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GRAND GULCH: FIRST ENCOUNTERS AND LASTING IMPRESSIONS

By R.E. Burrillo

R. E. Burrillo hails from New York and, as an archaeologist, has an intense interest in the cultures of the Southwest. One of those cultures that he is particularly drawn to is that of the Ancestral Puebloans or Anasazi. In this personal essay, he provides a wonderful example of what happens when boyhood infatuation becomes a man-sized passion; when what one has been studying becomes an on-the-ground reality. Grand Gulch became ground zero as R. E. launched himself into his first experience and a career based on the Ancient Ones. That encounter still informs his value system today, as he struggles with the question of how to preserve a fragile culture left behind over a thousand years ago.

All photos in this article are provided by the author and were taken on the trip he discusses.

One of my biggest sources of conflict is between my particular subculture and my chosen field of study. I became an archaeologist because I have always loved visiting ancient places and ruins, learning about ancient peoples and cultures, and generally communing with those who went before. For most of my young adulthood, I spent the majority of my free time either reading about them, writing about them, or trekking deep into the deserts, plateaus, and canyons of the Southwest looking for them. Thus, becoming a professional archaeologist was an effort to convert my favorite leisure activity into a career. To make a living doing what I love best instead of, for example, working full-time in the service industry and playing “site bagger” on the weekends. That was precisely the situation, in fact, when I first hatched my plot to visit one of the greatest places to see unfenced, unregulated, and still scarcely visited ruins in the entire Southwest.

Meanwhile, I count myself alongside people who ferociously protect such places, like hair-trigger Rottweilers, against the thievery of both pothunters and archaeologists. My friends often liken the former of the two to pirates: treacherous, despised and lawless robbers, who take things from their rightful places for personal gain. As for the latter, they are more like privateers: law-abiding and socially praised, while they also take things from their rightful places for personal gain. We – I still say “we” – line ourselves up against all despoilers, both righteous and otherwise, with equal viciousness toward those who would steal artifacts away for their window sills or the black market as for those who would steal them away for a box underneath some damned museum.

So pothunters are like Blackbeard, and archaeologists are more like Sir Francis Drake, or so a great many people believe. Pirates of the Colorado. This was my internal dilemma for quite a long while, before I became a full-time archaeologist and realized that the Indiana Jones grab-n-go model of archaeology went extinct a long time ago. But I didn’t know that then, and a lot of my chums still don’t. When I announced my intention to pursue a degree in archaeology, in fact, some of my renegade friends from my Grand Canyon days bared their teeth like angry coyotes. “You’d better not take anyone to our spots...”

Bridging that gap is not easy going. The best practice that I have found, so far, is to study about archaeology on the one hand, go and visit archaeological sites on the other, and then simply write about it. No shovels, no curation, no destructive analysis; just a story about something I love. Like this one.

The Grand Gulch Primitive Area is a portion of Cedar Mesa – one might call it the main portion – which is a highly desiccated plateau of uplifted sandstone located inside the
“V” formed where the San Juan and Colorado Rivers meet. That “V” and the surrounding area as far north as Moab makes up San Juan County, one of the most environmentally heterogeneous places in North America, with snow-capped peaks, lowly swamps, desert, scrub, sagebrush plains, riparian New England-like forests, and what feel at times like jungles in the bottoms of some of the deeper canyons. Everything but coastline and tundra can be found there, more or less, and if you consider the shore of Lake Powell to be “coastline” of a sort, then the only major ecosystem they’re missing is the one with polar bears.

The area practically overflows with archaeology, particularly “photogenic” archaeology like cliff dwellings. This fact is well-known enough nowadays to be threadbare, if not ingratiating, but when I first learned about the place almost 15 years ago it most certainly was not. I read about Cedar Mesa in David Roberts’ In Search of the Old Ones while working as a seasonal restaurant manager at The Grand Canyon Lodge, and to all the critics of Roberts who froth and snarl over how he effectively advertised the place to a global audience: I know at least one hard-working technical scientist who found out about it the same way.

