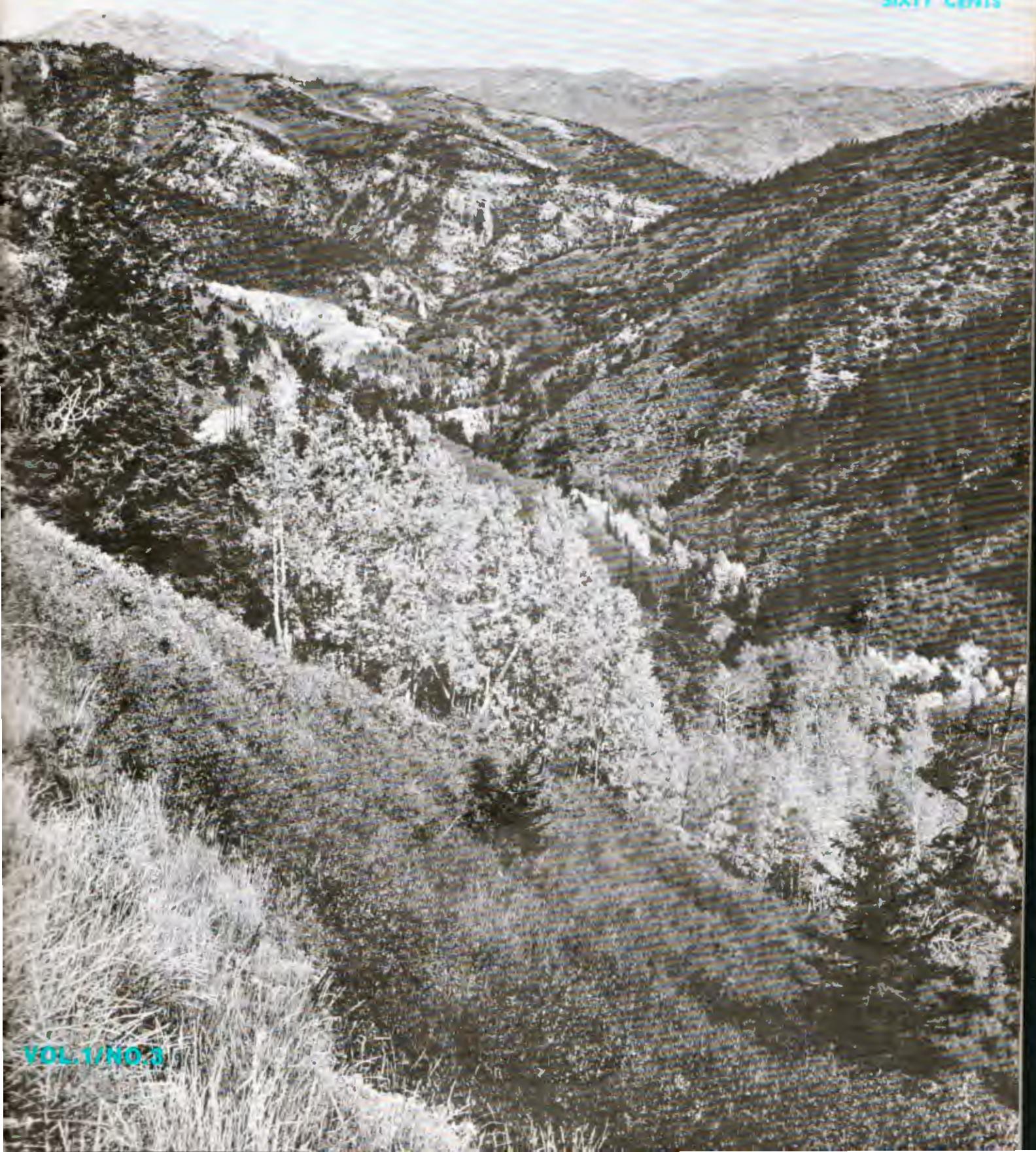


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Rim-Rock Hopping Utah's Bowditch Canyon

by E.C. Howard

Enid Howard is a former Californian addicted to desert living. She has been a dress designer, sewing instructor, worked on a newspaper, and operates the Westerner Trailer Park in Monticello Utah. During the summer she guides for Kent Frost Canyonlands Tours and claims that the best of all possible worlds is guiding hikers into the deep canyons in the Spring and Fall months. —Ed.



Flood water basins like this one furnished drinking water until we found the spring.

If you ask a Rim-Rock Hopper why he or she works up and down the ledges into the canyons, the answer will not make sense to persons who suffer agony at the slightest change in elevation, but is completely logical to those who look to far horizons.

