

**May 29, 2022**

## **Grand Canyon History Tidbit by Kim Besom**

### **Rangering Below the Rim**

The last tidbit talked about early park rangers on the rims. But in the same way that ‘half the park is after dark’, half of the rangering occurs below the rim. Before the 1950’s, Park Rangers from the rim responded to inner canyon emergencies.

From 1994 interview with **Tex Worley**, a Park Ranger at Grand Canyon from 1932-1943:

**Worley:** ...We'd get calls in the middle of the night on what we called a ‘drag out’. A ‘drag out’ meant that these people had gone down during the day and then started to come out and were exhausted and completely given out. They would get to one of the emergency telephone stations and they would call for help. The Chief Ranger would then in turn call to send one of the rangers down with one, two, or three mules. We'd have to go up in the middle of the night to the corral, saddle those mules up, and go down the trail to the ‘drag out.’ Usually what happened was they'd call for one [mule], so that meant it'd take two. And when we'd get down there, there would be two or more [exhausted parties], and we'd wind up walking out, leading the others, while the tourists were sitting back there riding on those mules. Those were not very pleasant memories.

**Interviewer:** Did you ever lose anybody, or did everyone usually make it out okay with some assistance

**Worley:** Yes, we did, we lost one fella. He froze to death. There were two of them. This was wintertime [in 1939] and they were warned not to go. But they went down the Bright Angel Trail, all the way down. As they started back out, night overtook them and it began to get colder and the further up they went, the colder it got. Finally, they stopped and built a fire, but one of them stumbled and put the fire out. The other one went on up to the rest station where there was a telephone and left the other one behind. The next morning, two fellas from the U.S. Geological Survey went down and they passed this shelter where the emergency telephone was. They went on down a couple of switchbacks or so and they saw a hand sticking out [above the snow]. They uncovered it and found that this fella was dead and had frozen. They went back to report it to us, the rangers, and called in to the office up here. While this geological survey man was talking, he heard some sort of a noise or grunting, and he looked up. Under the overhang of the shelter was this other one who had made it up to there. He had tried to call but he didn't or couldn't read the instructions there that said he had to push in a knife switch. After some effort and no results, he crawled up under the overhang for as much protection as he could. He was almost frozen but was able to make some noises and attract the attention of this USGS man... So, we saved his life but the other one was frozen.

The earliest park rangers to have duties that specifically included inner canyon coverage appear to have been hired in the 1950’s. In a 1999 interview, **Dan Davis**, son of 1950's District Ranger, also named **Dan Davis**, talked about some of his father's duties, which still included many rim responsibilities:

**Interviewer:** What would some of the duties have been for a Canyon District ranger in those days? Was it still a little bit of everything?

**Davis:** It was a LOT of everything. It was much less specialization... The first thing every morning, as Canyon District ranger, he had an old pickup truck and he'd go through the campground and empty the trash, take it to the dump, maybe repair some fences. Then he'd come home, take a shower, and go out and give an evening campfire program at night. So, it was real generalized back then... [He also did] law enforcement on the rim and below the rim. And even though there was a Canyon District ranger, there was also the Village District ranger, which would coincide with today's South Rim District ranger. But they both did everything.

**Interviewer:** And they both gave programs as well?

**Davis:** They did. And during rescues or during emergency incidents, gosh, I remember they would almost just empty headquarters. The administrative officer and the librarian, or whoever they could grab and go out and assist- regardless of background, qualifications, training- that was almost nonexistent back then. Everybody would just chip in and do it.



#02625B: PARK RANGERS DEMONSTRATING THE USE OF THE UNICYCLE STRETCHER AT THE HEAD OF THE BRIGHT ANGEL TRAIL, JULY 1954.

**Interviewer:** Did they in those days hike on a regular basis, or only if needed?

**Davis:** Hiked on a regular basis. My dad... had one of those old Trapper John packs- the wooden frame packs. He would go into the canyon for two weeks at a time and come back for three days. Then he'd go back out for two weeks. And he did this for years and years. Very few people at that time even got below Indian Garden... Visitation was really confined to the rim. Very few people went into the canyon itself. There were no river trips. In fact, my dad was the first park ranger to go down the Colorado River- one of the first 200 people to go down the river with Georgie White... on one of her trips. Then he started rowing for her. He almost quit the Park Service and went to work for Georgie as a boatman. But he spent most of his time, early-on, as I recall, just exploring the canyon. He wrote a couple of books. From Lees Ferry to Lake Mead, he made a listing and explored all the escape routes from the river. For some reason, that was a major thing back then. I think they envisioned that more and more people were going to be going down the Colorado River. With the absence of radios and immediate availability of helicopters and those kinds of implements, if you got in trouble on the river, they thought it was real important that you be able to get out on your own.



