

The 'Trunkman' Mystery

By Colin Fletcher

TWO YEARS ago I was walking from Boulder Dam to Eldorado Canyon, picking a route through rough country near the Colorado for the good of my soul or something, when I came around a rock buttress and saw, standing in the middle of the narrow wash that I was following, a trunk.

It was a beautiful trunk — metal-sheathed, wood-banded, hump-topped. The metal had rusted, the wood grown gray. Yet the trunk did not look decrepit: it had simply weathered into maturity.

As I came close I saw that scattered around it on the gravel surface of the wash lay an ancient canteen, a washbasin, a rusty stove chimney, a shovel, a bucket, two empty five-gallon cans, some smaller cans, two steel animal traps, and a bleached yellow measuring tape that snaked erratically down the wash and ended near the trunk.

Empty Trunk

I lifted the trunk's lid. Except for two very ordinary brown paper bags — the kind you'd pick up in a grocery store for a fresh lettuce or half a dozen apples — the trunk was empty. But on the papered inside of the lid was glued an attractive color print of a woman in a wide-brimmed hat. Flowers and small pastoral scenes decorated the print's border.

The paper had cracked along four lines of dried-out wood. Otherwise the print was in almost perfect condition. But, like the trunk, it stood in the past. The words that welled up in my mind were 'turn-of-the-century.'

I closed the trunk and walked on a few paces through the scattered camp gear. At once I saw, left and above me, a shallow cave. I took off my pack and walked

up a natural rock ramp into the cave.

Near the head of the ramp stood an Indian *metate*. Its granite surface, where the grain had been ground, was worn into only a shallow depression. Beyond the *metate*, in the cave's central and largest chamber, lay three smooth stones, a stool and a small table (both made from wooden boxes), and several smaller items.

Off to the right, near the end of the cave, a rectangular "mattress" of dried grass formed what had clearly been a bed. But the densest and most interesting collection of articles was off to the left in a small, low-roofed annex of the cave.

Scattered forlornly about this annex, on and among sticks of firewood that half-hid many smaller items, lay a "shepherd's" stove, a chimney that clearly belonged to it and was also brother to the one lying outside in the wash, a wooden folding chair, a heavy iron Dutch oven, a frying pan, a coffee pot, a pair of tattered green shoes lacking soles, and an assortment of wooden boxes and metal cans.

The Inspection

For a few minutes I knelt and examined the relics. There were many more than I had thought. Clearly, a man had once lived in this cave, and I began to wonder what I would discover if I examined every article carefully.

But the canteens in my pack held little more than a gallon of water; and I could not be sure of reaching either the river or a spring before the following afternoon.

I did not hesitate for long. As soon as I had marked the cave's location on my map — about six miles below Boulder Dam and two airline miles

west of the river — I swung the pack onto my back and walked on southward toward Eldorado Canyon.

The Return

A year later, in November, 1959, I returned. And for ten days I lived in "the old-timer's cave." I wanted to achieve — quite apart from the good to my soul that always comes with desert peace — some understanding of how my "oldtimer" lived.

First I photographed the cave and the trunk and other camp gear lying outside. Then I began to list details of every man-made or used article I could find. After six days' pretty steady work, my list ran to almost three hundred items.

Finally I collected all the artifacts and reconstructed in the cave's main chamber a setup of the kind that might have been used by my oldtimer — whom I had now christened "Trunkman." The reconstruction gave me a remarkably complete and comfortable camp.

By the end of the ten days I had built up — mostly from my meticulous listing of each item, but in part from the reconstruction of Trunkman's camp and also from living in his cave and sleeping on his grass bed — an outline picture of what had gone on over the years in that remote cave.

First Period

The cave had seen three distinct periods of activity.

First, long before Trunkman arrived, there had been the Indians. They had not, I decided, used the cave as a regular dwelling. Otherwise they would have built a stone wall to shield at least a section of the west-facing cave from the afternoon sun.

They had no doubt used the place the way they habitually used every halfway commo-

dious cave — as an overnight stop.

But my prime interest lay with Trunkman.

Old Autos

The first thing I tried to do was date him. I soon found, held fast between the *metate* and one of the stones that jammed it firm, a half page from *Popular Mechanics* magazine. The contents suggested a date round about 1914.

On the fourth day I unearthed a fragment of the classified ads section of an old newspaper. The used automobiles for sale suggested 1916 or 1917. Further pieces, apparently from the same paper, identified it as the *Los Angeles Times*.

Finally, on the evening of the seventh day, I found a fragment from the top of a page. It said: 'September 10, 1916.' And that was that. (Later, I confirmed that the *Popular Mechanics* was the issue of November, 1915.)

As the days passed and I listed Trunkman's belongings and lived in his cave and slept on his bed, I came to know several slivers of his character.

He was a neat and meticulous man. Fifty paces from his cave he arranged four heavy rocks to make a garbage pit. Even today, such concern for the countryside is hardly standard. In 1916 it must have been remarkable. (Three men who knew the desert at that time have expressed astonishment at the act.)

