

Few Visit This Hard-to-Reach National Monument in Southern Utah, but Those Who Do Never Forget Its Soaring Arch of Stone

BY RALPH GRAY

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With Illustrations from Photographs by the Author

THERE still are empty spaces in the United States. Along the Utah-Arizona border a desolation of stone and sand rolls on and on—a nightmare jumble almost unmarked by signs of man.

In the midst of this red-and-yellow wilderness of slickrock, at the heart of a vast roadless area, rises Rainbow Bridge, one of the natural wonders of the world. World travelers number it high among the sublime sights of creation (opposite and page 556).

Yet so remote and inaccessible has Rainbow Bridge remained since its recorded discovery by white men that in almost half a century fewer people have seen it than view Grand Canyon in two average summer days.

Talking with Neil M. Judd, leader of many National Geographic Society expeditions in the Southwest and a youthful member of the party that discovered Rainbow Bridge in 1909, I became inspired to see for myself this hidden gem of Uncle Sam's jewel case.

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← Rainbow Bridge Spans the Dusty Creek That Carved It out of Desert

So lost is this stone arch in the immensity of Utah's red rock and yellow sand that white men did not discover it until August 14, 1909. Within months the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE published the first definitive account and pictures: "The Great Stone Arches of Utah," February, 1910, by Byron Cummings, one of the discoverers. Additional articles followed in October, 1911, and February, 1923. The September, 1925, Magazine presented Rainbow's first picture in color.

With popular interest aroused, President William Howard Taft on May 30, 1910, preserved Rainbow Bridge for all time by proclaiming it a national monument.

Almost as long as a football field, the bridge is wide enough for a two-lane highway. Among the world's natural bridges and arches, it stands first in size. Few can match the perfection of its lines.

Ages ago, while digging its channel, Bridge Creek cut into necks of sandstone. The stream wore away other formations, but this one it penetrated, leaving a great rib of rock suspended in air.

The author's party reached this remote formation in three ways: here by air; by river, and by horseback.

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Kodachrome by Edwards Park, National Geographic Staff

Though no highway reaches within miles of it, I found, surprisingly, that there are three "roads" to Rainbow. With Edwards (Ted) Park of the National Geographic Staff, I tried them all. We traveled first by boat up the Colorado River, then overland on horseback, and finally by plane. In each case half the joy of seeing Rainbow was getting there.

We wanted to take the river road first. Maps told us the deeply entrenched Colorado surges within six miles of the bridge. But would the river be high enough for navigation? Where could we find a boat?

Cowboy Turns River Guide

"Look up Art Greene at Marble Canyon," a friend in Gallup, New Mexico, told us. "He has a place perched on the rim and keeps a boat at Lees Ferry."

Marble Canyon lay 300 miles away, but our friend gave directions as though it were a ditch at the edge of town. He knew Art Greene as well as if he lived in the next block.

"Art will take good care of you," he said. "No one knows the river better. And when you're on the Colorado, having an expert along might save your insurance company a lot of money."

"Funny thing about Art," another said in the best tradition of Western exaggeration and humorous insult. "He was a poor but honest cowboy for years before he turned to river piracy. Now he owns that big setup he calls Cliff Dwellers Lodge, hobnobs with the governor, and doesn't blink an eye when people call him the Baron of Northern Arizona."

By the time our drive to Cliff Dwellers Lodge ended we felt we knew Art well, but no words could have prepared us completely for a meeting with this rimrock patriarch.

Though it was long after dark, Art glared at us with a high-noon squint that countless desert days had creased into his face. His battered Stetson, faded shirt, and tight jeans seemed as much a part of him as his craggy countenance, a near match to the Vermilion Cliffs rising 3,000 feet behind his place.



One Road to Rainbow Is the Colorado River

Art Greene's powerful boat invades the highwayless desert, passing giant promontories and fantastic formations at every turn. After 68 miles the voyagers reached Forbidden Canyon; thence a six-mile hike led to Rainbow Bridge.

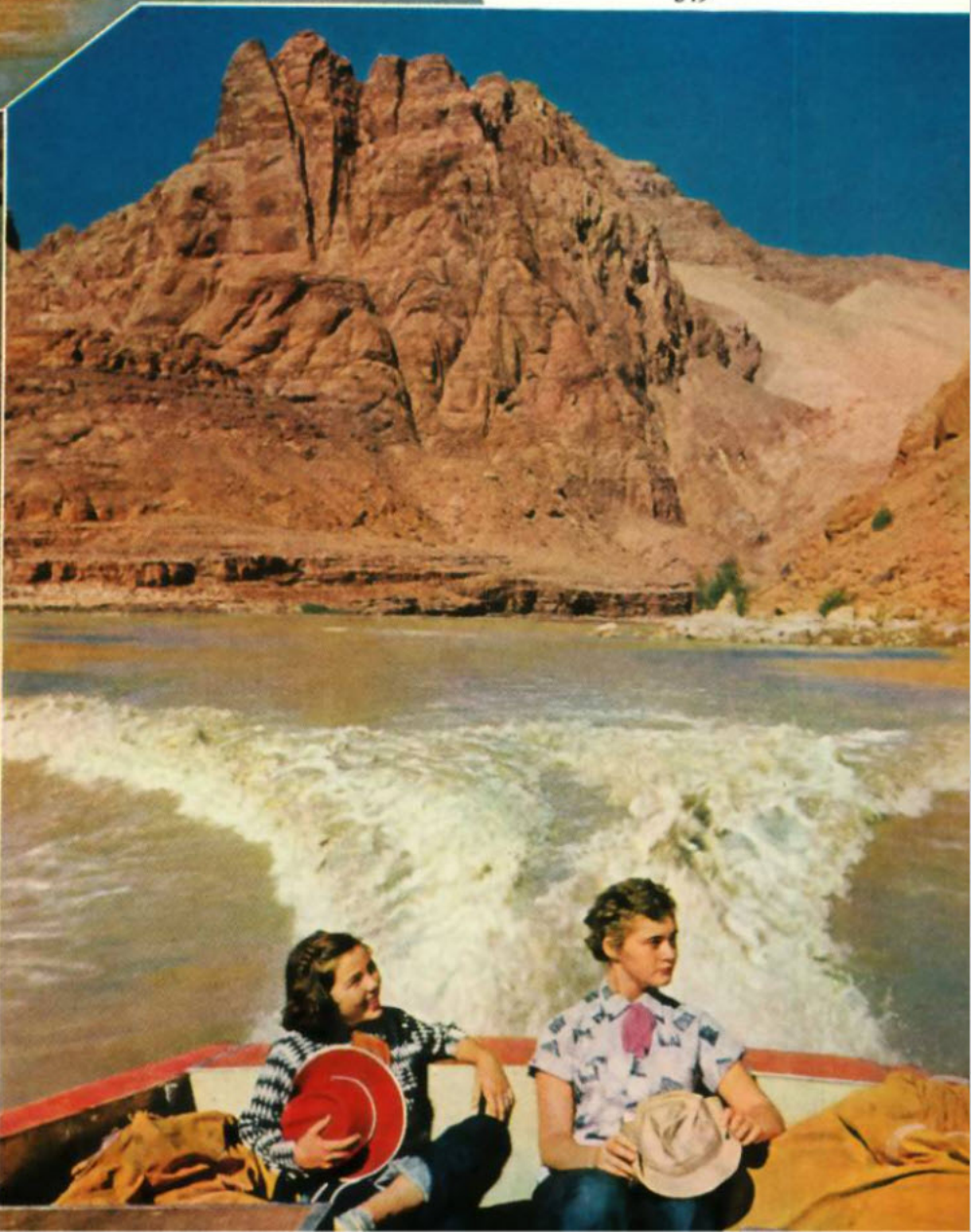
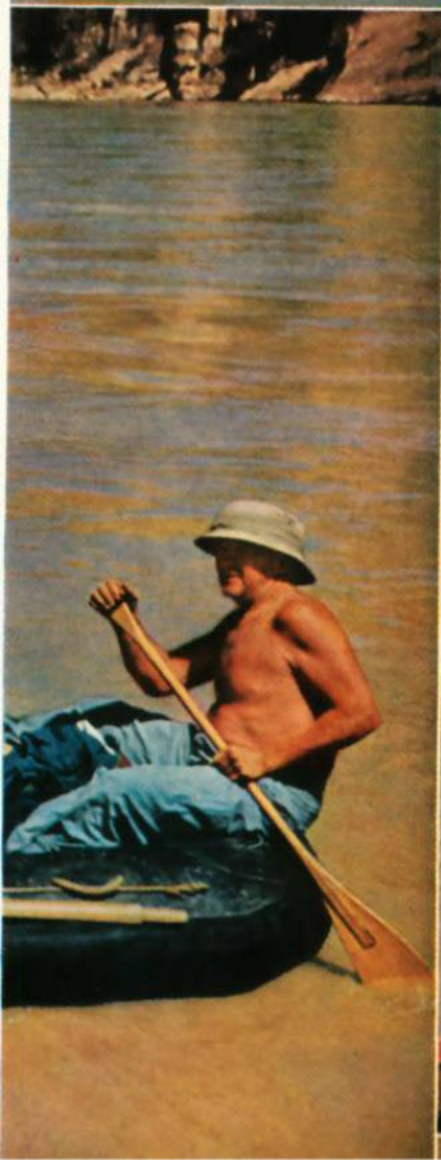
←Page 548, lower: These vacationing Los Angeles families exchanged food and news with the author's party. Driving rubber rafts, they floated down the rapids-free stretch between Hite, Utah, and Lees Ferry, Arizona.

