The Washington Post

THE WILD &

By James Conaway June 12, 1983

"This is the most beautiful place on earth."

Edward Abbey, "Desert Solitaire"

SNOW SWEEPS over the plateau, bouncing off the windshield and melting as it encounters slick rock along the roadside. Beyond drifting, ragged clouds stretches a hard blue sky. It is May in the desert, hot and dry when it isn't freezing or awash with mud. I have arrived to hike through sandstone canyons and other natural disasters, amid some of the most extraordinary landscape on earth--landscape that has fascinated me since I first saw it more than 20 years ago, aboard a Greyhound bound for California.

Southeast Utah is one of the last wild redoubts of the American West. It harbored a cliff-dwelling civilization that vanished like a whirlwind about 700 years ago. I wanted to camp where those people had lived, and to stretch myself in this ancient, empty land. I chose as an ambulatory introduction to its mysteries a place called Grand Gulch, a spectacular ditch descending from the Bear's Ears to the San Juan River in isolated loops of rimrock and cottonwood bottom. Thousands of years of human existence were played out here, in amphitheaters of Cedar Mesa sandstone that still contain rock paintings, dwellings, and graceful, cunning artifacts.

The name Grand Gulch was bestowed by pioneering Mormons who couldn't get their wagons across. (They might have called it Grand Canyon instead, but that handle had already been attached to another ditch farther south.) I had heard that it was a kind of Mesa Verde without blacktop, or tourists. I had also heard of rattlesnakes, scorpions and black widow spiders, quicksand that can swallow a horse, poisonous alkali springs and flash floods that carom off canyon walls.

My companion for the trek is Rich Warnick, a 29-year-old veteran of Hike-A-Nation in 1981, who never got over his first sight of southern Utah. He now lives there, in a town called Monticello, and devotes weekends to his passion--descending into the surrounding country with his well-worn orange pack.

Grand Gulch was declared a primitive area by Congress in 1970. Yet today it still hangs in political limbo, just short of official wilderness. The Bureau of Land Management within the Department of the Interior administers it as if it were wilderness, which means no roads, signposts or amenities, including drinking water. You must pack that in, or find springs, called seeps, in wooded side canyons.

We head in through a tributary, Kane Gulch, where muddy spring run-off soon soaks our jogging shoes. Canyon walls rise on both sides, the stunted aspens replaced by pinon pines and sagebrush flourishing in the shadow of red rock. I am nervous about the several things I mentioned, but at least the storm clouds have passed. Snow-melt tumbles among huge boulders, the physical shock of it accentuated by the force of the new-blown sun.

On this steep and narrow trail an early explorer, Richard Wetherill, descended with horses in 1897, and watched one of them plunge to its death. That has not kept other horses out. Five of them, and two riders, overtake us halfway down. The first rider wears dark leather chaps and a cowboy hat pulled tight against his eyebrows; the second has a nickel-plated revolver strapped to the pommel of his saddle. They are guides from Colorado on a busman's holiday, but they look like desperadoes or, worse, pot-hunters.

It is illegal to take any artifact out of Grand Gulch, but during the last 100 years every major archeological site has been ransacked. Now the dealers are after the rock art itself, for wealthy collectors. A friend of Rich's was offered $60,000 to carve pictographs out of the sandstone with a power saw and hand them over to a helicopter pilot, who would fly them out of the Gulch, a suggestion that outraged him.

Big, tortured cottonwoods sprout from the canyon floor, where Kane Basin intersects with the Gulch. We camp among juniper trees, beneath a 300-foot cliff face harboring Junction Ruin, home of the Anasazi, as the cliff-dwellers are called. Its midden--the Anasazi equivalent of a Disposal, where trash was tossed down a hillside--brims with pot sherds, flint points and bits of weaving. Wattle-and-daub structures are built into the cliff face, once the site of a teeming and ingenious domesticity, chosen for its southward face, open to the sun in winter, shaded during the ferocious summer when the sun was higher in the sky.