Competent Handyman

Trunkman was a highly competent handyman. The folding chair, which he had braced with twisted wire, still supported my 195 pounds without a whimper. The cardboard cases of a dozen 12-gauge shot gun shells had been neatly cut short; the shells were obviously destined for reloading with powder and primers from the dismantled rifle cartridges of various calibers that lay around the cave.

Above all there were the "thin sticks" and "string sticks." Both were neatly, almost exquisitely fashioned. The finely pointed "thin sticks" averaged about a foot in length. Each "string stick" measured about four inches. Bound to its tip was a four-inch piece of string with a small wooden toggle tied to its free end. (I have recently confirmed that these sticks form the vital parts of an Indian-type 'deadfall' trap for small animals.)

'The Meanest Lodger'

Trunkman read more than *Popular Mechanics* and the *Los Angeles Times*. I found one mouse-gnawed fragment of *Young's Magazine Advertiser* — which ceased publication in 1933 and whose nature I have yet to determine. A fragment of a fiction story set in England and called "The Meanest Lodger" may have come from this magazine or from a novel or novelette.

Another scrap of paper bore on both sides advertisements for private schools in Pennsylvania.

In the end I built a picture of Trunkman as an educated and unusual man. I also saw him as quite young. These are opinions, not deductions; but when I told my story and showed my photographs to Mr. Murl Emery of Nelson, who has lived in Eldorado Canyon since 1918 and knows the desert backwards, he arrived independently and intuitively at the same conclusions.

I know, or half-know, certain details of Trunkman's stay in his cave. He lived there for about a month: his garbage pit held 42 empty food cans, and if you allow for such food as flour and crackers and the animals he no doubt trapped that seems a fair month's ration.

He probably, though not certainly, outfitted in Las Vegas: one empty wooden box bore the stencilled legend: 'W. E. Hawkins, Las Vegas, Nev.' (W. E. Hawkins, a

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clothing store owner and bank director, was in 1916 the mayor of Las Vegas.)

Trunkman probably arrived in Las Vegas by train: in his cave I found a fragment of a railroad timetable for the old Salt Lake Route, connecting Los Angeles with Chicago and the East. Clearly, he could have come from East or West.

Not a Prospector

But none of this suggests what Trunkman was doing in his hideaway, down in a canyon that is probably too rough for laden burros. He was not prospecting; he chose country most unlikely to produce minerals; and he left none of the hammered samples that you find in every prospector's camp.

At first I thought he was a professional animal specimen collector for a museum or private collection. Careful research demolished both this hypothesis and its suc-



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cessor — that he was a trapper.

But he may well have been one of the "remittance men" who at that time thronged the West. Or he could have been a recent college graduate determined to experience the desert before taking his first job.

Who Was 'Trunkman' Anyway?

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For my first three days at his cave I did not even know why some of his belongings lay out in the wash and most of the rest in the low-roofed annexe. After all, you would expect to find them in the main chamber, where a man could stand upright and live in comfort.

Third Period

But on the fourth day I unearthed irrefutable evidence, too complicated to list here, that supplied the answer. It revealed a third and last period of activity at the cave.

Before Trunkman left the cave he stowed his gear into a small natural 'storeroom' at the back of the annex. He blocked the entrance, at least in part, with stones and wood. And for many years his cache lay undisturbed.

Then someone discovered the cave and dragged much of Trunkman's gear down into the annex and some into the wash. I do not know who these Discoverers were. But

This World, Sunday, February 7, 1971

they came no earlier than 1932: two .22 cartridges that they fired just outside the cave were of a kind not made before that year.

Archeological Mystery

And the Discoverers probably came no later than the early 1940's: quality control numbers on the two grocery store bags that they left in the trunk show that the bags were made in Chicago in either 1929 or 1939. Similar research has confirmed the dates of both Trunkman and the Discoverers.

I am a writer by trade.

And in the story of Trunkman's cave I smell a book — a sort of step-by-step, do-it-yourself, archeological mystery. But I am not sure I can write a totally satisfactory story until I know who Trunkman was or at least what he was doing in the cave.

I therefore offer a reward for the information that enables me to answer one or both of these questions.

Best of all, naturally, would be to find Trunkman himself. He may still be alive. Next best would be to find someone who knew this

man who probably arrived in Las Vegas in the Fall of 1916 and went out for about a month to live alone in his remote cave. He probably backpacked his gear down from the rim of the rough Colorado country.

Shorter Odds

But to transport it from Las Vegas to the rim he may have bought or rented burros or have hired a packer with burros, a wagon, or even a car. Because these events happened 54 years ago, my chances of picking up Trunkman's direct trail seem poor.

But the Discoverers offer

shorter odds. The empty trunk suggests that they carried away some of Trunkman's belongings. So they may have discovered his name, or at least learned what he was doing.

Anyway, I am eager for information. If you have any relevant memories or artifacts, please contact the editor of this paper. For the information that leads me to Trunkman I will gladly pay \$100.

I should add that none of Trunkman's belongings now remain in the cave. To protect them from vandalism, three of us packed them out. With luck they will one day be set up locally as a public display.
