

GUEST SPOTLIGHT



THE KID WHO CAN'T GROW UP AND AND DOESN'T WANT TO

This is the story of a boy who was born on the Colorado Plateau more than eight decades ago. It is a story about love of darkness that allows us to see distant light.

The kid grew up in the town of Kanab, Utah. Well, he tried to “grow up” but never could get the hang of it. His decade older sister calls him “The mean widdle kid” – a reference to a roll played by comedian Red Skelton.

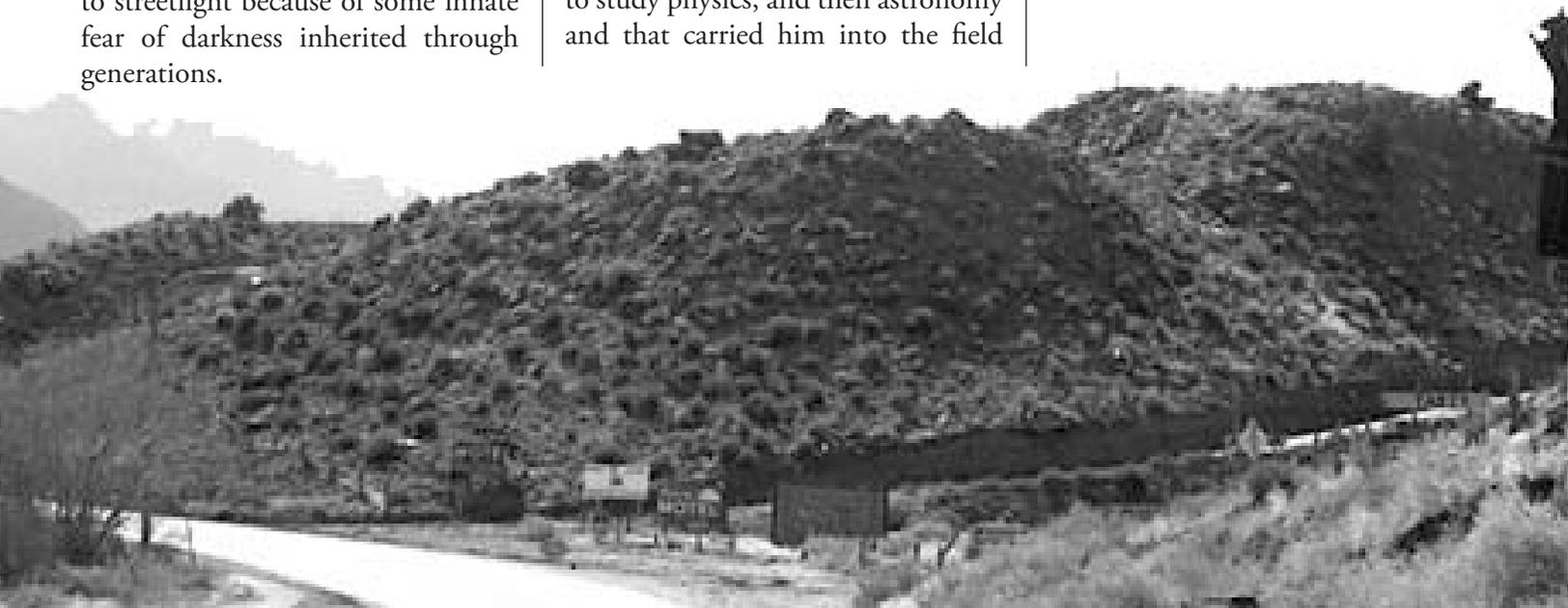
The sky was pretty dark in Kanab in those long-ago days; just a few streetlights on a few corners and lights at a few businesses. In one respect the kid did not like darkness. At night he would run from streetlight because of some innate fear of darkness inherited through generations.

His love affair with darkness probably began when he occasionally slept overnight on the lawn beside his home. He looked up at the beauty apparent overhead and began to wonder, as all of us do, about himself existing in all this beauty that surrounds us; not just beauty at night; beauty of those red hills, of the rocks, plants, animals and all the rest. He sensed that he was literally in the presence of the Sun when he felt its warmth upon his skin.

