



Insider's Look at Grand Canyon

Webisode #20 –Then and Now, Interview with Ranger Chris Carroll Transcript

Patrick: Welcome to yet another webisode of Insider's Look at Grand Canyon. I'm Ranger Patrick. Today's webisode is entitled "Then and Now." Let's start with 'now'. And my guest right now is Ranger Chris Carroll. Welcome to the show.

Chris: Glad to be here, Ranger Pat.

Patrick: So, Chris, you've been a ranger how long right now here at the Grand Canyon?

Chris: Grand Canyon- 8 years.

Patrick: 8 years. And just to give the folks out there in webland some background about yourself...before you became a ranger, and from what I understand, once you retired from your other career, you became a ranger. What did you used to do?

Chris: I spent 28 years in the New York state public schools as a teacher, a guidance counselor, a people personnel director, and an interim principal whenever they needed one.

Patrick: That's great. So for much of your life working in education. Then you became a ranger here for 8 years, but I've heard you tell stories that you had once been to the Grand Canyon before. And what was going on in your life at that time?

Chris: My first visit to this incredibly beautiful place was in 1969. And that era, if you were in the Peace Corps you trained in the United States. And the training site was Bisbee, AZ down in southern AZ. And at the conclusion of our training program, to celebrate, Peace Corps gave us a choice- Mexico or Grand Canyon. So 10 of us came up here and that was my first visit to the canyon. And it was a memorable visit, to say the least.

Patrick: So way back in 1969, your very first experience at Grand Canyon, you're about to leave in the Peace Corps. Where did you end up in the Peace Corps?

Chris: Libya, North Africa.

Patrick: In North Africa. So, another desert place. And so you came here to the Grand Canyon with your fellow Peace Corps folks. And I'd really love it if you could share for the "Then and Now" what it was like then and we'll compare it a little bit later to how you see it today. So tell us about your actual adventure that you had here in 1969. Tell us what you guys were wearing, what did you have for gear. What was that like?

Chris: Gear was so very, very different in that era. From southern AZ, which was a little bit warmer than here in early October, was the time of our trip, our celebratory trip. We came up here...10 of us came up here. And we were looking for campsites and found out that we could pretty much pitch tents fairly close to, in this case, the Bright Angel Trailhead, something you cannot do today. It was a fun thing to do. It was late at night. We set up shop. We were ready to descend into the canyon the following morning. We had bought our meals ahead of time. Peace Corps had picked up the tab for us at the Phantom Ranch Lodge. All I remember was what a cold night it was. Temperatures were in the high 30s, low 40s. So we were very happy to get on the road. . We carried our water in aluminum canteens, probably weighed 9 or 10 pounds to carry water into the canyon. And the Bright Angel Trail- we really had no knowledge. We just came up here thinking, "Oh, not much of a hike." That 9 mile hike to Phantom was quite interesting.

Some of us wore wing-tip shoes, some of us wore basketball sneakers. We didn't have cross-training shoes in that era. We didn't have what we call day hikers...very stiff boots. But I did have hiking boots and I did lose a toenail or two and many, many blisters.

Patrick: So, opposite of most place you go hiking, because most places you start by going up and then at the end of your trip you go down. Here, it's reverse and if you don't tie your shoes right you can get 'canyon toe', the blisters with the blisters under your toenails. So you guys had some folks with- let me get this right- wing-tips and really, really stiff hiking boots. And you were here in October and it can get pretty cold at night here. But it's a bit warmer at the bottom of the Canyon. So how does this trip progress? You go down the 9 miles to Phantom Ranch. What happens next?

