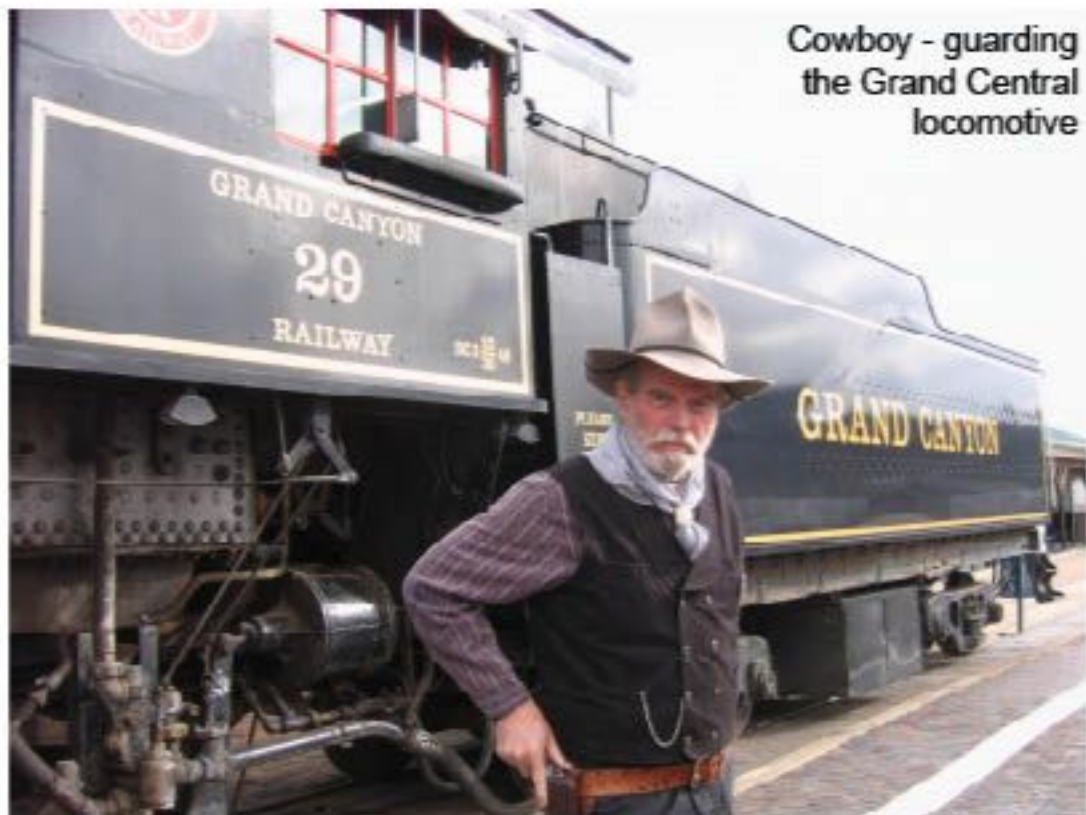


HOW GRAND IS THE CANYON?

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

WILLIAMS, Arizona—Sometimes a story doesn't let the facts or the author get in the way, and writes itself.



Cowboy - guarding
the Grand Central
locomotive

On a trip to Kenya a few years ago and failed miserably. The I was determined to focus on magnificent wild creatures had the anything but the jungle safaris, first and final word.

In Egypt, an attempt to look beyond the pyramids and Valley of the Kings also went up in smoke. You could almost hear the pharaohs laughing in their tombs.

And now, while touring Arizona, I vowed not to be intimidated by the Grand Canyon, and this proved to be my most ridiculous mission. It was defeat at first sight.

