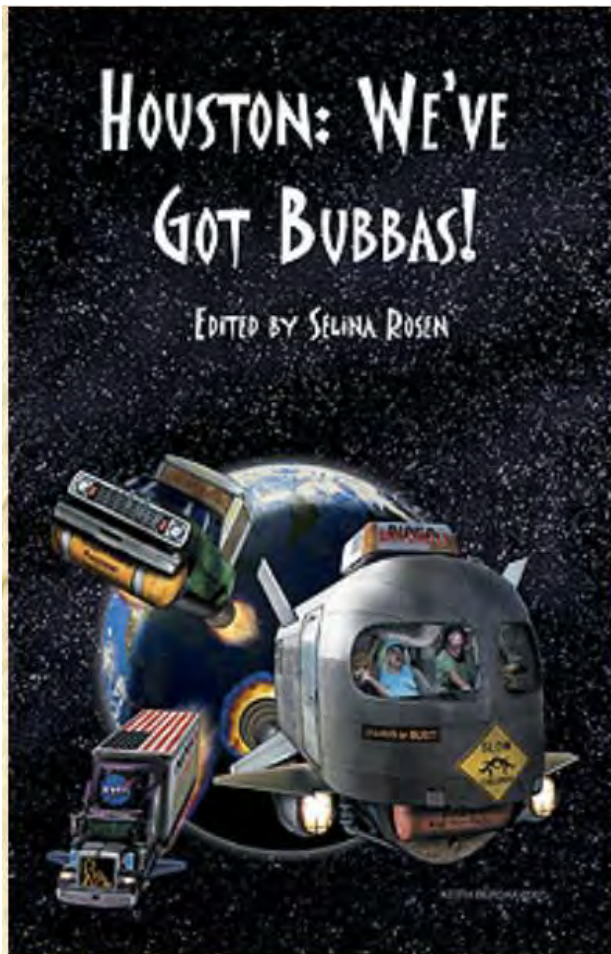


My Fairly Unusual Childhood Experiences

Paul Carlson
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School Trips

Our adventures stretched well beyond northern California. Every year the teachers hosted long field trips, according to their individual interests and experience. Each lasted a week or two.

Jim Stein, with his sturdy Land Cruiser, would bring a group of students to Baja California. Unfortunately I did not go, however one or both of my sisters did.

Bill Kenney (Alice's husband) knew the owners of a school on Saturna Island, in the straits near Vancouver, British Columbia. Each year the schools would switch places, and most of their (fewer) students would come to Pinel, while a group of our kids would fly up to Canada.

I went during my first year at Pinel. I recall some of the older kids, and student teachers, building a native style sweat lodge on a nearby beach. Nerd that I was, and not having seen one before, somehow I did not think of it as a sauna. Instead, I recall sitting in there with most of my clothes, and my hiking boots, still on. I should note that some of the older girls wore considerably less, and I was reaching an age where this caught my special attention.

After working up a sweat inside the lodge, the idea was to jump into the ocean. The water was calm, surrounded by many islands, and icy cold. At some point I took off most of my clothes and jumped in also, that can be quite a challenge. Like a cartoon, where you leap in, then come flying back out, just as fast. But I persevered.

After staying at the school there, we rented bicycles and took the big car ferry over to Vancouver Island, then rode into Victoria. The highway, at that time, wasn't designed for this, and it was actually quite dangerous, sharing a narrow outer lane with a stream of big trucks.

At some point the locals had mercy on us. I recall piling all the bicycles into the back of a truck, then riding on into the city.

We stayed in the basement of a large church on Quandra, as I recall. Unfortunately, for the first and only time in my life, I was struck hard by homesickness. I could not understand what was happening, and tougher-guy friend Doug B was also puzzled, as I'd break into tears.

I was enjoying our activities, loved Butchart Gardens and everything, yet it got so bad, one of the teachers sacrificed a day and took me all the way to Vancouver airport, to fly home early. That day or the next, the whole group was interviewed on local television, and I so wished I'd been there. To this day I don't fully understand, and except for brief flashes, it never happened again.

One time, when one of my son's friends was sleeping over, he got up (but Joshua stayed asleep), in the throes of homesickness. Even though, in his case, he was just a few miles away. But I sure could sympathize, and somehow knew what to do. No lectures, I just read him a book until he fell back to sleep.

Our most popular and best-known venture was hosted by Ray Amir and his friends the Flasher brothers. This was a visit to Havasu Canyon, a portion of the Grand Canyon that is home to the Havasupai Indians. Their reservation is on the canyon floor, and in the years since, they've successfully sued to have much more of their ancestral lands restored, adjacent to the national park.

Many people have seen scenic calendars, and movie scenes, set at the base of the fantastically gorgeous Havasu Falls, with its distinctive bluish water and travertine pools.

We took two vehicles, full of eager kids. As I recall, I went twice, and immensely enjoyed each trip. We'd drive toward Bakersfield, and stop at one small town Basque restaurant, where we'd stuff ourselves silly. The place reflected Ray's own heritage; they had a puli dog, and would play "tobbely" i.e. backgammon, seemed like all day.

