

Where the Grand Canyon Really Came from

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The Christians say God made it, about 6000 years ago. The geologists say erosion made it, over the last few million years. I used to go with the scientific idea. After all, both my parents were geologists. Then I discovered the truth.

It was the frogs.

I know it sounds stupid, the kind of thing an eight year old would make up. In fact, it was kind of stupid, a mistake anyone could have made. In this case, it was a communication problem between the Havasupai and the frogs.

You probably haven't heard of the Havasupai Nation. There's only a few hundred of them left, after all. They lived in and around the Grand Canyon for a long time, and still own part of it. The US government stole most of their land in the 1800s, but gave back a big chunk in the 1970s. "Justice," it was called. Turns out it was something else entirely.

A few years back, I was on a Forest Service back road in my van, just outside the Havasupai Nation border. Flat tire. No cell phone signal. Damn. Tires on that thing are heavy, changing it alone would be no fun. Well, when there's no choice, you do what you must.

The world is quiet out there, 30 miles down a dirt road to nowhere. The air is dry, and sound carries, but there wasn't much sound. Until a rooster let loose, exhibiting his masculine dominance. Hey, someone lived on the other side of this border fence, back in the trees. Maybe I could get some help? It was getting close to sunset, the sooner the better.

"Fred" (not his real name) helped me change the tire. A really friendly guy. I offered to pay him, but he laughed it off. "I like to help people change tires out here. Tow them out of the mud when it rains, too."

It was nearly dark. I'd decided to sleep in the van, and take off in the morning. "Hey, Fred, want a drink? I'm camping here overnight, unless there's a problem."

"What problem? You're on Federal land, you're free to camp anywhere here. Just don't block the gate. Sure, I'll have a drink. Wife's down in Flagstaff with her sister for a couple days, shopping for stuff we need. What have you got?"

Johnnie Walker Blue Label. Always travel with the good stuff.

We were about 63% blotto, sipping whisky from some nice glasses he brought over from his house, watching the incredible night sky from the lounging chairs I set up outside my van. Talking about life out in the desert. He told me about guiding paid elk hunts for famous actors and billionaires. Way out of my price range.

After a while, the conversation turned to the Canyon. Fred said, "We've been here a lot longer than you think. I know what the books say. 800 years or so, migrating here after the mega-drought of the 1200s. Bullshit. We were here when the canyon was made."

I shouldn't have laughed. Everyone is entitled to their myths. After all, our national myth has a kid throwing a coin across a mile wide river. Our religious myth has a man talking with a shrubbery that was on fire. But I couldn't help it. "Six million years? Fred, we're not chewing peyote here, we're sipping Scotland's finest."

He laughed back at me. "Who said six million years? The canyon isn't that old. Twenty thousand years, tops. My people remember."

"Remember what?" I was skeptical, to put it lightly.

"Remember how it happened. We didn't mean for it to go this far, you understood. But once you start them, they're hard to stop."

What the hell was he babbling about? Some stupid joke on an outsider? "Who is hard to stop? Little green men with digging machines?"

He nodded gravely, then belched a little. "Close. Little green frogs. Fill me up, and I'll tell you about it. But don't pass it on. It's a secret."

If he wanted to think I'm gullible and tell me a tall tale, why not let him? The night was beautiful and the whisky was smooth. "My ears are open, O Wise Fred of the Havasupai. And my lips are sealed."

"You know each tribe has a creation story? Ours is that we came up from underground, and could speak with animals. Hey, I went to college, I know we didn't just climb up out of a hole in the ground. Migration from Asia, 20,000 years ago or more. But we got here soon thereafter, and have been here since. A nice place."

I had to agree to that last statement. I raised my glass, "To nice places everywhere!" And we drank to that.

Fred went on, "But the speak to animals part is true. Most of the skill is lost now, but a few of us still have it, a little."

I yelled out, "Squirrels, be gone! There, I can speak to animals, too."