And why not? Check any natural wonders of the world list and the

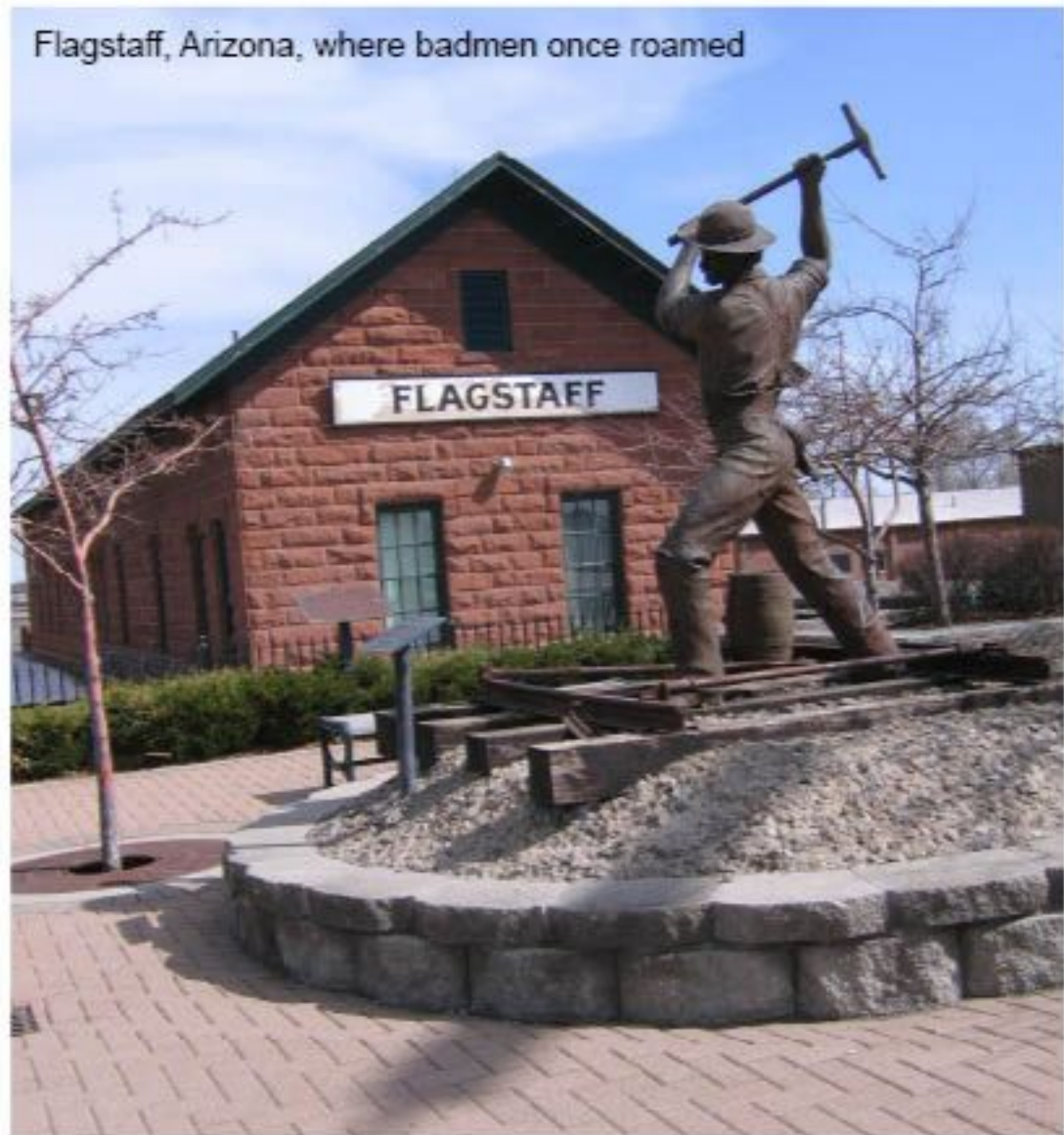
Grand Canyon will often lead the way, or at least be in the top five, ahead of such marvels as the Great Barrier Reef, Mount Everest, Antarctica and the Sahara.

But perhaps simply because it's here, North Americans tend to take its grandness for granted. To the rest of the world, however, it sets the standards for the spectacular. In fact, foreigners are often more knowledgeable about the Grand Canyon than we are.



Canyon framed by tree

Flagstaff, Arizona, where badmen once roamed



Ask just about anyone how many states the Grand Canyon touches and the response will usually be three to five. That would also have been my guess before my visit. The correct answer is one: Arizona.