The word Anasazi is a Navaho term meaning "ancient enemies," whose land the Navaho occupied. They go back at least 15,000 years, encompassing several Basketmaker and Pueblo cultures. "Anasazi" is a catch-all term for nomads who gradually succumbed to a more easeful life, in which they had only to clear land with Stone Age tools, carry water straight up sandstone walls, and defend themselves against marauders, drought, blizzards, floods, starvation and those black widows that like sandstone caves every bit as much as the Anasazi did.

We put on dry socks, and go up for a look. Most of the dwellings have fallen, leaving rock streaked black from the cooking fires. A granary stands against the cliff, presumably used to store pinon

nuts, yucca root and corn, the pivotal crop imported from Mezoamerica that finally turned these hunters into farmers. The midden is littered with 600-year-old corncobs no more than three inches long, the runty forerunner of today's superhybrids developed long after the Anasazi were gone.

Several cultures are represented, piggy-backing on one another. Thoughtful hikers have laid out bits of pottery, some of it delicately thrown and decorated with geometic patterns. Other, thicker pieces have corrugated surfaces, the remains of cooking vessels that best conducted heat. Scoured into the surface of a communal boulder are grooves where corn was ground, known as metates to Spanish parvenus who stumbled into the Southwest in the 16th century. A smooth stone mano--the pestle--from the same period lies nearby. The Anasazi consumed so much sand with their ground corn that it wore away their teeth.

Ceremonial pits--kivas--lie open, the timbered roofs gone and the architecture obscured by weather and pot-hunters' shovels. Anasazi men huddled in these dark rumpus rooms covered with sod, off-bound to the women. The floors contained holes called sipapus, symbolizing the mythical emergence of man from the earth, but the holes have long since been filled. Once the entire Southwest was populated by families connected through commerce and religion. How they got up to the inaccessible ruins on the cliff face without pitons and beleying gear is difficult to imagine. Likewise their collective end, brought about by invasion, or years of drought, or even dwindling firewood, all theories without substantiation.

Back at camp, I build a fire of juniper boughs, grateful for the fragrant warmth it generates. The descent into the Gulch has given us appetites, and a sense of satisfaction that goes well beyond the physical challenge. This is not the God-forsaken place the Winnebago pilots--or passengers on Greyhounds--might imagine,

but a kind of Anasazi old home week. Night falls first on the canyon floor, while the sun lights the red canyon rim, and cliff swallows drift against the blue crease of sky.

We are joined the next morning by Rich's friend, John Noxon, a freelance anthropologist with an overriding interest in rock art. His dog, Copas, part Australian collie and part dingo, carries her own food in a canine backpack. She has a beautiful blue cast in one eye, and chases lizards as we head down-canyon, the walls afire with earth colors.

The new cottonwood leaves shine iridescently in the sun; yellow prince's plume and Indian paintbrush bloom along the cutbank. A sparrow hawk works a sandstone ledge a hundred feet above us; the pleading calls of pinon jays echo through the blemishless desert air. Thin green shoots of Mormon tea, brewed up by the early settlers to stave off scurvy, grow in clumps, and Indian rice grass--another Anasazi staple--brushes our legs as we step in and out of the stream.

A mile below the Junction is another ruin, and on the rock face are stylized drawings and handprints in mineral-based paints. The effect is riveting, touching some human chord far deeper than scholarship or art appreciation. John insists that it is not rock art, but rock writing. The down-thrust arms of the anthropomorphic figures mark the burial spots; a wavy line etched into the rock--a petroglyph--is a reproduction of the horizon as seen from that vantage point.

High on the wall is a famous petroglyph, known as the goat on a bicycle. It's really a rendition of a big-horn sheep above two corkscrews. "It means," says John, "that here you can go up and down the canyon, but you have to go like a sheep."

Human bones and pot sherds litter the ground. The fallen timbers

of the kiva are full of holes that have been plugged with corks, left there by practitioners of dendrochronology--the science of dating ruins by coring the wood and counting the tree rings. Dendrochronology is accurate to within a year or two; practicing it is great fun for archeology students. "At least they could put some color on the corks," says John, "so you couldn't see them so easily."