Fred laughed back at me. "But we talked with animals. Anyway, back to the story. When we got here, there wasn't a big canyon. There was a small canyon cut into the sandstone, but that was about it. Tributary streams wandered in here and there. The bottom of some of those had good soil and nice things for eating grew there."

I put in, "You mean, like at Havasupai Gardens campground in the National Park now?"

"Exactly like that. So our elders back long ago talked to the animals, and they talked back, and told us lots of useful things about how to live out here. When I say animals, I don't just mean big things like elk. Small animals, too. Squirrels aren't very interesting, though. Too frantic. But what was and still is interesting were the local frogs living by the streams."

I knitted my intoxicated forehead. "If a squirrel doesn't have anything interesting to say, how can a frog? How big are these frogs? Like the ones I've seen down in the canyon, croaking their lives away -- size of a quarter? They can't have interesting brains."

He said, "What you say makes logical sense, but logic isn't always right. These frogs are special. They have a collective intelligence, like a termite nest or other things ... like mole rats. One frog is an idiot hopelessly studying to be a moron. A group of them is not so dumb, in either meaning of the word. At least, not when they get woken up by talking with people."

"So what did your old time elders tell the frogs? Dig a Grand Canyon for us?" I pulled a little more whisky into my mouth. Nice smooth swallow.

“Of course not. They found out that the frog groups think kind of like what we call engineers these days. Maybe they’re mutants from all the uranium around here. But give them a task, and they’ll charge ahead into it. Think of a stubborn Scottish engineer who gets a notion into his head, and will carry it out even if the sky falls.” He raised his glass and drank to the mythical Scottish engineer. “Damn, some of those Scots produce great stuff.” Another thing I had to agree with.

“Fred, these damn frogs are tiny. What are you saying? Did they dig the Grand Canyon?”

He grinned at me. “It was an accident. The elders taught them to dig the soft sandstone with flakes of harder rock. The frogs picked it up quickly. The idea was to widen the stream beds, which would provide better living space for the frogs and better space for the plants we liked to grow. All this was before agriculture, of course, but gathering fruits and seeds has been around a long long time.”

I asked, “So what was the accident? Or the mistake?”

He looked serious. “There was no way to turn the frogs off. Generation after generation, they improved their digging tools and methods. They kept digging, because we asked them once. The tributaries and the main channel of what you now call the Colorado river. It wasn’t dramatic at first, because it was just an inch or two a year. But over the centuries and millennia, that adds up.”

“Why didn’t you just tell them to stop?”

“Didn’t work. Try to tell that Scottish engineer ‘never mind’ -- once it’s in his mind, heaven itself won’t stop him. The frogs are worse. You can’t actually reason with an amphibian. We tried. There was some success. Not all the tributaries were dug down so deep by the frogs. Only the ones that still have water flowing are the ones the frogs wouldn’t stop with. The dry streams are places we managed to get a word in edgewise.”

I laughed and told him, “That’s a good story, Fred. Frogs digging the Grand Canyon. I’ll have to ask them about it on my next backpacking trip.”

His face was unsober and serious. “That’s not all. You know how the government took all our land away, what with the silver strike, uranium mining, and so on? And then gave us back a big chunk 90 years later? That was the frogs, too.”

I was a little tired of being fed a line of frogs. “What, did you bribe the government with frogs? I know they passed a law to give you back that land.”

He said, “Some geologists started to get suspicious. There was an investigation by the USGS, and then the BIA. I don’t know the details, that was before I was born. But the upshot was that we traded some information about the frogs for the return of some of our land. I know the Defense Department was interested. They are the ones that trained the frogs to dig better.”

I laughed again. “So the frogs could be dropped into Russia and dig up their roads, or something? What did those guys do?”

He was deadpan now. "It was more of a research thingy, what do you call it? A study. They made them little tiny things like jackhammers. Go listen to the frogs. You think they are making mating calls? Maybe a little, but a lot of that racket is their little digging machines. The frog group mind isn't stupid -- they figured out how to make their own jackhammers. It's out of control now. The digging in the Canyon is going faster and faster."

