

---

## Zion Canyon

by

Frank Stehno

---

Other than a few hikes during one summer on the Aquarius Plateau, I had not really gotten into backpacking. Early on we lived among the flatlands of Nebraska where there weren't many opportunities for that type of activity. But on our first visit to the Grand Canyon, in that Aquarius Plateau summer, Arla and I vowed that at some point in the future we would backpack across that great chasm. As it turned out, in the early 1980s we found ourselves living in Ely, Nevada, a mere six hour drive from the North Rim, and there we met several geologists who had made the trek across. Thus inspired, we bought the necessary equipment and began preparations.

One often repeated recommendation was to get plenty of preparatory exercise. Get your lungs and legs in shape for the trail and for carrying that extra weight on your back. Another suggestion was to make several short shakedown trips to become accustomed to the pack and to setting up in wilderness situations, and to learn how to pack your bag to distribute the weight evenly while making sure that key items are situated conveniently.

We set a date in early June for beginning our Grand Canyon trek, made the necessary backcountry reservations, and began a winter-long exercise program, including a stationary bike. We read up on how best to pack our bags, what to wear in the desert, and how to hike effectively over long distances. When spring came we eagerly looked for opportunities to get out and try our new skills and to get that initial backpack trip under our belts.

Our first trip was a short overnight hike up an old jeep trail leading into the Snake Range near Ely, out of Cave Lake State Park. We learned to adjust our packs, set up our new mountain tent, prepare meals on our single burner Coleman Peak 1 backpacking stove, and how to clean up our dishes with a limited supply of water. Of course we used our Space Blankets as ground cloths. It went well and the three of us had a good time. Positive results always encourage continued effort. We decided on a longer, more strenuous trip, in Zion.

Since our first visit in the early 70s, Zion National Park has been one of my favorite hiking locations. It's a fairly small park, compared to the larger stars in the system, like Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, and Yosemite, but it is a jewel none the less. One of the things I like about the park are the spectacular views from every trail. Some of those trails are steep, indeed, but the beauty of the landscape and the geology eases the pain of the climb and rewards the spirit with magnificent panoramas of the sheer cliff faces and wonderfully sculpted canyons.

We hadn't been to Zion in over a decade, but remembered several trails we had wanted to

---

---

hike. Our first backpacking trip there was a four mile climb with a 2,300 foot elevation gain, up the East Rim Trail through Echo Canyon and on up to Observation Point, right above the main canyon. It was a hard climb, but we did well. We took our time on the many switchbacks, stopped when necessary, and made it to our destination without major issues. It was late in the day by the time we arrived. Because of weight considerations and expected good weather, we did not take our new mountain tent. We spread out our Space Blankets in a flat, narrow area between tall bushes, rolled out our sleeping bags, and made camp.

We did have a fitful night, sleeping out under the stars for the first time as a family. Even in a comfy sleeping bag one feels vulnerable and exposed, and though a nylon tent doesn't add more than a thin barrier between you and the "outside," there is still a sense of being sheltered. Our other concern was the possibility of wandering off the edge in the dark of night, tumbling down into that magnificent precipice. That was one night we didn't wander around without a flashlight.

But we managed, had a great time, and, of course, enjoyed the views across to the West Rim and down into the canyon. At sunset, sunrise, and in full sun, the canyon looks different at each point in the day. And even though those amazing landscapes will always be remembered, in the end it was an uneventful eight mile round trip hike.

Sometime later, after our Grand Canyon trip, we hiked 4.5 miles up the West Rim Trail toward Horse Pasture Plateau. This was an exciting backpack because at one point you have to climb along steep cut that was blasted at an angle across the sheer face of a high wall of sandstone. One's balance is always a bit off when under the weight of a big pack, and when there is nothing but a long fall on one side of you it can be nerve-wracking. But we made it up and into Refrigerator Canyon. In the mid summer heat, the cool shade of the appropriately named gorge is a welcome relief, even though it's only a brief respite.

