



## **The Swell of San Rafael - Part II or Yellow Cake Blues**

**By Rob Bettaso**

If you read Part One of this two-part article (Part One ran in the December 2017 “GYMOAZ”), you may recall that I had elected to spend each night of my five-day camping trip to the San Rafael Swell area of Utah out under the open sky; situated near our nightly oak-wood fires. I do own a tent but I only use it when it’s raining, snowing or dangerously cold. Even if it only looks like it might rain or snow, I set up the tent and then sleep out in the open until precipitation actually begins falling.

Of all the things that make camping uniquely fun (e.g. campfires, camp cooking, camp stories and songs), perhaps my favorite is the option of star gazing from the comfort of a warm sleeping bag. In fact, while a starry night enhances the experience, it is not essential, as ghostly moonlight illuminating slate-blue clouds is equally compelling.

In much of the arid Southwest, the resident wildlife only become active after dark. As such, not only does camping *sans* shelter allow for a visually exciting way to appreciate our environment but it also allows a greater sense of being OF our environment. When you can hear a woodrat scuttle by, a mere matter of inches from your head, you have some idea of what it might feel like to be an owl on the prowl.

Lest you think I’m oblivious to the other side of the coin, namely the risks associated with being completely vulnerable during my slumbers, rest assured, thoughts of large carnivores, venomous reptiles and arachnids, rabid mammals or even crazed chain-saw murderers have entered my mind during some fitful nights. But then again, the normal creaks and rattles of rafters and appliances in my home can also cause me to toss and turn.

I guess that, to my way of thinking, the benefits of sleeping *al fresco* in the wildlands of Mother Earth simply outweigh the risks. Such was the case as I zipped into my sleeping bag, near the fire, not far from the shores of Muddy

Creek in Emery County, Utah. For a while, I listened to the competing sounds of popping embers and the gurgling stream but, before long, a chorus of coyotes commenced to yowling and I slid into a contemplative state.

Despite the glow of the fire, the stars shown brilliantly and the nearest sandstone cliffs only partially occluded my view of the heavens. It wasn't long before the first shooting star streaked across the sky. It was a long and vivid trajectory, enough to illicit a gasp of astonishment from me and a call out to my comrade Magill, about 20 paces distant and on the other side of the campfire.

"Did you see that?!" I said in a whisper loud enough to cover the distance. He muttered, "See what? I'm sleeping."

"Shooting star," I said, and then continued: "Your loss, *hombre*, I ain't closing my eyes till I've counted at least five more; we're in the Leonid Meteor Shower, donja know?" I heard him roll over, deep in his den of blankets and sleeping bags, piled high atop his ground cloth and sleeping pad. Magill and I are somewhat similar in that we both tend to buy inexpensive gear but then keep it forever for situations where weight doesn't matter, such as "car-camping."

"Fine," I offered, "but don't expect me to waste any shooting star wishes on your behalf." A muffled snore was his only response.

The second arcing flash came fairly quickly but I only caught it briefly out of my peripheral vision. I knew that the Leonid was an annual event (peaking every 33 years), having something to do with our solar orbit. I had also heard that the comet debris that ignited as it entered Earth's atmosphere appeared to astronomers to be coming from the direction of the Constellation Leo.

Once, at Northland Pioneer College's Show Low campus, I had taken a springtime class in star watching. It was a fun class and, among other cosmic things, I learned that Leo, or at least a part of it, was shaped like a backward question mark. But, either Leo was only viewable during certain times of the year or it was blocked by the cliffs, because I couldn't see it now. The whereabouts of the celestial question mark was left an open question, something for Hercules to solve as one of his "labors."

Time passed and before a sixth fragment flared across the sky, my eyelids grew heavy and my thoughts turned to sleep. I decided the time had come to remove my specs so that I could roll over onto my side. The fire was dying down and I knew it was going to be cold; somewhere down in the low 20s. I had forgotten to bring my sleeping bag's fleece liner and although I had donned layers in which to sleep, I suspected it would be frigid enough tonight to have me curling up like a dormant grubworm in my sleep.

I awoke just before dawn and reached over to grab my gallon water jug (an old milk jug). It was frozen nearly solid. I felt like I had shivered off a few pounds during the night so, as my mind tried to focus, I thought of chocolate, creamy hot coffee and getting the fire started. But first, I needed just a few more "zzzs," so I dug deeper into my sleeping bag and slipped back to sleep.