I decided to play along. "Tell them to stop. Offer them something else. Why doesn't the government tell the frogs where to get off?"

Fred answered, "We never taught them how to talk with the frogs. They trained and equipped them with pantomime. Clever, really, but limited in communicating abstract ideas. Not that the frogs are big on abstract ideas, anyway. The government wouldn't pay our price for the speaking-to-frog knowledge."

"I'll bite. What's the price?"

"We want the whole Grand Canyon back. It's been ours from the very beginning. Ours and the Hualapai, of course. They can transfer control of the National Park to us, and keep the details hidden from the public."

That was the punchline. The whole frog joke was just a setup for saying, "Give us back our canyon."

I slept in my van, Fred back in his house. In the morning, he came over and looked at me closely. "Hey, white man. How's your head this morning? That was some good hooch you were pouring."

Blue Label is good, but I did have a little headache. I told him so, and then said, "Man, I was drunk last night. You told me some story, but I can't remember it."

He looked a little relieved. "Frankly, I don't remember it either. Just a way to pass the time way out here. Where are you going now?"

"Back to Tusuyan, then driving back East on the Interstate. Have to get back to my job. Not all of us get to live out in the open like you do."

He smiled, "Yeah, not everyone can be lucky. What's your job, anyway?"

I told the truth, a tiny part of it. "I take reports from a lot of sources, and write summaries for the higher-ups. Sometimes interesting reports, sometimes boring. It's a living. See, I have a nice van -- my self-propelled tent."

"Well, next time you're out here, stop by again. And get a better jack."

A couple years went by. I changed jobs, started working for the Defense Department. One of my first tasks was to prepare an executive summary of a bunch of wild proposals to harness the forces of

nature for warfare. Projects with fanciful titles; for example, Marshmallow Thunder, Chardonnay Lightning, and Cherry Blossom Winds. I had to be codeword cleared into each project to get the report. Lots of technical details, mostly aimed at nonsense ideas. A lot of money had been spent.

Eventually, I worked my way down to project Halvah Frogs. "Frogs?", I thought. A force of nature? I requested access to the project report, but for the first time was denied. I pointed out that it was part of my task assignment. No dice. Only SecDef or his personal designee could grant access. I pushed my case up the bureaucratic tower of ineptitude, and worked on other reports.

It took a few months, but eventually I got a mostly unredacted copy of "Halvah Frogs." As I opened and skimmed through it, the smell of Johnnie Walker seemed to drift out of the pages. "Fred" hadn't been BS-ing me at all, back there in the desert. Frogs were a force of nature. The Havasupai had got back a big chunk of land in return for a modified limited hang-out about the frogs.

The report was full of speculations about what the frogs could do for the military, if only they could be recruited. Sabotage enemy roads. Dig holes undermining enemy dams. Build fortifications in the fields. The urgent need was to explore these possibilities. But only the Havasupai knew how to talk with the frogs at all. The political discussion of the "price" for getting this knowledge was blacked out in the copy I got.

I wrote my executive summary, shredded all the reports I'd worked from, and moved on to other projects. I figured nothing would come of any of these beyond-the-blue-sky projects.

That was true. Until Ivanka became President.

I was close to retiring, and pretty senior in the hidden and artificial world of military bureaucrats. And apparently one of the few people left above the ground who was cleared for "Halvah Frogs."

Somehow, Ivanka had heard of this insane project, and she wanted to be briefed on it. The finger of fate landed on me, so off to Camp Jared (formerly Camp David) I was whisked. I was met by her half-sister and chief of staff, Tiffany, who whispered to me, "Humor her. She has an obsession. It will pass, I'm sure." Obsession about what was not clear. Yet.

Ivanka let me present the outline of the frog story with only a few questions. Sharp questions. She wasn't a dolt, unlike her brothers. Then she asked, "Do you think the frogs could change the shape of mountains? Given tools and plans, I mean?"

I had to answer, "I think so, but I'm not sure. The Havasupai said it took the frogs thousands of years to dig the Canyon. And that was mostly in soft sandstone."