At home and at school the boy became obsessed with science more than with girls – oh yes, eventually he did fall in love with one woman and they began to have a family of boys. He went away to Universities to study physics, and then astronomy and that carried him into the field

of astronomy education. This began with a job at the Robert T. Longway planetarium in Flint, Michigan. From there he migrated to Michigan State University working at Abrams Planetarium.

Jumping way ahead to when the boy was about three-and-one-half decades old, while traveling back west with his family to visit relatives, they stopped for the night at Badlands National Park where they attended a campfire program. Not many trees to obstruct the sky at that NPS location! His family just wandered over to where the “ranger” was building a campfire for the evening program. He greeted them with the question, “Where are you from?”



As the ranger continued working he greeted all the other attendees with the same question. He also inquired about what people had been doing that day. It was interesting to hear the replies and learn that most of us were from fair-sized cities around the U.S.A., with a few from other countries. Finally, with the fire burning and the audience in place, the ranger looked at the group and began his presentation. Employing a small screen and slide projector he discussed the special features of the Badlands, talking about what he hoped people had noticed that day or should look for the next.

While the ranger did his work and it got darker, the kid, who used a planetarium to motivate people for enjoying and learning about the cosmos, became excited by the stark beauty of the canvas overhead. He wanted to call out “Look – look at the sky – just look at that wonderful vista, that exquisite beauty that encases us.” But he restrained himself throughout the presentation.

Back at camp, lying under the stars, he could not sleep; he never slept in a tent unless rain or insects made it necessary. Looking at the spectacular starscape of heaven he thought about what he had just experienced in

context with his own profession of using a domed projection screen to simulate what he now saw with such clarity. He whispered to himself, “That ranger was very skilled at his job. He knew his audience when he began the program and he expertly covered what he was supposed to tell them about the park. But wait! He missed one grand opportunity. Those people were experiencing something many of them had not likely known before. They came from lighted cities and here they were in silent darkness under those beautiful stars that seemed so close that one might reach up and pull them down to earth. Wasn’t that celestial vista something the interrupter might have used in his presentation?”

Next morning the sleepy man who still felt like a kid went over to the park office – just a small trailer-house building – and asked if he might speak with the “Naturalist”. When the “Interpreter,” as he learned they called themselves, came out the boy from the planetarium tried his best to tactfully ask if the park had considered

“What is the vertical boundary of a park?”

the opportunity to include the wondrous starry sky in its presentations. The reply was, “our job is to interpret the things that are unique to THIS Park and that is primarily geology, paleontology, wildlife and ecology, not astronomy.”

Driving on the way west again with family, perhaps only a mile or so from the park, the boy nearly stopped to turn around. “But, that starry sky last night WAS a unique feature of THAT Park for most of THAT audience. What is the vertical boundary of a park?”