The answer, "Well, I want to *see* what is there on the bottom, and where it (the canyon) goes."

My good friend, Kent Frost, is a native Utahn. He was bitten by the exploring bug at a very tender age, and has walked the sandy and rocky floors of most of the canyons of the Colorado Plateau, probing their secrets. I am most fortunate to call him friend, teacher-guide, and hiking companion.

Any day is a good day to start a rim-rocking project. Four free days finds Kent, myself and our jeep, camped on the mesa top rim of our canyon. Our target is Utah's Bowdie Canyon, located on the East side of the Colorado River, in San Juan County, Utah. Its drainage is northwest from Dark Canyon Plateau into the Colorado's Cataract Canyon.

Requirements for Rim-rock Hopping

To become a dedicated rim-rock hopper you need stamina, plenty of high energy food, plus water in large amounts. It helps to have calm nerves and the ability to stay unshook.

What you carry in your backpack is *very* important. In effect, survival equipment. We wanted light packs so take only essential items. *No* sleeping bags; we each have one very light tarp to roll up in. We carried concentrated and high energy foods. Jerky, dried soups, freeze dried meals, oatmeal, powdered milk, raisins, nuts, candy, dried peaches, teabags.

We also had a supply of pemmican; that old Indian trick of concentrating a lot of food value in a small package. We make this ourselves, and it's good!

One other item is Kent's constant burden on every walk-in canyon exploration; a light rifle as emergency insurance. Our food supply is calculated for each meal, but the canyons are sometimes capricious. Flash floods from the mesas or storms can cut off retreat for days.

Only then is the rifle used to obtain food.

. . . We began our descent into the canyon by working across small benches and rims to dry wash in the bottom. The July day was sunny and warm with the fragrance of the canyons and mesas floating enticingly to our senses. The pungent cedar and pinon scent mingled with the dusty aroma of the dry wash as our boots stirred up small swirls of sand.

We found a well traveled deer trail, but it proved to be very difficult as the canyon deepened, and we climbed up and down the ever larger steps and ruffled petticoats of talus that lined the canyon walls.

Slow-careful Foot-work

At one time we hung over the canyon wall to make our way around what proved to be a hundred-foot fall. (Now dry) We conquered two of these barriers which required slow careful foot-work. Kent's eye was sure and practised as he selected small shelves to walk along. The canyon floor dropped swiftly as the walls became higher.

At one place high on the canyon wall, there appeared to be a cave walled in with some dark material. We studied it through a small binocular.

Kent finally announced, "It looks like a bat bulletin board where all the local bats stop to leave their calling cards."

"You're joking." I said, "I've never heard of such a thing."

Kent's eyes twinkled as he said, "Tis true, that's the way bats are."

All I could think of to reply was, "Just plain Batty."

The bottom of the canyon widen-

ed, then narrowed to slick-rock knobs and rimmed steps trimmed with the canyon's own jewels of green and gold flora. The bed-rock swirled into shallow pools that held flood water from rains of the previous week. We drank from the sky-blue reflection bowls—the water was delicious.

As we crossed a low wide bench, Kent pointed to the ground and said, "See those horse droppings? You'll notice they look old." He added, "There could be wild burros in the canyon, keep a sharp look-out."

No Jeep or Horse Trails

"All right, but does that mean there are horse trails into Bowdie now?" I inquired.

"Not necessarily, the old trails into Bowdie and other back-country canyons have disappeared." he replied. "I don't know of a jeep or horse trail into this canyon. Those who have the stamina to hike in here, see an unspoiled wilderness; a backpackers paradise."

"It is that." I agreed, "And according to San Juan County history, the cattle business played a large part in the settlement of this area. Some of the funniest stories of those times are about cowboys rounding up wild cows. Surely the cows didn't get into canyons as deep as this one."

Kent laughed as he said, "Well, the cowboys always said, 'Where cow can go, horse can go.' and they did too." He continued, "The mesas above Bowdie and other canyons around here were the grazing range of cattle in the late 1800's. Many of the cows drifted into the canyons and produced two or three generations. I expect it was rather like an explosion when the cowboys tried



First group of ruins mostly rubble. A single log roof support remains in place.

to round up those wild-eyed cows.”

. . . We had been hiking four hours when we entered a grove of very large Cottonwood trees. There was a spring here, and pools of water covered with moss. The area was rank with willow and cane grass taller than our heads. We made our way with difficulty through this sharp forest. The cane grass slashed at our hands, clothing and faces, and we were buried in the thick green world of the stout under growth. The water through the cane was swampy and stagnant.

