Roughing It in Rattlesnake Canyon

by Tom Dollar

Just west of the cabin there's a fire ring, heaped with gray ash and a few charred tin cans. The ground around the ring is trampled smooth and bare. Upside down, next to the fire ring, is a heavy-gauge wire crate, a relic from when milkmen still delivered thick glass bottles from horse-drawn wagons. Beside the crate there's an old-fashioned lawn chair, its metal seat and back welded to a tube-steel frame.

I'm at ease in the lawn chair with a sandwich of smoked kippers and red onion on crusty slabs of French bread, feet propped on the wire basket, facing the cold fire pit. Idly, I recall the fresh piles of bear scat I saw on the trail hiking into this place. "Hope that bear's nose isn't any too good," I say aloud, taking a healthy bite of my sandwich.

The cabin, long abandoned and used only now and then by hunters or Forest Service workers, is nestled in a grassy meadow at the end of a long trail in Rattlesnake Canyon in the Galiuro Wilderness. Two nights ago, Jack Dykinga and I drove from Aravaipa Road near Klondyke to our campsite on the rim of the canyon. This morning, I hiked 6 miles to the cabin. More of an outback today than ever, this place is remote, unpopulated, difficult to get to and seldom visited.

Experienced backcountry travelers, Jack and I knew better than to undertake the jeep trail into Rattlesnake Canyon after dark. When we arrive at the Forest Service Road 96 turn-off near Klondyke, 58 miles north of Willcox, it's almost 5:30 p.m. There's less than an hour of late-November daylight remaining, but in our eagerness to make camp near the rim and hike into the canyon at dawn, we drive on, anyway. Having scouted the territory, we know the road. Besides, Jack's diesel-powered, three-quarter ton, four-wheel-drive pickup will go anywhere — we think.

But darkness changes things. With vision confined to a narrow tunnel of light defined by headlamps, you don't see low-hanging branches. Weird shadows distort everything. Small rocks appear large, deep ruts appear shallow; the road seems at once wider and narrower than it actually is. What's worse, darkness distorts judgment, encouraging bad choices.

We manage the first several miles without incident and, by the time we get to Rattlesnake Mesa, about 9 miles in and only 3 miles short of Powers Hill, where we'll set up camp, our mood is self-congratulatory. We've traversed the hogback ridge where steep vertical drops on either side of the road took my breath away the last time we drove here during full daylight. We figure the worst is behind us.

Then things get dicey. A mile or so beyond Rattlesnake Mesa, the road dips steeply to cross a wash then makes a hard right to contour up a ridge. At the bottom of the ravine, we drop the right-rear wheel off the road on the downstream side. There's a loud rasping *crunch*. Sounds like real trouble.

Then, pulling upslope, the powerful torque of one of the wheels dislodges a rock that ricochets off a tree, *whang!* against the side of the truck.

In the morning, we inspect the damage. Tailpipe badly bent, an ugly dent in the right-rear fender panel, a deep laceration where a heavy tree branch lashed across the leading edge of the camper unit, a hatchwork of linear scratches — desert pinstripes — on the paint of the new truck and camper.

We estimate $300 to $500 worth of damage in 3 miles. At $150 per, those are some high-priced miles. It's the most expensive campsite we've ever bought.

Although inhabited back in 1918, Rattlesnake Canyon was a wilder place than now, maybe because the people were wilder, tougher. Woodrow Wilson was president, the war they called the Great War was still being slugged out in the trenches of Europe, and Arizona had been a state for only six years.

Telephone wires linked a few houses, and the Model-T Ford was replacing the horse and buggy on dirt roads hereabouts, but life was hardscrabble in sparsely settled Graham County. People lived off the land mostly, working with their hands, raising cattle, mining, maybe running a little bootleg whiskey. Most men wore sidearms and carried loaded rifles in saddle boots. Disputes over property and grazing rights bred longstanding feuds that sometimes exploded violently. Death by mishap — runaway horses, collapsing roof beams, and complications in childbirth — was common. Letters and diaries for the era tell of fingers severed by saw blades, toes lopped by axes, eyes blinded by splintered wood or shattered glass.

On maps, the meadow where the cabin sits is called Powers Garden. In the perfect calm of this early November day — the sun warmly illuminating the cabin, the corrals, the shed with a good-luck horseshoe tacked above the door, the grassy field, the grove of ponderosas — the atmosphere is serene, Edenic.

But the ground under my feet has been blood-soaked. One wintry morning, 90 years ago, a furious shootout erupted here. When it ended, three men were dead, and another lay dying.

