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RETRACING MOQUI FRONTIER FANTASIES & RECREATION IN FLAGSTAFF

STORY BY
KYLE BOGGS



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Prior to the 1890s, there was no viable road to Grand Canyon from Flagstaff, but according to the town's first newspaper, the *Arizona Champion*, there was much potential to bring visitors to Flagstaff if such a road were constructed. Accordingly in 1890, Flagstaff's business elite started making plans, and in two years' time, the paper ran stories musing about the possibility of Flagstaff as "the gateway to Grand Canyon." With a stagecoach route underway, circling the western slope of the San Francisco Peaks before heading north, hotels were envisioned along the line. By the end of May 1892, the "Moqui Stagecoach" route opened from Flagstaff, leaving three times a week.

During this year, ads for bicycle manufacturers, such as **Ben-Hur bicycles**, started popping up regularly in the paper, as well as ads for pneumatic bicycle tires. The next year, other ads appeared: **Coventry Cross Cycles** from Chicago, **Buckeye Cycles** from Ohio. The paper soon became larger and more successful, and was renamed the *Coconino Sun*. Stories lamenting the success of the stagecoach route continued to accompany ads for bicycles: **Indiana Bicycle Co** and **Victor Bicycles**.

Bicycling became so popular by the end of 1894 that in the archival index for the newspaper that year, "Bicycling" appears as a labeled sport for the first time and has more articles referenced than any other sport, including baseball, hunting, shooting, horse racing, fishing, and others. The paper documented bicycle races held at local festivals and regional bicycle trips individuals took to Oak Creek Canyon, Prescott, Sedona, and one "Flagstaff bicycle aggregation" used the stagecoach route for the first time to ride to Grand Canyon.

Illustrative of the cultural and technological shift taking place in Flagstaff during this time, ads began popping up from the **Sykes Brothers**, local machinists who "fell in love with cycling." In 1888, their company ran ads for their specialty in brands for horses and cattle. By 1897, they were advertising their specialty in bicycle repair.

In 1895, they formed the **Coconino Cycling Club**, which publicized and organized annual supported group rides to Grand Canyon. The members group included what would appear to be some of Flagstaff's wealthier citizenry: a local physician, the owner of **Riordan Mercantile Company**, the treasurer for **Arizona Lumber & Timber Company**, and other businessmen.

During the same year, the *Coconino Sun* did its part to drive tourism to the area, assuring the country Flagstaff and its surrounding area were safe, no longer the epitome of "Wild West" lawlessness so many outsiders associated with Arizona. One writer opined: "For a town that a few years ago was a frontier settlement and as 'wild and woolly' as they make 'em ... crime statistics were at an all time low." The same article claimed more visitors had been drawn to Flagstaff that summer than any preceding season in the history of the town, and trumped up the town's "superior advantages as a place of recreation."

The following year, the Coconino Cycling Club sought to make their annual ride to Grand Canyon the largest and most successful to date. Realizing the potential of using the ride to help drive tourism, the *Coconino Sun* helped the group publicize the event with a generous amount of column space in which the ride was described in exquisite detail.

Imagine reading this having never been to the region:

The entire route to the Canyon is a succession of interesting and beautiful sights. The dim, shadowy vistas of the pine forest stretching away on either side, the charming little glades and valleys with which its expanse is broken here and there, the magnificent views of the noble San Francisco triad, the changing hues and shapes of the cliffs and hills along the road, the black carpet of volcanic cinders to the left, Sunset Crater with its sombre slopes and crest of eternal sunshine, all combine to make the first twenty miles of the journey a scenic panorama of indescribable beauty, while the fragrance of the pines and the crisp, fresh mountain air render every breath a delight.

"This will be found preferable to the tents," the 1896 article went on, because "sleep in the open air is most refreshing and invigorating." The article also lamented the "sense of freedom" riders will feel from "widespread views" in the prairie, "extending many miles on every hand." When it turned out the 1896 group were caught in a heavy rainstorm on the way to the canyon, the weather did not dampen their spirits, but tested their "power of endurance."

Without going too far on an academic tangent, postcolonial theorist **Edward Said** referred to this as an "imaginative geography," and used a house as a metaphor. He says, "The objective

space of a house ... is far less important than what poetically it is endowed with ... space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning." The physical space of mountains, trees, and valleys between Flagstaff and Grand Canyon, like Said's house, is not as meaningful as the imaginary.

The 1896 excerpt above continued to describe nearby places visitors could visit including not only the "romantic" banks of Oak Creek Canyon, but also **Montezuma's Castle** and **Cataract Canyon**, "with its magnificent waterfalls, and the picturesque settlement of the Yava-Supai Indians which is located in this Canyon."

Less important than the imaginary is, perhaps, the fact that there is no such tribe as the "Yava-Supai." One might guess the writer of the article unintentionally combined the names of the actual tribes, **Yavapai** and **Havasupai**, likely referring to the latter who do indeed live in the village, Supai, surrounded by beautiful waterfalls deep within an off-shoot of Grand Canyon. While it is perhaps ironic that the writer, who sought to draw outsiders to bicycle to Grand Canyon, is ignorant of the people who inhabit it, the mistake only solidifies the idea that the imaginary is many times more important than the reality.

A week prior to the group's 1896 bicycle ride from Flagstaff to Grand Canyon, the paper ran another article capturing the group's enthusiasm. "It is expected that one hundred wheelmen" would show up for the ride; the ride further involved several local businesses and would include "handsome ribbons" for participants and a parade to see them off.


The day after the group left, however, the paper published a few short paragraphs about the start of the ride. Ride organizers expressed disappointment that of the sixty cyclists from outside of Flagstaff who committed to join them, only seven showed up for the event. The fact that so many people from all over the country read the initial article, were enticed by the vivid description of the landscape, and signed up for the event — yet so few actually participated — further illustrates the powerful allure of the imaginary. Months before the ride, it existed as an exciting fantasy; one can only guess the reality of logistics and physical capability weighed more heavily on would-be participants as the date approached.

Though the club conducted small annual group rides to the Canyon into the 20th century, the stagecoach itself was closed after 1900, in part because a rail line was constructed from Williams to the Canyon, and later, an automobile road was built from Flagstaff. Today, the original Moqui Stagecoach exists within a complex web of Forest Service roads that crisscross and intersect the historic 70-mile-route to Grand Canyon. Though people do hike sections of it, and even run it as an ultra-marathon, mountain bikers have made great efforts to mimic the efforts of those cyclists in the 1890s.

The annual "FLAG2GC" draws riders from all over the Southwest to "pedal through Arizona history," another opportunity to revive frontier fantasies. Its website claims the idea for the ride was rekindled in 1994, when a small group of mountain bikers heard of the old stagecoach route.

"Armed only with trail snacks, water, a local map, credit card and a thirst for adventure, they were off to follow the original Moqui Stage Coach route to the Grand Canyon." Today funds from the ride, perhaps as an effort to forge more inclusive relationships with the diverse cultural make up of Northern Arizona, benefit Toys for Tots, specifically delivering toys to children that live in Supai.

Even though the Moqui Stage Coach line was short lived, it represented early efforts to draw outdoor recreational tourism to the area in a way that contextualizes outdoor recreation today. Because Flagstaff relies on tourism to sustain its economy, this presents both challenges and opportunities: challenges to resist narratives of the landscape dominated by white settler fantasies, and opportunities toward inclusivity.

As Flagstaff — and the Forest Service — draw people here to ride bikes, rock climb, trail run, ski, and more, it also has a responsibility to listen and respond, to manage the landscapes in a manner respectful of multiple ways to live, love, and play. 

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