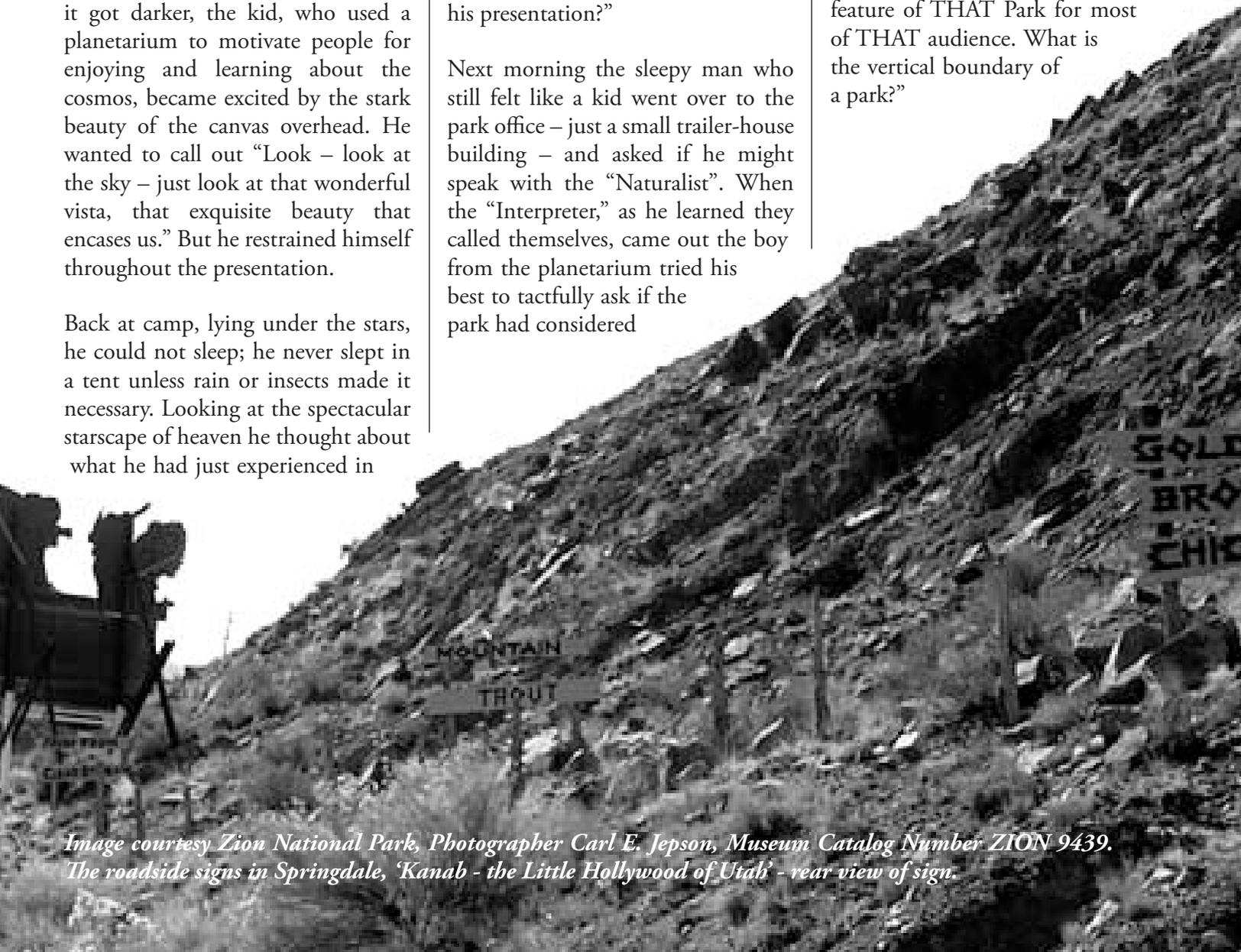


Image courtesy Zion National Park, Photographer Carl E. Jepson, Museum Catalog Number ZION 9439. The roadside signs in Springdale, ‘Kanab - the Little Hollywood of Utah’ - rear view of sign.



Sunset over the park, Mesa Verde National Park, 2014.

He encountered that same rationale in other places as well as a clever story that illustrates the situation. Picture the scene of a small group gathered on a hilltop with a ranger pointing out special features of a national park when he is interrupted by one of the group – “Ranger, what is that beautiful bright star up there?” Ranger: “Sorry, I do not know.” Visitor: “I thought rangers were supposed to know about everything in the park.” Ranger: “That isn’t in the park!”

Later on his first visit to Mesa Verde National Park with family, he pulled up to the Visitor Center overlooking Spruce Tree House about the same time that a man, woman and little boy arrived. The boy tugged at his father’s legs, jumping up and down, “can we go down there?” he asked. The man replied, “what for, we can see it better from up here than from down there.”