↓ Swirling Waters Flash Past Templed Cliffs

This stretch of river remains as unmarked by man as when Maj. J. Wesley Powell first navigated the Colorado in 1869-72.

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"I'm glad you're not one day later," he said in an unexpectedly soft and welcoming voice. "The river is dropping so fast the catfish are wearing straw hats. But we'll give her a good try."

Next morning Art's relatives began pouring out of the lodge's rooms, cabins, and trailers until Ted and I, the only guests, were almost lost in the crowd. Art picked out three grandchildren, one daughter, and one son-in-law to make the three-day trip with us.

We began by driving the few miles to Lees Ferry, leaving the highway at the west end of Navajo Bridge and following a side road that winds down the wall of Marble Canyon. This was the only spot in the 430 miles between Hite, Utah, and Lake Mead where a motorist could drive to the level of the Colorado River.

Lees Ferry is Mile Zero on the Nation's fourth-longest river. All upstream and downstream distances are measured from this point. The old Mormon ferry is gone, displaced by near-by Navajo Bridge, but a cable still spans the swift stream. It carries a man in a basket to the gauge on the opposite shore.

"Seventeen thousand cubic feet per second today," Art announced after speaking with the Government man. "That's about as low as I'd want to try it with my big boat."

It looked like worlds of water to me, but Art was serious for once. Earl Johnson, his son-in-law and helmsman, revved up the twin engines while the rest of us loaded the 24-foot craft (page 548).

"Trail to the Rock That Goes Over"

"What's that painted on the side?" I asked.

"I thought you story-writin' fellows could read," Art said, and then rattled off the Navajo words. "Tseh Na-ni-ah-go Atin'—that means 'the trail to the rock that goes over.'"

Art's daughter Irene and his grandchildren jumped aboard. Butch and Betty Jo Schoppman of Kanab, Utah, had traveled to Rainbow before, but it was the first trip for Judy Greene of Rough Rock, Arizona.

Earl, Irene's husband, sunburned as dark as a water-stained cliff, was Butch's idol. "This will be his fortieth trip," Butch said. "No one knows the river like Uncle Earl."

We shoved off—and promptly grounded on a submerged sand bar 15 feet from shore.

"That gives you an idea how shallow the old Colorado is," Art grinned sheepishly. Though heavy and big, *Tseh* draws only 16

inches of water. Her propellers are recessed in grooves along the hull bottom.

By alternately going ahead and reversing, much as you rock an auto stuck in the mud, Earl dislodged *Tseh*, gunned her into the main channel, and we were off.

Lees Ferry, with its desolate road end, cable, and one tiny house, soon disappeared around a bend. We seemed alone in the world as the vertical walls of Glen Canyon closed in, often rising directly from the river's edge. The sun beat down on our heads with a palpable weight. The air hitting our faces felt like the heated blast from a washroom hand drier.

All day long we churned upstream, averaging eight miles an hour despite an eight-mile-an-hour current. We were at the mercy of the river and the boat. None of us could have lasted long in the red-rock desert above, even assuming we could have found a way to scale the canyon wall. Pondering these things, we suddenly were given a near-tragic example of the perils of desert travel.

Plane Pancakes into the Colorado

A light plane glinted in the sun ahead, flying well within the close-set canyon walls. It appeared to be stunting.

"That's suicide!" exclaimed Ted, who had piloted fighters during the war. "Air currents in this winding gorge could slam it against a cliff or push it down to the water!"