It took months of planning. I was little more than a kid, juggling college and a bartending gig in Flagstaff, and the only backpacking I’d done prior to this trip was when I was a Boy Scout in my youngest teenage years — what my best friend and I still refer to as “drug-free fun days,” in lamentable contrast to our later teenage years. I also smoked and drank a lot, at the time, and I didn’t want to haul such things deep into the backcountry and/or accidentally start any forest fires, so I had to quit both of them first. And obtain a bike so I could pedal between the Kane Gulch and Bullet Canyon trailheads. And equip myself with backpacking gear. And every other damn thing. By the time I felt ready, there was snow on the ground in Flag, but that’s nothing big. I’ve seen snow on the ground there every month but July and August. It was Thanksgiving, and I had a five-day break to utilize. My loving and supportive then-girlfriend made me a mix CD for the ride and off I roared.

I arrived at the Kane Gulch Ranger Station not long before nightfall. My plan was to stash my backpack somewhere nearby, drive down to the Bullet Canyon trailhead and leave the truck, and then ride my mountain bike the seven-or-so miles back to where the backpack was waiting. I would camp nearby for the rest of the night. The next morning I would set off into Kane Gulch, the best and most popular tributary route into Grand Gulch proper. From there I would backpack to, and then out, Bullet Canyon, where I would reunite with my truck.

The plan was strategic and precise, down to the typical Tuesday Breakfast style of “meal baggies” common among backpackers, calories rationed to about 3,000 per day — which was, in retrospect, far too few — with a backup cache of food and water in case of an emergency. It was virtually foolproof, but for one fatal flaw: me. What really happened is that I marveled over the maps posted outside the closed ranger station, shaking with excitement; then drove the truck to Bullet, pedaled back to the station faster than I’ve ever pedaled anything, locked bike, paid backpacking fee, retrieved backpack, and then took off into terra incognita with a headlamp to guide me. Years later, when I returned and hiked the same route a bit more sensibly, I would laugh at myself for all of the gorgeous scenery I missed by blundering into Kane — and, thence, Grand Gulch — in the dead of night.

Hiking toward the drop into Kane Gulch proved easy enough, if a bit unsettling. The trail cuts across a wide swath of pasture, with here and there a stony creek bed, while sounds, such as my own echoes, seemed distinct. I would later swear that airplanes passing overhead were actually dragons. My headlamp constantly swayed from side to side, washing the scenery in front of me in an eerie LED blue-white as I tried frantically to keep my eyes on the small piles of rocks (cairns) leading the way. If I lost the trail, I would have to sleep in a cow pasture, a fate whose gnashing awfulness kept me well-motivated.

The pasture eventually gave way to a valley, and then choked into a canyon — or, in this case, gulch. I never saw it happen, unfortunately, for its being twilight and all. The trail snaked into the gulch a boulder at a time, or so it felt, and at one point I had to squeeze through a two-foot wide, ten-foot long gap between two giants, like a tiny slot canyon, and this was when it finally occurred to me that hiking in a beautiful place at night is very, very dumb. I blundered onward. One sight finally did stop me, however, and that was when I suddenly realized that the gulch had dropped way below the trail itself. I was hiking along, keeping the cliff wall to my right, absent-mindedly noting that the other wall was getting farther and farther away. And then I looked to my left: a great, dark, yawning chasm of space. I stopped dead in my tracks. I could see the other side of the gulch, mainly from the light of the stars, but only faintly — it was some serious distance away. I looked down again. The trail had changed from the sort that lies along the bottom of a gulch to the sort that clings to one of its walls, and I hadn’t even noticed.

I reached the floor of Grand Gulch a little under an hour later, knees still a bit shaky from having so suddenly realized I was traipsing along beside a sheer drop of many hundreds of feet. My heart was beating with the gentleness of a jackhammer. So this was the famed Grand Gulch, which meant I was near the equally (in some circles) famed Junction Ruin,
sleep like a lullaby. And I can usually hear a vehicle or two as well, if distantly and faintly. All of that was gone, at the junction; no coyotes, no cows lowing or elk bugling, no cars or trucks – nothing. All I could hear was the rustling of the wind in the leaves, overhead, and even that was scarcely a whisper. It was the best night of sleep I’d ever had, and a happy prelude of things to come.