Chris: Well, we had to carry very, very heavy sleeping bags, so were weighted down with that. By the time we got to the bottom of the canyon there was actually a 30 degree difference. A little bit unusual. But we went from the high 30s to the low 90s when we arrived down there. So we had a lot of gear. We had to sort of stay away from crowding. And there wasn't any in that era, the crowds that we see at the Canyon today. But we pitched our tents somewhere along the Colorado River, fairly close to Phantom Ranch, may be a quarter mile away. We also needed to clean up so we believe, or I believe, in recollection, that we jumped into Bright Angel Creek, somewhat up toward Phantom Ranch. Skinny-dipped, as a matter of fact, using bar soap and shampoos to clean up. I mean, we went down as if we were checking into a hotel, with a lot of heavy gear. And we also knew that the next day when we were going to hike out we had a problem with all that gear. Since we were walking down, I'd already lost a toenail on the walk down. Walking out, quite frankly, is easy- still is today, as far as I'm concerned. But you know, with the gear, the water, all the weight that we had with us was amazing. We did very quickly talk to the folks at the Ranch. And they'd arranged for the gear to be carried out, space available on the mules so we could go up.

Patrick: Just to compare some of the 'then' and 'now'- today we get 4.5 million visitors at Grand Canyon. And today, we don't use soap in the creeks. But back in 1969, that was perfectly fine, everybody did that. But one of the things that happened for you guys still happens today in that you can get your gear carried up and down by mule. Some people, a lot of people, ask me, "Hey, if I walk down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, can I actually ride a mule up?" And the answer is 'no'. If you're going to go down by mule, you can go up by mule. But if you're walking down, you're walking up. But they do have a duffel service, where they can take your stuff up. But it's best to pre-arrange these days with so many more people here. So, hey, here we are in this story. You're down there and here we are 1969. What's going to happen next?

Chris: Feeling pretty good, we'd had our dinner and we were bedding down for the night. We had no concern for what time we were going to leave in the morning. We had an outfitter who was hired by the Peace Corps to bring us up here. The arrangement was to try to get up by 6 or 7 in the evening. Most of us- all of us- left at 8 in the morning and after a rather hearty meal, to say the least. What I usually tell people is 10 went down, 9 came out. I didn't come out with my colleagues. I made it about as far as two miles along the river and then became quite ill and dehydrated very, very quickly, which meant quite nauseous, a lot of diarrhea. It was not pleasant. And at the first stop, I believe it's Pipe Creek, I put in at a house where there's a phone. And just simply wanted to lay down and be left alone. I didn't care if it was the rest of my life, as a matter of fact. Distressed that I was ill, just thinking it was a passing thing. I was in for a very, very long day in a very, very beautiful spot. All I wanted to do was go to sleep.

Patrick: This is an important point right here. In an incident like this, a lot of people think about what's happened to me while I'm here. You can get affected by water-borne disease. You can get affected by the heat. You can get affected by all these things. But what if you got exposed to something before you even got here? That can set you up for a situation that I think you might've been. So you were going to the Peace Corps training in southern AZ. At any point prior to being at Grand Canyon, did you end up in a situation where you might have got some contaminated water?

Chris: Exactly. What happened- I was not aware of it at the time- we call dysentery. Living in Arizona we often, to practice our English as second language skills- that's what I did in the Peace Corps- we would go into small towns in northern Mexico and take part in soccer matches, which was a good way to do cross-cultural training. I took myself to a restaurant in a town called Nogales, it's not a small town. And offered Coke, but ice cubes came in it. And physicians believed that that's where I picked up bacteria, by drinking some contaminated water.

And about a month to 6 weeks prior to our trip to the Canyon, I had come down with dysentery of the intestinal tract. And was on antibiotics and what not but had actually thought, "oh." But by the time we came to the Canyon I was over that. And that was not the case.

Patrick: Okay, so you had some things, you had heavy gear, you had stiff shoes. And then you'd already worked all the way down there, you still weren't over dysentery. Your friends were all ahead of you (*garbled*)...back there from your group?

Chris: They did. Many offered to stay with me, but when you're 21 years old, you're very insistent that you're going to be fine in a very short period of time. And I insisted that they go on ahead. Many of us were suffering from blisters and what not, so we knew it was going to be a bit longer to get to the top. It isn't that I was abandoned; they went up to the top and actually had sought out rangers to report that I was missing or worried about where I was. They- the ranger staff here- knew that there had been a call down from the bottom of the canyon where I was and just assured them that a little bit of dehydration and I'd be back on my feet. Maybe a little bit longer than I'd planned. I don't know if I mentioned the dysentery to anyone. It wasn't until I made it to the top of the rim- and I got up around midnight- and was taken to Flagstaff and the hospital that I mentioned the dysentery. And immediately the doctor started an antibiotic treatment and a drip. I was fine.