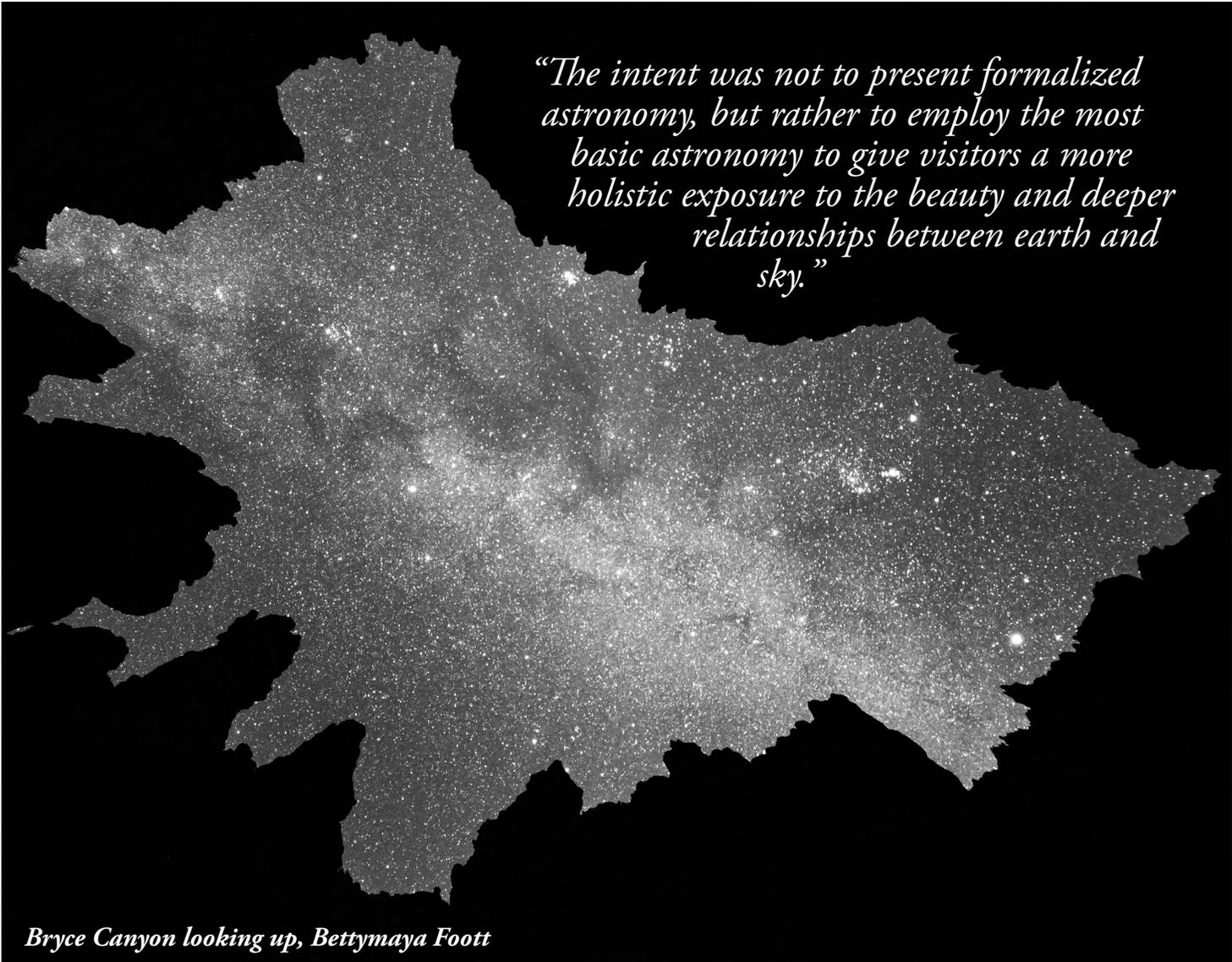
Going into the Visitor Center the Kanab kid and family explored the nice museum. When he asked to see the “interpreter” who soon appeared, he asked the now-familiar question; “Have you considered using the night sky in any of your programs,” and he received the familiar answer. “Our mission is to interpret what is unique to this particular park and that mostly concerns the people who lived here long ago.”

Of course, that is what they did and should do. Back home he went to Michigan State University library thinking that surely he could find some interesting bits about Native American astronomical beliefs and practices. He was overwhelmed at the abundance and variety of what he found, concluding that American Indian traditions of the sky were just as engaging and profound as those found anywhere else in the world. “Why aren’t they better known here in America,” he asked himself. Thus began one of the most important and interesting quests of his life. Exploring what has been known as archaeoastronomy, ethnoastronomy and cultural astronomy, our boy ended up attending lots of conferences at which he presented and published papers. His primary researches concerned Diné (Navajo), Pawnee and later Zuni sky traditions.

