

The testament of witness trees

The air is still and cool this early summer morning. The sun has done little to arouse any heat at the edge of the precipice of Black Canyon. Quiet and loneliness pervade the cliffs. Only the pinyon and juniper trees and I witness the dawn at the North Rim's Exclamation Point.

Exclamation Point is accurately described.

"Created" in the early 1990s when the North Vista Trail was blazed, the overlook is essentially wild. No rock wall, no railing, and no signs are placed here. The serene nature of this morning belies the struggle and the activity that may have taken place here.

The wind has been here. Drought has been here. Extreme heat and winter's icy grip have been here. The evidence of the battle is left over in the trees. Bare-naked branches, gnawed scars in the bark, twisted trunks – all give testimony to the harsh conditions.

Remnants of ancient and not-so-distant people are also here on the North Rim. Chipping sites, stone tools, and wickiups have been left behind. People have come to the chasm since antiquity, most notably the Utes who lived seasonally along the canyon's rim. They hunted small game, gathered the fruits of yucca and serviceberry, and harvested the pine nuts from the pinyon.

Some of these pinyons are monitored, like tree 408.



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

I camped next to it a couple of weeks ago. The soils are shallow, but 408 is quite tall. . . for a pinyon. It's no more than 15 feet high. Watched for health, number 408 probably provided shade near the canyon's edge while it observed the activity of Utes who came to the rim.

Older trees like this are sometimes called "witness trees." Being of some age, they bear silent testament to events and actions now long gone. Some of them are tracked, such as trees that survive on Civil War battlefields like Gettysburg or Manassas (the latter in Virginia). Some are used to guide archeologists to locate historic sites.

Closer to home, witness trees have been used to find locations at the East Portal town site in the depths of Black Canyon. Researchers matched a historic photo, which included a line of juniper trees, with the landscape as it is today. The trees were still there and pinpointed the site of the school house and a portion of the foundation.

Back on the North Rim, I wonder what relationships might have developed between Ute people and the canyon. Certainly they came to gain food and materials to ease their survival. But what did they feel when faced with the plunging cliffs? Perhaps their senses were heightened by the cliffs even as ours are today.

A number of years ago, Ute elder Clifford Duncan visited with us at the rim of the canyon in an effort to shed some light on these questions. He believed there could be some ceremonial and perhaps spiritual locations along the top. He couldn't be specific. And perhaps the entire canyon is blessed.

Some archeological evidence and prayer feathers found in recent times seem to support his view. Their ancestors embraced the stillness. They faced life head on, and when time allowed, they found union between spirit, stone and sky.

The record they had was passed down to younger generations by oral tradition. But by their separation from the place, some or even much of that may have been lost; except for the evidence held within witness trees.

These trees provide a glimpse into the sacred nature of the canyon. The whispers of the ancestors might be revealed on the breezes through their branches. The trees set us on common ground as people of different cultures who may seek to share equally in the sanctified.

We will never know if Exclamation Point (or any



A juniper tree, upper right-hand corner, witnesses a group picture of Montrose residents celebrating the opening of the first road to the rim of Black Canyon, September 1930 (upper photo). The first railings were installed some 30 years later. Dubbed the Dedication Tree today, it watches over visitors at Chasm View on the South Rim. (Submitted photo/ National Park Service)

specific rocky prominence in the canyon) provided a unity between human and hallowed spirit. But in the stillness, in that tranquility which can be found in grand landscapes, maybe it's enough to know that the pinyon and juniper trees continue to frame the transcendent while keeping silent for those who seek that peace.

Paul Zaenger has been a supervisory park ranger at Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park since 1993. Other park assignments include Mount Rushmore National Memorial and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

Introduction to choosing the right knife

Probably the single most useful tool any outdoor person can have with them would be the knife.

A pocketknife is a part of my everyday carry as one is with most people. I have carried a pocketknife for so many years that I am really lost without it.