Patrick: So on some of our trails as you mentioned, we have phones. We had them then. We have them now. Did you make the call or did some knight in shining armor assist you and how did you find a knight in shining armor, if that's the case?

Chris: There was a knight in shining armor and it's one of the high points in my life. I didn't realize it then but certainly now I remember the person who took care of me. It was a woman from Switzerland, at the age of 80- excellent hiker. She knew all of the issues surrounding dehydration. And so she literally sat with me for over 7.5 hours, giving me juices, rubbing my head, assuring me that I would be okay. (*garbled*)...rangers on the phone about my condition. Again, I never mentioned the dysentery, so the assumption was severe dehydration. And she was doing all the things we still do today to hydrate folks when they're knocked down by heat. Her name was Jeanine. I remember her name well, until her 91st year, when she passed away. She taught me a lot of things. One, compassion for people who are ill on the trail, especially for younger folks. At 21, I was pretty invincible and I literally thought within an hour or so I'd be walking out of the Canyon. And I sort of walked, but I had assistance.

Patrick: So, Chris, it's interesting that you said you were 21; your knight in shining armor was an 80-year old woman. Our number one candidates for injury at this park are really- I'll just say this out loud- it's guys who are under 30 who are not married. One of the best things about having a friend with you to tell you, "Hey, you know, maybe it's not such a great idea to take that shortcut or jump off that wall or maybe you're not doing as well as you think." So you had this great assistance, you had this amazing experience that sounds like you learned a lot about it. Now we're in 2009. Did you, when you became a ranger here 8 years ago, did you immediately go down to Phantom Ranch and reconquer it or when did you actually go to Phantom Ranch again and have you ever gone to Phantom Ranch again?

Chris: I had no interest in returning to Phantom Ranch. But you know what? You've got to get the monkey off your back. You need to return to Phantom Ranch. And two things happened. In 2001, I was scheduled to go down with a colleague of mine in the Desert View District here and she had never been down to Phantom Ranch and had been working here 14 years. Now, of all things, three days before the hike, I suffered a roll break. I broke my left metatarsal. There was a piece of me that was almost relieved. I no longer had to make that hike. But we had actually made a bet for charity that who would complain first about our hike into the Canyon. I really felt no desire to go because when you have an issue you're not going to forget it. And I didn't. But last year, I had the opportunity to return to Phantom Ranch to do an interpretive program or two down there. I went. I'm in pretty good shape. I've had some serious medical issues in my intervening years. So down I went, did my interpretive program, actually announced to the crowd that was down there for my evening program that this was my first visit and why to a round of applause. And a side line to that, on the way out I met three brothers that had been on my talk the night before, spent the night down there camping. Late 50s to early 70s. And the older brother actually became dehydrated and I had the opportunity to spend the time with the gentleman and his two brothers to get him hydrated and get him out of the Canyon. So, there was a real reward and I got Christmas cards the last couple of years from assisting these folks out of the Canyon. So there's a what goes around, comes around. The gentleman was 72 and we were laughing because he said, "I'm not invincible."

And similar to my situation we had food poisoning down in the Canyon, about 4 or 5 people staying in some bunkhouses down there, and including one of the rangers down there- all came down with some food poisoning, which is a quick 24-hour-type bug. But it does dehydrate you. In the end, he had gone through something similar to that. He had an infection he'd picked up; it dehydrated him. So it was not lost on me that these things still continue to happen today.

Patrick: Chris, it sounds like you've come full circle, from 1969 to 2009. I'm really, really glad that you shared these stories with us. I think there's a lot of lessons in them and it shows you that people think here- we've got modern sleeping bags, we've got all these great shoes. But there's so many other factors that can get you. But, like I said, I think there's a lot we can learn from this great story. Thank you so much for being on this show and thank you so much for sharing your amazing tale with us.

Chris: My pleasure. It's just a continuation of closure, as I like to say.

Patrick: Again, thanks for joining us on the show. We'll catch up with you next time on Insider's Look at Grand Canyon.