Near the upper end of Refrigerator is the lower end of an engineering feat known as Walter's Wiggles, a series of 21 tight switchbacks built into a nearly vertical crack, designed to help a hiker make it up to Scout Lookout, the two mile point, at the base of Angel's Landing. On this trip we headed farther in, along the West Rim Trail, across the exposed sandstone and desert landscape to the base of another set of cliffs that form the plateau.

In this area there are a few thin threads of water falling over the edge from above, the remnants of a small stream created by the West Rim Spring (or Cabin Spring, on some maps). I remember it being very hot that day, right at 100 degrees, and I was getting nasty cramps in my calf muscles. We stopped in a cool, shady spot and guzzled Gatorade to hydrate our bodies and balance our electrolytes. After that short rest we headed on up and found a nice flat camping spot among the ponderosa pines where we could watch the evening sunlight play across the canyon walls to the east. We were almost directly across the canyon from Observation Point, at about the same elevation. It was interesting looking across to see where we had camped before.

We set up our new camp, this time using our nylon mountain tent. When we use the tent we generally lay out one of the Space Blankets on the tent floor for extra protection from the inevitable rocks and twigs beneath. Quite often we'll lay out a second Space Blanket on the ground under the shade of a tree, to serve as a clean seat for sitting or napping. After our shelter

---

was secured, we proceeded to collect water from the little nearby stream.

The Rangers told us there would be water near our intended campsite, so we only brought enough to get us to our destination. The Ranger also warned us, when we picked up our backcountry pass, that because of giardia, we should not drink the water without treating it first. On a hot day, when you are already feeling dehydrated, the sight and sound of a cold running stream is almost too much to resist. But after splashing our faces and necks with liquid pleasure we grudgingly collected more fresh water in an aluminum pot and boiled it over our little cook stove for the necessary time to kill all of the nasty stuff it might contain. Then we poured the sterile water into our Nalgene bottles and let them sit in the stream to cool. We had to boil a lot of water to quench our thirst, to prepare our evening meal, and to get us back down the trail the next day, so we burned a great deal of white gas. That was good in one sense, since we would be packing less weight on the way out, but we also had to make sure we reserved enough to prepare our evening meal.

After the boiled water cooled we eagerly poured ourselves a Sierra cup full and, though our thirst was quenched, the bland taste of boiled water just didn't cut it. We survived, but didn't enjoy the processed water nearly as much as we would have enjoyed the wild running refreshment. Of course, if we hadn't boiled it, we would not have enjoyed ourselves a week later when the giardia took control of our digestive tract. There are some natural pleasures that we can no longer enjoy on this crowded planet.

As a side note, in 1992, backcountry campers built an illegal campfire which started a forest fire near the West Rim Spring, damaging many surrounding acres. Because of the selfishness of a few, the rest of us must now walk through a charred landscape and backpackers can no longer camp within a quarter of a mile of the spring. If we would all just follow the rules, and use common sense, we will all have the opportunity to enjoy these great landscapes.

Years later, when Anne, my second wife, and I prepared for one of our Grand Canyon trips, we decided an overnight backpack into the Kolob Canyon section of Zion would be a good workout and help get our bodies conditioned for our anticipated time under the pack. You can work your legs and lungs, but that extra thirty-five to forty-five pounds can really do a job on your shoulders, hips, and back. A few preliminary one-nighters can make a difference when preparing for a longer hike.

Kolob Canyon is located north and west of the main section of the Park, and must be accessed from a point off of Interstate 15. It's an impressive area that most people either aren't aware of, or choose to skip in favor of the better known features in the main canyon. So, as a result, Kolob Canyon is less visited, which suited us just fine.

Within this section is a natural sandstone feature known as Kolob Arch, near the confluence of two small streams about a quarter of a mile north of La Verkin Creek. We made this our general destination, obtained our overnight permits, and headed in along the La Verkin Creek Trail.