Another sort of inscription reads: AMNH No. 70, '90. It wasn't etched there by an Anasazi, but by Wetherill on one of his collecting expeditions. His finds went to the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Before coming to Grand Gulch, I went to New York to see those artifacts, part of the Hyde collection. An assistant to the resident archeologist took me into a room full of metal cabinets containing corn cobs, dried seeds of the rice grass and squash, and beautiful, whole pots and tightly-woven baskets.

We lunch beside a muddy waterfall, known in the Southwest as a "pour-off." Seeps high up on the opposing canyon wall shine like silver with reflected light. The air is so clear that sage growing in the rock faults and the tortured ponderosa pines leap out at you. The only sign of civilization, other than our dusty selves, is the feathery trail of a 747 flying from Denver to Los Angeles.

We camp that night on a sandy swale at the mouth of Shiek's Canyon. Leaving gear behind, we slosh across the stream once more and walk into Green Mask Spring. Stunning pictographs overlook the water: handprints, and a depiction of a woman who has given breech-birth, the shock and the pain apparent in the stylized rendering. Circles of paint mark the upper reaches of the sandstone, deposited there as paint missiles blown through Anasazi pea-shooters. Whether or not they have real significance, or were deposited there by children testing their lung power, no one knows.

The famous green mask smiles from beneath an overhanging ledge, menacing and inscrutable. Frogs up the canyon begin to moan in

the gathering darkness.

Rich says, "I'm glad I don't have to sleep up here."

The sandstone walls radiate heat throughout the night, making the air warmer than that on the surrounding plateau. There have been no sightings of rattlesnakes, nocturnal hunters. The local subgenus, the faded midget (Crotalus viridis concolor), is both rare and shy. Rich has never encountered him; John has seen only one in all his travels. The scorpion is also a night rambler. Hikers are supposed to check footgear each morning before shoving their feet inside, but what self-respecting scorpion would harbor inside a soggy sneaker?

We overtake the horse party the next morning, camped at the mouth of Bullet Canyon. Their scattered saddles, tents, chairs, skillets, ponchos, feedbags and food containers look like the wreck of a small airliner. The men accompany us on foot to a nearby ruin, taking pleasure in describing how much steak they ate the night before. John dutifully lectures them in basketmaker lore, but they are clearly thinking about breakfast.

A chunk of pictograph has fallen from the rock face. A note on the ground beside it says, "This is a valuable relic." John left the note there himself, four years before, and the relic has not been disturbed.

The kiva has been restored by the BLM. Copas barks as we descend into its fetid shadows; it smells of bat droppings, smoke and great age. I decide that the Anasazi women were lucky to be excluded from this totemic gloom.

One of the cowboys says, "Let's go make us some pancakes!"

A black-chinned hummingbird flits among the tamarisk. In three days we have seen a rufus-sided towhee, goldfinches and a red-tailed hawk. More birds are lured daily by the desert spring,

including kingbirds, fly-catchers and assorted warblers. The sun bakes the rock; I smell red dust and pine resin.

John and Rich have to be at work the next day, so we start the long climb out through Bullet Canyon. I wish we had more time in the Gulch; I am also afflicted by the canyon-dweller's common desire--one shared by the Anasazi themselves--to get to the rim.

"Now if you want something really wild," says Rich, "you should try Dark Canyon."

Dark Canyon lies northwest of Grand Gulch, and is part of the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. This time I am without a guide as I drive Highway 95 and then follow a dirt road that ambles off into the desert. There will be no horse parties and probably no other human beings in Dark Canyon, which includes 50,000 acres within the Manti-La Sal National Forest that has been proposed for wilderness designation. It seems a good complement to the Gulch, truly wild, with few ruins but traversed by big-horn sheep, bear and even mountain lions.

The BLM map given to me in Monticello is vague. Another, rougher road leads across dry streambeds after a dozen miles. Finally I have to leave the car on slickrock, and walk the edge of the mesa. Big cumulus clouds ride out of the Henry Mountains; the evening air is cool, but radiant.

