

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE RAINBOW TRAIL

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Some of Zane Grey's most memorable and stirring geographic descriptions are featured in the pages of *The Rainbow Trail*. The passages devoted to Red Lake Trading Post, Navajo Mountain, and the Tsegi (spelled Sagi in this book) capture the character of the landscape exceedingly well. I argue, however, that Grey's evocation of the overland route on the north side of Navajo Mountain to the Rainbow Bridge—the eponymous “Rainbow Trail”—is unsurpassed in its accuracy and exceptional literary style. Prior to reaching this point in the book, Grey weaves together a geography of real places, such as Kayenta, with mythical places, such as Stonebridge and the village of sealed Mormon wives.

In this sequel to the most famous romance novel of Grey's canon—*Riders of the Purple Sage* (set in 1871)—the action begins twelve years after Lassiter rolls the stone. *The Rainbow Trail* extends from one spring (April) to the next, so the temporal setting is 1883-1884. The general geographic setting is entirely east and south of the Colorado and San Juan rivers in northeastern Arizona and southeastern Utah, on the vast and jumbled plateaus, mesas and canyons of the northwestern portion of the Navajo Reservation (Figure 1). John Shefford, a failed clergyman from Illinois, is on a quest to find the mysterious Fay Larkin, who is supposedly ensconced in idyllic Surprise Valley with her adoptive mother, Jane Withersteen, and the incomparable gunman, Lassiter.

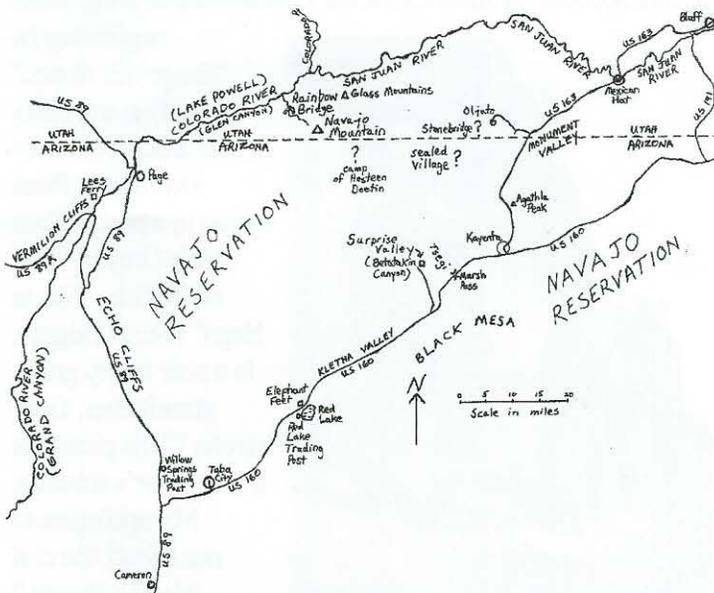
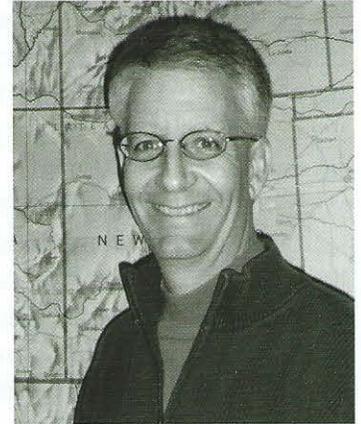


Fig. 1: Geography of the Rainbow Trail.
Cartography by Kevin Blake.



In Chapter 1 Shefford rides to “denuded and glistening” Red Lake, a playa, or dry lakebed, except for a small pool of sour, alkali water that provides a meager drink for his thirsty horse. In Chapter 2 he sets out for Kayenta, riding past “two great yellow buttes like elephant legs (Elephant Feet) and through the greasewood-covered valley (Klethla Valley) on a route that parallels US Highway 160 today. As he approaches Marsh Pass at the outlet of the Tsegi with Black Mesa on his right he gets a glimpse of a “single black shaft of rock rising far in the distance,” which is Agathla Peak or El Capitan, a volcanic neck a few miles north of Kayenta.

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it is “always purple a little way ahead.”*

Whether walking or riding, Shefford admires the purple slopes of the range; though the sagebrush is gray up close, it is “always purple a little way ahead.” When Shefford looks northward from Marsh Pass into the Tsegi, a “wonderful cañon winding between huge, beetling red walls,” Grey unequivocally states that this is the “Deception Pass” of *Riders*.

In Chapter 3, Shefford learns about a Mormon village called Stonebridge located in Utah, about twenty miles north of Kayenta. That places this fictional town somewhere not too far west of Oljato, Utah. Charles Pfeiffer (2001) suggests that Stonebridge might be based on the real town of Mexican Hat, but the description of Stonebridge in Chapter 10 is all wrong for Mexican Hat: Stonebridge is in the center of a wide valley with dark green alfalfa fields, surrounded by pink cliffs. Mexican Hat, by comparison, is in a narrow cleft of the San Juan River.