Heading in from Lee Pass, the trail gradually descends to the south through pinyon and juniper to a slightly wooded area across a sandy bench along an intermittent stream. It's fairly

---

level walking, except that much of it is through loose sand. That makes it like walking in a stream; you can never really get solid footing.

Along the way, in a sandy area with scattered cottonwoods, we encountered a small rattlesnake. That's always cause for an adrenalin rush. Shortly after that we reached La Verkin Creek, where the trail makes a sharp turn to the northeast. Here we found an inviting slab of water-washed sandstone and decided it would be a great place to take a break and slip out of our packs. We even kicked off our boots and cooled our toes in the ice water of the stream. Then we sat back to let our feet dry, and enjoyed a snack of whatever trail food we had with us at that time.

We hadn't encountered any other hikers until we stopped, but that stream-side location quickly became a magnet for wandering spirits. Everyone that came along wanted to spend a few minutes enjoying the view and the gentle sounds of the tumbling water.

After our rest we headed on toward our assigned campsite. And it was this stretch of trail that really annoyed me. It was quite sandy and frustratingly difficult to walk along. Loose sand always seems to take more energy and terrorizes my lower back. I can walk on a solid surface all day, but beach sand always does me in. Fortunately this stretch of trail is fairly flat and within a short time we made it to our assigned site.

It was a fairly nice location, under the cover of several deciduous trees and surrounded by tall bushes. There was a short cliff along one edge that overlooked La Verkin Creek, our source of water for the night and the return trip. But no more boiling for us. We had purchased a fancy new water filter that made the purifying job much easier. And the water tasted much better, even though all natural water tends to have more "flavor" to it than our usual tap or bottled water.

We set up our tent, as usual, and laid out Anne's Space Blanket under our sleeping bags inside. We used my original Space Blanket, which was by this time beginning to show signs of age and wear, as a doormat near the entrance to the tent. That way we would bring less of the fine sand inside. I weighted it down with two small stones to keep it in place.

In the afternoon we napped under the shade of the trees—one of the pleasures of backpacking—and as evening approached we prepared our meal over our little Coleman stove. As Anne stirred our dehydrated meals into something resembling real food, we spotted a cluster of three mule deer picking their way down the stream below us. A very nice, tranquil, scene. Around that time two sets of hikers passed by on their way farther up the trail. The last we saw of anyone until the next morning.

As evening approached, the weather began to turn, and the wind came up. We hurried our eating and clean-up, hung our remaining food from a tall tree to keep it out of the reach of the local rodents, and prepared to call it a day. The Park Service generally does not allow campfires in the backcountry because the fire danger is just too high, and there are just too many people out in the backcountry to warrant the risk. With no flickering fire to keep us company, we turned in.

Lying there inside the tent, drifting in and out of sleep, one hears all sorts of "unusual" sounds. We all get used to the little noises around our own homes as a furnace turns on or off or the refrigerator cycles through its normal routine. But in the wilderness there are sounds we are not accustomed to hearing. Twigs snapping, little clicks and pops, the wind through the tops of

---

the trees, and the heavy blanket of silence itself. On this night in Zion I swear that several deer tromped through our campsite as we tried to sleep. But when I'd sit up and look through the mesh door I could see nothing in the darkness outside.

The wind gusted from time to time, rattling tree branches and swooshing through the underbrush, tugging at the tent as it passed. Then came the unexpected rattling/crackling sound, like a sheet of thick plastic slapping from a backyard clothesline. Of course, it was my old Space Blanket, left outside as a door mat. The small rocks I'd used to weigh it down were not sufficient to resist the heavy tug of the storm moving in. The wind yanked it away from our entrance and unfolded it into a wonderful sail. It was gone into the darkness before we woke enough to realize what had happened. We could hear it being pulled and pushed all around our campsite, and then we heard it moving off into the distance.

I figured it was gone, telling myself I'd make an effort to locate it when the Sun came up. I imagined it shredded, littering the pristine landscape. As old and used as it was, it wasn't a great loss. It had served well over the years, and finally found its freedom in the wild backcountry of Zion National Park. A fitting end to for a well used piece of equipment.

