Introduction: Some Reflections about the Grand Canyon National Park Centennial

By Byron E. Pearson

As a native Arizonan who has hiked all over Grand Canyon, slept more than fifty nights in its depths, ridden the Colorado River in a small boat, cast flies (successfully!) to trout in a myriad of its secret places, and researched Grand Canyon environmental issues for the last quarter century, I'll just come out and say it: I am unabashedly biased. Grand Canyon is my favorite place in the world. When David Turpie, editor of the *Journal of Arizona History*, asked me to edit and contribute to this issue in commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of Grand Canyon National Park, it was not only a wonderful professional honor but it also offered me yet another chance to immerse myself in the work of other people who study Grand Canyon—and who love it as deeply as I do. What a privilege it has been . . . and it has also been a lot of fun.

Grand Canyon is the measuring stick against which every other canyon on Earth—and in the solar system for that matter—has been gauged. Simply google "Grand Canyon" and one will discover that in the United States alone there are Grand Canyons of the Yellowstone, the South, the East, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Texas, and numerous other places. Farther from home, much farther in fact, one finds that Mars has a Grand Canyon and that Miranda, one of Uranus's moons, has canyons that are "twelve times as deep as

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the Grand Canyon."[1] Yet as apt as some of these comparisons may be, there is still only one original: the great chasm that is the identity of my native Arizona, one of the seven wonders of the natural world, Grand Canyon—the most sublime place on earth.

Long before anyone experienced the true meaning of sublime—and stood in terror and awe on the brink of one of Grand Canyon's rims or stated that it could not be described in words, and then tried to do so anyway—Grand Canyon just was. A mile-deep chasm 277 miles long, unnamed, unprotected, unloved, it just was. It existed long before humanity walked the Earth, a pure manifestation of absolute physical geological truth.

When first seen by Spanish explorers in 1540, Grand Canyon was described as an obstacle to travel. Nineteenth-century Anglo-Americans portrayed it as an impediment to development, completely without value, a "profitless locality."[2] Later it was viewed in economic terms for its mining and hydroelectric power potential. Only at the turn of the twentieth century, as Americans grappled with how to reconcile the economic and aesthetic value of nature, was Grand Canyon set aside and protected as a national park in 1919 by people with the foresight to realize that America's iconic landscapes would soon be gone forever if something wasn't done, and done quickly, to protect them.

"Leave it as it is," President Theodore Roosevelt thundered from the south rim in 1903 upon seeing the great chasm for the first time.[3] And although subsequent generations have not exactly followed his admonition, neither have they allowed the developmental interests to go unchecked, although there have been some close calls along the way.

We have not left it as it was in 1903, yet I believe if Teddy Roosevelt could weigh in on today, at the turn of Grand Canyon National Park's second century, he would approve of our efforts. A pragmatic man, Roosevelt understood that it would have been impossible to encourage people to come see Grand Canyon without building accommodations for them. A president who, more than any other, is responsible for the transformation of the presidency

[1] "Miranda," NASA Science, Solar System Exploration, available on the NASA website, https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/moons/uranus-moons/miranda/in-depth/ (accessed September 3, 2019).
[2] Joseph C. Ives, *Report Upon the Colorado River of the West* (Washington, D.C., 1861), 110.
[3] *Coconino Sun* (Flagstaff, Ariz.), May 9, 1903.

into the powerful office it is today, Roosevelt would applaud how the strong government he helped create has built upon the executive order he issued per the Antiquities Act to create Grand Canyon National Monument in 1908. As a man with an incredible breadth of interests, Roosevelt also would have appreciated the efforts of people who have tried to capture the essence of Grand Canyon in accordance with the dictates of their respective fields of expertise.

This anthology is a collection of ten essays by a diverse array of scholars who, first and foremost, are passionate about Grand Canyon. As each author is a Grand Canyon advocate, so too does each one present a different way for the reader to experience it. Some (Harlow; Usher, Stein, and Pearson; Youngs) focus upon specific topics such as burro eradication, river guiding, and tourism, using these studies and recollections as lenses through which one can examine larger issues such as exotic species management, river culture, and the economics of tourism. Others (Toro; Karlstrom, Crossey, Huntoon, Billingsley, Timmons, and Crow) look at how the four (yes, four!) dimensional features of the canyon have been reduced to paper in histories of Grand Canyon cartography and geological mapping, and how the methods used to create these images have changed over time.

Two articles probe how the canyon has been represented in the arts and humanities disciplines (Engel-Pearson; Stein) by exploring how authors and artists have tried to capture the canyon in words and on canvas from the time Europeans first gazed upon it. Others (Robison; Sweeney and Hirt) closely examine the canyon through the legal lenses that initially protected it as a national park and show how legal priorities and the nature of that protection have shifted from promoting tourism, at the expense of preserving the canyon's environment, to regulations designed to manage and enhance its ecology. One (Pearson) attempts to place the environmental changes that have occurred within Grand Canyon National Park during the last century into a global context of ongoing environmental transformations that have taken place over millennia.

As I reviewed the contributions to this centennial commemorative issue, I found myself invariably wanting to know more about each author's inquiry. I wanted to read more words, see more maps, examine more tourist literature. I wanted to know the logistics of burro removal, experience the adrenaline rush and terror

of running Crystal Rapid during extreme high water, and dissect the legal jousting that has taken place in congressional offices. I wanted to know more about rocks and mapmaking, and why certain methodologies and forms became emulated by generations of landscape artists. I wanted to know why, after four centuries of trying to describe Grand Canyon, we are seemingly no closer to a meaningful comprehension of it than García López de Cárdenas was in 1540.

For what do we really know about Grand Canyon? Does Grand Canyon exist? Of course! Can we plot the national park boundaries on a map? Absolutely! Can its rocks and layers be named? Without question! Can environmental change be chronicled? You bet! Can we (at least some of us) paint stunning visual representations of it or capture it in rapturous prose. Obviously! But what do we really know? Like Grand Canyon itself, this collection of essays raises more questions than it answers. A lot more. And that's a very good thing indeed!

Whether one is a newcomer to the wonders of the Grand Canyon State's namesake canyon or has nurtured a lifelong passion for this stupendous landscape, the original essays in this commemorative issue of the *Journal of Arizona History* will offer new perspectives and questions for consideration as they reflect upon the one hundredth anniversary of America's most iconic national park. The authors offer us the tools to begin our own inquiries and to gain a more complete understanding of Grand Canyon. It is my fervent hope that if enough people individually seek a greater understanding of Grand Canyon, learn about the struggles to preserve it, become aware of the pressures that now threaten it, and pause to hear Roosevelt's words that still echo to us across time, we—like the generations of Americans before us—will continue to act collectively to protect it.