After decades of rambles in the Canyon Country, Aleson's body was wearing out; compounded by a troublesome hernia, and he wasn't up to a long two or three day trip down the Rock Creek Trail to the Seldom Seen Ranch with Terry's ashes and wrote to Dock Marston on September 4, 1967: "Privately, the placement of the ashes near the rim canyon overlook would be a blessing for me...It would forestall the long round trip hike which I suggested to Mrs. Sumner and help me NOT make the long back-packing trip and holding onto my hernia much of the time..."



Harry Aleson at 68, taken by his wife Dorothy

I vanished for nearly two years—driving—wandering—a lost soul looking for my brother. Upon my return I took control of the situation, retrieved my brother's ashes, (with a cryptic note from my aunt, "good luck on your mission"), and drove to the west rim of Desolation Canyon. With my brother's ashes on my back, and a collie puppy for solace, I walked down Flat Canyon to the river. I placed my brother's ashes above the high water line, constructed a stone monument, and the next day hiked back to the rim.

Aleson meanwhile planned his next great northern river adventure. After rowing for decades, he traded his oars in on a sleek Turbocraft. Following his trail on the water can be as challenging as it was in the desert canyons, but journals and letters indicate that he logged over 3,000 miles on the Peace, Slave, Mackenzie, and Yukon Rivers, hoping to spark interest in his Arctic River Expeditions. Harry lived seven more years and filled them with more living than most would in a lifetime.

Notes

[1] By 1946 only a handful of river runners had drowned in the Colorado, beginning with George Stole who on August 29, 1867 purportedly built a life raft with James White fleeing hostile Indians. With the advent of commercial river running, the number have increased proportionally, primarily from alcohol abuse.

[2] Mescal Pits (or roasting pits) were used by Native people to roast the hearts of agave plants. The outer leaves are removed from the fibrous core and buried and roasted leaving a distinctive circular pit common in the Grand Canyon.

[3] Edward Weston (March 24, 1886—January 2, 1985) has been called one of the most innovative and influential photographers of the 20th century. His subjects ranged from landscapes, portraits, still lifes, to “whimsical” subjects. In 1937, Weston received a Guggenheim Fellowship to photograph the American West. For two years he and his girlfriend Charis Winston toured the West in their Ford V-8 Sedan, “Heimy,” and produced over 1,400 negatives using an 8x10 camera. He endeavored to create taut lyrical images of sweeping forms that as he wrote in *California and the West*, become not just documentation of a given subject matter, but its sublimation—the revealing of its significance...”

[4] Everett may have been suffering from Borderline Personality Disorder which is a mental health condition that impacts the way one thinks and feels about ones self and others. It includes a pattern of unstable intense relationships, a distorted self-image, extreme emotions and impulsiveness. The condition usually seems worse in early adulthood.

[5] John Wetherill is credited with being the first white person to “discover” Rainbow Bridge (guiding Theodore Roosevelt there in 1913), Mesa Verde, Keet Seel, and Betatakin. With 140 rooms and ceremonial chambers, the ruin is one of the largest in Arizona, located in a massive alcove adjacent to a spring. It has been said that Wetherill had remarkable back-country skills, a unique depth of character, an unsurpassed knowledge of the remote reaches of the region, and could outfit and led others on long treks into Terra Incognita. As an “amateur” archaeologist (stopping just short of using dynamite as an excavating tool as his contemporaries had done), he and his brother Richard spent two years looting artifacts in the Betatakin area and selling them for whatever they could. A disgruntled Navajo shot and killed Richard Wetherill in Chaco Canyon in July of 1910.

[6] Ruess was clueless and disrespectful of Navajo Culture. More than once, he sought shelter in abandoned hogans that the Diné had purposely vacated out of respect to departed spirits. He dismantled them and used the wood for campfires even though on one occasion, an old Navajo women tormented him for doing so. On another occasion, he bragged of his prowess as a killer of rattlesnakes and would bring out rattles and begin shaking them at which point the Navajos scattered, as their religion forbids this mindless slaughter. They predicted he would die soon.

[7] Everett suffered all his life from pernicious or folic anemia, the former a deficiency in Vitamin B12, the latter the absence of green leafy vegetables. Students of Ruess believe he was “manic depressive.”

[8] The vast distances Everett covered are almost inconceivable, as today cars streak by in air conditioned comfort on Highways 12 and 191, joining 160 to Shiprock. In miles, it’s considerably longer than Everett’s route but a more direct route wasn’t feasible due to the terrain. Ruess followed trails and rutted roads on the Rez on what is now Highway 13 through Red Valley that bumps into Highway 491 just south of Shiprock—a distance of a little under 100 miles from Chinle.

[9] The author came in contact with Everett’s saddle blanket and Kodak camera with an Affidavit of Authenticity from Waldo Ruess’ son Brian Knight Ruess who said it was used on most of his journeys. The author captured images for this chapter. Reviewing them, a peculiar orange orb floated through the picture that had never appeared before or since.

[10] Terry Russell AKA Terry Sumner.