In the morning we found that the temperature had dropped considerably. The wonderful spring weather had turned gray and nasty. It would be a cold hike out. While we tried to convince ourselves to crawl from our warm bags we heard a distant, sharp, pop/crack reverberating up the canyon; almost like the report of a rifle. But hunting is not allowed in the Parks, and, at that time, fire arms were prohibited. We listened intently for a repeat, to determine the point of origin. What we heard was a low rumbling followed by the crashing of tree branches and underbrush. The noise lasted just a few seconds, then stopped just as suddenly as it had begun.

Confused, we continued listening, but nothing. We new there were other campers off in that direction, but we didn't hear voices or any sounds at all. It was as if Nature had taken a deep breath, like us, and was listening intently to hear what might follow. But nothing. Our final conclusion was that a large slab of sandstone had separated from a cliff face (with the pop/crack) and had fallen off into the brush below. We only hoped there were no campers in its line of descent.

When we did crawl out of our tent we had quite a surprise of our own. There, on the other side of our campsite, was my Space Blanket, caught up in tall bushes in a tangle of red and silver. My first impression was that it was shredded, but when I retrieved the remains I found it to be completely intact, with the exception of one or two small holes where branches had poked through during its capture from the wind. I gently pulled it from among the twigs, shook it out, folded it as usual, and placed it back into my pack. Safe for another trip.

And indeed, as expected, it was a cold, windy hike out. We put on light windbreakers, but hadn't brought long pants. The cold wind on our bare legs kept us moving until we got back to the trailhead and the warmth of our vehicle.

We've used my old Space Blanket on two other occasions in Zion. On subsequent backpacking trips along the Horse Pasture Plateau through Potato Hollow and above Sleepy Hollow to the head of Telephone Canyon. Again, I think it was a preparation trip for another of

---

our long hikes across the Grand Canyon. The trip was uneventful, other than the continuously amazing scenery, and we found a really nice campsite in a clearing surrounded by widely spread lodgepole pines. It was a warm day, but we set up the tent anyway, and used the Space Blankets as usual. This time the wind didn't blow it away. But on that night I know we had at least one mule deer, a buck, tromp through our camp. I got to see his silhouette through the mesh of the tent door.

The last time we used the Space Blankets in Zion was on a one night backpack up to Cable Mountain, on the east rim. This was a difficult hike because of the steepness of the trail along the last ascent, and because there were no active springs on top; we had to carry two days worth of water. At eight pounds per gallon, water can really add weight to a pack.

Up on top we tread through a black forest of charred trees. The summer before there had been a forest fire in this area, and the vegetation had not yet recovered. At least near our campsite, right at the spot where the old cable structure still stands, the vegetation had not been harmed. So we had a great sandy location to set up the tent. But we'd forgotten to bring the custom made ground cloth for the octagonal mountain tent. Not wanting to place the thin nylon floor directly on the ground, we improvised by using my old Space Blanket. We then used Anne's newer blanket inside, beneath our sleeping bags. This arrangement worked great, but my old blanket took more wear and tear, since inevitably there were small stones and pieces of wood buried in the sand, each puncturing the thinning fabric.

That following morning, breaking camp, I held the old Space Blanket up to shake off the sand and noticed light shining through the many pin prick holes accumulated over its many years. It looked like a star chart of the heavens.

And it was then that I first realized my trusty old blanket probably needed to be replaced. It had endured years of service, but the twigs, thorns, rocks, and desert sun had taken their toll. On close examination I could see the surface beginning to lose bits of silver coating on one side while the opposite side had weathered to a dull red. The poor thing was fading away like an old soldier.

As we journeyed home after that trip I began a casual review of the places I had used that blanket, and all of the adventures it represented.

~ THE END ~

Created: December 11, 2006

Revised: January 16, 2011

Copyright © 2007 by Frank P. Stehno

All Rights Reserved

3,540 Words