The BLM's register box, planted in the middle of sagebrush, is a lonely sight. I am on my own, which engenders some fear, and a curious impatience. I remonstrate with myself for bringing only a quart of water to get down into the canyon, where a river rages. There are four gallons of water in the car, but that will not be of much use if I get stranded on the 1,200-foot, near-vertical descent of a talus slope.

I sign my name and walk another mile to the canyon's rim.

Boulders litter the broken canyonside--the Sundance trail, a misnomer if there ever was one. A muddy cataract courses along the bottom, dwarfed by distance; wind-whipped sand drifts dreamily out over the abyss. It makes Grand Gulch look downright benign.

It takes a full hour to reach the bottom; by now the sun is long gone. Canyon walls rise in tiers, supported by sandstone columns of huge, fantastic aspect. I pitch my tent on sand, relieved to be off the slope, and build a fire of driftwood and boil a pot of water, to let stand overnight so the mud will settle. The wind dies down after dinner, and a bat wobbles across the wedge of night-blue sky.

The next morning my cup of tea looks like, well, mud. But it tastes all right. Within a few yards of the tent there are tracks of mice, a packrat, and a rabbit, and the soft round pads of a bobcat. Hiking in either direction--east toward the Bears Ears, or west toward Lake Powell--means sloshing through the river. Ridges cut across the trail like the prows of oceanliners. The water was snow until a few hours ago, and the cold takes my breath away.

I cross and re-cross, sinking into mud that seems to have no bottom. Finally I have to stop, strip, and stretch out in the sun to get warm. The top of the opposing canyon reflects the varied hues of a geological stratum known as the Cutler formation. Next come the shales and limestones mixed among the sandstone, and then the basic chert of the Hermosa formation. It's all part of something called the Monument Upwarp, a dome running from the junction of the Green and the Colorado rivers down into Arizona.

Above the mouth to Lost Canyon, the river drops fast between granite shelves. I climb rimrock to avoid further crossings, and have to crawl past an outcropping directly over turbulent red water. A fall here would mean lying on a ledge for a week or so until the BLM helicopter arrived, if it arrived. An injured hiker who tumbled

into the river would probably find himself at the end of a boat hook in a month or so, down in Lake Powell.

The floor of a small side canyon shows the dark signs of a spring disappearing into the sand. Farther up I find a clear pool supporting water bugs and tiny crustacea that leave tracks on the bottom, an indication that the water is sweet. Mormon tea rings a sink hole deep enough to bathe in. More water drips from a limestone overhang and splashes against the rock, watering the earth around it that is rank with growth: hawkweed, red trumpet-like gilia, thistles with leaves as broad as my hand.

An awesome peace hangs in balance here, where the air is so clear that depth perception becomes a problem. The opposing sandstone benches and hoodoos seem touchable. Relatively few people have set foot in this unnamed side canyon; there are no other human beings within miles. I have come a long way to reach this brief stasis, to satisfy a self-conscious need probably peculiar to modern man, but it is worth the trouble.

The wind rises again in the afternoon, as I head back to camp, clinging to the rimrock. Hot, violent gusts whip up-canyon; sand lashes my face and sticks to recently-applied Chapstick. At one point I think I hear buzztail--faded midget himself. Two gartersnakes encountered that day have put me in mind of rattlesnakes, but it's just the wind whipping the collars of my shirt.

It blows all night. Thin rivulets of sand cover sleeping bag and gear the next morning. The wind does not subside. Racing cumulus has acquired black, anvil-shaped bottoms, and thunder echoes against the cliff faces. The idea of climbing that talus slope after a heavy rain is frightening.

While I pack my gear for the arduous trek out, an enormous bird rides the gale above the canyons. Binoculars reveal the dark

underside of a golden eagle. He tucks his wings and dives, then soars again with an almost contemptuous ease, covering in one brief minute a distance that would take a man a day to traverse.

The story must be told.

Your subscription supports journalism that matters.

Try 1 month for $1