The next thing I knew, as I poked my head out from my frosty sleeping bag, was that it was appreciably brighter outside and that Magill had re-ignited the fire. He told me later that it started without a match as the oak embers remained hot throughout the night. Hmmm, you wouldn't have known it from where I slept.

With the orange flames serving as encouragement, I bolted upright and slipped on my down vest (it had been my pillow for the night). Magill was busy making fancy coffee using a French Press (21st Century cowboys, such as it is). I stretched and made a beeline for my truck's downed tailgate where an "Action Packer" held my food.

I slapped my gloved hands together, then stripped off the gloves to open the container and snatch a chocolate bar; which I tore open and summarily devoured despite its being partially frozen. Meanwhile, Magill had finished making the coffee and was rummaging about his cooler for breakfast items. Being a big breakfast eater, he was preparing to cook bacon, eggs, potatoes and tortillas. Me, I would be content with the one Hershey's bar for a couple of hours, as long as there was plenty of coffee. In that regard, Magill and I are similar, as we both consume coffee like a wino swills Ripple....

Anyway, that first night turned out to be the coldest night of the trip but, over the course of the remaining three nights, we still managed to burn all the oak and aspen I had brought, as well as the Lodgepole Pine that Magill had loaded

into his pickup's bed back in Boise. During the following days, we explored riparian canyons, dun-colored cliffs, weathered arches and a few old miner sites. It is the latter topic with which I will conclude this article.

Like anyone who has spent scads of time traveling the Western United States, I've seen my share of mines -- be they strip, open pit, placer or deep mines; both active and abandoned. I've seen operations for copper, gold, silver, coal, borax, gypsum, gemstones and, on this particular trip, uranium. And while any mine site is a dangerous environment in which to explore, the uranium mines we saw on this trip positively gave me the willies. This should come as no surprise to anyone, as the word "uranium" is practically synonymous with radio-activity. (Think: 1950s Sci-Fi films where unleashed radiation transformed everything from ants to humans into grotesque mutants, often of gigantic proportions.) But of course, that's sheer fantasy, right?

Well, granted that those stories were make-believe, nonetheless, that didn't allay my fears, given the fact that at every historic uranium mine we came to (and we could hardly avoid them where we traveled), there were placards festooning the area, warning of grave dangers to anyone who lingered near the sites. And we're talking not just skull and crossbones (ominous enough) but also the universal symbol (the "trefoil") for dangerous levels of radiation.

Thus far, at least, I haven't come down with a case of acromegaly. Nonetheless, the experience of being several days in close proximity to pitchblende, gummite and carnotite (and other minerals, geologic strata and/or ores associated with uranium mining) was not only enough to unnerve me but also to have me visiting our Larson Library upon my return to Pinetop.

Among the books I now have on my bedside stand is *Yellow Dirt* by Judy Pasternak. It is a work of non-fiction that addresses the history of uranium mining in the Southwest, particularly the social and political aspects as they relate to mining on the Navajo lands.

Before anyone accuses me of bleeding heart liberalism (never mind paranoia), let me just say that I am not one of those folks who thinks we should be living in caves using candles for light (certainly not unscented candles...). But I do struggle with the balance between creature comforts and knowing when to say, "enough is enough." We do need uranium for modern life, although I hasten to add that uranium's primary purposes are for weaponry and as a fuel, both of which we would need much less of, if we just maintained the planet's human population to sustainable levels.

But I had best get off my soapbox before I slip and break my neck. It would be too easy to get me ranting on our over-reliance on finite resources, as well as the suddenly very relevant and related issue of the Antiquities Act and the designations of our National Monuments (hint: my preferences lean towards less people; less wanton wastefulness; more wildlands).

The time came to part ways with good old Magill. We shook hands at a dusty intersection where he would head north to I-70 and I would continue on to the Southeast, hitting the pavement not far from Hanksville where I would stop for gasoline (damn hypocrite that I am, extravagantly consuming finite fossil fuels). Before crossing the border, I would once again get to travel along the spooky but spectacular "Moki Dugway."

Being in Abbey country, I can't help but end this article with his increasingly relevant sentiments: "Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit and as vital to our lives as water and good bread." Amen.