And so the man, but still a kid down inside, embarked on one of the most important journeys of his life – really more a quest than a journey. He became absorbed with the opportunity people at parks and other outdoor visitation places had. He was sure that they had a much better chance of helping people learn about the cosmos in parks than he did in planetariums.

While on a family vacation in the summer of 1971 he introduced what he called “sky interpretation” to a few National Parks – Rocky Mountain National Park, Bryce Canyon National Park, Capitol Reef National Monument and Grand Canyon National Park (South Rim). Sky Interpretation became, for him, akin to preaching the gospel of introducing basic astronomy to people out in nature. The intent was not to present formalized astronomy, but rather to employ the most basic astronomy to give visitors a more holistic exposure to the beauty and deeper relationships between earth and sky.

Then in 1972 he used a sabbatical from Michigan State University for a more formalized program at a dozen parks (Canyon de Chelly, Chaco Canyon, Glen Canyon, Zion Canyon, Cedar Breaks, Bryce Canyon, Craters of the Moon, Crater Lake, Modoc Lava Beds, Mount Rainier, Olympus and Glacier). At Canyon de Chelly Lloyd Jacklin, Chief of Interpretation, took him into the canyons to see what were being called “Planetarium sites” with groups of stars painted on ledge overhangs, and rock shelters. Thus began a more serious interest in Native American ethnoastronomy.



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Bryce Canyon looking up, Bettymaya Foott



Chaco Fajada, Bettymaya Foott

At Chaco Canyon that interest intensified. Watching Fajada Butte, a lone bluff standing majestically in the mouth of the canyon, our “Colorado Plateau kid” kept thinking that this was a most likely place where ancient people might have gone to make critical observations for calendar keeping and other reasons. The park superintendent told him and his two older boys how to climb the butte where they found rock art, including the spiral petroglyph that would become the famous “Sun Dagger” a year or so later. When they returned to the superintendent’s home the two younger boys came running out shouting, “we made a damage!” Dreading what might have happened, the hikers followed the pair of youngsters into the driveway where the boys were pointing at a

tiny replica of a puebloan ruin made of small rocks held together with mud as they shouted in unison, “see, we made a damage.”

Hoping that they might have clear dark night skies, they had carefully scheduled the times for visiting these places. In preparation for this trip they had asked what kind of weather they might expect. One park answered, “don’t worry, about weather, we haven’t had a drop of rain in months.” However, they drove into the area amid flashing lightning and resounding thunder. People began jokingly thanking them for bringing the first rain of the season. Meeting other family in his hometown our “Kanab kid” told his brother about the bad weather they had encountered. As they attended church together when the invocation

expressed thanks for the recent moisture, the brother whispered, “They are thanking the wrong person.”

The sky interpretation training program continued at many additional parks in the following years. As part of the effort five issues of a Sky Interpretation Resource Bulletin were published and distributed to interested parks. The bulletins suggested ideas to make the sky part of any park scene and included lists of astronomers from various universities and observatories who were willing, indeed eager, to visit parks and present programs to staff and visitors.

All of this led to experiences where this small town kid engaged audiences under starry skies in parks, on river trips, cruise ships – including a Halley’s Comet cruise – hill tops, night walks, etc. as well as in planetariums.

On one night walk at beautiful Crater Lake, he put a telescope at the base of a trail going up to the rim overlooking the lake, indicating that those who wanted to could stop and use the scope on the way back. They started up the trail in twilight, stopping to rest here and there. At each stop they looked at stars becoming visible with growing darkness.

Everyone in the group learned the names of those stars. Reaching the top, overlooking that magnificent lake, now under a jaw-dropping dark starry sky, people had a few “friends” up there. If they had waited until the top of the trail they would not have been able to pick those stars out from among the myriads of dimmer ones now visible. They looked around and talked with each other – this was not a lecture – it was an exchange of ideas about what could be seen.