I was probably around 8 years old when I got my first pocketknife. Having a knife meant I was old enough to take care of myself in the great outdoors. It had a blade that was so dull you couldn't cut peanut butter with it. A dull knife is more dangerous than a razor sharp one. Even though it was so dull, I managed to cut myself with it several times, before I lost it. I probably should have had a first aid class before my dad gave me the knife, but I digress.

With a knife, you can slice, cut, dig,



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

split, prep food, build a shelter, hunt, dress wild animals, clean fish, make a fire, pry, and have a makeshift screwdriver. Most of these things you probably not want to do with a knife, but in a survival situation all bets are off.

For our purposes, we will divide the knives into two categories; fixed blades and folding knives. Fixed blade knives are much stronger because they do not have the folding joint in the center, which creates a weak point. Folding knives are more compact, and most come with a metal clip that will secure the knife in your pocket. My first knife did not have this feature, which is why it now belongs to the ages.

For a folder, the most important feature is the locking blade. If a blade does not lock open, it will cut you as it closes when you try to use it. Stop by sometime and I will show you my collection

of scars to prove this.

You can purchase a pocketknife that comes with assisted opening. If you have arthritic fingers, this makes opening the blade much easier. I prefer assisted opening so I can open the blade with one hand because usually the other hand is busy holding onto the project I need the knife for.

Recently, Gov. Hickenlooper signed into law SB17-008, which legalized switchblades and automatic knives in the State of Colorado for all to carry. An automatic knife is one that opens under the power of a spring by pushing a button to extend the blade.

Automatic knives are my personal favorite because they can be opened with one hand. It seems that whenever I need to cut something, one hand is occupied with the project. I would mention that an important feature for any automatic knife would be a lock to prevent the knife from opening in your pocket accidentally, which can make for an exciting time trying to retrieve the knife without cutting various parts of your anatomy that should never be near a sharp blade. Again, ask to see my scar collection from carrying knives without that safety feature.

Pocketknives can be obtained with multiple blades and small tools, such as the Swiss Army Knife. These "MacGyver" type knife/tools are very useful in the outdoor world. Because of their compact size, they are great for detail type work. I prefer a portion of my blade to have serrations that make it much easier to cut ropes, vines, and tough cuts.

For superior strength, a fixed blade cannot be beat. A good, solid fixed blade is perfect for all the heavier-duty chores that you need to accomplish, such as splitting and chopping. Look for a blade that is full tang, meaning that the blade and handle are constructed of one continuous piece of metal.

I am not a fan of the big "Rambo" type knives, so popular on the survival television shows. They are just too big to haul around all day, especially with all the other equipment I carry

with me. I prefer my fixed blades to not have any serrations on the blade, leaving that to my pocketknife. I also avoid those "gut hooks" that are on the backside of the blade on so many hunting knives. You have to turn the sharp blade towards you whenever you use the hook. Again, ask to see my scar collection.

Since most fixed blades are worn in a sheath around your waist, I look for a blade that is 6 to 8 inches with a durable and comfortable handle, large enough for my hand. I still prefer a leather sheath to the fabric types but that is a personal preference. Leather is more comfortable to wear but does hold moisture.

The drawback for the fixed blade is that you wear it around your waist. I carry so much stuff in my pockets and attached to my belt now that my pants arrive ten minutes after I do. You could attach the fixed blade to your pack for carrying which saves on belt space.

Choose a quality-made knife and stay away from the cheaper imports. The low-end knives are usually made from cheap steel and will not withstand the demands made on them in the outdoor world. As with most things outdoor, you get what you pay for.

In the next column we will discuss some of the many different blade types available. It is difficult to find any one style that will do every chore well.

Like most folks, I have been buying new knives most of my life. Seems like I just can't refuse a shiny new blade when I see one. In the ideal situation, you should probably carry both types of knives with you in the woods. And if Mr. Murphy, of Murphy's Law is going to take part in the proceedings, you should have an extra knife in your pack. Until next time, see you on the trail.

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Pictured are a few pocketknives that would make good choices for a folder (first three on left) and fixed blade (three on right). (Submitted photo/Mark Rackay)

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