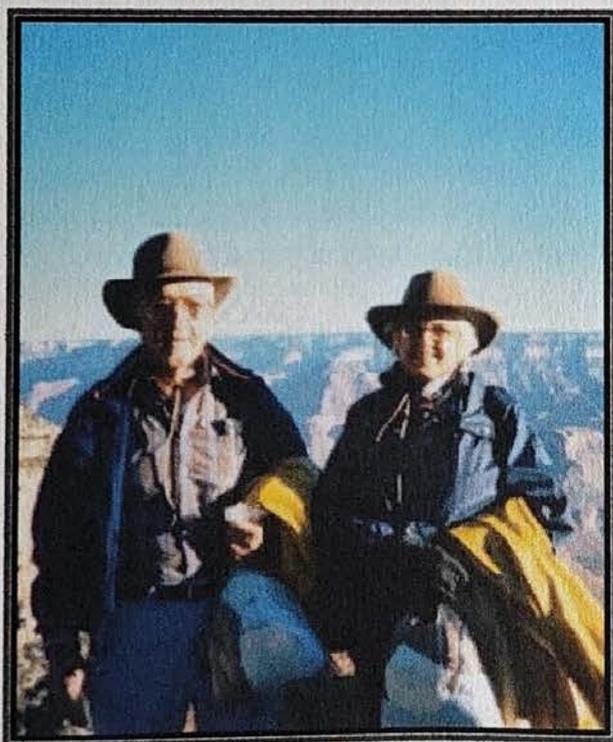


# **Our Journey to Phantom Ranch**



**By Janet and Bob Aldridge**

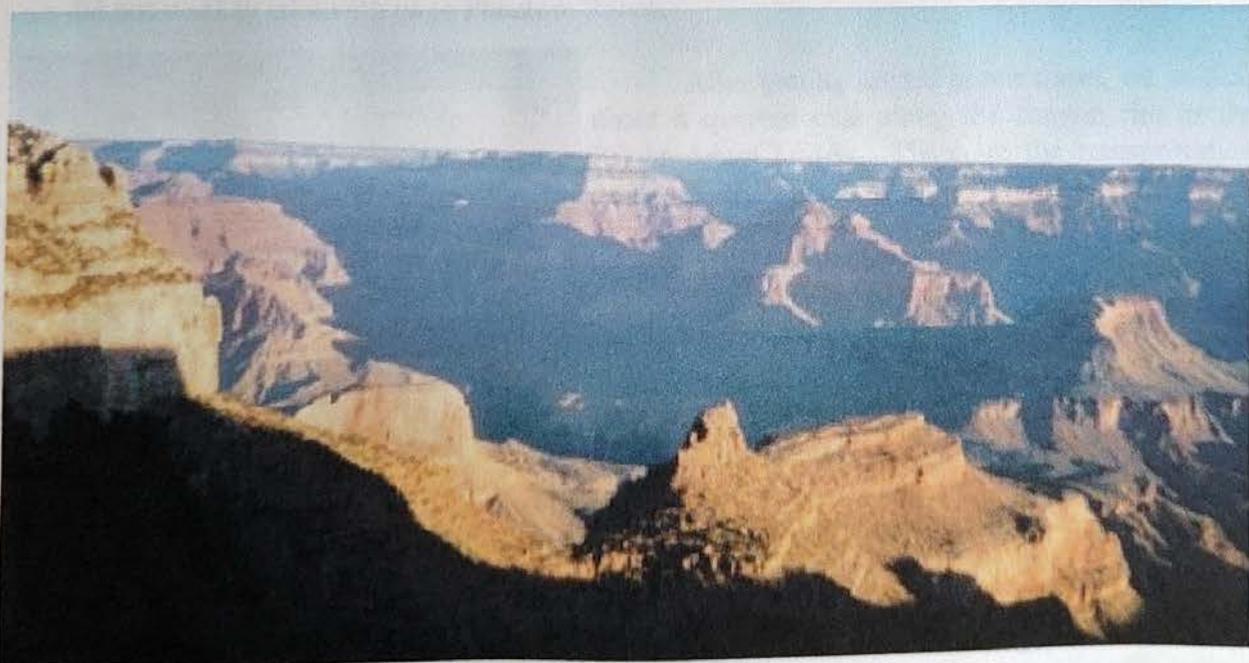
# Our Journey to Phantom Ranch

By Janet & Bob Aldridge

For our 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary present our ten children gave us a Golden Honeymoon to the Grand Canyon. As part of this adventure we would ride mules to the bottom and spend a night at Phantom Ranch. All of this was presented to us in a most dramatic manner at our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary party on August 17, 1997, which took place in the Arbor Area of Central Park in Santa Clara. We received broad-brimmed hats and bandanas along with tickets, reservation sheets, and a package of loot.