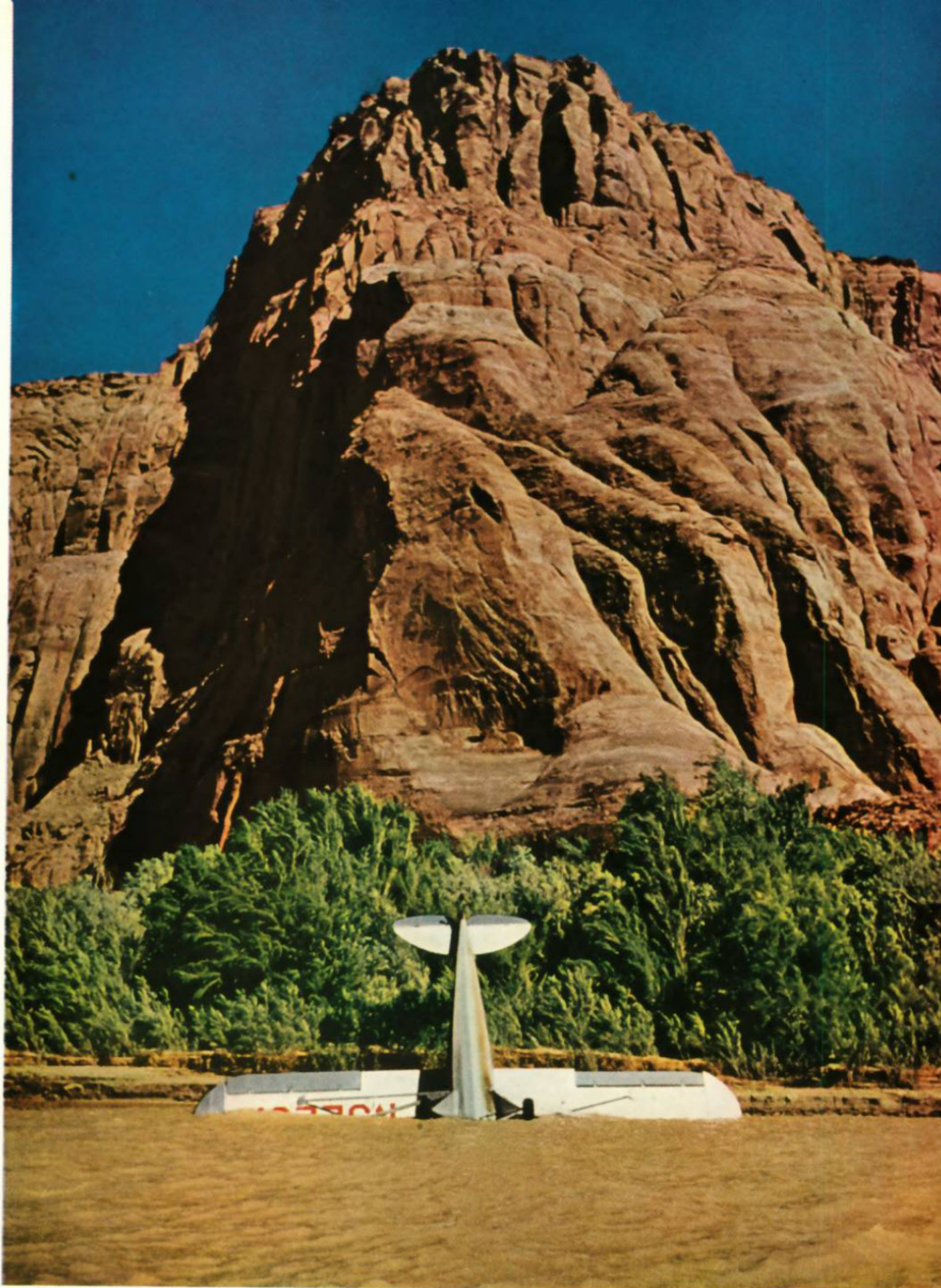
As though bearing out his words, we saw the grim scene pictured opposite when we returned three days later.

Afterward we learned the full story. The flyer had been in trouble with a failing engine. What we took for stunting was his desperate effort to stay aloft.

Around the bend below us he pancaked in midstream and rode his drifting plane to shore, where it buried its heavy nose in the sand. He dragged pieces of driftwood together, made a raft, and floated down to Lees Ferry—"a very lucky man," as he told us later at Cliff Dwellers Lodge.

At the moment we knew nothing of this. *Tseh* droned on, Earl taking her from side to side in constant search for adequate depth.

Ted and I gaped at the passing scenery. Though the canyon walls rose 1,000 feet, an ever-changing panorama presented itself. "Desert stain," caused by water, had varnished each smooth cliff with a differing tapestry effect, like bunting on a Broadway parade route.



Nose in Water, Tail in Air: a Monument to the Perils of Desert Flying

Swooping low, the pilot appeared to be stunting above the boat party. The rivermen, returning later, found the wreck. Engine trouble, they learned, stalled the plane; the flyer built a raft and drifted to safety.

In the Crossing of the Fathers region (Mile Forty), where the walls lower, a plaque marks the spot where Father Silvestre Vélez de Escalante found his way across the river on his epic exploration of 1776.

A few side canyons break the solid walls. We stopped for lunch in the slitlike mouth of one and walked along the tiny stream bed till it narrowed enough for us to reach out and touch both walls.

Uranium Hunters Drift By

On board again, we soon had company. Two life rafts floated toward us loaded with eight persons of assorted ages and both sexes. With their jumbled gear, large hats, and tanned backs they looked like a couple of suburbanite families on vacation—and so they were. We cut our motors and drifted with them awhile (page 548).

“‘Geranium’ hunters, eh?” Art said, noticing a Geiger counter.

“Yes, we’re taking our time, doing a little uranium prospecting on the side,” replied one of the two men.

“Stake any claims?”

“We got a pretty good buzz up in the

Shinarump a couple of days back and put down a marker.”

Shinarump, I learned, was a stratum of likely uranium prospects. In this part of the Southwest, where there’s a lot of geology (and not much else) on the surface, people locate places by the stratum they’re in. Chinle, Wingate, Morrison are the desert’s street names and highway numbers.

By now we were well into Utah. As the river twisted, we often looked ahead to bends where the Colorado seemed to end, to disappear into the rock just as it was believed to behave before Maj. J. Wesley Powell and his party first navigated the stream (page 549).

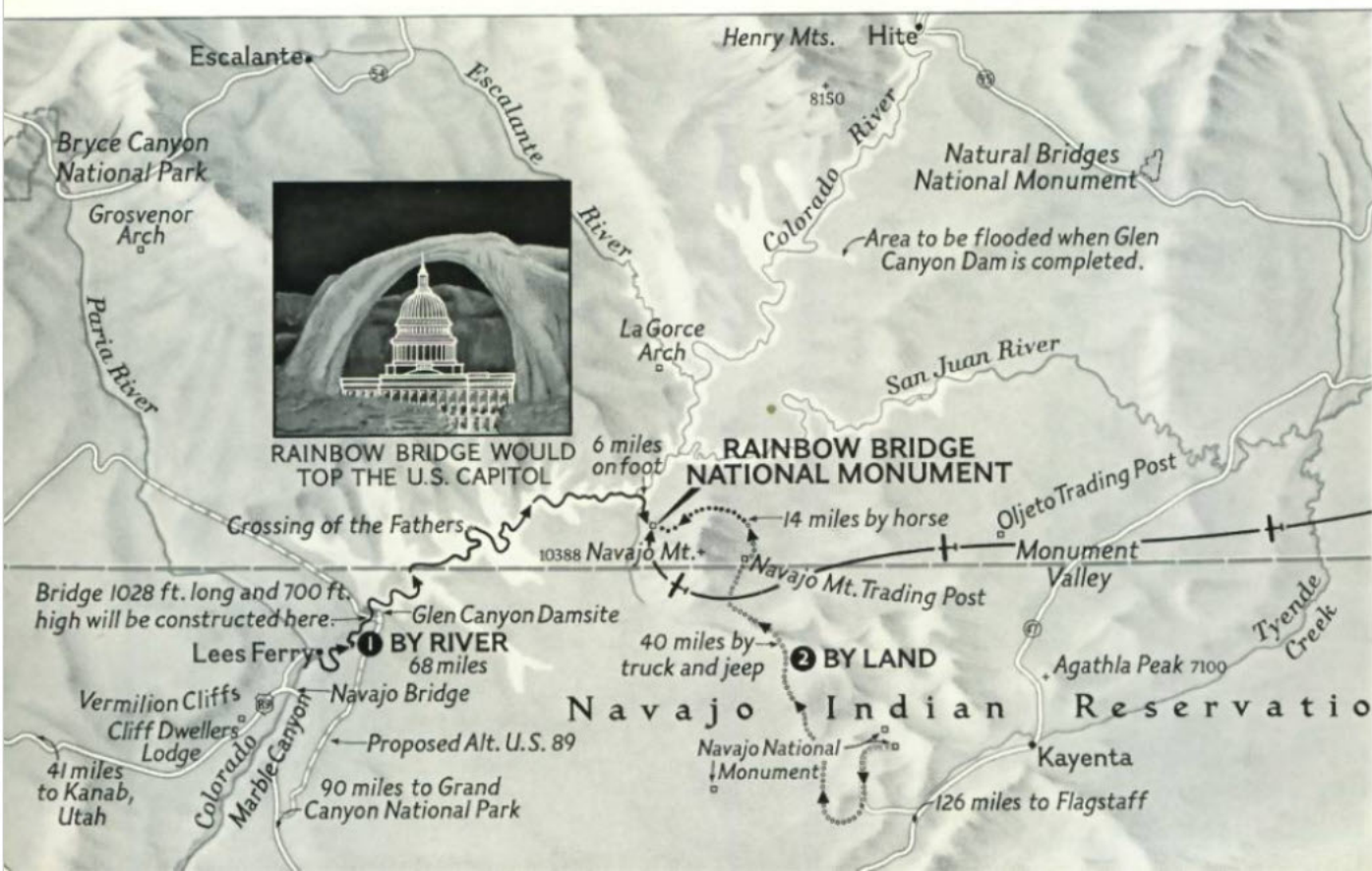
Finally I noticed Art peering ahead at a break in the wall: the mouth of Forbidden Canyon. Up this tributary gorge we would walk six miles tomorrow to Rainbow Bridge.