Delightful Downstream Walking

From the spring downstream, the canyon was delightful walking. The stream-bed thrust the canyon walls back to make room for the sandy clearings with their small shrubs, stubby Pinona and Junipers. We found much of the Crested Wheat plant, which Kent said originally came from Russia.

I remarked, “Sounds complicated but it must have an easy explanation.”

“It does,” he replied, “Crested Wheat thrives in our semi-arid climate, and was used to re-seed the over grazed mesas above Bowdie, flood water carried it into the canyon.”

. . . The day was far gone as it had taken much time to work down the canyon. We located an overhanging ledge and made camp beneath its protecting roof. We were delighted with our cave room with a view. There were cottonwoods for shade, a small waterfall furnished running water.

The fringe benefits that went with our cave were very spectacular. The cream, pink, and deep red walls soared to five hundred feet. Desert varnish had created a tapestry of artistry and form on the bold flat face of the Cedar Mesa sandstone. Across the canyon on a high ledge were caves containing Indian ruins!

We were quite tired, so we rested and studied the opposite wall through the little spy glass. There appeared to be no way up to the caves, but the steep horizontal ledges joined a great rock buttress at the curve of the stream.

Indian Ruins

Curiosity nagged us, so we were



Pottery shards found at the base of the fortress rock.

off to walk around the buttress, and found we could climb a series of ledges to the central ridge, then cross to the other side where the ruins were. However, our attention became riveted on the very top of the buttress; there were ruins there too!

Tired muscles were forgotten as we tackled the slick-rock slopes of the buttress. Our rubber soled shoes gave us a toe hold, but soon the small ridges in the sandstone were barely two inches wide. We were on the east side where the wall dropped a sheer five hundred feet, and roughly ten feet from the top. I didn't look down. Those last ten feet were tricky as we gained the summit.

Kent was all smiles as he said, “Say now, what do you think about this as a fortress look-out point? You'll notice it commands a good view up and down stream for about a half mile.”

I managed a breathless, “Wow!”

The mortarless stone walls around the perimeter of the buttress were falling apart, although some sections three and four feet high stood intact. I thought, “Whose feet and how many, in an ancient time had touched the stones that we were standing on. Whose piercing eyes had probed the distance on the canyon floor, to fathom friend or foe?” For the moment there was no other world

except this fifty by seventy-five foot summit of the look-out rock—this monolithic oasis, suspended in an ancient time clock.

We retraced our route carefully past that sheer drop, then down to the ridge and walked across to the cave. We found four structures. All were mostly rubble with parts of the walls still standing. They looked abandoned and sad.

It had been a long, hard day, but exciting and rewarding for our first day of rim-rock hopping.

Water . . . a concern

. . . The next day we left our gear at the cave and carried our lunch. Kent set a steady swinging pace as we walked on bed-rock layers of jasper and chert. The silver ribbon of water continued to meander through cottonwoods, willows, some cane, cat-tails and grasses, or flowed over rippled, water polished limestone, sometimes disappearing, only to pop up later singing, “Surprise!”

Kent constantly nagged me to drink lots of water. As he put it, “All you can hold comfortably.” I became accustomed to the sloshing sound inside me as I walked.

Our concern over water can be understood; one gallon of water weighs eight pounds. It is impossible to pack enough water into the can-

yons for an extended stay. A hiker needs two to three quarts a day in hot weather, and that is minimum.

Rim-rocking trips must coincide with rains that fill flood basins and pot-holes, or we must know there are springs in the canyons. Utah is arid country on the plateaus and in the canyons. Pinon-Juniper groves dominate the mesas, and desert shrubs and thin grasses on the lower benches are the rule.

This section of Bowdie Canyon was extremely resplendent and enchantingly lovely. The cream-white to yellow-brown, soft pink, and sometimes light red Cedar Mesa sandstone walls flared out in stunning grandeur, were a thousand or more feet high. They twisted first east then west, but always progressively north. The soft patina on the sandstone had a glow peculiarly within its own structure; the beautiful aura of age.