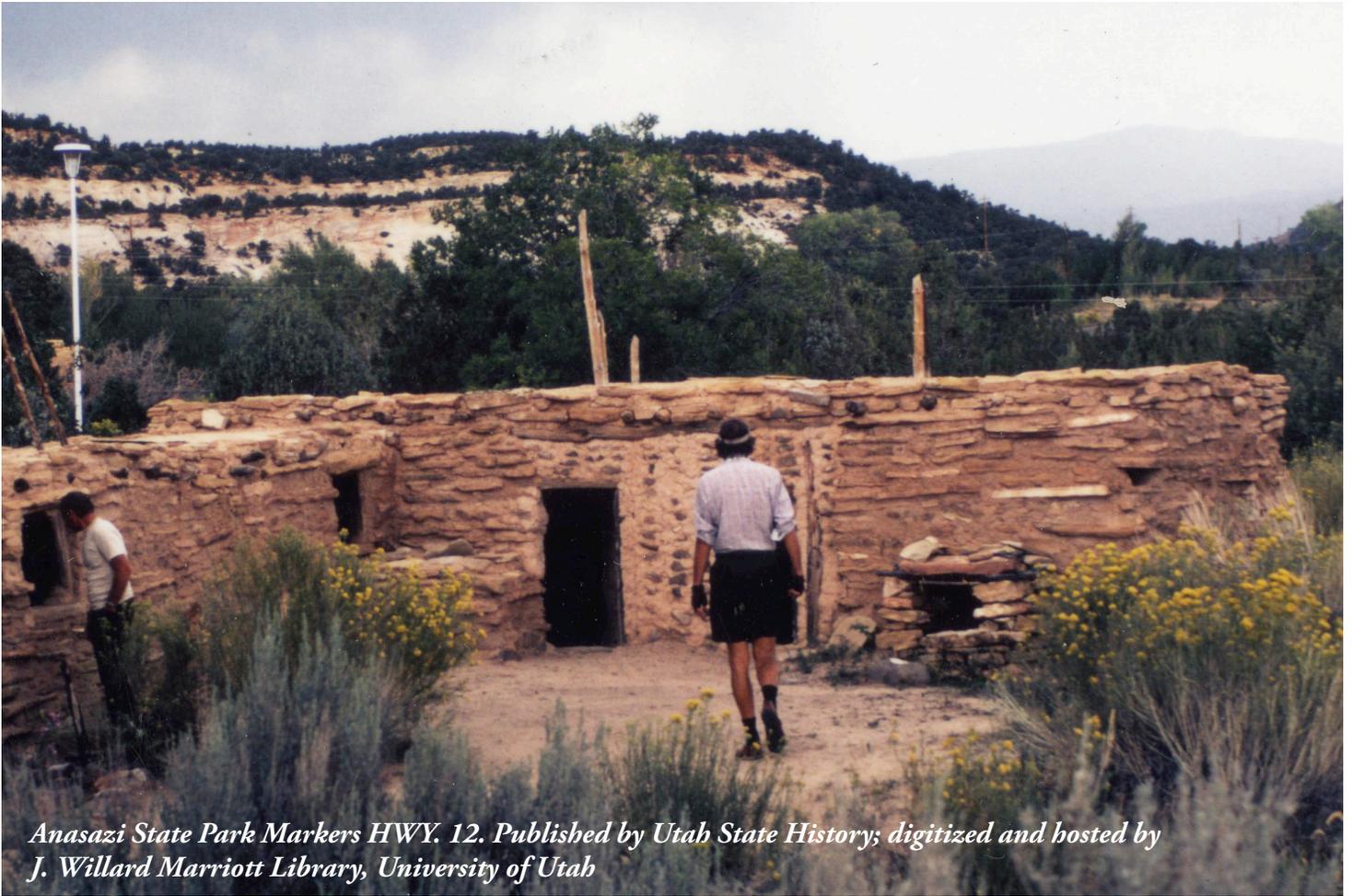
At one point they were directed along the Big Dipper from bowl to handle and on to the star Arcturus, “You can find Arcturus by remembering the phrase ‘follow the arc to Arcturus,’ “ the man said, then added, moving the

laser pointer farther down, “and here is Spica in Corvus. Some people say ‘follow the arc to Arcturus and drive a spike to Spica’; others say ‘follow the arc to Arcturus and speak to Spica.’” At that point one child piped, “You could say, follow the arc to Arcturus and spit on Spica!”