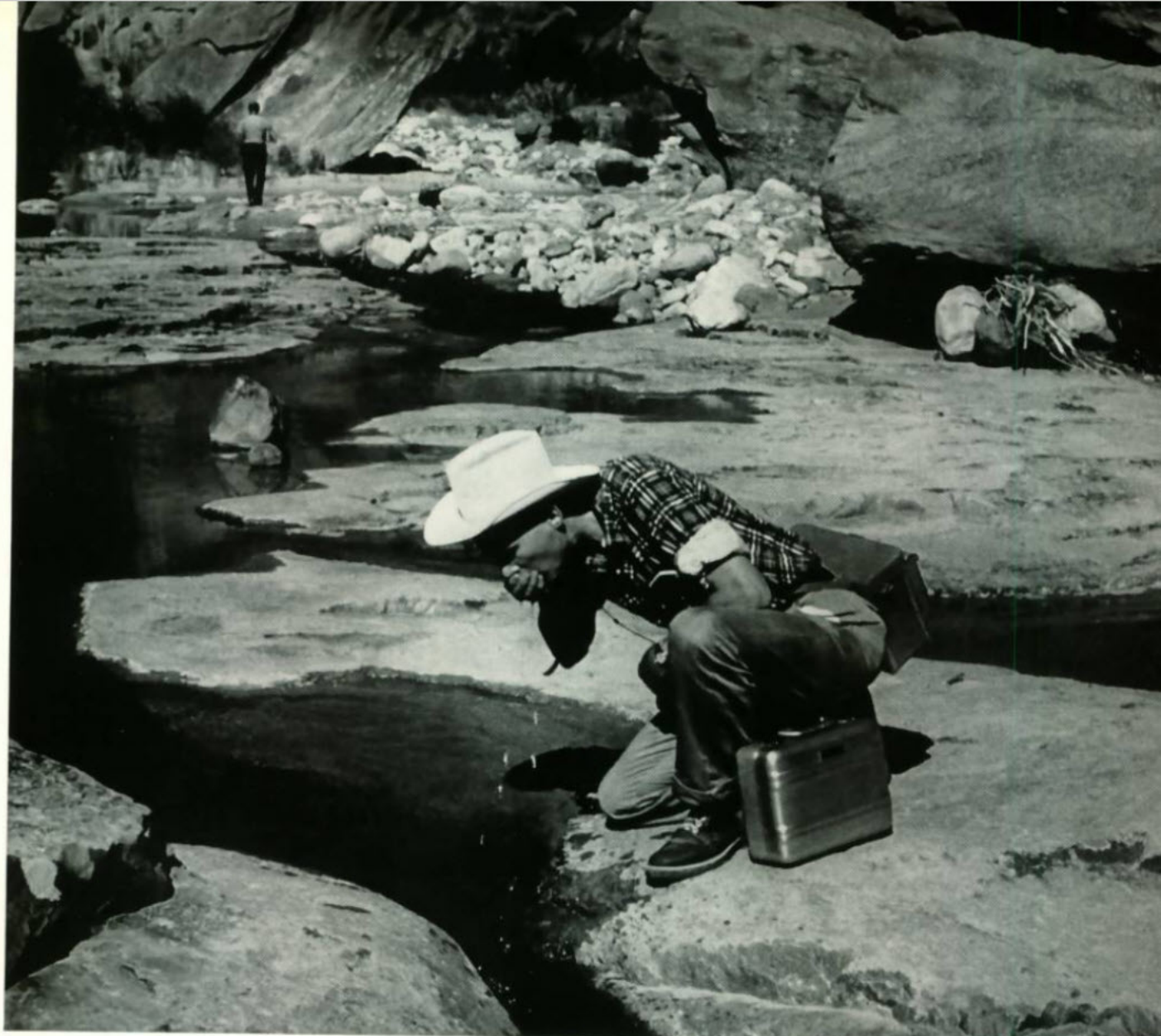
First we camped. As Earl turned off the thrumming motors, the susurrant Colorado kept our ears filled with sound and gave us pleasant music to eat and sleep by.

The children, freed of the close confines of the boat, rollicked and whooped around camp long after the rest of us had unrolled our sleeping bags and lay looking at the stars.

Map Traces the Author’s Routes to Rainbow by River, Land, and Air

Valley areas in white will be flooded when Glen Canyon Dam, now under construction, pushes a man-made lake 186 miles up the Colorado and 71 miles up the San Juan. A dike will stop reservoir waters short of Rainbow Bridge. However, the backed-up Escalante River may wet the supports of La Gorce Arch, which honors the Vice-Chairman of The Society’s Board of Trustees. Grosvenor Arch is named for the Chairman.





↑ Forbidden Canyon's Water Tastes Sweet to Camera-laden Ralph Gray

Glen Canyon Dam's access roads and impounded waters will take sight-seers within a stone's throw of Rainbow. Its reservoir will fill Forbidden Canyon.

Next morning we started walking up Forbidden Canyon, a narrower version of the Colorado cleft. We crossed and recrossed the tiny stream that had carved this fissure and soon were in places where the sun never reaches. Maidenhair fern grows in ledges where water constantly drips from cracks. The pellucid stream courses from one bathtub-shaped pool to another, and the girls peeled down to their bathing suits for cooling dips.

Soon Rainbow Bridge Canyon came in from our left. We trudged along the bed of the dry stream that in ages past had been both architect and engineer on the Rainbow Bridge job.