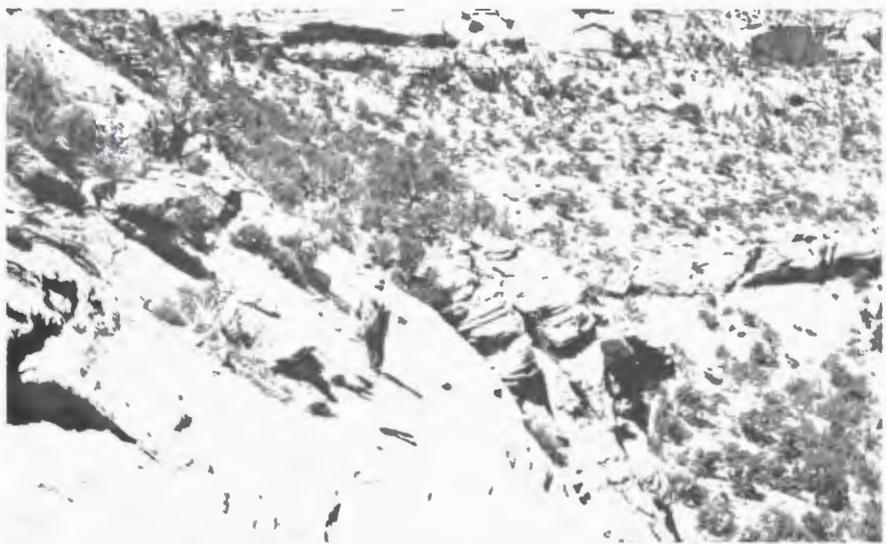
The escarpments were scrolled with erosion from wind and rain. Relentless polishing had worn the surface into weird patterns, that imagination turned into pictures of people or animals, or grand turreted castles, out of the myriad shapes, shadows and colors. The fanciful game of imagery is but one of the delights of rim-rocking and canyon exploring.

Anasazi of the Basketmaker Period

We had walked perhaps a mile, when we discovered another ruin on a ledge about three hundred feet up the terraced cliff. So, up we went over rim-rock and steep talus. The ancient Anasazi must have had an easier way up there, but we did it the hard way, straight up. Kent remarked that, both groups of ruins we found appeared to belong to the Anasazi culture in the Basketmaker period, and that the Colorado Plateau canyons contain many such groups.

A deep cave sheltered the ruins and contained four structures. They did not appear to have been disturbed. Three of the little rock and mud shelters were slightly the worse for their age, but the fourth one was still in perfect condition. Its small doorway was nicely in place, with the top edge supported by weathered pinon branches.

The soft pink sandstone block



Rim-Rock Hopping Bowdie Canyon's slick-rock walls.

house appeared as fragile as a toy doll house, yet had stood impervious and enduring—a tribute to man who must create, no matter what his status or time in the world may be.

Returning to the canyon floor, we continued down stream. It had become rather uncomfortably hot, but Kent had a cure for that, he said, "We'll make our own air-conditioning." Then fell into one of the large rock basins of water, fully clothed. I followed. Dripping as we walked, it was delightfully cool, but the dunking had to be repeated often, for the heat dried our clothing quickly.

Slightly past noon we came upon a great southwest loop in the canyon that turned out to be the point where the north and south forks converged. We were hiking the south fork. There was a large island in the center where the two branches met, and the streams at full force are free to sweep around the islands sturdy base before flowing on to join the Colorado River.

Properly Impressed

Kent suggested we climb the canyon wall to obtain a better view of the great loop, and we were properly impressed. His observation, "It's a lot of earth moving for a particular purpose."

Kent wanted to walk up the north fork, but I declined. I found a smooth rock to stretch out on and dozed a bit. How infinitely quiet Bowdie's deep cradle in the earth was.

My hiking partner returned in an hour and reported the north fork was the same in character as the

south branch, except that it was a dry canyon. We spent the afternoon returning to our cave camp. Our progress down the canyon had been slow, but we were satisfied to have reached the concourse of the channels.

Slow on the Deer Run

. . . It was 6:00 a.m. our last day rim-rocking, and we lost no time leaving as we expected the canyon to heat up early. Kent had located a spur that he thought would be easier to work out of to the top—we did not want to retrace the difficult route we had used into Bowdie.

We arrived at the side canyon and surveyed the steep benched walls that appeared to be a thousand feet high. Kent said, "It looks possible, should we try it?"

"Lead on, if we don't come up rim-rocked (need to back track) we can make it." I replied.

We found a deer run and made slow progress as the trail made unreasonable demands on our climbing technique. We were two small human flies inching our way up a steep rough wall. Those deer trail blazers used sky-hooks when they laid out that bit of engineering. Three hours hard work and we were on the mesa top. From there a swift easy hike to the jeep camp.

Time did not allow us to explore further into the main canyon of Bowdie. Our three days of rim-rock hopping was great adventure, and leaves the rest of Bowdie to the future. ■