Then we headed east across the desert through Barstow, and into Arizona. First we'd veer south, and spend a night in Sedona. At the west edge of town, along Oak Creek, there was a public campground available. (Later it changed to a day use park, then got popular enough to fill its parking lot, even as fancy new houses surrounded the area. Last time we went by there, it was jam full and we couldn't even stop by.)

One year, a utility crew was putting in a new line, and setting poles into that rocky landscape. As we often did, us kids quickly befriended the crew, and they showed us how everything was done. We even saw how they used dynamite to blast some stubborn rocks, with of course, all the standard safety measures.

Another tradition was to make a huge vat of hot cocoa, drink a bunch of it, and fall soundly asleep. Adding evaporated milk made it taste richer, a simple lesson I'm told has lasted those kids a lifetime.

Then we'd drive to Hualapai Hilltop, at the lip of Havasu Canyon, leave our major belongings and supplies to be picked up by mule, and hike on down. Most guide books recommend a full day to get down there, and another to get back up, though we kids set a pretty good pace. At the time, around 1970, it was nothing but a gravel parking lot. But, even then, the local Indians were talking about ways to bring in more tourists, and a better income for the tribe. A cable lift system and hotel were mentioned, and by now there's a helipad, for those who don't want to, or cannot, make the long hike. (Seems this area often gets confused with the Hualapai Indian reservation to the west, but that's many miles away by road.)

Below the reservation and its ancient Supai Village, you descend past the famous Mooney Falls and Havasu Falls, then reach a National Park Service campground. For years the camping area was unattended, just occasionally patrolled, but then during one holiday a crowd got out of hand. So, the second year I went down there, Ranger Dave was on site, in a little cabin of his own. We'd all sit around a campfire and swap stories.

I can now honestly report that I've fallen off the Grand Canyon and lived to tell the tale. More exactly, there's a steep ravine known as Ghost Canyon just west of the campground. My rock climbing skills are marginal, back then nonexistent. So I tried to climb up that little canyon, leaned in too close to the rocks, and slipped. Went flying past the ledge I'd been standing on, down maybe ten feet to the bottom. Where I landed upright, on a pile of streambed sand. Nothing injured but my dignity. Good thing too, because nobody else was with me.

Back then, the US government had a program (now seen as notoriously racist, and worse yet) of placing all Indian children into special boarding schools. The Havasupai tribe endured this too, all their kids were in a school near Flagstaff.

Earlier Pinel visits brought many encounters, and I was later told, our kids attending church in the village one Sunday became a real icebreaker. Our group was the same age as their absent kids, and we really got along well.

This was, of course, before home computers, and Supai Village hardly had any utilities back then. So the local men played checkers, and became very very good at it.

Several of us boys spent a lot of time with one guy, at first he said "I'm Buffalo," but later shared his everyday name of Buford. Sheldon was a rated tournament chess player, and when challenged to a game of checkers, assumed it would be a breeze. Instead, as I watched, Buford wiped the floor with him. Double jumps all over the board, a quick decisive victory. The second game, Sheldon did his best, but still lost.

Buford had horses, so we'd ride along the trail with him, sometimes make our way down toward the campground. I remember coming upon two men skinny-dipping in the creek, which Buford did not care for, so he rode his horse into the water and stomped around, sending a torrent of mud upon those casual campers.

The man was also good with a lasso. When I was walking along the trail, he'd come up quietly on his horse, and lasso me (at other times, some of the other kids), then canter off, so I'd have to run along behind. It was slow motion, not dangerous or anything. I soon learned to be wary, and when the rope came down, I'd instantly raise bent arms, snap my hands upward, and fling the lasso loop back over my head.

One time my buddy Peter was riding with some of the locals, and two tourist ladies came along the trail. At that time, Peter had long black hair. I was walking nearby, and hear one lady exclaim, look at that cute Indian boy. We did not correct them, but soon after, had a good laugh.

Reeds grow along the mineral-laden creek, and the Havasupai ladies made baskets to sell to tourists. One young lady, named Minnie, was quite skilled. She didn't have any more, and so I bought one from an older lady. Unfortunately I lost track of it somehow, over numerous moves and life changes.

There were some troubles. One year we waited in vain for our food and supplies to show up. After a while we went back to the village, and talked to the tribal manager, I think the only white guy living there. He implied that the local guy who was going to pick up our stuff had certain problems, and didn't make it on time. They got some extra supplies from the little village store, to tide us over. No harm done.

That tribal manager, I think his name was Ted, had an impressive skill. He would dive off Navaho Falls, into the deep pool below. Head first, smooth as could be. I saw it myself, wouldn't dare try that, but Ted made it look easy.

Some of the kids would make an extra hike, down into the Grand Canyon proper, and visit the Colorado River. Alas our time was limited, and I could not do everything.

One year, three of us decided to hike out the night before, by starlight. We got an okay, and I don't think we had a flashlight anyway. Since then I've read about nocturnal desert wildlife, but we did not encounter any, at least who let us know about it.

Talk about night vision, we could see quite well by the stars alone. So many! I realized that I could get some objective measurement, so I counted 16 stars within the bowl of the Big Dipper. Later on, living in some areas, I was lucky to spot that constellation at all.

Eventually I wrote a fantasy tale, which was included in the Yard Dog Press anthology *Houston, We've Got Bubbas*, based largely upon my experiences at Supai.