

A Good Career

The first time I saw the Guadalupe Mountains, I thought they were clouds floating above the distant horizon. I was driving east across the plains of West Texas at the beginning of the summer rainy season, when the air of the Chihuahuan Desert is not only unbearably hot but also oppressively humid and muggy. The thick seasonal haze that afternoon carried a tinge of grayish-brown smog from El Paso, which made the eastern horizon invisible. Or so I thought. Ahead of me stretched dry grass, yuccas, and scrubby creosote bushes for as far as I could see, unbroken by anything worth noticing until they disappeared into the haze below what seemed to be a bank of clouds. Despite the haze—or perhaps because of it—the fleecy apparitions reflected the afternoon sunlight in a way that made them appear grand and luminous, like a pale-orange mirage glimmering above the barren landscape.

It was late June 1995, and I was on my way to Carlsbad Caverns National Park for a job interview that I hoped would get my career back on track. For the previous three years, I had worked as the site manager at Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument, a tiny enclave in the Gila National Forest in Southwestern New Mexico that preserves cave dwellings built hundreds of years ago by people of the Mogollon culture. (The name is Spanish, pronounced Moe-go-yone.) Yet I wasn't satisfied with my position. The remoteness of the site and personality clashes between staff members had made it both frustrating and stressful.

Only a few months earlier, I had met Carlsbad Caverns' chief of interpretation at a National Park Service conference in Denver and told him I was looking for a change of duty station. My required term of service at the cliff dwellings was ending, and I hoped to find

another position as a frontline interpretive ranger at a larger park. He assured me that if I didn't mind working underground, two positions on his staff would become available within a few months. It seemed likely I would qualify for one of them. So there I was, fixating on cloud formations as I drove across West Texas.

Yet the closer I got, the less certain I became that they were clouds. Surely they couldn't be cliffs: they were far too high and imposing for that. And yet . . .

A wave of astonishment swept over me. They were indeed a wall of rugged cliffs, veering away toward the north and rising thousands of feet above the desert floor. It was their imposing foundation of dun-colored talus that had made it seem as though they were floating in the air; it blended convincingly into the smoggy haze. But not the cream-colored cliffs: they shone through like the glorious harbingers of a massive storm front. With each passing mile, I became increasingly captivated by their size and magnificence, and I concluded that they had to be the western flank of what the map showed to be the Guadalupe Mountains. I had no idea how significantly they were going to affect my life.

Carlsbad Caverns appealed to me for several reasons. As one of the largest and most popular national parks in the desert Southwest—my favorite part of the country—it would be a welcome relief after the isolation of Gila Cliff Dwellings. Moreover, instead of being a manager and supervisor, I would be doing the things I enjoyed most: presenting guided tours and other interpretive programs and interacting with park visitors. Two of the tours were supposed to be very strenuous, but that didn't bother me; I was in good physical condition for a fifty-two-year-old and had always enjoyed hiking, jogging, and bicycling. My experience as an interpreter and interpretive supervisor made me fully qualified for the job, and I felt confident I would do well in

the interview.

Yet several unwelcome concerns lurked in the back of my mind, refusing to go away. The first was that I had visited Carlsbad Caverns as a teenager, and it hadn't been a good experience. As my father bought our family's tickets for the guided tour down the Natural Entrance Trail—this was before the later self-guided tours—I felt apprehensive, as though something bad were about to happen. I tried to brush it off, but as we walked down the trail from the visitor center to the cave, my anxiety grew and I began to feel queasy.

When we reached the Natural Entrance, my queasiness turned to panic. Looming before us, under a massive rock overhang that bristled with cactus and other sinister-looking desert plants, was a monstrous opening in the earth, a yawning chasm that seemed ready to devour anyone who approached too closely. Cave swallows, unaware of my apprehension, swooped in and out of the opening, yet I hardly noticed them. The only thing I could see was the trail descending into that evil abyss in a series of steep switchbacks, until it finally disappeared in darkness far below. The group of visitors waiting for the next tour to begin seemed unaware that once they had descended into the cave, the rock overhang was going to collapse behind them and bury them alive. Never again would they enjoy the light and air of the earth's surface. They were about to enter their own grave.

There was no way I could go down that trail, and I desperately tried to think of an excuse that might save me from certain death. My mother apparently felt the same way: she began stammering that she didn't want any part of that big hole in the ground. It was just too scary, and she didn't like being in the dark. Quickly sensing my own salvation, I told my father I would sacrifice myself and wait at the visitor center with my mother, because she obviously needed someone to comfort her. My father appeared to accept this reasoning, and I felt my tensed

muscles begin to relax. I had camouflaged my own desperation and salvaged my manhood.