It was quieter going back down the trail. They walked carefully to avoid tripping, falling and tumbling in the darkness while they thought about how they had climbed a little way up into the sky where they stood on the rim of a crater amazed at the glittering cosmos. They did stop at the bottom of the trail to look with the telescope and continue conversing.



*The Milky Way illuminates the night sky over Crater Lake at Crater Lake National Park, Oregon.
Jeremy M. White / NPS*



Anasazi State Park Markers HWY. 12. Published by Utah State History; digitized and hosted by J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah

The kid spent a decade at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, another at the Hansen Planetarium in Salt Lake City and he taught a course titled “Astronomy in Our Lives” – no, not astrology, rather basic astronomy of the naked-eye sky – at both the University of Utah and Utah Valley University.

Taking a big jump in time we consider an example of how the two professional passions (encouraging astronomy education in beautiful places where lots of people go and exploring Native American traditions of the sky) of the kid came together. Having just conducted sky interpretation training at Capitol Reef National Park in May 1994, at

the urging of a Utah archaeologist, he drove over the Boulder Mountain to Anasazi Indian Village State Park to check on possible astronomical orientations of the site. Knowing that the most important astronomy for any village would likely involve sunrise and sunset observations to reveal times to plant and harvest crops, he walked through and around the village site.

From the village itself it was obvious that the visible horizons both to the east and west were not suited for such observations, but a bluff just west of the village, called “Schoolhouse Ledge” by the local residents, looked interesting. From the top of that bluff there was a perfect, nicely contoured distant horizon in both the sunrise and sunset directions, and it was

most interesting to find that there was a tiny set of room blocks on the east edge of the bluff. From up there it was obvious that the entire annual calendar could easily be defined.

So our Colorado Plateau Kid worked with the park archaeologist, climbing to the top of the ledge many times throughout the year to photographically document the sunrise calendar showing that Schoolhouse Ledge was a likely place where the village Sunwatcher could have done his work so that people who lived there about 1,000 years ago could have an accurate reliable calendar to know when to plant, harvest and do other important things.

OK, that is surely enough about this small town kid who attempted, but failed, to “grow up” on the edge of the Colorado Plateau. When he retired from formalized teaching, he returned to his “Center Place” among the red hills of Kanab.

Over the decades of his life so much has changed! The “Earth at Night” photograph taken from orbit tells it all. The starry sky is, as surely as can be, on the endangered list for most humans. Even in tiny communities lights begin to overwhelm our view

of the cosmos and without that we cannot hope to comprehend our own deepest origins. Almost in a panic with the expectation that endangered darkness might not survive, it is somewhat comforting to know there are numerous efforts underway to save darkness so that we can see where we came from and recognize pathways leading toward what we might become. We are, after all, one example of the universe being able to comprehend itself, and without darkness what would we know about the vast cosmos we emerged from?

“We are, after all, one example of the universe being able to comprehend itself, and without darkness what would we know about the vast cosmos we emerged from?”



Earth at Night. NASA's Earth Observatory/NOAA/DOD

POSTSCRIPT

The kid from Kanab, Von Del Chamberlain, is pleased to be part of a group working to establish the Stellar Vista Observatory dedicated to helping members of his community and visitors look into darkness with eyes and lenses, exploring the cosmos for themselves. He has summarized his own lifelong experience with such exploration by saying, "The better I know the cosmos, the more I love the Earth."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Von Del Chamberlain received a BA degree with major in physics from the University of Utah and a MS degree in astronomy from the University of Michigan. He taught classes for the University of Michigan, Flint Community College, Michigan State University, University of Utah and Utah Valley State College (now Utah Valley University). His profession has been primarily that of museum and planetarium administrator and educator, with considerable time spent in sky interpretation in parks and other outdoor settings. He has lectured in classrooms, on cruise

ships, in planetariums and out under nature's stars. Major employment has taken him from Flint Community College to Michigan State University, the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum, the Hansen Planetarium in Salt Lake City where he retired in 1996, and Utah Valley State College. He was Scholar in Residence for the Pope Southwest Desert Institute at Utah Valley State College. He is most noted for his studies in Native North American ethnoastronomy. He is the author of nearly 200 articles and papers, and five books the latest of which is a novel titled, *Children of the Sky*.