Most of the water that I found the next day had a frozen layer on top, which pleased me greatly because it meant that I had to break through a layer of ice in order to have water. Like a Tough Guy, I broke down and packed up camp, explored and probably cried over the intense beauty of Junction Ruin (I had not, prior to this trip, seen anything like it before), tried and failed to spot a means to reach the upper portion, and then hurried on. The weather was absolutely perfect. It was just cool enough that I could strip away my storm shell (backpacker jargon for “heavy outermost jacket”) while I was hiking, but not so hot that I couldn’t go far without it when, frequently, I took off my pack to explore something interesting more closely. I was surprised at how sparse the foliage in the canyon was, considering how long and by how many successive generations it was populated. I couldn’t see much growth at all, in fact, for which I was frankly grateful. Thrashing through vegetation is particularly difficult in the desert because the desert is particularly difficult to live in, and thus, by necessity, all of the vegetation that lives in the desert is hard and vicious. I would run into this soon enough.

Within an hour I reached Turkey Pen Ruin, my next objective and one that I hadn’t expected to be overly exciting. I almost exploded with joy. This was even better than Junction! It was another complex of ground-level and upper-level ruins, only this time one could actually climb up into the upper level (although not anymore). There was one particularly interesting petroglyph – an antelope with a tall, thin line extending straight up from its back; I lingered overlong on that one. To the archaeological portion of my brain, it looked like an esoteric, maybe totemic insignia, perhaps the name of a shaman or chief, or a clan symbol, or maybe it marked some significant event. To that other part of my brain, the part that gives teachers headaches, it looked like a carousel animal. Did the ancients ride merry-go-rounds?

The best part was looking out at the canyon from above the chest-high wall of masonry in the upper level. It was like a parapet or a banister, and had I not been weary of its fragile foundation I would have leaned out and over it like a

which resided in the darkness someplace before me. At ground level, the confluence itself was marked by a distinctive hill, more like a plateau or an island, covered in sand and supporting a few gigantic cottonwoods. Beneath the limbs of one of those giant trees I found a clearing, which bore the distinctive marks of a popular camping spot, not least of which being an empty Sierra Nevada beer bottle. I remembered how I’d jettisoned a few vices just for this trip, including that one. Life is a cruel joke.

The night was deathly silent, which was new to me. I normally camp at the same elevation as the rest of civilization, wherever that happens to be. Around Flagstaff, for instance, I tend to camp at Flagstaff’s elevation; and around Sedona, the same. What this means is that all of the many things – two-legged things, four-legged things, wheeled things – to which that elevation is accustomed can, and often do, come within earshot. Cows wander near my campsites often enough to make me hate them, which is probably at the root of why I do. I can almost always hear the voices of coyotes, which used to unnerven me but now charm me into
kid on a high bridge. I could hear my mother, or the voices of mothers long-since passed, saying something like “stop leaning over that railing or you’ll fall.” It was Turkey Pen Ruin, after all, wasn’t it? Or was it the top of the Statue of Liberty? Or the banister at Bright Angel Point, or along Navajo Bridge, or maybe along the porch, back home, and I am a child, leaning high and far, staring down at the tomato plants. “Now, you be careful leaning over the edge like that or you’ll fall.” Yes, probably some day.

The stretch of Grand Gulch that lies between Turkey Pen and the next biggest attraction, Split Level Ruin, is loaded with interesting sites, and I tried my hardest to break away from the trail and see as many of them as I could, overcoming or barge through minor inconveniences along the way. The vegetation was getting thicker, with dense sagebrush and prickly pear menacing me more and more as the Gulch wound its way toward the San Juan, and would get worse before it got better. But I was in ecstasy, breathing a constant air of excitement and wonder, and would not be deterred by mere scratches and scrapes. I would hear plenty about the resulting scars from the girlfriend. Split-Level Ruin was amazing, mind-blowing, beautiful, astounding. As was the next one. The next. I’d brought my MP3 player with me so that I could listen to music whenever I got bored. I never once turned the wretched thing on.

