

ECHO IN THE CANYON

By Ted & Miki Smith

(Note: We first ran this article back in 2019)

BANGOR - In observance of our recent retirement and my 15th rebirthday of my stem cell transplant, my husband Ted and I traveled to the Four Corners region of the Southwest. Covering over 1200 miles in and around AZ, UT, CO and NEV we hiked in 4 national parks, 2 state parks and numerous national monuments. While the Grand Canyon's magnetic pull will always be the strongest for me, we also became immersed in the beauty of Arches, Canyonlands and Mesa Verde but it was climbing to the top of Mesa Verde that was most challenging. The top of the mesa stretched far beyond my comfort level. Dizzying drops on either side found me praying over our rental car, that our brakes were intact. It took about an hour from the visitor's center to reach the top where the line between mountains and clouds disappear, between fear and exhilaration, and realizing I had met my "safety limit". Though there is much to explore on Chapin and Wetherill mesas it was the treks to the cliff dwellings that was most memorable. To reach the cliff dwellings one must hike down steep inclines, scale numerous ladders (the highest being 32 feet!) and crawl through tunnels. My extreme fear of heights screamed for me to turn back but I have to come to believe I need to face my fears to keep my edge and not let my fears get in my own way. With ragged breath I managed to reach my goal by neither looking up or down and praying!

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We explored many cliff dwellings and became obsessed with the Anasazis. Ancestors of these nomadic tribes crossed the Bering Strait thousands of years before the birth of Christ. These hunter/gatherers moved down through North America and around the year 600AD these ancient Puebloans became farmers and made their home in the "four corners" region of the US. 1000's built and lived in the alcoves and cliffs for a few hundred years until they mysteriously disappeared between 1200 and 1300 AD. I found myself closing my eyes and thought I heard the whispers of these ancient people. Our complaints are shameful. We turn on a spigot and get water but somehow they survived a harsh environment of 18" of rain a year and ladling water from seep springs in the sandstone under cliff alcoves with a gourd ladle. Using dendrochronology, the study of tree rings, there were 30 year stretches of drought. They farmed atop of the mesa and climbed down using foot holes and hand holes in the stone, stairs made of stone rubble, ropes and ladders to reach their homes high above the canyons. I also wondered how many children were lost over their precarious perches. Never again will I view a cliff or an alcove anywhere and not think of the courage and determination that would necessitate such a dangerous existence. The switchbacks needed to reach the mesas were symbolic of a life's lesson- sometimes there's another way than straight up when faced with the impossible.

In all we visited and hiked The North Rim Grand Canyon, Antelope (slot) Canyon, Monument Valley, Hovenweep National Monument, Glen Canyon Dam, Valley of the Gods, Goosenecks State Park, Dead Horse Point State Park, Arches National Park, Canyonlands National Park and Mesa Verde National Park. The dry heat of the desert southwest, the monoliths of colored rock formations rising like behemoths, standing like sentinels over the desolate vastness and openness as far as the eye can see, are what I love about this place. There is something so humbling about gazing out over such an expanse, devoid of civilization for 100's of miles. There is magnetism in the rocks, rise and fall in the terrain and thinness in the air. The quiet can be deafening except for the canyon wren or the tapping of our trekking poles. And nothing can prepare you for the celestial star show in a huge dark sky with no light pollution. While at Canyonlands, a body of an experienced hiker was found reminding us even the most prepared adventurer can fall victim and this beautiful place must be respected.

Pennsylvania and the desert southwest could not be more different. Having lived in PA my whole life, I truly appreciate the fields and foothills, the dense forests of our mountains and our four seasons. But I have visited the southwest enough times to know I could happily live there. This kind of awesome makes the stomach clench and flop and causes me to wonder, "How could a human sustain this feeling everyday without overloading the brain?" But this I also know-whether it's my daily 4 mile run or a grand experience such as this, sometimes I need to leave so I can experience the feeling of coming back to the places and faces of those I love.

I cannot end this narrative without expressing my thankfulness to be able to enjoy good health, travel and move my body in such physical ways. I remain grateful for the prayers and never lose sight of the fact it was because of prayers and continued prayers that I've been meeting milestones these past 15 years and living this wonderful life!