Early in the morning on October 8, 1997, we boarded Reno Air with all our duds and gear. At Los Vegas we transferred to a smaller prop-jet operated by Eagle Canyon Airways. This took us for the final leg of our flight to the Grand Canyon Airport. We arrived there around noon. A taxi (Harvey Car) didn't cost any more than the shuttle so we opted for that. Our Golden Age cards got us into the national park for free. Pretty good so far.

Weather reports were a little worrisome to us, however. It had been below freezing with a little snow and frost. But our fears were unfounded because, as the whole adventure unfolded, we were blessed with perfect weather — not too cold and not too hot, but just right.



The "Harvey Car" taxi was actually a minivan. Our driver was a Native American woman who was very helpful in providing information about the Grand Canyon National Park. She has lived in the area for four years and has ridden horses all her life. According to her, this was the best time of year to take the mule ride to the canyon's bottom. The trip from the airport took about fifteen minutes — she was a careful driver and never exceeded the speed limit.

Our driver deposited us safely at the El Tovar Hotel a little after 1:00 pm. It is a rustic building built of local boulders and Oregon Pine (Douglas Fir). It first opened in January 1905 when the Santa Fe Railway started taking tourists to the Grand Canyon. Named after the Spanish explorer Pedro de Tovar who first reached Hopi Indian country in 1540, this 100-room hotel was first run by the Fred Harvey Company (purchased by AmFac Parks & Resorts in 1968). El Tovar sits on the brink of the South Rim of the Grand Canyon.



El Tovar Hotel

All arrangements were in order when we checked in at the desk. Although the normal check-in time is 4:00 pm. Our room was already made up and we were able to occupy it immediately. We found the hotel staff very accommodating. When we checked out the next morning to go on the mule ride, we were able to leave our luggage in the room and they stored it for us. It was returned to our room before we returned. A safe deposit box was also provided, in which we stored valuable which we did not want to take with us to Phantom Ranch.



Bright Angel Lodge

After getting settled in our room, we walked about a quarter mile along the canyon rim to the Bright Angel Lodge. There, at the transportation desk, we checked in for the mule ride. Again, all arrangements were in perfect order. We were weighed in, received saddle slickers and goatskin water bottles, and were advised of an orientation meeting at 4:00 pm. At the orientation meeting we were given additional instructions about what we should wear and what we should take with us. We were then told to report to the Stone Corral at 7:50 the next morning.

After checking in at the transportation desk we went into the Bright Angel Restaurant (also in the lodge) for lunch. Now we could eat more freely. One of us — you can guess which — had been dieting in order to get below the weight limit for mules.

The next morning — Thursday, October 9<sup>th</sup> — we met the other riders at the Stone Corral at ten minutes to eight. The head mule wrangler gave another briefing which took somewhere between twenty and thirty minutes. He stressed the safety precautions on the trail — keep a compact group of only three to five feet apart, point the mule outward



Meeting at the Stone Corral

whenever we stop on the trail so it won't back off the edge, ask the guide to halt whenever we want a drink of water or to remove a sweater, and to never dismount unless the guide is right beside us. We were also instructed on the use of the "mule motivator" — a riding crop to keep the animal from lagging too far behind. If the mule lagged, it would run to catch up and that is dangerous on the narrow and rocky trails. Anybody who had any last minute qualms about riding the precipitous trail was urged to cancel the trip with a full refund, This was possible at any time until we road out the gate. Once we did that the trip was paid for. The head wrangler stood by the trailhead as we rode out. At that time he said: "I gotchur money!"

Soon the trail guides rode into the corral leading their strings of mules. The guides packed our lunches into saddle bags. We were each allowed a small plastic bag of personal belongings. These were also packed into saddle bags. The saddle bags were then mounted behind the saddles of the mules who would carry the lightest people. The only other things we were allowed to take was

what would fit into our pockets, except for a camera or binoculars, not both and no cases, which was to be hung by a strap around our neck.



Earthquake



Belle

We who were staying overnight at Phantom Ranch were divided into two groups — ten plus the guide in the first group, and nine plus our guide, Cory, in our group. There were also many who were only on a day ride. They would follow us as far as the lunch stop and then turn back. After we formed groups, we went into the corral to be assigned a mule. Janet was picked first and was introduced to Belle, a veteran trail mule in her twenties. The chief wrangler said there was no more trustworthy animal in the bunch. Bob was put astride a younger mule named Earthquake. Our slickers and coats were tied to the saddle and our water bottle straps wrapped around the saddle horn. We were lined up with the women in front and the men in back. We were told this was because it

