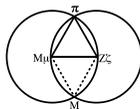


Paid in Sunsets

A Park Ranger's Story

By David. A. Dutton

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*To Kate
Who taught me to never give up*

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Acknowledgements

When someone suggests that you should write a book, you have options: run like hell the other way, or pick up a pen and paper. I chose the later, but not without considerable urging. If it were not for the encouragement of my wife Mary B to write a book about my rangering yarns, it might never have become a reality. Same goes for my son Logan, who freely offered millennial input, and when the time came, stepped up and cared for his old man.

Thanks also to other family members, all of whom endured the telling and retelling of Ranger stories at family get-togethers; brother Tom—your advice was always collegiate, always salient; brother Paul, a working man—your real-life perspectives were always encouraging, and Mom, who, at two years shy of being a nonagenarian, reminded me at every turn, “David, I’d like to read the book before I die.” No pressure there.

Colleagues Nancy Rogers, Rebecca Miner and Vance Austin, Park Rangers all, are owed a debt of gratitude for their insights and observations when the manuscript was in its infancy, and who helped me to keep the narrative grounded.

This book certainly would not have come to fruition without the guiding hand of Lauren Camp—accomplished poet and artist. Her wisdom, unfailing patience and uncanny ability to gently peel band aids off of bad writing, helped me to keep going, even when I didn’t want to.

Lastly, a shout out to all Park Rangers across this land—men and women who put on a uniform and step into the crowd to bolster the ranks of the Thin Green Line—you are the unsung heroes!

Thin Green Line

Some national parks have long waiting lists for camping reservations. When you have to wait a year to sleep next to a tree, something is wrong.
~ George Carlin

I was a Park Ranger once. For thirty-one years. Everyday I put on a uniform and a big hat, stepped into the crowd, and reinforced an ideal—what Rangers refer to as the “thin green line”—ensuring America’s treasures are protected and enjoyed for future generations.

Park Rangers are emblematic of many things—ruggedness, individualism, courage. They’re called upon to do dangerous things, like rappel down cliff faces to rescue stranded climbers, or cut fire lines in advance of raging forest fires. I didn’t do those things; what I did was share the natural world with others.

Somewhere in my memory archives, maybe when I was six years old, I remember a family vacation to Grand Teton National Park. I recall sleeping in a battered pup tent along with my older brother Tom, and having to go pee in the middle of a cold night. I walked bare-footed to the outhouse, cursing every pointy Lodgepole pinecone I stepped on. Trembling in cotton PJ’s, I vented into a porcelain trough mounted along a wall. Outside the kibo, garbage cans were being savaged by bears. *Why didn’t I just piss outside the tent?* I sprinted back (pinecones be damned), torpedoed into my sleeping bag, and shivered my way to warmth, exhilarated and scared at the same time. The next day, I told a

Park Ranger about my experience. He took a knee, put a strong hand on my shoulder, and told me to be careful around bears.

When I was about to enter junior high school, my family moved to Shadow Hills—a modest, middle class enclave in the east end of the San Fernando Valley—where houses, horse corrals and flies coexisted. My curiosity for the natural world intensified. I collected bugs of every imaginable variety and color, as well as spiders, snakes, lizards (especially the Paleozoic-looking alligator lizards), worms, pupae, toads...whatever I could find. Some of the beasties I put in glass jars with lids (always with holes for air). After a little while, I'd let them go.

One summer morning, I foisted a writhing gopher snake on Mom. I knew it wasn't a rattlesnake, but she might have thought otherwise. The snake's beautiful cream and dark diamond markings are strikingly similar to a rattlesnake's. No matter. Mom shrieked and shrieked. I knew snakes didn't have ears, which is probably why it seemed unfazed by the ordeal. I released the snake in a field below our house—what Dad called “the lower forty”—and caught him again a few years later. Absent kinks, he was taller than our front door. After I joined the Army, Mom wrote me and said the snake had been *accidentally* run over by our neighbor, Mr. Nelson, as it lay stretched across his driveway adjacent to the lower forty. I never forgave Mr. Nelson for it.

In high school, Mr. Comoletti, our assistant football coach, and a man who unfailingly wore a white golf cap, talked to our health class about his summers as a Park Ranger at Yosemite. I was intrigued by his exploits. It started me thinking: How great it would be to live and work in the outdoors?

Following a brief stint in the US Army, I returned home with a plan. I enrolled in the Natural Resources Management program at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. For my entrance essay, I wrote that becoming a Park Ranger was encoded in my DNA. I'm guessing the selection board liked that. In the spring of 1978, I packed my bags and said goodbye to sleepy Shadow Hills.