Excitement mounted for Ted and me as we neared our objective. But a more immediate





feeling was the pain of blistered feet. I walked the last mile on the heel of one foot and the toe of the other, shifting my photographic gear constantly to ease the weight.

Earl led us up over a shoulder of talus, paused at the top, and looked back to catch our expressions. For there ahead, partly hidden by an intervening cliff, an arch of stone gracefully jumped the canyon. Rainbow Bridge!

As we walked on and brought the stunning formation into full view, the feeling kept coming back to me that here was lifeless matter caught in dramatic action. Each time I looked, I felt that movement had just stopped, that if I had glanced up just one second sooner I would have seen the live stone leaping across the canyon.

Spring Plays Luncheon Music

Walking slowly to a point directly under the bridge, I stood in its shadow. Here the "flying-buttress" look is even stronger: the stone seems to stream from above and to arch gently down, cloistering the area beneath. The blocked-out sun sent oblique rays angling to either side and gave the span an indirect-lighting effect that set a mood of sanctity.

Inspired, I even heard chimes. Tracing the melodious tinkling sound, I found it came from a most unhallowed source. Previous visitors had left jars and containers of various sizes under the multiple drips of a seeping spring. Water dropped as from a dozen leaky faucets, each receptacle giving off a slightly different note.

Already Butch and the girls were unwrapping sandwiches under the weeping ledge. As we ate lunch, we needed only to lean over and take one of the brimful jars to quench our thirst. Otherwise there was little water near by, trapped in a few rapidly evaporating pools (page 559).

As a national monument, Rainbow Bridge is protected by the National Park Service,

and it is surrounded by thousands of square miles of the Navajo Indian Reservation.

From the earliest days a registry book for visitors has been kept under the bridge. Ted Park and I became signers numbers 10,740 and 10,741 (page 561). Signers have included Theodore Roosevelt and Zane Grey.

The ample pages of the register have room for reactions of awe, relief, frivolity. Many visitors wanted a "first" beside their names. One wrote "first girl to sleep all night on bridge." Farther along an unambitious man scribbled, "first man to die *under* the bridge." In the "Method of Transportation" column he wrote "hands and knees."

Nature has fashioned hundreds of bridges and arches in Utah and Arizona; new ones come to light almost every year.* Yet Rainbow overshadows them all. Its span measures 278 feet, and it rises 309 feet—large enough, lacking 24 inches in width, to frame the United States Capitol (map, page 552).

But measurements mean little. Rainbow appears to change size dramatically, depending on the vantage point. Seen from below, it is enormous. Yet from the cliff above, it is dwarfed by its surroundings, so lost and inconspicuous I could understand why it waited so long for discovery.

Indian Led First Whites to Rainbow

The late Dr. Byron Cummings of the University of Utah, while on a field trip in 1908, heard rumors of a great stone arch somewhere near Navajo Mountain. Mr. and Mrs. John Wetherill, of Oljeto Trading Post, Utah, told him that Indians whispered of the wonder, but they knew no one who had actually seen it. When Mrs. Wetherill learned that Nasjah Begay, a Paiute, had been there and could guide a party back, Dr. Cummings laid plans to search for the bridge.

Meantime W. B. Douglass, a Government surveyor, was also looking for *Nonnezoshi* (popularly translated "hole in the rock"). The two parties joined and trekked for days across canyons, over slickrock, past ghostly whalebacks and baldheads, and through scrub juniper flats.

The trail-weary horses and men entered a final canyon and reached a sun-blistered, waterless spot. Nasjah Begay indicated that the bridge lay around the next bend.

Art Greene had described to me the next

* See "Escalante: Utah's River of Arches," by W. Robert Moore, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, September, 1955.

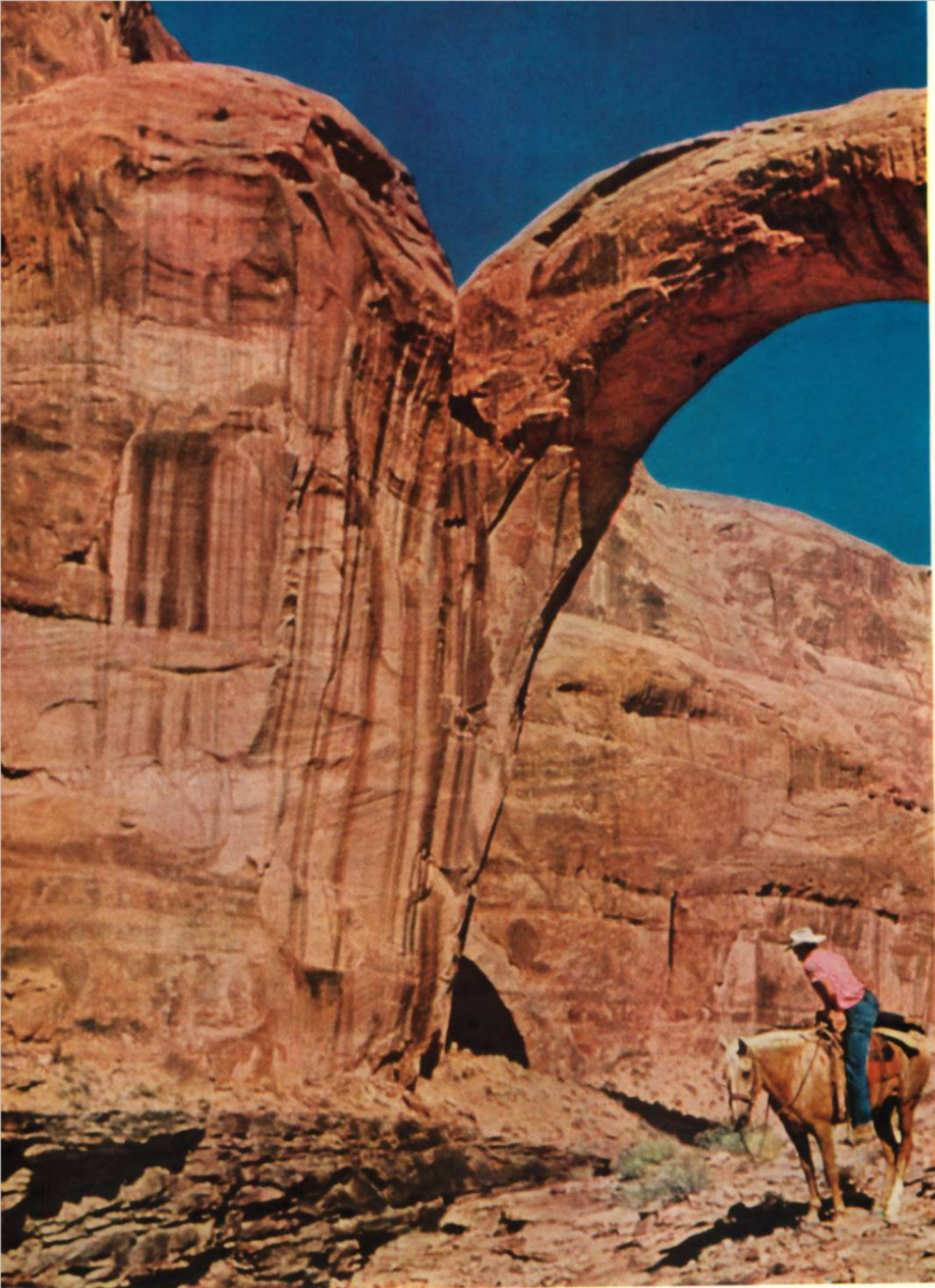
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← Riders to Rainbow Follow a Mile-high Trail Through Pastel Desert