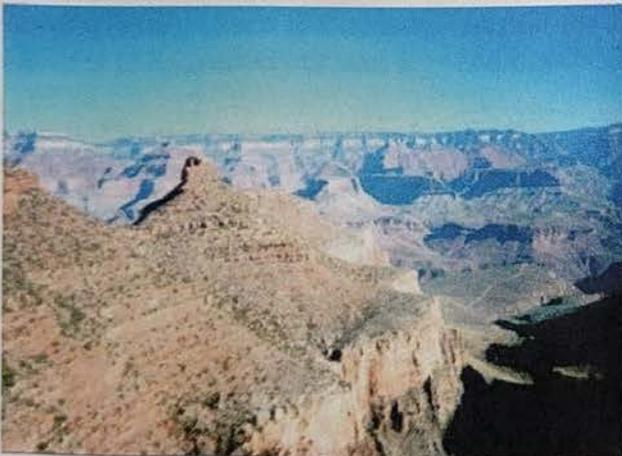
is dustier in the back. Janet was at the front of our group and Bob in the middle. Cory, our guide, led us out the gate and we started down the Bright Angel Trail. It was about 8:30 am. At this point we had paid for the ride.

It was pretty breathtaking at first. Much of the trail is literally carved out of the vertical cliff and a sheer drop for hundreds of feet. Perhaps near the top the drop was over a thousand feet because the bottom of the canyon is 5,000 feet lower than the rim with only the Tonto Plateau in between. Most of the trail is also a series of switchbacks from top to bottom.

A short way down the trail we stopped so Cory could check the saddle cinches for tightness.

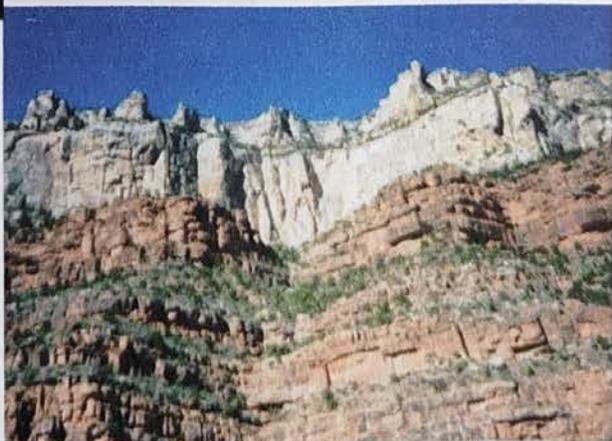


Beginning of Bright Angel Trail from South Rim of Grand Canyon



Bright Angel Trail on Tonto Plateau below

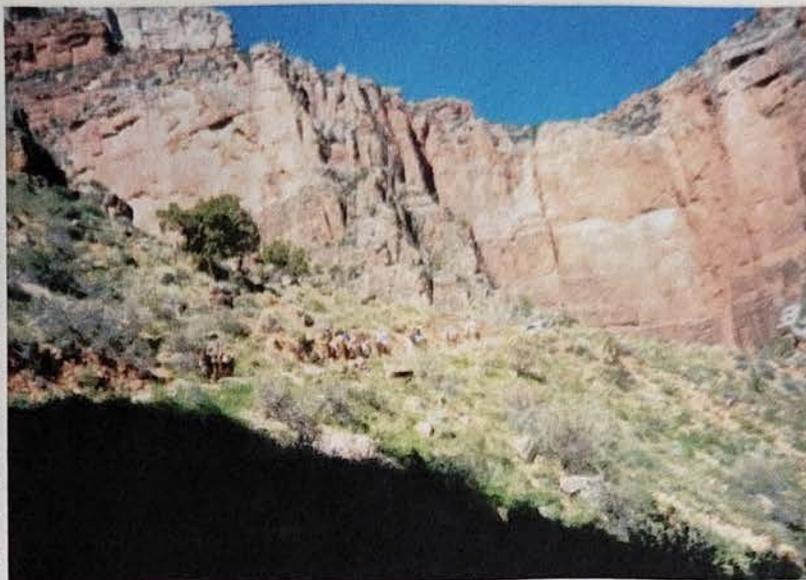
Gradually, as we neared the bottom of the first precipice, our perspective of the Grand Canyon was looking upward. This was a new experience for us who had only seen it from above. As we immersed ourselves deeper and deeper into its beauty we became more overwhelmed by the magnificence and enormity of this natural wonder of the world.



The Grand Canyon as seen from below

As we descended, the perspective continually changed. At first we could see our trail below us switching back and forth until it straightened out on the Tonto Plateau. We wondered just how safe these mules really were — mules are a cross between a donkey and a horse and are supposed to be smarter and more sure-footed than a horse. But as we went along we developed confidence in our steeds.

Our trail straightened out and leveled off as we flared out on the Tonto Plateau. It was now easier to see the group of over-nighters ahead and the day riders behind. After two hours in the saddle we would soon be at the noon rest stop. We were getting anxious to stretch our legs and sample those box lunches we had heard so much about. Besides that, our knees were getting a little sore and our behinds a wee might tender. We were really looking forward to the noon break.



