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## ROCK GLACIERS

by

Frank Stehno

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For several months one late summer and fall we parked our 20 foot Dutchmen travel trailer in the Bryce Canyon Pines campground just west of Bryce Canyon National Park. That autumn we treated the trailer as if it were a cabin, and spent all of our vacation time there, several long holiday weekends, and just about every weekend in between. Although it was a five hour drive from our home, we felt the adventure was worth it.

On one of our journeys I drove Anne up onto Table Cliff Plateau from the west side. I wanted her to see where I had worked back in 1971, as well as the panoramic view from Powell Point. We took the dirt road that passes Pine Lake and climbs up and over Barney Top and down through Main Canyon to Escalante. On this particular trip, after making the top, we parked at a wide spot along the side of the road and hiked out to Powell Point, where we could view most of the newly proclaimed Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument and the surrounding canyon lands. We also had a clear view of the main basin of Bryce Canyon, which is a prominent feature a bit to the southwest.

It's always amazing how one's perception changes when you can get up above these natural features and see their actual relationship to one another. A map helps some, but seeing the real lay of the land provides such a different perspective. The undulations of the landscape jump out at you and make you wonder how a highway, or a road, or even a mule train could make it through that convoluted maze of canyons and ridges. And the faded reds, the rusted oranges, the golden yellows, and the buff chocolates just add to the visual confusion arrayed below.

Of course, at Powell Point, the top of the Grand Staircase, the game is to identify or locate as many distant features as possible. "There's Navajo Mountain off toward the southeast, near Four Corners."

"That means Lake Powell and Glen Canyon are hidden off that way." Way to the left, toward the east, is the real maze of canyons that Congress set aside as Canyonlands National Park. "Ah ... yeah ... there's the tip of the La Sal Mountains, above where Moab will be."

Out there to the south you can see the dark swell of the Kaibab Plateau covered in its dark green forest of pine. It's hiding the Grand Canyon just beyond. "Kodachrome Basin State Park," with its magnificently phallic volcanic pipes, "must be right down in there," somewhere, among that mess of sandstone structures. "Yeah ... isn't that Cannonville ... there ... that little cluster of

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buildings. Kodachrome is just south of there and to the east.”

“Look ... if you look closely you can see tourists at the overlooks in Bryce.” Tiny figures moving along a ridge line, and the occasional sparkling reflection from a car window gleaming through the pines.

“Cool. Wave ... maybe they’ll see you and wave back.”

“Right!”

Back behind Bryce is where Zion National Park protects its own awe-inspiring canyon, but it’s hidden by the dark ridge of the Paunsaugunt Plateau. And to the west there seems to be a succession of mountain ranges running parallel, from north to south, as if stacked up, off into the distance of the Great Basin.

“Red Canyon must be right down there, over that ridge that makes up Bryce.”

“That’s part of the Paunsaugunt Plateau. So Casto and Losee Canyons have to be down in there, on the west side of that low ridge.” It all looks so different, and in some directions, not quite as spectacular as one might expect when down within those sandstone walls. From the bottom up these smaller canyons seem as impressive as any, but when you see them from the top, they appear as mere slits in the broad plane of the tree carpeted plateau.

Yet it all overwhelms the mind. There is too much to take in. The brain can only process so much wonder and beauty before it begins to blur and fade into a panoramic collage of color and form. It’s time to leave. And turning back to the trail, we notice the near trees for the first time.

“Are those bristle cone pine?” Their trunks are twisted and gnarly and weathered.

“No ... I don’t think so. Look at the ‘bristles.’”

“They look like bottle brushes.”

“But I think they’re too small. These must be limber pine ... a near relative to the bristle cone.”

“Beautiful though, in their odd, contorted, time worn sort of way.” You have to appreciate a life form that has endured the cold, wind, and exposure of these high elevations on this prominent point for hundreds or maybe thousands of years. We wish them many more centuries. If only us late comers will leave them alone.

After hiking back along the rutted road to our vehicle we drove to an area where we could examine a rock glacier. Again, I wanted Anne to view some of the features of these interesting piles of rocks that I spent a summer exploring so many years before. “Jack and I walked out across this very glacier as part of our initial recon,” I explained. Now Anne got to see what it was like as we picked our way across the loose chunks of sharp volcanic rock that had fallen from the escarpment along the top of the plateau.

As we made our way out across the surface of drab gray boulders the sky clouded over and the wind came up slope in gusts. It felt good on an otherwise warm day, especially after our long hike back from The Point.

Finally tiring of the constant balancing act as we worked our way across the glacier, we settled down for a rest, ate a little trail food, and absorb the view to the west. Just as we began to relax it began to sprinkle. Then those gentle gusts turned into a steady wind threaded with a real chill biting through its currents. Anytime you are above 10,000 feet the weather can change

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suddenly and you have to be wary of getting wet and chilled. Hypothermia can be serious business.

So, out came our trusty Space Blankets from their usual storage places in our day packs. We each made a little red cocoon, hunkered down inside, and stayed dry and comfortable until it passed. It never rained hard, somewhat to our disappointment, I think, and the lightning strikes stayed far to the north. We continued eating, and by the time we finished our energy bars the storm passed and the sky to the west cleared. We shook the moisture off of our blankets, folded them, and put them away, ready for the next time we might need them.

We had used our blankets as rain gear in the past, but this time our bleachers were a little more crude, and there was no baseball championship involved, but in our book we'd just witnessed Mother Nature pitch a perfect game.

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