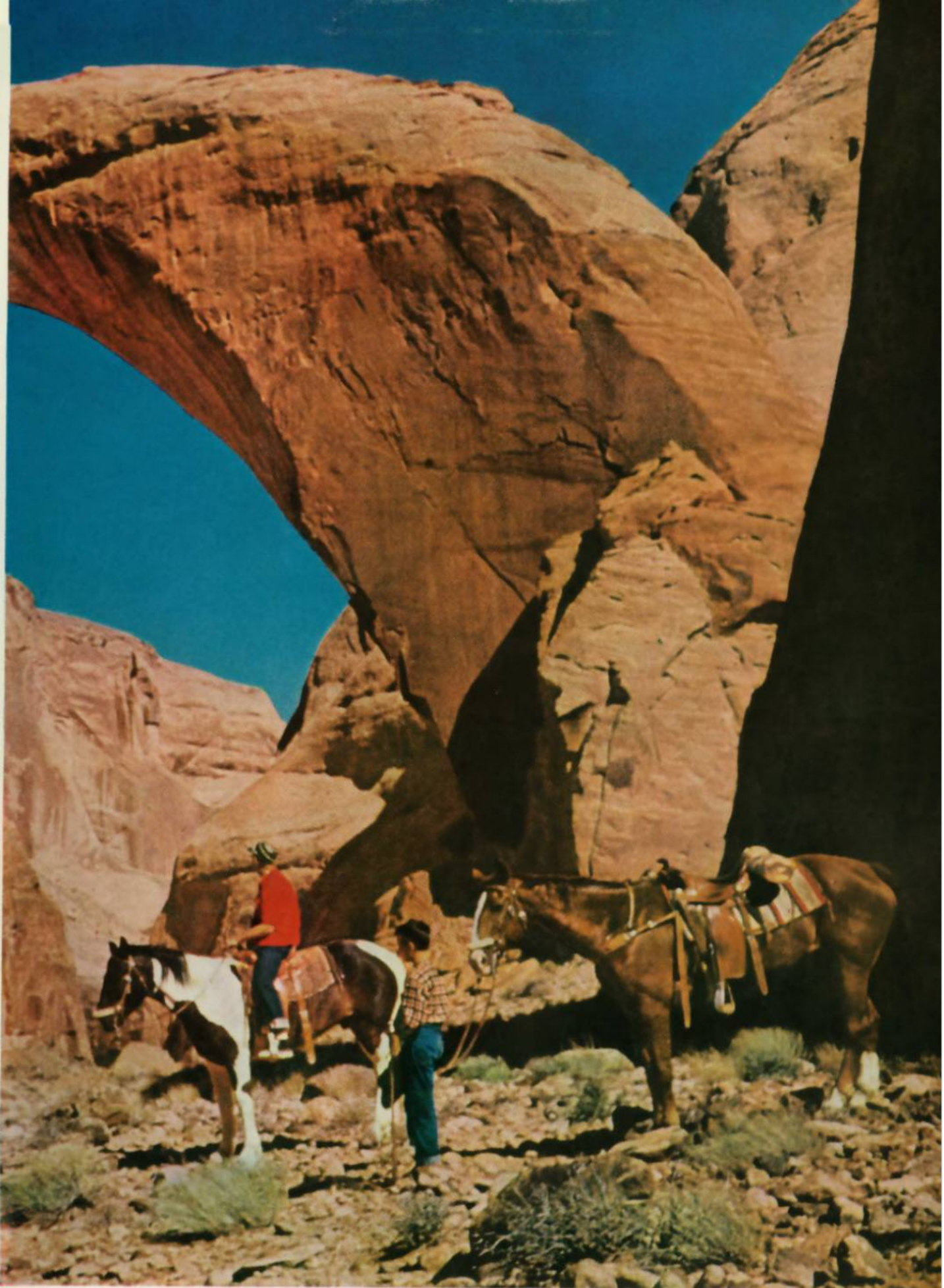
A Paiute Indian guided the Wetherill-Cummings-Douglass party in 1909 to *Nonnezoshi* (Hole in the Rock), which became known as Rainbow Bridge.

Here the National Geographic group follows a 14-mile trail that approximates the discoverers' route.

Sun-blistered, wind-blasted scenery is relieved by clumps of scented junipers. Occasionally a hidden canyon offers men and horses a cool drink.



Thousands of Tons of Sandstone Defy Gravity and Soar Unaided Across the Sky
Rainbow rises structurally perfect, delicately slender, yet massively braced for the millenniums.



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Utah's Natural Bridge Carries No Traffic and Leads Nowhere. It Spans a Void
Visitors are rare. More people see Grand Canyon in a day than reach Rainbow in a quarter of a century.

few moments of August 14, 1909: "Naturally there was rivalry among the men as to who would be first to see Rainbow. Wetherill agreed to hang back and allow Cummings to glimpse the bridge first. Then they stopped and let Wetherill be the first to walk under it." Other reports indicate that Douglass was the first to reach the objective.

To this thirsty and hungry trio went the honor of telling the world about Rainbow. Theirs was the vision that turned rumor into reality and resulted the following year in preserving their find as a national monument.

Soon Rainbow Bridge will lose some of its age-old isolation. Glen Canyon Dam, now under construction by the Bureau of Reclamation, will back water from the Colorado into Forbidden Canyon. A new highway running

north from U. S. 89 will lead to the dam. Thus motorists in the future will be able to drive to a boat landing and skim over the man-made lake to within shouting distance of Rainbow.

Our feet would have been thankful for a ride down Forbidden Canyon by motorboat. When we straggled into camp, Ted and I propped our throbbing extremities in the air and let Art Greene feed us the delectable fine-meated catfish he had caught in the river.

"It's not your feet that will be sore next time you go to Rainbow," Art joshed us.

He was right. Our second "road to Rainbow" was the horse trail from Ralph and Madeleine Cameron's Navajo Mountain Trading Post (page 554). We rode 28 rough miles and, while our feet were healing, the blisters appeared at other places.

The trail measures 14 miles—a good day's work. Before saddling up we had driven to remote Navajo National Monument to meet Foy Young, a tall and soft-spoken Westerner, typical of the personable and dedicated men who administer our National Park Service areas. Foy doubled as superintendent of both Navajo and Rainbow. Because so few persons visit the latter, he ordinarily stayed at his Navajo headquarters, making only occasional trips to the bridge.

"I'm starting tomorrow for my midsummer inspection," said Foy. "Why don't you and Ted come along? Three other riders will join us later."