It was Sunday, February 10, 1918, before dawn. The Graham County Sheriff, two deputies and a deputized U.S. Marshal rode into Powers Meadow and approached the cabin. They called for its occupants – Jeff Power, his sons, Tom and John, and their hired hand, Tom Sisson — to come out with their hands raised. Some say the law officers had come to arrest the Power brothers for World War I draft evasion. Others suggest bad blood existed between Tom and John Power and one of the deputies.

A fierce gun battle ensued. When it ended, the sheriff and his two deputies lay dead; old man Power was mortally wounded; Tom and John Power each had an eye shot out.

The Power boys and Sisson fled, but were captured, tried and sentenced to life in prison. Sisson died in prison, but the Power brothers were paroled in 1960 and granted a full pardon on January 25, 1969. For a time, the older of the two, John Power, lived in

the tunneled entrance of a gold mine the Power family had hoped would make them rich.

The road is a testament to the toughness, tenacity and ingenuity of its builders. Crossing ridges and contouring around the Galiuro Mountains' foothills, the distance from Aravaipa Road to Rattlesnake Canyon is roughly 11 miles, almost three hours of four-wheeling.

Incredibly, the road doesn't stop at the rim. The Power boys, their father and probably many others hacked, scraped and dynamited a road to the canyon floor, and kept on going for another 5 miles, all the way to Powers Garden.

Hiking in, I follow the road, first on one side of the stream, then the other — sometimes even in the streambed – all the way to the meadow. As impressive a feat as it seems to me, building this road was a puny human effort stacked against the hydraulic ferocity of water during flood stage as it propels tons of rock ahead of it. But undeterred, the Powers rebuilt after each flood.

Now there's no one around to remove debris from the channel, so I lose the road a few times. But the trail is blazed and, because it's confined to the canyon drainage, is pretty easy to follow. Besides, I'm in no hurry. Rattlesnake Canyon is special.

A curious thing about Rattlesnake Canyon is the topsy-turvy arrangement of vegetation. As we approach the canyon rim across the foothills of the Galiuros, we drive through a typical mid-elevation oak-pinon-juniper woodland zone. But as we drop below the rim into the canyon, we begin to see not only trees found in southern Arizona riparian zones — cottonwood, sycamore, ash and walnut, but also ponderosa pines and big-toothed maples, usually found only in much higher elevations.

It's 45 degrees out when I start walking at around 8:00 a.m., much colder than up on the rim, so I'm bundled to my chin in layers of clothing topped with a warm cap and mittens. As the canyon narrows and deepens, the temperature drops even more, and soon my breath becomes frosty, my fingers and toes numb.

The cold air flowing through the narrows may explain why the maples and pines find this riparian zone so hospitable.

It rained a week ago, and all along the way I come upon pools in water-sculpted basins. I boulder-hop across the shallower ones, the deeper ones, I detour around, leaving the streambed. Some of the shallow pools are covered with thin panes of ice. Beside one of them I find a single red stalk of Indian paintbrush.

Canyons are corridors. Things live in them and move through them, using networks of canyons as travel lines. Plants, mammals and birds are the obvious travelers. Today I've seen or smelled sign of deer, bear, raccoon and fox. So far this cold morning, the only birds I've seen are ravens and jays, the hardier species. Humans have used these corridors too, for ease of movement and because the means of human subsistence are

abundant there. And, of course, canyons are weather corridors with cold air from the heights draining into their floors to create unique microclimates.

But most importantly, canyons are water corridors. Where water flows, rock becomes soft. Spilling down slopes, water flows over rock, wearing it down, splitting, moving, pushing and scouring it — deepening the walls of the canyons. And it's water that turns canyons into life-supporting corridors of green.

Gradually, Rattlesnake Canyon widens, and sunlight tumbling over the rim finds the bottom. I come to a wide intersection where a trail marker points the way north up a side canyon to Juniper Spring, 2.8 miles, and to the West Divide, 4.4 miles. I look for a sunny spot to rest, to let the sun's warmth penetrate my marrow. Finding a sandy place bathed in sunlight, I lie down and close my eyes. Fall smells drift in: leaf mold, mint, damp earth, pine and animal musks. Gradually, I feel dampness seeping from the sand, so I rise and walk on.