A more likely analog for the landscape of Stonebridge is the town of Bluff, Utah, but Grey refers to Bluff by name as another town near Stonebridge. Complicating matters is the fact that when Grey wrote this story, Mexican Hat was known as Goodridge, named for an oil prospector, E.L. Goodridge (Van Cott 1990).

Given Grey's penchant for slightly changing the names of real places in his fiction (Felix instead of Phoenix or Flagerstown instead of Flagstaff), it is easy to think that Goodridge could have been transformed into Stonebridge. But it is more likely that Stonebridge is simply a name inspired by the region's numerous arches and natural bridges, and the setting of Bluff inspired the description of Stonebridge.

Near Stonebridge, but across the line in Arizona, is the unnamed village of sealed wives, which, as it turns out, is where Shefford finds Fay Larkin after packing supplies there via the mouth of the Tsegi and then turning northward. In Chapters 4 and 5, Grey sets this village in the mythical Rainbow Cañon, not to be confused with the canyon, Nonnezoshe Boco (Cañon of the Rainbow Bridge), that leads to the Rainbow Bridge (Nonnezoshe). Navajo Mountain, or Na-Tsis-An, is visible far above the village. Triangulating the location of this sealed village with Stonebridge, Navajo Mountain, and the route from Kayenta to the village, the location of the village is somewhere east-southeast of Navajo Mountain and northwest of Kayenta.

Just a few miles westward from the village of sealed wives, up on the slope of Navajo Mountain, is the cluster of Navajo hogans where Shefford, along with his pack-train partners Joe Lake and Nas-Ta-Bega, stop to pick up some goods to take to the trader Withers in Kayenta. Nas-Ta-Bega's sister, Glen-Nas-Pa, lives here with their grandfather, Hosteen Doetin. The outlaw Shadd kidnaps Shefford from this settlement, strips him naked, and leaves him for dead on a red ant mound before a timely rescue by Nas-Ta-Bega.

The plot continually builds toward an inevitable rescue attempt of Jane and Lassiter in Surprise Valley. Other works persuasively argue that Betatakin Canyon in Navajo National Monument is the likely inspiration for Surprise Valley as it is described in *Riders* (Pfeiffer 2001; Blake 2007; Ervin 2010; Pfeiffer and Ervin 2011). *The Rainbow Trail* bolsters this argument. Chapters 13 and 16 establish that Surprise Valley is only a few miles west of the sealed village, and it is "a red-walled gulf...strange, wild, beautiful...green with grass...and dark-foliaged, spear-pointed spruce trees. Below the terrace sloped a bench covered with a thick copse, and this merged into a forest of dwarf oaks and beyond that was a beautiful strip of white aspens..." This is a perfect description of Betatakin Canyon (Figure 2).

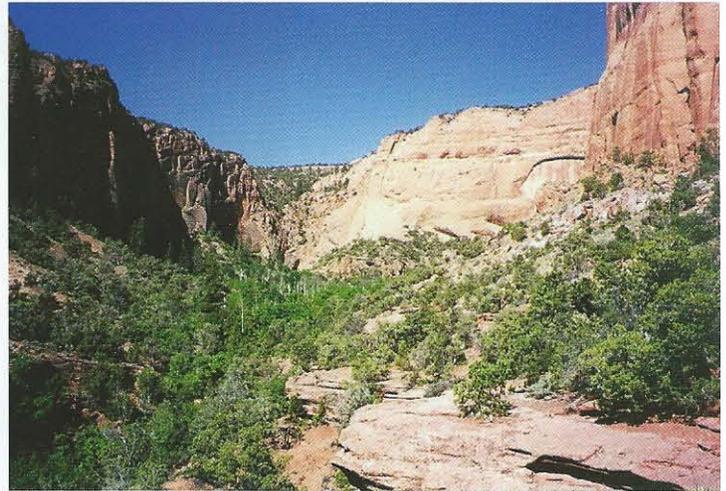


Fig. 2: Betatakin Canyon, June 1999.

The flight of Shefford's party from Surprise Valley toward the Colorado River in Chapters 17 and 18 showcases Zane Grey at the pinnacle of his powers of geographic description. Though not described by the name Glass Mountains, the scene leading up to and including the death of Shadd is set in a landscape of exactly this nature. The Glass Mountains feature "looming red rounded peaks...that labyrinthine network of wildy carved rock...smooth and hard, although not slippery. There was not a crack. ...not a broken piece of stone... every shape that could be called a curve" (Figure 3). Grey, however, uses the Glass Mountains as inspiration for the setting as opposed to setting the action in their exact location since the Glass Mountains are northeast of the supposed setting of the sealed village and not in line with the flight from Surprise Valley toward Rainbow Bridge and the Colorado River.