First, consider the size. The Canyon is 277 miles (446 km) long, up to 18 miles (29 km) wide and a mile (1.6 km) deep. To completely navigate its zig-zag rim would be close to 800 miles.

And its slowly growing even larger, geologists say, because of the constant shifting of the earth's surface.

There are deeper (Nepal) and wider (Australia) canyons in the world, but the Grand Canyon remains the canyon against which all others are compared. For a number of reasons.

Nowhere else will one find such a dazzling variety of colors in the uncountable rock layers, buttes and shadowed side canyons---hues of brown, green, aqua, blue,

rust--and some shades with no names.

From dawn to dusk, depending on the day, the canyon becomes an ever-changing still life, bursting with bold colors on sunny days, lazily resting in pastels under cloudy skies.

At once, your mind can see traces of the great Inca and Aztec civilizations within the canyon, then what looks like an Asian temple over there, and in the distance some Greek ruins. Tomorrow, you will make some

Grand Canyon





other discoveries.

Arizona has a number of fine museums, but no need to visit them. The Grand Canyon is a masterwork of nature's «art» that continues to unfold.

We spent two days walking the South Rim of the canyon, constantly looking for the perfect view, that once-in-a-lifetime shot. But this is one of those places in the world where you're tempted to

toss your camera into the canyon itself, for you will never capture on film what is before you.

I watched a German woman burst into grateful tears at her first glimpse of the canyon, while nearby a Frenchman began shouting with joy. More foreign languages are heard here than English during the spring and summer season.

When we first approached the

canyon, there was a small stone wall and we gazed out at what we thought was the entire canyon at our feet. In fact, as we would later learn, the view represented less than two percent.

The next thing that surprised us was that there were no safety barriers around much of the rim. «That would destroy the canyon,» a park guide told us. «This is not a zoo...it's man and nature in harmony.»

Nonetheless, unfortunately, there have been a few injuries and deaths at the canyon over the years.

There are a number of winding trails into the canyon for the more adventurous tourists, but the trails are narrow, less than four feet wide, and can be slippery.

At the very bottom of the canyon is Phantom Ranch, a resort village along the north side of the Colorado

Grand Canyon from low-flying plane



Grand Canyon



River which runs throughout the canyon.

The only way to get to Phantom Ranch is by foot trails or mules. This may also be the only place in the world where mail is still delivered by mules. But plan ahead---it often takes a year to get a reservation at Phantom Ranch.

One can reach the canyon by car, tour bus or via the Grand Canyon Railway about two hours

down the tracks to the once wild west town of Williams. The train ride features a number of cowboy singers strumming through the cars, and an occasional mock shoot-out or robbery.

We spent the day in Williams before our train ride, walked along the historic Route 66 which once stretched from Los Angeles to Chicago but now has been relegated to a secondary road here and there because of

superhighways.

Our guide was a colorful cowboy-type named Montana Miller. He had never set foot in Montana, but was named after his grandfather from Utah, who also had never visited Montana. But Montana was a wealth of information, although it was often difficult to separate the fact from fiction.

«Some of the baddest men of the west stayed here,» Montana said, «Billy the Kid, the Daltons, all

of them. That bakery there used to be a brothel owned by a lady called Jumping Jenny. Across the street was Dead Man Saloon.

«A man named Ambrose Means lived over there---he once roped a rhino and a lion over in Africa, and then came back home and worked as a guide at the canyon.»

A day before, we visited the quaint but touristy village of Sedona, site of Red Rock State

Red Rock Park





Historic Route 66, relegated to a secondary road

Park. We took a jeep tour ascending 2000 feet to view the burnt-orange and red rocks that came in strange sizes and shapes.

Some of the rock formations were as large as castles, others as small as cactus. We stopped for a boxed lunch on a cliff and marveled at this «otherworld» experience.

But of course, all of this was

before the Grand Canyon took its rightful place at center stage. It even left Montana speechless, although he has been here countless times.

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