#04149: RANGER DAN DAVIS ON PLATEAU EAST OF CHEOPS, CARRYING MATERIAL FOR WATER SURVEY IN HAUNTED CANYON, CIRCA 1954.

From a 1994 interview with **Al Maxey**, a Park Ranger at Grand Canyon in the 1950's, who worked with Dan Davis:

**Maxey:** Dan Davis came the year after I did. Dan and I were the hiking rangers. We loved to hike, and we loved to go in the canyon and the other rangers were older and had a bad foot, or better sense, or something. They didn't like to get into the canyon. When the canyon assignments came, Dan Davis and I took them. So, we did almost all of the rescues... and we were very proud of having been on all of the old trails, every one. And in those days, you didn't see anybody in the canyon. We'd go down and spend two or three days. We wouldn't see a soul... You'd see a few people on the Kaibab and the Bright Angel.

**Interviewer:** Would you get assigned to go patrolling or would this be your days off?

**Maxey:** Well both, but what it usually was, we were either on a rescue or searching for someone or we were on burro reduction.

**Interviewer:** You would actually get assigned burro reduction?

**Maxey** Yeah, we'd actually go down- they'd say, "We think we can spare you for a couple days- see how many [burros] you can get in two days."



#03507: WARNING SIGN AT HEAD OF TANNER TRAIL, AUGUST 1959.

**Maxey:** I lost a seasonal ranger that... second summer. Young kid, went down the Tanner trail, and Dan and I went looking for him. He'd fallen off a cliff. Probably become dehydrated... He was a seasonal. I felt very badly about that. He'd borrowed a canteen from me, and he'd borrowed a straw hat from me. And he wanted to go down inside the canyon and I sort of anticipated he'd go down five miles and come back. But apparently, he'd gone almost to the river, but not quite. Turned around and came back. And we tracked him to where he had slid, you could see he'd slid. I looked down over the ledge and there was my hat down on the next ledge, so I knew what had happened.

The body recovery of Ronald Berg, 22, was described by Dan Davis in the book *Death, Daring and Disaster* by Butch Farabee:

“One of the toughest search and rescues was for a seasonal ranger in 1954, who fell off a cliff while hiking alone down the Tanner Trail.

Al Maxey and I made the initial search and after tracking and backtracking, found where he fell off the cliff. We then cut our way under the cliff and found the body. By then it was dark so we dry-camped there. We had no radio or communications at that time, so got the message out by morse code with a flashlight to someone at the Desert View Watchtower.

The next day, two more rangers and a trail crewman were able to get a mule down the Tanner to where the body was. The Tanner at that time was virtually impassable for stock and they put a crew on the trail fixing the bad spots so we could get back out with the body. This particular trip we were all out of water. Maxey and I were showing symptoms of ten percent dehydration and were in pretty bad shape.

The Park, again by signaling, was aware of our predicament and dropped cakes of ice from a fixed-wing aircraft- no one on the staff knew how to air-drop by parachute. The ice very probably saved our lives even though one cake landed on one ranger's glasses and another crunched one of our three canteens, putting us at a disadvantage at getting out.

We did get to the river and filled our three canteens with river water; camped there a night and found some gallon cans in the old river cache just upstream from Tanner Wash. So, in going out, we all carried one-gallon cans as well as the couple of canteens we had left.

At that time, the park did not own one body bag. By then the body was five days old, temperatures well over 100 degrees, and all we had was a mante [canvas tarp for mule packing] to wrap it in, so it was pretty bad. Again, I mention this only to give an idea of the problems we encountered before helicopters. I might add that immediately after this, I wrote my first giveaway booklet on inner canyon hiking and water needs.”

The team involved in this body recovery were awarded the DOI Unit Award for Meritorious Service.



#02757: SUPERINTENDENT PATRAW PRESENTING MERITORIOUS UNIT AWARD TO TEAM INVOLVED IN RONALD BERG BODY RECOVERY. PARK RANGERS DAN DAVIS, TOM MAJOR, AND AL MAXEY, 1954.