LEARN MORE

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[When Stars Came Down to Earth: Cosmology of the Skidi Pawnee Indians of North America](#)

[Songs from the Sky: Indigenous Astronomical and Cosmological Traditions of the World](#)

[Von Del Chamberlain Cultural Astronomy Collection](#)

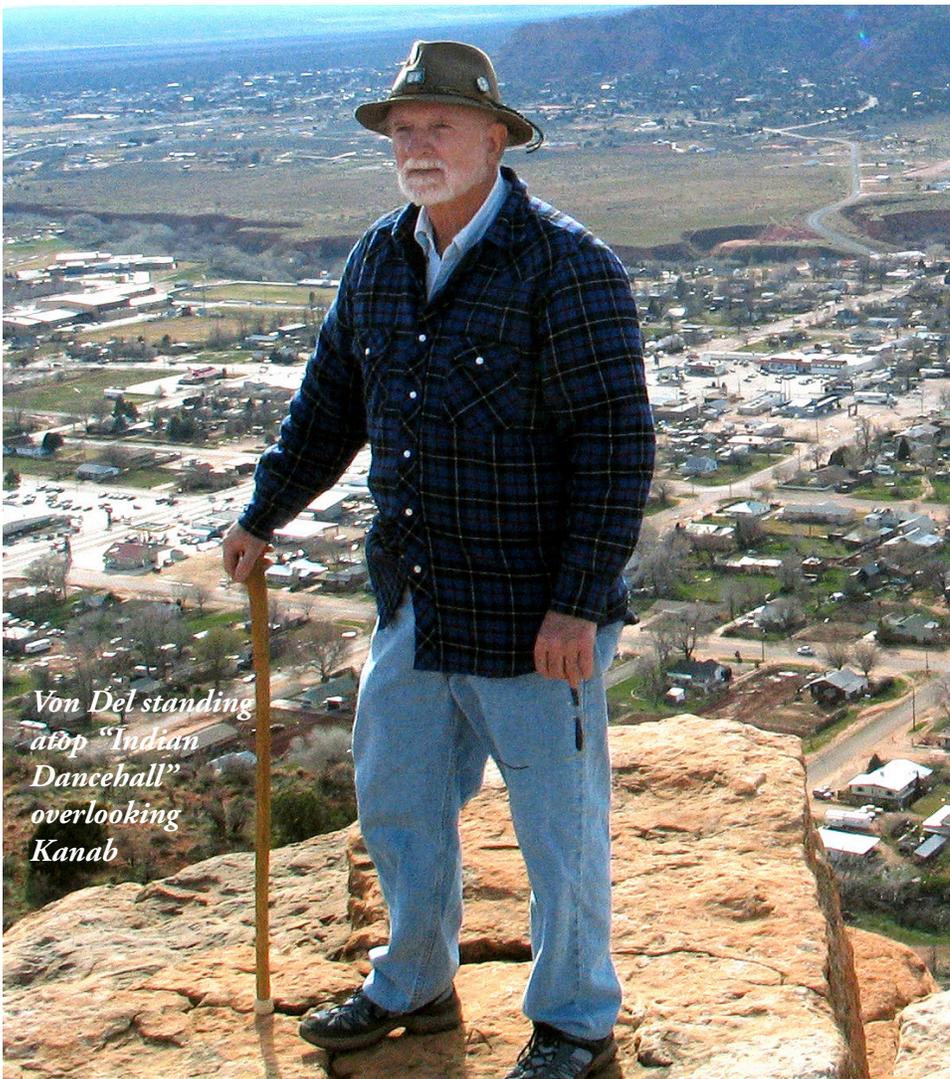
[Great Lakes Planetarium Association, speaker Von Del Chamberlain](#)

[Sunrise Calendar Keeps Time at Anasazi State Park](#)

[His Eyes on the Skies: Von Del Chamberlain](#)

[Downwinders Interview with Von Del Chamberlain](#)

[Stellar Vista Observatory](#)



Von Del standing atop "Indian Dancehall" overlooking Kanab