Day riders behind us on the Tonto Plateau

Indian Gardens is like a little oasis in a parched land. The mules were lined up at a long hitching rail and we were able to dismount. After being in the saddle for two hours it was great to stand up again, after a few minutes. At first we could hardly put one foot in front of the other. But we soon rediscovered our land legs and were able to walk around to enjoy this beautiful spot.

The guides unpacked the box lunches and handed them out. They contained a roll with cheese and summer sausage. There was also a cookie bar, bag of peanuts, and an apple. We sat on a bench in the sun and enjoyed our meal. Then we refilled out one-liter water bags and explored the area



Lunch at Indian Gardens

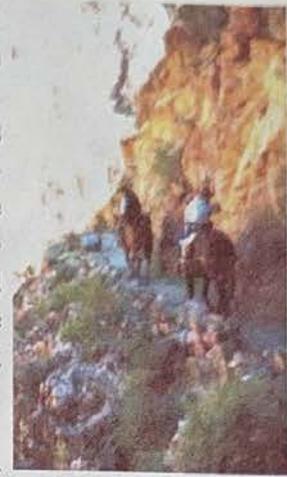
some more. Soon it was time to mount up and move on for another five miles. Only our two groups of over-nighters continued on the trail. The day riders turned back at this point.





Mules at Indian Gardens

We started downward on the Tonto Plateau. At first the trail was fairly level and straight. It gave us some respite from the tender spots we had developed on the steep descent that morning.



Cory and Janet on The Devil's Corkscrew

Soon, however, we were sorely reminded of those

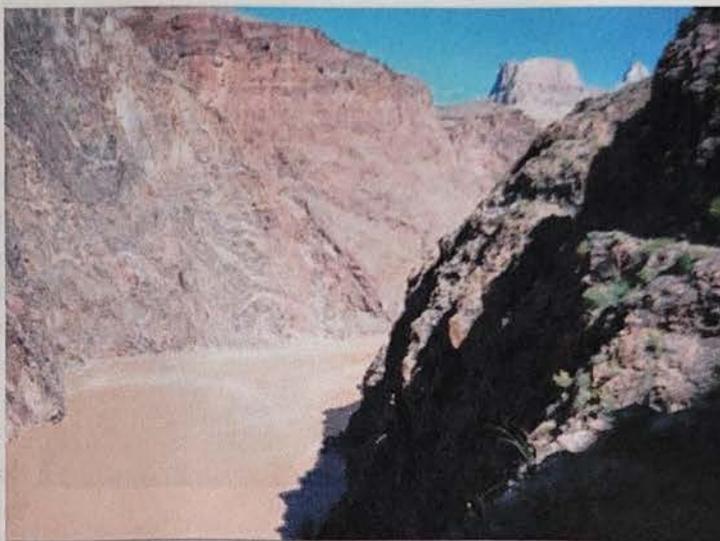
newly-developed tender spots when we came to the steep and precipitous path called The Devil's Corkscrew. It was easy to see how it got that name. For perhaps a thousand feet or more in descent the trail was a continuous series of switchbacks. We could look down and see the snaking trail below us. At a lower level, where the canyon wall was not as steep, the trail looked not unlike many we had hiked in the Los Padres National Forest. But at the beginning the path was cut out of the rock wall. Sometimes when the mule walked the edge and we looked down on the outboard side, there was nothing between us and the ground hundreds of feet below.



The Devil's Corkscrew

Eventually we reached the Colorado River. It's color was a dirty brown and not a pretty sight to us. It looked like the Sacramento River at flood stage. There were some rafters on the river. Their bright yellow rafts were easy to spot on the muddy Colorado. The people on the rafts returned our waves.

Upon reaching the river we turned West on the River Trail. It rose and fell, up and down a couple times from river level to perhaps 500 feet above. In many places it had been blasted out of solid granite.



Mule group ahead of us on River Trail



Kaibab Bridge over the Colorado River

After about a mile on the trail we reached the Kaibab Bridge over which we would cross the river to reach Phantom Ranch on the north side. At the south end of the bridge we first went through a short tunnel which opened onto the bridge. At the other end the trail made a circle to the right, went back under the bridge, and continued on toward the east. On the north side of the river, about a hundred feet downstream (east) from the bridge, was a sandy beach on which river rafters camped for the night.



Entering Tunnel



Inside the Tunnel



Crossing Kaibab Bridge

After about 9-1/2 miles of trail and 4-1/4 hours in the saddle we arrived at Phantom Ranch at 1:45 pm. Elevation here is 2,500 feet above sea level, compared to 7,250 feet on the rim of the canyon. After learning to walk again and recovering our plastic bag of belongings, we assembled for a brief orientation and assignment of cabins. We were assigned Cabin #1, which was just above the only public telephone and the dining room.



Janet by our Cabin #1

Our exploration of Phantom Ranch was pretty much limited to the remainder of this day. Tomorrow breakfast was to be at 6:30 am and we were to meet at the corral ready to travel by seven. For the remainder of this day the schedule was pretty simple. The dining hall serves as a canteen when meals are not being served.