Grand Gulch is no longer a secret hiding place for backcountry connoisseurs of any sort, and it really wasn’t by the time I made it there over a decade ago. It’s becoming popular, a testament to which is the fact that nearly every person who’s told me about their own Grand Gulch experience, aside from mentioning how spectacular the ruins are, recounts with a mournful or angry tone their encounters with other people. A not uncommon tangent in a story about a Cedar Mesa hike involves “those idiots with their kids and dogs...!” For my part, I had strategically aimed for one of the few times in the calendar year when I was sure I’d have it all to myself, and I’d hit a bull’s-eye. It was Thanksgiving. All of the normal men, women, and children in America were visiting their families; eating turkey or, increasingly, something vegetarian; giving thanks for who-knows-what, exactly, in this latest variant of the ancient Harvest Feast. I had the entire place all to myself. Looking back today, that illusion of solitude is probably what makes me grind my teeth whenever the Kane Gulch Ranger Station looks like the parking lot at Lollapalooza.

And yet... In the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu says “those who speak do not know; those who know do not speak.” Which is to say: those who chatter all the time about what they know are probably insecure about it, and in any event genuine knowledge is often not an intellectual understanding so much as clarity of perception. But that didn’t stop him from saying that, now did it? We are a bipedal paradox. Our first and strongest instinct upon encountering something we love is to tell as many people about it as possible. Our second and almost as strong instinct is to try and hide it from everybody. Attempting to reconcile the two compulsions within the same mind is a handy way to wind up in a room with rubber walls. So we tell everyone about it, wave our arms and ask for their help in studying and protecting this amazing thing, and then we get enraged when they decide to come and see it for themselves. This is the sort of thing that probably killed the dinosaurs.

I pitched camp that night in an enormous north-facing alcove, bereft of archaeology so far as I could tell. North-facing alcoves often are – the former denizens of this area preferred south-facing ones for their tendency to maximize sunshine in the winter and minimize it in the summer. I was in a daze. Never had I been in such a beautiful place. I re-
member trying at one point to think about all of the things
that I wasn’t thinking about. I tried to concentrate on home-
work – but that was in Flagstaff, far away, and there was
nothing that I could do about it anyway. I tried to think about
my job, whether or not I was happy there, whether or not
it was worth it – but, again, that was in Arizona, and I was
in Grand Gulch. I tried to think about girls, about friends,
about books I’d been meaning to read, books I’d meant to
write, cars, investments, habits, hobbies, family, religion,
philosophy... I tried to think about all of the things that nor-
mally fill my mind to the verge of eruption. They wouldn’t
stick. I was too joyful to be savaged by such trivialities.

Speaking of sticking: I unpacked my backpack to discover
that in my haste to get hiking, I’d left all of my dishes dirty
from breakfast. Quite dirty. I will never not embarrass my-
self somehow. Dinner was the same thing every night, be-
cause variety may be the spice of life but laziness is its meat
and potatoes. Anyway I liked my method – I would boil a
pouch of Tasty Bites and a bag of boil-in-bag rice in the pot
for ten minutes, combine them in a bowl, then add sugar
and cinnamon to the now very rice-y water to make a sort
of warm horchata. I still do that. It was also in the months
leading up to this trip that I realized every gas station, fast-
food joint, and convenience store in the country has piles
of little single-serving condiments just sitting there for
backpackers to grab. The best and rarest of them are good
honey and good hot sauce; stuff your pockets with those
whenever you get the chance. Of course, as Sancho Panza
famously quipped, “the best sauce in the world is hunger.”
Forget to pack enough food on a backpacking trip and you’ll
learn this, too.

Sunshine crept into the canyon in fits and starts, the
morning of my third day; purple at first and then smoldering
red before relaxing into normal daylight. Not enough – the
ice all stayed frozen that day. The redness presaged rain. Ly-
ing in my tent, watching the canyon wake up, I noticed for
the first time that the muscles in my legs ached, and it fi-
nally occurred to me that I’d been carrying a heavy burden for
a long while. In my ecstasy I had forgotten that the human
body, a machine after all, can only stand so much weight
for just so long, on top of which I am not an “ultralight” so
much as a “kitchen sink” backpacker. I sat upright, sighed,
and smiled. If the muscles in my legs wanted to hurt, then
let them hurt. Today was my last day in the Gulch, and the
last day that I would have to bear the dreaded pack.

Outside the tent, the air was colder still. I pulled my hik-
ing pants over my camp pants, pulled my long-sleeved shirt
over my tee-shirt and my heavy shell over that, put on my
boots and gloves and hat, and set about breakfast. The sky
was starting to get cloudy. I thought about flash floods, and
then told myself not to think about flash floods.