Soon, I'm hiking in full sun in shorts and a T-shirt, the layers I wore against the earlier cold now stuffed in my daypack. I spot a fresh pile of bear scat, still steaming, and in the sand next to it, the impression of a good-sized paw print. Logic speaks first: *Human trails, animal trails, it all amounts to the same thing. Where else would you walk except right down here where the ground is nice and smooth?* But the nagging, primal-fear side of me answers right back: *Geez, hope I don't meet that bear; that paw print looked pretty big.*

To warn the bear, I start singing. At first tuneless nonsense: "Scare the bear/ no, don't scare the bear/ yes, do scare the bear." Then, "Bye bye bears/ Bye bye bears/ Don't sigh, don't cry/ Bye bye bears," sung to the tune of *Bye Bye Blues*. It works.

Finishing my sandwich, I poke around the corrals and sheds, finding an old harness, horse liniment on a shelf, 6-point deer antlers nailed to a wall, fence posts, and a few crimson maple leaves like fallen stars. I spy five white-tailed deer moving silently into the cover of trees on the far side of the meadow. It's Indian summer. Even the jays that had scolded me all the way into the clearing are quiet. I think I could stay here forever.

The Power family must have wanted that too. Back in the mid-1960s, backpackers describe meeting an old man in Powers Meadow walking around with a cane. His greeting was cheerful and friendly, they said. Later, looking at old news photos, they identified the old man. It was John Power.

SRP00014

ARIZONA HIGHWAYS

Site Search

Risk Free Trial Offer

SUBSCRIBE | SHOP | PHOTOGRAPHY | WEEKEND GETAWAYS | TRAVEL GUIDE | OUTDOORS IN AZ | CONTACT US | ONLINE EXTRAS | ON NEWSSTANDS

Online Store
Gift Shops Info
Shop for Calendars

Manage Your Product Account
Info for Shoppers
Featured Prints

Customer Service
Shop for Books

Arizona Highways 2010 Engagement Calendar
$3.75

Arizona Highways 2010 Classic Wall Calendar
$2.75

- Customer Service
- Corporate Sales
- About Us
- Request Newsletter
- Arizona Highways Digital Issues
- Digital Edition SAMPLE
- Insider's Guidebook Digital Edition & SAMPLE

Roughing It in Rattlesnake Canyon

by Tom Dollar

Just west of the cabin there's a fire ring, heaped with gray ash and a few charred tin cans. The ground around the ring is trampled smooth and bare. Upside down, next to the fire ring, is a heavy-gauge wire crate, a relic from when milkmen still delivered thick glass bottles from horse-drawn wagons. Beside the crate there's an old-fashioned lawn chair, its metal seat and back welded to a tube-steel frame.

I'm at ease in the lawn chair with a sandwich of smoked kippers and red onion on crusty slabs of French bread, feet propped on the wire basket, facing the cold fire pit. Idly, I recall the fresh piles of bear scat I saw on the trail hiking into this place. "Hope that bear's nose isn't any too good," I say aloud, taking a healthy bite of my sandwich.

The cabin, long abandoned and used only now and then by hunters or Forest Service workers, is nestled in a grassy meadow at the end of a long trail in Rattlesnake Canyon in the Galiuro Wilderness. Two nights ago, Jack Dykinga and I drove from Aravaipa Road near Klondyke to our campsite on the rim of the canyon. This morning, I hiked 6 miles to the cabin. More of an outback today than ever, this place is remote, unpopulated, difficult to get to and seldom visited.

Experienced backcountry travelers, Jack and I knew better than to undertake the jeep trail into Rattlesnake Canyon after dark. When we arrive at the Forest Service Road 96 turn-off near Klondyke, 58 miles north of Willcox, it's almost 5:30 p.m. There's less than an hour of late-November daylight remaining, but in our eagerness to make camp near the rim and hike into the canyon at dawn, we drive on, anyway. Having scouted the territory, we know the road. Besides, Jack's diesel-powered, three-quarter ton, four-wheel-drive pickup will go anywhere — we think.

But darkness changes things. With vision confined to a narrow tunnel of light defined by headlamps, you don't see low-hanging branches. Weird shadows distort everything. Small rocks appear large, deep ruts appear shallow; the road seems at once wider and narrower than it actually is. What's worse, darkness distorts judgment, encouraging bad choices.

We manage the first several miles without incident and, by the time we get to Rattlesnake Mesa, about 9 miles in and only 3 miles short of Powers Hill, where we'll set up camp, our mood is self-congratulatory. We've traversed the hogback ridge where steep vertical drops on either side of the road took my breath away the last time we drove here during full daylight. We figure the worst is behind us.