The canteen would be open until 4:00 at which time it would revert to a dining hall. We would eat at five sharp. After the evening meal was cleaned up the canteen would re-open at seven. That was the schedule for the facilities. We were now free to do what we want.



Our Golden Honeymoon Cabin

We went first to explore our cabin. It was small but cozy, and very hot. We found a "swamp cooler" air conditioner above two Indian pictures on the back wall. A switch alongside turned it on and the cabin was cool in no time. Below was a heater which we didn't need.



We had a desk & queen-size bed,



a wash basin & enclosed toilet,



an air conditioner and a heater



Dining Hall and Canteen

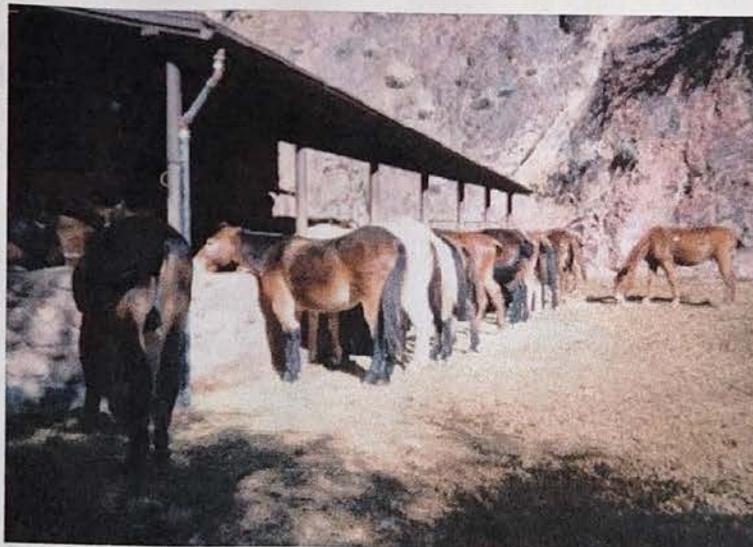
The cabin also had a queen-size bed, a wash basin, and a flush toilet enclosed in a small closet-size room.

After getting settled and unpacking our skimpy luggage we decided to check out the canteen before it closed. Cres had called our hotel before we left and left a message to buy a T-shirt at Phantom Ranch because they can't be

purchased anywhere else. We did so at a great reduction in our available cash!!! We also bought some picture postcards which would make the first leg of their journey to the recipient by mule pack.

One of these was sent to each of our children who made this trip possible. We also telephoned Bob's mother, Mimi, from the bottom of the Grand Canyon. She was in the hospital at the time with a broken leg.

Next we decided to explore more of Phantom Ranch which lies in the very narrow and steep-walled valley of a tributary to the Colorado River. Walking downstream we passed the corral where we hitched the mules upon arrival. A little farther was the Ranger Station, and then we came to the paddock in which the mules were feeding. We watched



Our Mules Feeding At Phantom Ranch

them for a while. In many ways they reminded us of our children when they were younger, the way they would kick up and nip at each other while eating. Some mules get along well together and other combinations don't. That is one reason the mules are kept in the same order while on the trail — it would not be safe to put two mules together who tend to quarrel.

Our age began to show and we were getting mighty tired. So back to our cabin we went for a little rest before dinner. At five sharp the dining room doors opened and we were treated to a magnificent steak dinner. The staff sang "Happy Birthday" to one fellow in our group who made this trip to celebrate his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. We turned in early that night.



South Wall as Seen From Phantom Ranch

Friday morning, October 10<sup>th</sup> — we rose at 5:45 am to organize our gear before breakfast at six-thirty. After that hearty repast we reported to the corral where our mules and guides were waiting. Soon we were on our way for the trip back up. As the lush little canyon opened to the Colorado River we had a picturesque view of the south canyon wall with the South Kaibab Trail winding up its near-vertical contour. This is the trail we were taking back up to the South Rim. The distance is slightly shorter — about 7-1/2 miles — but it would take a little longer because we would stop more frequently to rest the mules.

As we backtracked along the Colorado River we could see some Bighorn Sheep on the far canyon wall. We then re-crossed the Kaibab Bridge, climbed a little way on the River Trail, and then branched upward on the South Kaibab Trail. Along the way we passed several of the Bighorn Sheep we could see from the other side of the river.