While this incident had occurred many years earlier, I still hadn't been into a cave, and I now wondered if I would be able to work underground.

Another concern was that the strenuous tours involved crawling through tight passages, and I was mildly claustrophobic. Several years earlier, I had been reluctant to crawl into the confined space under my house to check a water pipe and had to call a plumber. Would I react the same way to a tight cave passage? Moreover, the chief of interpretation had mentioned that I'd have the option of learning to climb rope, which would be essential if I wanted to become a "caver" and explore some of the many caves in the Guadalupe Mountains. Yet I had a fear of heights. Given my love of adventure and exploration, there was no way I could work in a cave park without learning to cave and climb rope, so I had to ask myself: Would I be up to the challenge?

Looking back, I could see that my National Park Service career hadn't prepared me for working at Carlsbad Caverns. I hadn't gone underground or crawled into tight spaces, and I hadn't climbed rope or otherwise been exposed to heights. For the most part, I had supervised other employees and worked behind a desk.

I had been a national park ranger since the early 1970s, when I became a trainee at the Albright Training Academy—named after Horace Albright, the second director of the National Park Service—at Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona. Although I had grown up in suburban San Diego and been hired while living there with my parents, I had always loved the outdoors and had even done some hiking and camping. I had also spent three years in the military, but in a position unrelated to the outdoors. I was an air traffic control officer in a ground-based radar

unit, supervising men and women who directed aircraft in flight during inclement weather. I spent most of my days in small, dark rooms lit only by flashing radar screens.

I also had worked for one year as a high school history teacher, a position I found less rewarding than I had expected. Between grading test papers, struggling with malfunctioning audiovisual equipment, and trying to maintain order among students who didn't seem interested in learning, I longed for a job that would challenge me intellectually while also satisfying my love for the outdoors. After resigning my teaching job, unsure of what I wanted to do next, I kicked around for months without doing much of anything. Then I came upon an NPS brochure in the career-placement files at my alma mater, San Diego State College. I had always admired the National Park Service and enjoyed working with the public—I had been a student assistant at the library checkout desk while in college—so I took the required government exam and applied for a position. Almost a year later, I received a phone call telling me I had been selected and would begin training the following month.

[The rest of Chapter One describes Doug Thompson's career in the National Park Service, his job interview at Carlsbad Caverns, and his first walk around the Big Room Trail.]

After an hour of fast-paced walking, I arrived back at the elevators, fully convinced that the Big Room lived up to its reputation. Within minutes I was heading across the parking lot toward my car, squinting in the bright sunlight and excited by the prospect of working at such an amazing park. Driving south from White's City, I felt completely happy and optimistic, and by the time I reached Guadalupe Mountains National Park, I was already setting goals for my new assignment.

The first was to learn as much as I could about Carlsbad Cavern and the other caves of

the Guadalupe Mountains, through research and by exploring them in person. Because I knew nothing about caves—I was still confused about the difference between stalactites and stalagmites—this would be a significant challenge, involving many hours of study in the park library as well as ongoing discussions with other interpreters and members of the park's cave resources staff.

My second goal was to become an experienced caver. I had the required strength and stamina, but now I had to prove I could overcome my fear of tight spaces and heights. This was essential because I would need caving and climbing skills to go on weekend caving trips with Pete [my new supervisor] and his friends. I didn't yet realize how much work and commitment this would involve, but within weeks I would be struggling to master technical equipment as well as climbing techniques, and enduring many exhausting hours of practice on rope. Eventually, I would test my new skills in some of the mountains' deepest vertical caves.

My final goal was to explore and learn about the Chihuahuan Desert. I knew from past experience that visitors to national parks constantly ask questions about things unrelated to a park's primary theme. At Yorktown Battlefield, they had wanted to know about the deer they saw grazing along roadsides and the wildflowers growing on earthworks. At Gila Cliff Dwellings, they had asked about the hot springs and the fish they saw swimming in the river. At Carlsbad Caverns, they would undoubtedly ask about the desert, so I had to be prepared.

I would find, to my surprise, that Carlsbad Caverns is as much a desert park as a cave park. My time there would be divided almost equally between exploring the Chihuahuan Desert and exploring the underworld of caves. It would be an unforgettable adventure, taking me from rocky canyons bristling with spiky lechuguilla plants into twisting cave passages decorated with gypsum flowers and sparkling aragonite crystals. Along the way, I would discover that the desert

and its caves are linked not only by the creative actions of water and other natural processes, but by nature's inexhaustible desire to create a world of astonishing beauty, both below and above the earth's surface.