Sheep Trails Through Navajo Land

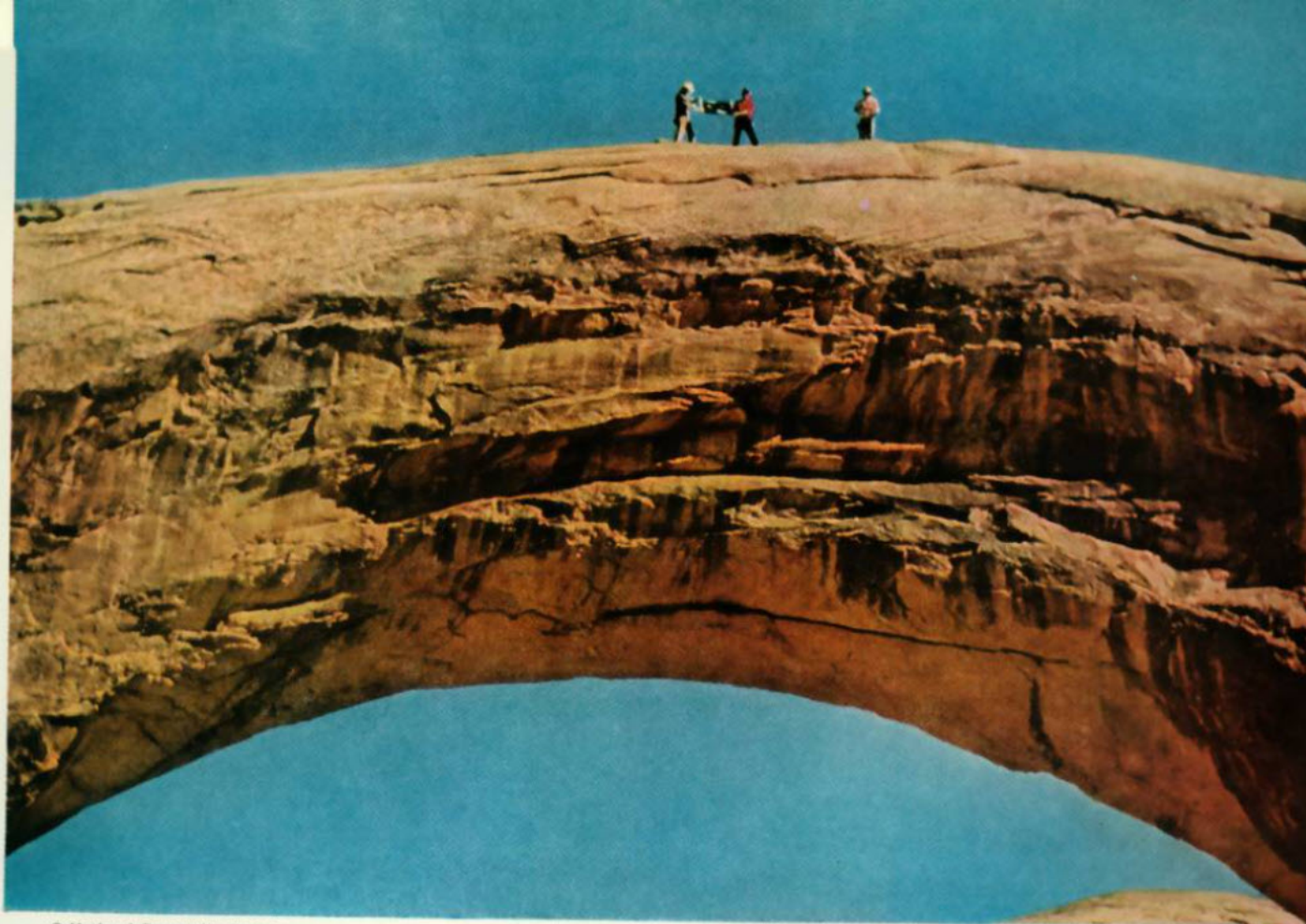
We piled into his pickup and took a short cut across the mile-high reservation, passing Navajo herdsmen with their dusty flocks and grinding our way through sand drifts blown across the slightly recessed desert track. Foy chose from myriad sheep trails the paths that led most directly to Navajo Mountain, 10,388 feet in elevation, the vast whale-backed landmark that can be seen from almost unbelievable distances in the clear air.

At a final Y, the right fork led to Navajo Mountain Trading Post. The post finally loomed before us, its buildings shaded by huge cottonwoods, a bit of green grass growing be-



To Get Up on the Bridge, One First Has to Scramble Down a Rope

Edwards Park, of the National Geographic Staff, works his way down a rock wall abutting the monument. This 40-foot descent will put him on the stone arch (opposite).



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↑ **Stone 42 Feet Thick Hangs in Mid-air**

Author and companions unfurl the National Geographic Society flag. Their footing was tricky, a blustery wind was blowing, and the 33-foot-wide platform felt none too secure.

↓ **Watery Mirror Inverts the Arch**

Bridge Creek, architect of the span, dries completely every summer. This shallow catchment in the creek bed did not linger long in the blistering sun. A cool spring near by always stays fresh.



hind a white picket fence. Indian ponies and a couple of the inevitable pickups were standing in front of the post store. Ralph Cameron, the trader, broke off a conversation in Navajo with one of his customers and welcomed us warmly.

Next morning the first hour of the trip was a five-mile ordeal by jeep to a rendezvous point where Bud Gilbert and other wranglers had brought up the horses. There is always great excitement at the beginning of any pack-trail ride, and this was no exception: getting acquainted with one's mount, deciding what to stow in the saddlebags, trying to act as if you did this sort of thing every day, but fooling nobody—especially not your horse.

But with a tug here and a nod there, Bud Gilbert quickly had his string on the trail. Whereas our river road to Rainbow took us through the bowels of the earth, here on horseback we were on top of the world, on the plateau at the 5,000- to 6,000-foot level.

High, Rocky Trail to Rainbow

All day our sweating mounts picked their way across the northern ridges and furrows of Navajo Mountain. Immediately to the north the rocky flats drop off toward the San Juan River, finding a way through this tortured, stove-hot, Dantesque landscape.*

We saw water only three times, at the bottoms of great gulches down whose sides we switchbacked aboard our blowing horses. At the first one—Surprise Canyon—we found the surprise was trees. A later surprise was meeting a lone Paiute. His friendly hello rang out clearly, then he started speaking in "signs and wonders." (He made signs and we wondered what he meant.)

Ahead of us loomed so-called Hellgate, a narrow box canyon we climbed at its dead end. Then we were up on the slickrock level again, where our horses slid on the polished, almost glassy surface of wind-smoothed sandstone. Finally we struck Bridge Canyon and followed its welcome late-afternoon shadows to Echo Spring Camp.

Ted and I strolled the remaining half mile to Rainbow Bridge and saw it at one of its best moments—in the muted, faint-colored, cathedral light of dusk, with a rose-window sky above.

Though I had seen this natural wonder only a few days before, it burst upon my view with the same thrill of newness. I believe one is never quite convinced the giant span is real.

Here stone loses its stolid, earth-bound role. The blind processes of erosion have shown thousands of tons of rock how to defy gravity and soar unaided across the sky. The viewer stands spellbound, still hardly believing Rainbow is not a dream.

Back at camp, Bud was throwing together a meal when we returned. He keeps a supply of staples, canned goods, cooking utensils, and dishes under lock at Echo Camp. Later he pulled cots and blankets out of a shed, and we made our beds in the open air.

