

McCormick
Huber
Wells

The Pride of the Elements

C. Bruce Brooks

It had been a cloudy, threatening morning, and at two o'clock the sun had yet to make its appearance when I entered a lookout cabin stationed at the highest point on the south rim of the Grand Canyon in Arizona. This was the last stop on my tour of the Southwest, and here, along with about forty other tourists, I was to hear a lecture on the subject of one of Nature's great wonders, the Grand Canyon of the mighty Colorado River.

Inside the cabin were many exhibits: fossils removed from the canyon wall, stuffed animals which gave us an idea of wild life at the bottom of the mile-deep gorge, a geologist's time chart consisting of rock samples which showed the schist found on the canyon floor to be millions of years old. A porch at the rear of the cabin seemed to totter on the very brink of the precipice, and far below we could see a winding brown ribbon which I knew to be the silt-laden Colorado. The sheer magnitude of the spectacle filled us all with a sense of awe, and conversation was carried on in whispers, as if loud voices might somehow shatter the beauty of the landscape.

The time for the lecture drew near. I reluctantly tore myself away from one of the telescopes which were fitted to the iron porch rail and settled myself resignedly in a chair at the rear of the porch, fully expecting to hear a dull account filled with statistics and geological jargon. But I soon found I was mistaken.

The lecturer, a forest ranger, began explaining to us the origin of the Grand Canyon. He told us that most canyons were formed by the gradual cutting process of a swift river eating its way downward through layers of soft rock. Then he made the unusual statement that the Grand Canyon had not been formed in that way at all; instead of the river's cutting downward, the land had moved upward very slowly through the centuries while the Colorado had remained at the same level, cutting and tearing at the canyon floor on its tumultuous way to the sea.

The ranger proceeded to point out the scientific basis for his statement. The area around the canyon, he told us, is a vast mountainous region known as the Kaibab, which is surrounded by low semi-desert areas on every side. The Colorado flows straight through the Kaibab from east to west and has its source to the northeast in an area of lower altitude. The river could not have run uphill; hence, it is still at its original level and the Kaibab has risen around it.

I had become deeply absorbed in the ranger's narrative, but suddenly I was aware that a storm was about to strike. A bolt of lightning hit the porch roof with a mighty crash. Fantastic blobs of white fire danced briefly before my eyes and were swallowed in the vastness of the canyon. The biting scent of ozone filled my nostrils. A woman shrieked; the group seemed on the verge of panic; but the ranger laughed away our fears. He pointed out that the cabin roof was studded with lightning rods and had been struck hundreds of times without being damaged. Just then the rain came and a whistling gale drove it under the porch roof, forcing us to dash into the cabin proper to avoid being drenched.

Here, huddled securely in a small room, we listened to the rest of the lecture while the storm raged without. When the ranger concluded his talk, we went outside and found that the rain had ceased; and, although the sky was still threatening, the dark-faced cloud banks were rapidly breaking up and scudding away before the wind. Great masses of steam rising from the sun-heated rock at the base of the chasm mingled with the dispersing clouds.

As I drove away from the lookout cabin, the sun burst through the lightening heavens and shone upon the canyon walls, revealing all the splendor of vivid color for which they are famous. Brilliant shades of yellow and red blended with tan and black to produce a scene the artist's brush could never capture. To east and west, the Grand Canyon stretched as far as the eye could see. Here was a favored view of Nature's handiwork. I shall always cherish the memory of it.