Then things get dicey. A mile or so beyond Rattlesnake Mesa, the road dips steeply to cross a wash then makes a hard right to contour up a ridge. At the bottom of the ravine, we drop the right-rear wheel off the road on the downstream side. There's a loud rasping *crunch*. Sounds like real trouble.

Then, pulling upslope, the powerful torque of one of the wheels dislodges a rock that ricochets off a tree, *whang!* against the side of the truck.

In the morning, we inspect the damage. Tailpipe badly bent, an ugly dent in the right-rear fender panel, a deep laceration where a heavy tree branch lashed across the leading edge of the camper unit, a hatchwork of linear scratches — desert pinstripes — on the paint of the new truck and camper.

We estimate $300 to $500 worth of damage in 3 miles. At $150 per, those are some high-priced miles. It's the most expensive campsite we've ever bought.

Although inhabited back in 1918, Rattlesnake Canyon was a wilder place than now, maybe because the people were wilder, tougher. Woodrow Wilson was president, the war they called the Great War was still being slugged out in the trenches of Europe, and Arizona had been a state for only six years.

Telephone wires linked a few houses, and the Model-T Ford was replacing the horse and buggy on dirt roads hereabouts, but life was hardscrabble in sparsely settled Graham County. People lived off the land mostly, working with their hands, raising cattle, mining, maybe running a little bootleg whiskey. Most men wore sidearms and carried loaded rifles in saddle boots. Disputes over property and grazing rights bred longstanding feuds that sometimes exploded violently. Death by mishap — runaway horses, collapsing roof beams, and complications in childbirth — was common. Letters and diaries for the era tell of fingers severed by saw blades, toes lopped by axes, eyes blinded by splintered wood or shattered glass.

On maps, the meadow where the cabin sits is called Powers Garden. In the perfect calm of this early November day — the sun warmly illuminating the cabin, the corrals, the shed with a good-luck horseshoe tacked above the door, the grassy field, the grove of ponderosas — the atmosphere is serene, Edenic.

But the ground under my feet has been blood-soaked. One wintry morning, 90 years ago, a furious shootout erupted here. When it ended, three men were dead, and another lay dying.

It was Sunday, February 10, 1918, before dawn. The Graham County Sheriff, two deputies and a deputized U.S. Marshal rode into Powers Meadow and approached the cabin. They called for its occupants – Jeff Power, his sons, Tom and John, and their hired hand, Tom Sisson — to come out with their hands raised. Some say the law officers had come to arrest the Power brothers for World War I draft evasion. Others suggest bad blood existed between Tom and John Power and one of the deputies.

A fierce gun battle ensued. When it ended, the sheriff and his two deputies lay dead; old man Power was mortally wounded; Tom and John Power each had an eye shot out.

The Power boys and Sisson fled, but were captured, tried and sentenced to life in prison. Sisson died in prison, but the Power brothers were paroled in 1900 and granted a full pardon on January 25, 1909. For a time, the older of the two, John Power, lived in the tunneled entrance of a gold mine the Power family had hoped would make them rich.

The road is a testament to the toughness, tenacity and ingenuity of its builders. Crossing ridges and contouring around the Galiuro Mountains' foothills, the distance from Aravaipa Road to Rattlesnake Canyon is roughly 11 miles, almost three hours of four-wheeling.

Incredibly, the road doesn't stop at the rim. The Power boys, their father and probably many others hacked, scraped and dynamited a road to the canyon floor, and kept on going for another 5 miles, all the way to Powers Garden.

Hiking in, I follow the road, first on one side of the stream, then the other — sometimes even in the streambed – all the way to the meadow. As impressive a feat as it seems to me, building this road was a puny human effort stacked against the hydraulic ferocity of water during flood stage as it propels tons of rock ahead of it. But undeterred, the Powers rebuilt after each flood.

Now there's no one around to remove debris from the channel, so I lose the road a few times. But the trail is blazed and, because it's confined to the canyon drainage, is pretty easy to follow. Besides, I'm in no hurry. Rattlesnake Canyon is special.

A curious thing about Rattlesnake Canyon is the topsy-turvy arrangement of vegetation. As we approach the canyon rim across the foothills of the Galiuros, we drive through a typical mid-elevation oak-pinon-juniper woodland zone. But as we drop below the rim into the canyon, we begin to see not only trees found in southern Arizona riparian zones — cottonwood, sycamore, ash and walnut, but also ponderosa pines and big-toothed maples, usually found only in much higher elevations.