We continued our ascent and the trail unwinding below us got longer and longer. We could see the Kaibab Bridge, which we called the Mule Bridge, below and it shrank smaller and smaller. The view of the canyon and Colorado River became more and more breath-

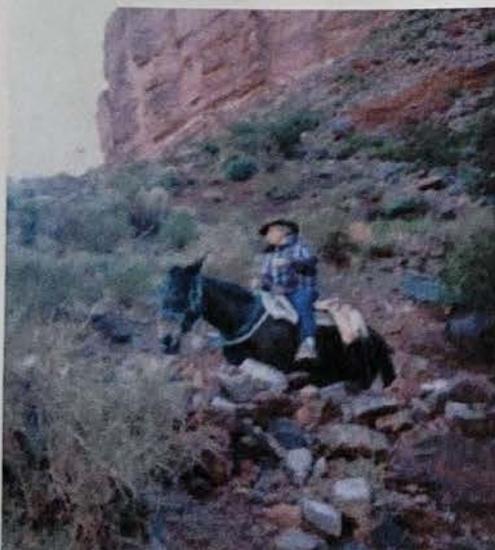
taking.

Although we could not ride side-by-side, or even one behind the other,

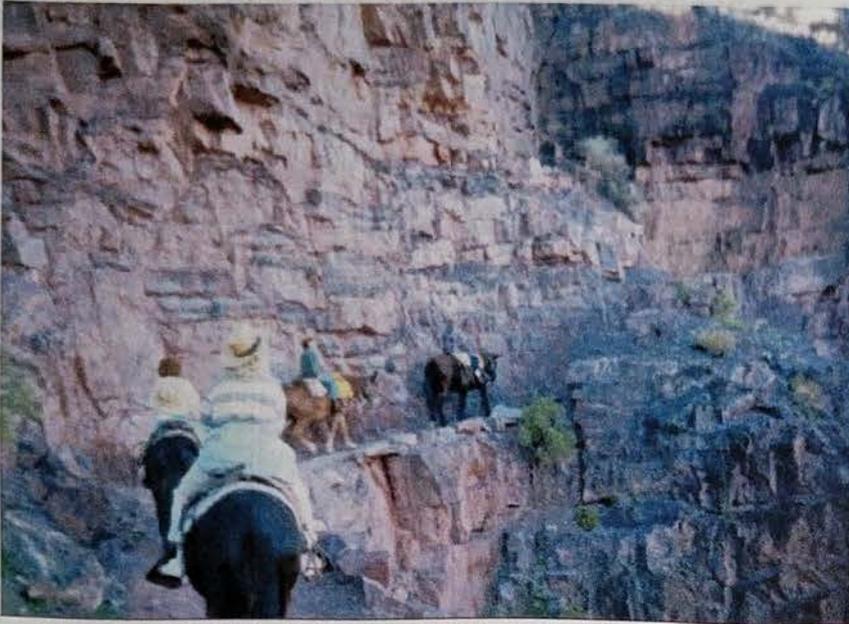
we were able to exchange smiles and comments at almost every switchback, and there were plenty of those. The poor mules were really panting and sweating.



Bighorn Sheep Along Trail



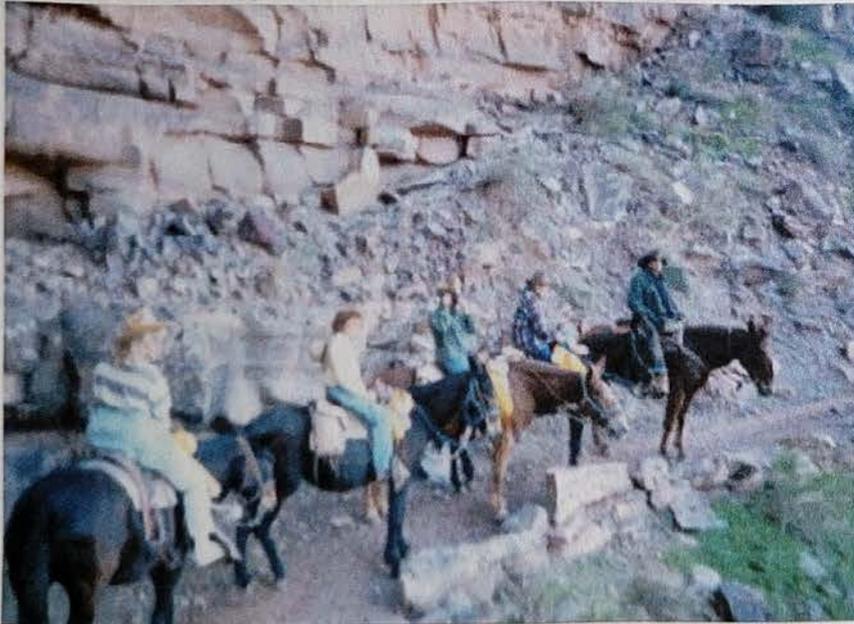
Janet & Belle on Switchback Above



Climbing the South Kaibab Trail. Janet in front.