Bullet Canyon turned out to be a jewel of a place, east-
west aligned so there was plenty of sunshine after the
clouds had spat their paltry few raindrops and dispersed.
I had missed Sheik’s Canyon, somehow, and therefore missed
also the famous Green Mask spring-and-ruin combo. I
wouldn’t get to see them until about ten years later, when
my former fiancée and I repeated this trip on an extended
Valentine’s Day weekend. Meanwhile, all those long years
ago, visitation was still so sparse that trails hadn’t yet been
beaten into the ground as if by marching herds of jackham-
mers. Like now.

I hiked into Bullet for about an hour, the vegetation
gradually receding as the elevation gained, the distant walls
drawing closer together. Sandstone combs appeared to one
side, slashing into the canyon like a stop-motion wall of fro-
zen mud, and I noted them on my map. My spirits were ris-
ing again. I wasn’t eager to be done with the Gulch, but I
was eager to be done with this part of the trip. I wanted
extra time to dally on top of the Mesa. I wanted to build
acampfire, which is allowed up top. But I still lingered at
Perfect Kiva and then Jailhouse Ruin for as long as I could.

The latter was, and still is, a treasure. I recently did a re-
search project that involved hunting for historic photos of
the iconic archaeological sites of the Bears Ears area and
then comparing those images with how the structures look
today. It was a heartbreaking affair, for the most part, but
Jailhouse Ruin is one of the notable exceptions. It hasn’t
changed a bit since 1893, at least not that I could see.

Perfect Kiva, on the other hand, is a heavily stabilized
“visitor-ready resource” where I could plainly see the ply-
wood that now comprises the uppermost roof. I revisited
the place again just this past summer, many years later, and
this is still true. It reminds me of Ann Zwinger’s sentiments
on stabilization and visitation in her splendid book Wind in
the Rock:

Whether to stabilize or not is a thorny question. If
done skillfully and discreetly, it probably preserves the
site in its near-original aspect. Judgements have been
made on a site-by-site basis. If it means such an altera-
tion of the site that it loses its quintessential charac-
ter, then some archaeologists feel that more radical
responses are called for. One might be salvage excava-
tion, to obtain more information before the site dete-
riorates further; another would be closing the site to
unsupervised visitor entry. The worth of the archaeo-
logical sites in Grand Gulch Is that they are here to be
learned from, to be understood in all their rich com-
plexity and relation to the natural world around them
rather than fragmented, disassembled, and closeted
behind glass in an air-conditioned museum. Conse-
quently, the hope is that they can be both preserved
and visited by the public.

A thorny question indeed. At hour zero, construction of houses and storage buildings and such is intrusion upon the wilderness, but nature takes ownership of them in the fullness of time. Sunken ships famously become coral reefs after enough years have passed. Similarly, archaeology contributes to the character of wilderness as much as wilderness contributes to the character of archaeology, including that characteristic called erosion. Natural decay is part of what makes archaeology so interesting to look at and study. Visitor-induced decay, on the other hand, is merely annoying and certainly warrants stymying efforts. But is it annoying enough to warrant, say, arriving at a wondrous backcountry ruin after several blissful but brutal days to find yourself staring at plywood slabs from Home Depot? I tried not to think about it.

The rest of the trip amounted to a stroll up and out of Bullet, reunion with my trusty old 4Runner and the big bag of potato chips I’d wisely stashed inside, a call to the girlfriend to report my survival, retrieval of the bike, and then the luxury of a roaring campfire. And still I saw not a single other person.

As the years drag on and word of this magnificent place is spread farther and wider, I always think of that first encounter with Grand Gulch a little sadly. Sometimes very sadly. Arm-waving conservation efforts like the ones in which I’ve recently become embroiled are more a response to the ever-increasing crowds than they are a catalyst for them, but only just, and they are a catalyst nonetheless. A double-edged sword. More internal conflict. Local hiking legend Vaughn Hadenfeldt, who’s been watching this process for about twice as long as I have, once suggested that I bear in mind how every visitor to Cedar Mesa has that same exquisite feeling of excitement and novelty when they see it for the first time — even if their experience is a far more crowded and degraded one than ours was. They don’t know that; experience is relative, after all. And telling them so only makes you seem like a jerk. Maybe so. But that doesn’t stop me from telling them anyway.