SRP00015

Subscribe Renew Digital Edition Book A Trip

Experience the marvels and mysteries that make Arizona unique. Subscribe >

Online renewal couldn't be easier. It's fast, convenient and affordable. Renew now >

The digital edition is convenient and affordable. View now >

Stop searching and spend more time traveling. Just click, scroll, click. Go >

It's 45 degrees out when I start walking at around 8:00 a.m., much colder than up on the rim, so I'm bundled to my chin in layers of clothing topped with a wool hat and mitt[ten]s. Rattlesnake Canyon narrows and deepens as the temperature rises. Before long, I'm sweating beneath the frosty, my fingers numb.

The cold air flowing down from the narrows may explain why the mule deer I've been seeing since I left the trailhead don't find this riparian zone so hospitable. Instead, I'm finding their tracks along the way. I climb over pools in the dry, rocky streambed, I boulder-hop across the shallow ones, the deeper ones, I detour around, leaving the streambed. Some of the shallow pools are covered with thin panes of ice. Beside one of them I find a single red stalk of Indian paintbrush.

Canyons are corridors. Things live in them and move through them, using networks of canyons as travel lines. Plants, mammals and birds are the obvious travelers. Today I've seen or smelled sign of deer, bear, raccoon and fox. So far this cold morning, the only birds I've seen are ravens and jays, the hardier species. Humans have used these corridors too, for ease of movement and because the means of human subsistence are abundant there. And, of course, canyons are weather corridors with cold air from the heights draining into their floors to create unique microclimates.

But most importantly, canyons are water corridors. Where water flows, rock becomes soft. Spilling down slopes, water flows over rock, wearing it down, splitting, moving, pushing and scouring it — deepening the walls of the canyons. And it's water that turns canyons into life-supporting corridors of green.

Gradually, Rattlesnake Canyon widens, and sunlight tumbling over the rim finds the bottom. I come to a wide intersection where a trail marker points the way north up a side canyon to Juniper Spring, 2.8 miles, and to the West Divide, 4.4 miles. I look for a sunny spot to rest, to let the sun's warmth penetrate my marrow. Finding a sandy place bathed in sunlight, I lie down and close my eyes. Fall smells drift in: leaf mold, mint, damp earth, pine and animal musks. Gradually, I feel dampness seeping from the sand, so I rise and walk on.

Soon, I'm hiking in full sun in shorts and a T-shirt, the layers I wore against the earlier cold now stuffed in my daypack. I spot a fresh pile of bear scat, still steaming, and in the sand next to it, the impression of a good-sized paw print. Logic speaks first: *Human trails, animal trails, it all amounts to the same thing. Where else would you walk except right down here where the ground is nice and smooth?* But the nagging, primal-fear side of me answers right back: *Geez, hope I don't meet that bear; that paw print looked pretty big.*

To warn the bear, I start singing. At first tuneless nonsense: "Scare the bear/ no, don't scare the bear/ yes, do scare the bear." Then, "Bye bye bears/ Bye bye bears/ Don't sigh, don't cry/ Bye bye bears," sung to the tune of *Bye Bye Blues*. It works.

Finishing my sandwich, I poke around the corrals and sheds, finding an old harness, horse liniment on a shelf, 6-point deer antlers nailed to a wall, fence posts, and a few crimson maple leaves like fallen stars. I spy five white-tailed deer moving silently into the cover of trees on the far side of the meadow. It's Indian summer. Even the jays that had scolded me all the way into the clearing are quiet. I think I could stay here forever.

The Power family must have wanted that too. Back in the mid-1960s, backpackers describe meeting an old man in Powers Meadow walking around with a cane. His greeting was cheerful and friendly, they said. Later, looking at old news photos, they identified the old man. It was John Power.

Copyright © 2010 Arizona Department of Transportation, State of Arizona.
All rights reserved. Reproduction in part or whole without written permission from the publisher is prohibited.
The images on this Web site are copyrighted, digitally watermarked and registered with the Digimarc tracking system.
All rights reserved. Copying and downloading images from this site are strictly prohibited.

Phoenix Yellow Pages
Business Dentist
Location Phoenix, AZ

Blinds, Bonds, Buffet, Cabinets, Camp
Candles, Clothing, Condos, Cookies, Curtains
Gift Baskets, Gift Shops, Home Decor, Home Theater, Kitchen Cabinets
Lamps, Nanny, Nursery, Outlet, Party Supplies
Preschool, Shoes, Skin Care, T Shirts, Theater

by MojoPages