Fig. 3: Glass Mountains, October 2013.

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Once free of the outlaw gang’s pursuit, Nas-Ta-Bega leads the protagonists into Nonnezoshe Boco, which heads near Navajo Mountain. Today we call this Bridge Canyon, and Grey aptly characterizes the water there as “cold and sweet, without the bitter bite of alkali.” Above the canyon walls, “the narrow strip of sky above resembled a flowing blue river.” Huge caverns or alcoves have been hollowed out in the canyon walls, like “a great, ragged, iron-hued amphitheater.” As the canyon deepens, there are “long levels of round boulders” that cause the weary travelers to slip and stumble on the loose and treacherous stones. I can attest to the accuracy of these statements, having backpacked through the Glass Mountains to Rainbow Bridge in 2013 with Harvey Leake, Todd Newport, and Terry Bolinger (Figure 4).

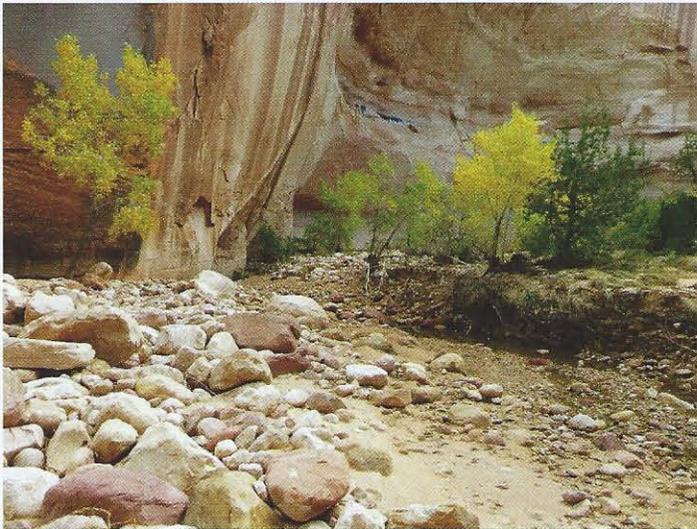


Fig. 4: Bridge Canyon, October 2013.

The opening lines of Chapter 18 that describe the Rainbow Bridge (Figure 5) may be the best ever written by Grey:

The rainbow bridge was the one great natural phenomenon, the one grand spectacle that Shefford had ever seen that did not at first give vague disappointment, a confounding of reality, a disenchantment of contrast with what the mind had conceived. This thing was glorious. It silenced him, yet did not awe or stun. His body and brain, weary and dull from the toil of travel, received a singular and revivifying refreshment. He had a strange, mystic perception of this rosy-hued, stupendous arch of stone, as if in a former life it had been a goal he could not reach.

After leaving Nonnezoshe in Chapter 19, the group travels the rest of the way downstream to the Colorado River where they wait for Joe Lake to arrive with a raft he has stolen upstream along the San Juan River. Grey writes that this is the Grand Canyon. Certainly, the rapids that pound the raft make for a tale of dramatic escape, but in reality Bridge Canyon joins not the Grand Canyon but rather Glen Canyon, though the confluence is today, of course, drowned by Lake Powell. Glen Canyon, named by the Powell Expedition of 1869, was in contrast to Grand Canyon, famous for its serene, smooth-flowing water.

Later downstream, Grey writes that the raft enters the notorious rapids of Cataract Canyon, though in reality Cataract Canyon is upstream of Glen Canyon. Despite this riverine embellishment, the raft eventually carries the travelers to the Vermilion Cliffs and Lees Ferry, where two days additional travel along the Echo Cliffs brings them to the Painted Desert and the relative safety of Willow Springs Trading Post, located about ten miles west of Tuba City, Arizona. Once there Joe Lake and Nas-Ta-Bega depart to return to their homes in the canyon country, whereas Shefford, Fay, Jane, and Lassiter take a relatively easy ride into Flagstaff and then travel on to Illinois, where Jane is reunited with her beloved racehorses, Black Star and Night.

The recollections described by each character in the Epilogue highlight the geography of *Riders of the Purple Sage* and *The Rainbow Trail*. It is a geography that is stunning and surreal and always memorable. Jane fondly remembers her riders of the purple sage, Lassiter evokes rolling the stone, and Fay dreams of Surprise Valley. Shefford holds in his heart wild uplands, cañon ramparts, silent Nonnezoshe, and the rampaging Colorado River—all that embodies the meaning of the glorious rainbow trail.

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*Fig. 5: Rainbow Bridge, October 2013.
All photos in this article courtesy of Kevin Blake.*