Belle tended to be a little slow and Janet had to use the "mule motivator occasionally. Of course she was getting up in age as far as mule years go. Earthquake, on the other hand, seldom let even three feet separate him from the mule ahead. Bob hung the quirt on the saddle horn and didn't have to use it once. Occasionally he would lag behind a little on the steep climbs but a little nudge in the ribs with Bob's heels was all the motivation he needed. For the most part the mules

were given their heads to pick out the best portions of trail on which to walk. Frequently we would stop and point the mule's heads outboard while they rested.

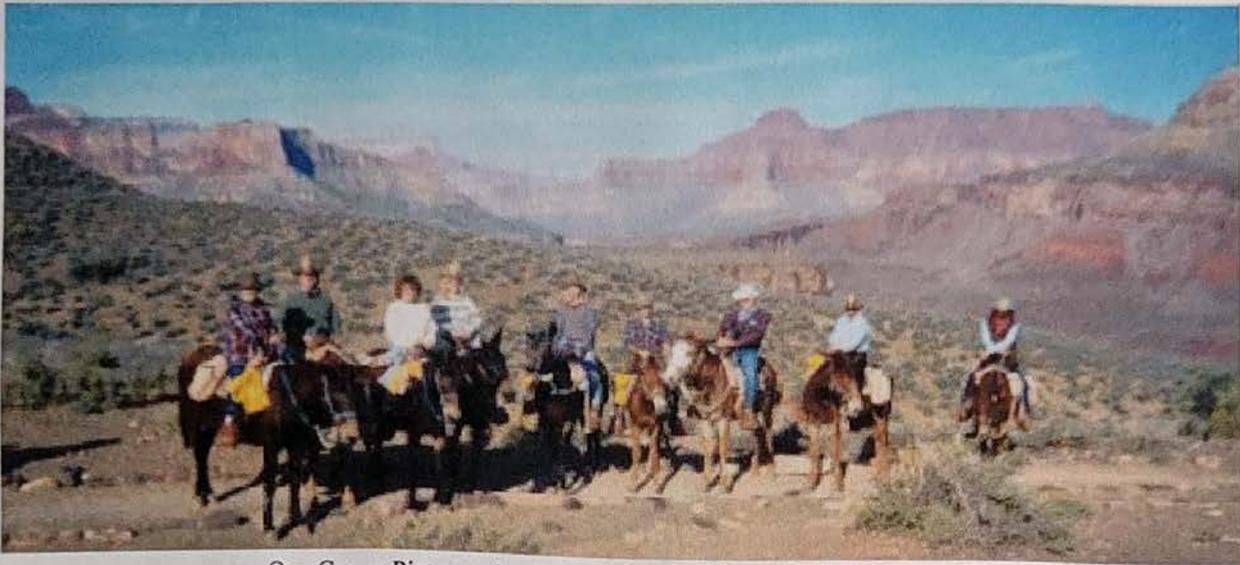


A rest stop for the mules. Cory on right, Janet second from right.

The terrain between the South Rim and the Colorado River is basically three types. There are steep and precipitous cliff above and below the Tonto Plateau, which lies in between.

The trails are well kept up but they are far from smooth. There are many rocks and boulders around which the mules must pick their way. Frequently there are half-buried logs about six inches in diameter which are placed crosswise in the trail to run the water off and prevent

erosion. In some spots the trail may be paved with rocks like a cobblestone street for fifty feet or more. The mules don't like these stretches because the rocks are very slippery for their metal shoes. They pick their way gingerly through these cobblestone locations.



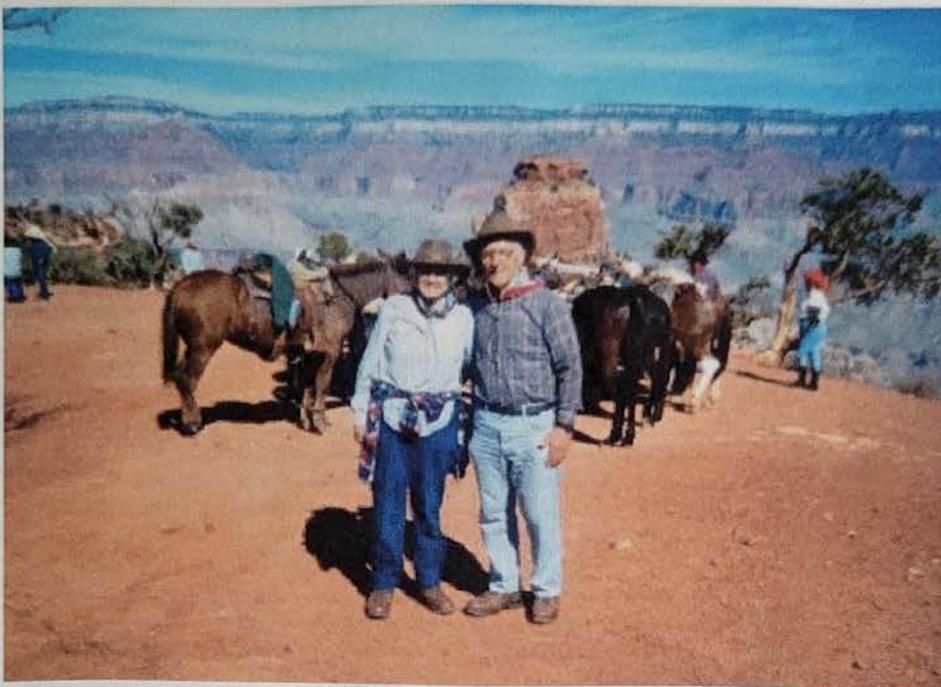
Our Group Picture taken by Cory. Janet on left and Bob in center.