At the time, the Natural Resources Management (NRM) program at Cal Poly was in its infancy. It was coupled with the School of Agriculture, seemingly as an afterthought. It may have looked something like this:

School of Agriculture

and Natural Resources

During my freshman year, I took an animal parasitology course. The classroom resembled a sheep pen with desks, and smelled like a petting zoo. The instructor started off by asking the class their respective fields of study.

“Show of hands,” he asked, “how many of you are bovine?”

Veterinarians study cows, but these folks didn’t look veterinary. They were the sons and daughters of farmers and ranchers, who would return home after getting an education, and manage large agribusinesses. I was a suburban kid who wanted to be a Park Ranger. The inquisition continued.

“Equine?” A spattering of hands rose up, although the pool was steadily shrinking.

“Ovis?” A few tepid hands more.

“Sus?”

After he’d exhausted his barnyard list, he turned to me and asked: “Sir, you didn’t raise your hand. Why not?”

“I’m an NRM major,” I answered, proudly.

“Oh, you’re one of them.”

As “one of them,” I quickly became immersed in every imaginable “ology”—mammalogy, ornithology, herpetology, plant ecology, dendrology, plus a boatload more. I often wondered—after spending three hours in an Entomology lab trying to key out a species of leafhopper—how this would help me become a Park Ranger, but I persevered.

Just before completing my sophomore year in the spring of 1980, I dropped by my faculty adviser’s office. I needed guidance on how to break into the field of Rangering. My résumé was

anorexic—grocery store bagger, horseshit shoveler, deputy assistant afterschool playground attendant, butcher, baker—these weren't exactly the experiences that land you Park Ranger jobs. My adviser, a stylish academian with plaid pants, a bowtie and saddle shoes, suggested I apply for a position with the Student Conservation Association, an organization specializing in hands-on environmental stuff.

"Federal agencies work them like mules," he said. "Kind of a cheap labor force. In exchange you get some valuable outdoor experience. And they'll even pay you five dollars a day!" He handed me a pamphlet.

"Five dollars a day?" *That's doable if I cut down on beer.*

I took the SCA application home to my apartment, complete with a dying ficus, paper thin walls and orange shag carpet, and began writing. A month later, I received a phone call from a nice lady at SCA Headquarters. I'd been accepted at Bandelier National Monument—a National Park Service outpost in the Jemez Mountains of northern New Mexico. I thanked the lady and hung up the phone.

I popped a beer from the fridge, found a dated atlas, and sat down at the kitchen table. New Mexico? I pictured Wylie Coyote baying atop buff-colored mesas, steely-eyed sidewinders slaloming through dunes of white sand, and lots and lots of prickly cacti.

#

It's 1,041 miles from San Luis Obispo, California, to Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico, not counting the half-mile detour I made to the Cork 'n' Bottle liquor store to stock up on the best road food of all time—corn nuts. I stuffed my '63 VW Bug—which was only three colors, if you didn't count the gray bondo—with everything I figured I needed for three months. I'd be joining legions of idealistic SCA neophytes fanning out across the nation, all eager for a career opportunity in the great outdoors.

By late afternoon on my first day, I'd made it to Barstow, California. I gassed up, and bought a Sony Walkman and a Billy Joel cassette at Radio Shack. Some asshole had stolen my prized Blaupunkt AM/FM stereo when I stopped in Bakersfield. The theft left an unsightly hole in the dash, which I covered with silver duct tape. Next up, Needles, California—a furnace-like stopover on the western banks of the Colorado River—internationally recognized for setting world record temperatures. *No AC, no cruise control...but hey, I have the Piano Man on the boom box.*

By early evening, the Bug and I struggled to reach the top of the Kaibab Plateau. I pulled off the interstate in Flagstaff, Arizona, and into a gravel parking lot that fronted a log cabin with a flashing neon Hamm's Beer sign in the front window. I went inside and ordered one. The place hummed with a collegiate vibe, and smelled of spilled hops, sweat and perfume. I'd not factored a hotel stay into my meager travel budget. Gas, corn nuts and a Walkman were about it. I asked several coeds where I could camp.

"Anywhere," they said. "Just pull off the road, and camp under the pines. Everyone does it."

I washed down a greasy burger with another icy Hamm's, and set out in search of a place to bed down for the night. A half-hour later I was hopelessly lost on a dark road, looking for anywhere to lay out a sleeping bag. Powered only by a six-volt battery, the Bug's headlights were no match for the inky pitch of the Kaibab forest. The ascending road truncated, and I turned in. Headlights shined on a small patch of grass. *This will do nicely.*

I spread out a tarp, draped my sweaty clothes over a nearby post, and slithered into my sleeping bag. Lying cocooned in goose down, I stared up at our galaxy. At 7,000 feet above sea level, the Big Dipper seemed close enough to grab its' handle. The next day, if everything went well, I'd be at Bandelier National Monument.