Human Prints on a Wild Land

Those craggy, hermetic desert dwellers keep the rest of us, safely ensconced in our homes, in touch with the untamed drama of nature.

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WHEN THE HERMIT OF Tahquitz told me he was selling his land high in a canyon above Palm Springs, I should have rejoiced. Tahquitz is a sheer-walled abyss that has been uninhabited for most of history - - except for this fellow Bob who for almost two decades has owned a cabin and his own waterfall up in the gnarly reaches.

Now that Bob is too old to scale a mountain every day, he's moving to town and Tahquitz will return to its unpeopled state. Theoretically, that should please me. I like trails with no footprints and habitat devoid of humans — the so-called blank places on the map.

But in fact, I feel let down by Bob's news. I see now that while I claim to love wilderness, what I really love are wild places with a human seasoning.

People — certain people who are not so common these days — breathe meaning into dunes and granite. I can see Tahquitz Canyon from my backyard. It's thrilling to look up there when the wind is whipping and think of Bob in his hut, bent over his biblical translations, perhaps with a turkey roasting in a pit and a cougar sniffing around from an outcrop.

Knowing the name, face and story of this canyon dweller somehow orients me to the land. Such dwellers have helped me to get my bearings in the mountains and desert around Palm Springs. I've studied a map of the Santa Rosa Mountains a hundred times, but I could never quite tell the twin peaks — Santa Rosa and Toro — apart until I learned about Desert Steve Ragsdale, an old-fashioned eccentric who lived on the mountain and painted poems on pine trees up on Santa Rosa peak. One year his woods came close to burning down, so Steve gave the trees a voice: "TO MAN AND TREE I SAY TO THEE BEWARE OF FIRE IT'S KILLING ME."

I was even more set on finding the peak when I heard that anonymous admirers went up on the mountain with paint cans now and then to freshen up the poems. I studied the maps with a new urgency, and now I can tell Toro from Santa Rosa.

Desert Steve died in 1971. If I'd met him in the flesh, he might have annoyed me with his anti-government rants and his snuffling flock of goats. I like people moored to places, but only if the actual person is not too obtrusive. So while I mourn the retirement of the Tahquitz Hermit, I'm beginning to see that a man who has departed, like Ragsdale, can still lend a place his imprint.

That's the case in Chino Canyon, the wide alluvial fan you ascend in your car as you approach the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway. Off to your left, in a tangle of mesquite and grapevines, lived a Cahuilla shaman, Pedro Chino, who was 126 years old when he died in 1939. He sometimes traveled under Mt. San Jacinto via a waterway no one but medicine men had ever seen. When miners dug a tunnel under the mountain for the Colorado River Aqueduct in 1934, they hit a subterranean stream.

The wilds are so complex they're hard for a human mind to grasp. I don't know that it matters to a raven that Pedro Chino lived by a hot sulfur spring below the tramway. A raven has her own landmarks. But to me, the association makes that place more knowable.

If I were closer to my wild woman ideal, perhaps I could appreciate a place directly, skin to stone, with no human intermediary. Undoubtedly, though, my predilection reflects a universal human uneasiness with what's truly wild. In fact, a trackless land can kill you. Therefore we like our outback with signs that someone, no matter their fate — Juan Bautista de Anza, the Donner Party — has been there before us.

My affinity for the land dwellers is also, in part, aesthetic. A human life set against a timeless immensity makes for an effective accent. The American landscape painters of the 19th century were always looking for a ruined cabin or broken wagon wheel to set off sandstone and creosote bush. "Simple nature is not quite enough," wrote painter Thomas Cole. "We want human interest, incident and action, to render the effect of landscape complete."
Until recently, I would have disputed the painter. I believed people, with our cellophane wrappers and monster tires,

were the worst thing that could happen to a natural place. If you're human and you love wild lands, you can sometimes feel bad about your very existence.

But Pedro and friends provide a loophole. There may be a place for us yet.

When I say we , I'm not talking about the tourists or day- trippers who trek across a plateau with a GPS unit and some goo in a tube. (Unfortunately, that's the only way most of us know how to be in wild places these days. We've forgotten how to live like lonely, heat-addled residents on the land.) I'm talking about people (just a few will do) unreasonable enough to settle in a dangerous gorge that most humans could never reach on their own power. And to care like crazy about that place.

The biologist E.O. Wilson called such people "votaries of particular places." And it's true that Mountain Bob, Desert Steve and Pedro Chino are like votive candles to me. In the boundless desert, they are the tenants who keep a light on.