The Tonto Plateau is beautiful. At one rest stop for the mules, our guide took a picture of our group with each of our cameras. By this time we were getting pretty tired of sitting in a saddle but we still had a way to go before a real rest stop. It helped to take our feet out of the stirrups, while the mules were resting, and move our legs about.



The Tonto Plateau with our trail behind us

Finally at 10:30 am, after climbing six miles of trail and spending 3-1/4 hours in the saddle, we reached a rest stop where we could dismount and walk around. It had a hitching rail and toilets but no water. The elevation here was 5,250 feet above sea level. We took several pictures and walked out some of the kinks and cramps. This stop was not very long as we had only 1-1/2 miles yet to go.



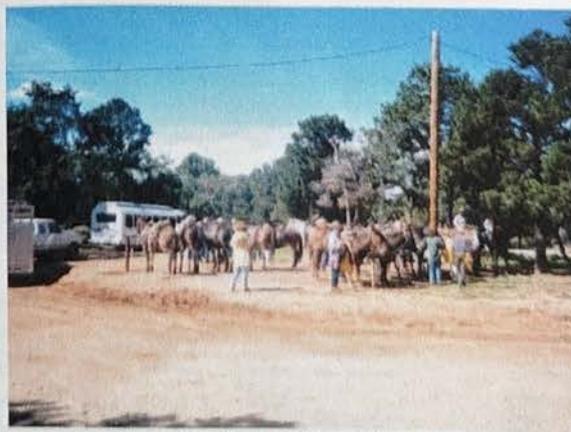
Janet & Bob at rest stop on South Kaibab Trail

Back in the saddle again for the final leg of our journey. This would take less than an hour. There was more climbing and zig-zagging back and forth. The final quarter mile was a series of sharp switchbacks up a sheer rock wall. Then we were once again on the South Rim and a short quarter-mile walk to the South Kaibab Trailhead, which we reached at 11:45 am. Here our mules were hitched to a rail and we dismounted for the last time. We were transported back to the Bright Angel Lodge by bus and the mules taken back to the Stone Corral in a huge horse trailer. But before we boarded the bus our guide, Cory, conducted a short ceremony. We were inducted into the Order of Master Mule Skinners. Each of us received a certificate of accomplishment.

Thank you, to all of our children, for making this grand experience possible.



The Final Zig-Zag



South Kaibab Trailhead

# Order of the MASTER MULE SKINNERS

*of the Grand Canyon Trails*



Be it known to all that Jane F  
was a member of today's party on Bright Angel, Kiabab Trail  
to Phantom Ranch and, having  
faced the precipices, descended and ascended the perpendicular walls at  
and in the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, endured the vicissitudes  
of this magnificent journey, and borne the whims and caprices of his  
gentle, faithful, educated, individualistic, long-eared mount—part horse,  
part jackass and all mule—named "Belle"  
is now a member of the renowned ORDER OF THE MASTER MULE  
SKINNERS OF THE GRAND CANYON TRAILS, with rights and  
privileges to boast of this accomplished feat forevermore.

Issued by  
Geo Hawley  
As Sanitar witness  
this 10 day of Oct, 1997

Certified to by an expert witness of the  
magnificent cooperation between rider  
and mule during the entire journey,  
Signed  
Geo B  
GUIDE

# Order of the MASTER MULE SKINNERS

*of the Grand Canyon Trails*



Be it known to all that Bob  
was a member of today's party on Bright Angel, Kiabab Trail  
to Phantom Ranch and, having  
faced the precipices, descended and ascended the perpendicular walls at  
and in the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, endured the vicissitudes  
of this magnificent journey, and borne the whims and caprices of his  
gentle, faithful, educated, individualistic, long-eared mount—part horse,  
part jackass and all mule—named "Earth Quake"  
is now a member of the renowned ORDER OF THE MASTER MULE  
SKINNERS OF THE GRAND CANYON TRAILS, with rights and  
privileges to boast of this accomplished feat forevermore.

Issued by  
Geo Hawley  
As Sanitar witness  
this 10 day of Oct, 1997

Certified to by an expert witness of the  
magnificent cooperation between rider  
and mule during the entire journey,  
Signed  
Geo B  
GUIDE