In the morning Ted and I, with 16-year-old Mickey Haskell of Newport Beach, California, hooked canteens on our belts, grabbed a 40-foot coil of rope, and started out to climb Rainbow Bridge, something few of the monument's visitors attempt.

We walked under the arch and down the canyon about 400 yards. There we started climbing the west wall (page 556) at a point where it is broken and slopes gently up to a great shoulder almost level with the top of the bridge. As we climbed, we clung to numerous natural toe holds. Doubling back, we crossed a narrow neck onto the abutment at the west leg of the bridge.

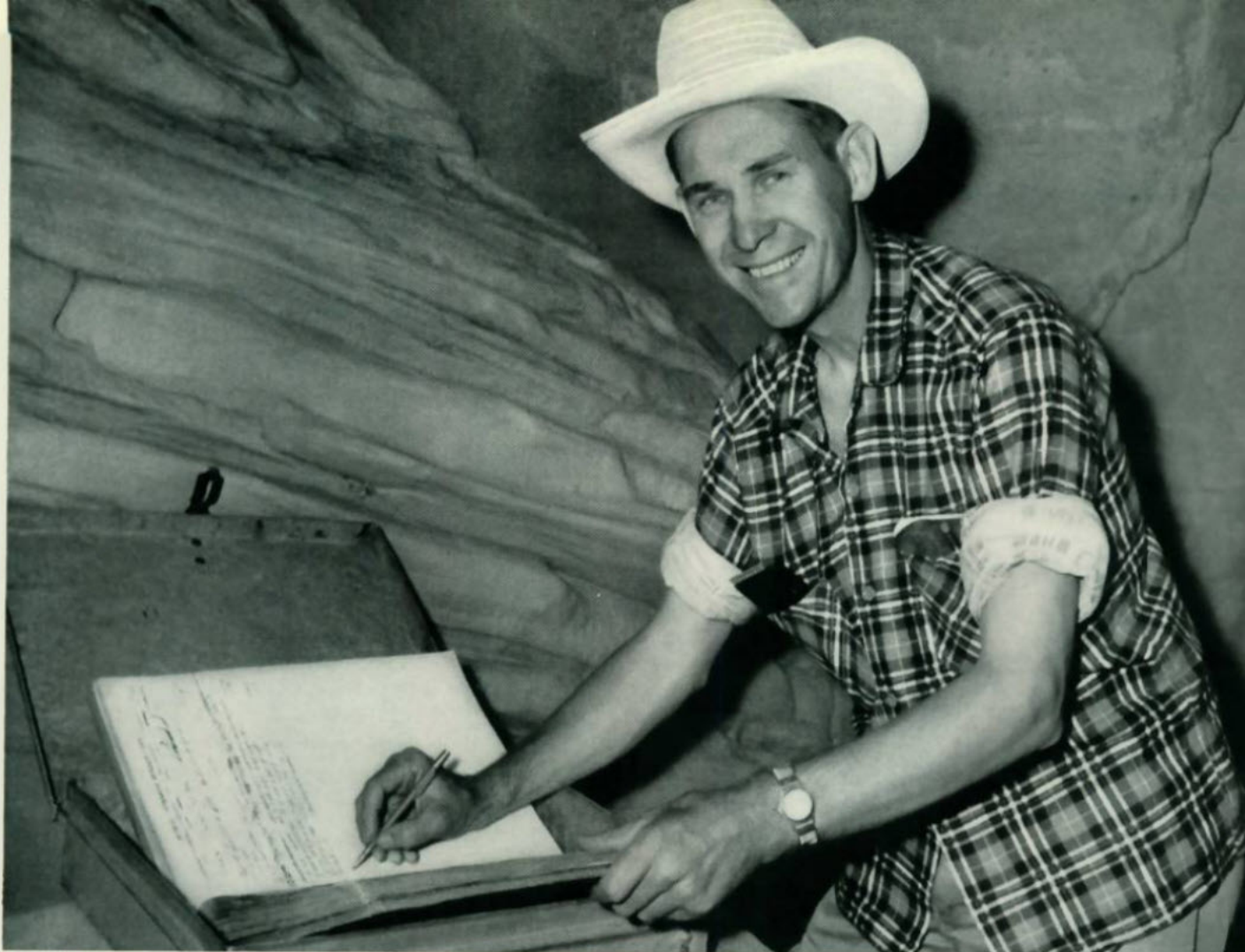
I had thought the bridge and this abutment joined together, but there is a crack between them about a foot wide. Someone had driven a spike securely into the top of the abutment; we looped the end of our rope around it and lowered ourselves hand over hand (page 558). Forty feet below, our dangling feet struck the bridge at a point near enough to the top to give fairly level footing.

Final Assault by Air

Slender as Rainbow looks in certain views, it measures a solid 33 feet wide and 42 feet deep at the top. Leveled and smoothed, it could accommodate an average highway. But for us, stepping over the ribbed and pocked surface and avoiding the sloping edges in a blustery wind, it seemed crowded with only three pedestrians (page 559).

The feeling of dizzy height from our perch in the sky prepared us for our final assault on Rainbow. After riding back to Navajo Mountain Trading Post, we drove to Cortez, Colorado, where Vic Reynolds strapped us into a Piper Tri-Pacer for a flight over our objective.

* See "Desert River Through Navajo Land," by Alfred M. Bailey, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, August, 1947.



Author Gray Signs. His Name Is the 10,741st Entered in the Registry Since 1909

Though quickest and cheapest, the aerial road to Rainbow lacks the intimacy of the other two methods: you *see* the bridge, but don't actually *visit* it, since there is no place to land. However, the sight is so magnificent that I'm sure this method of reaching Rainbow will become more popular.

Our flight took us past Ute Peak, then straight west in a line a few miles north of the Arizona-Utah border.

Even from the air Navajo Mountain looms as the largest landmark of this two-State area. Vic headed directly for it, passed it on the south, and swung sharp to the right around its west shoulder. Almost immediately he pointed down with urgent gestures.

There, already in view below, was Rainbow Bridge. I remembered the long hot day we had spent riding horseback from this same mountain to the bridge—such a short distance when seen from above.

Dwarfed by our height, Rainbow looked like half a butterscotch Life Saver lodged in a crevice (page 546). Vic stayed at least 500 feet above the plateau, an altitude which put us about 1,500 feet from the canyon-buried

bridge itself. From this ultimate vantage point I got a glimmering of how this and other natural bridges are formed. Bridge Creek first laid down a stream course that meandered back and forth. Later uplift of the region caused the stream to furrow a canyon in the soft Navajo sandstone.

This canyon followed the previous meandering watercourse and created necks of solid rock where the stream bent back upon itself. Silt-laden water scoured this neck from both sides, finally piercing it.

The stream flowed through the short cut, widening it. Seasonal erosion further shaped the bridge, and centuries of wind gave it a final polishing.

There is a school that explains works of art in terms of algebra and trigonometry. Ted Park and I felt, as we flew away from the world's largest and most beautifully shaped natural bridge, that geology and erosion fall as far short in explaining Rainbow's creation. We twisted in our seats to keep the arch in view as long as possible, not knowing when—if ever—we would again see this transcendent wonder of the American Southwest.