She said, "Yes, but they only had stone tools. With modern mini-machines designed for them, they could work much faster and on harder rocks. Besides, in the Grand Canyon, the inner gorge is carved into granite and basalt."

A briefer isn't supposed to question the President, but I had to ask, "Why carve up mountains? New roads? Tunnels?"

She got frosty. "I want your information and opinions about technical feasibility. The goals and politics are my business." I backed off. You don't rise in the bureaucracy by having the personality type that starts arguments with politicians.

I answered her question. "Yes, they could do what you want, given tools and clear instructions. And monitoring of their progress. Otherwise, they'll just keep going and possibly wander off in undesired directions."

She had some more questions, good ones. By the time I left, she had got over her chill attitude, and warmly thanked me, "I appreciate your opinions. If I decide to proceed, I may need you on the project team. Tiffany told me you are thinking of retiring. Perhaps you could hold off on that decision for a few months?"

I told her that I could wait until the end of the year, but that I wanted to travel in the West a lot before I got too old. She smiled, "If this project goes through, there will be a lot of travel in the West to look forward to, I assure you."

In early November, I was putting my retirement forms together. What a mess. I had to look up lots of random codes to enter in lots of random places. Do I want this? Is my health insurance coverage of that type? What about my life insurance? Pension (sorry, annuity) options. And there's no guidance from HR, none. Mess it up, and you'll just have to live with the consequences.

I get a call from the Director of National Intelligence, my current ultimate boss. She asks me to put off my retirement, due to an important project straight from the White House. "The President wants to see you. Again."

Shit. The "call of duty." Ours is not to wonder why, ours is just to do or get fried.

This time, the meeting was at the White House. Ivanka and Tiffany were there, along with a bunch of people I'd never seen before -- and I'd been around the DC national security scene for a long time. Introductions around. The two important ones were the National Park Service Director and the Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Solidified my pre-meeting feelings. They were going to do a deal with the Havasupai.

The public story is well known. The Havasupai and Hualapai would be "brought in" to help run the Grand Canyon National Park, because of "their long history with and unequaled knowledge of" the environment. The hidden story was that the tribes would have a nearly free hand in the Park. In return, the government would get the secret knowledge of how to communicate with the frogs. There were lots of caveats about ensuring the government got what it wanted, and ways for the government to claw the deal back if it didn't work out.

No one asked, “Why are we doing this? What do we gain?” So I kept my mouth shut in the crowd. Afterwards, I had a few moments alone with Tiffany, and asked her, “What’s going on here?”

She said, “Ivanka wants to use the frogs to build a memorial to our father and to Jared. She thinks of them as martyrs who gave their lives in the cause of Making America Great Again.” She made a quick face at the last phrase. The pair had died in a jet crash on the campaign trail, blamed on bad maintenance that had used cheap and uncertified replacement parts.

“Why the frogs? Why not ram the money through Congress, or fund raise from the rubes? Then do it with human labor. Probably faster, and more controllable than amphibians.”

She leaned towards me, and whispered, “Ivanka is obsessed. She doesn’t want a single memorial. She wants to carve whole mountains, like Rushmore but bigger. And more than one. Don’t cross her on this, it brings out our father’s rage in her.” She tooled out, leaving me confused and dumbfounded. Maybe I should retire and run away out West.

After some thought, I did retire. I came back as a contractor at about 5 times my Federal pay, as liaison with the Havasupai Nation. I told them what the frogs would be used for. They didn’t care. White men (and women) do stupid white man things. How did that affect them? They were getting control of their Canyon back, well over a century since it had been ripped from them.

I helped out on the project for a while. Banked a fair amount to help with the go-go years of retirement, which I started up after a year or so on the payroll. It was all to be a secret. The giant monuments to Donald and Jared would appear as if from nothing. You should see the documents everyone had to sign, basically allowing the government to squash anyone who breathed a word of this enterprise.

It took a few years for the scope of Ivanka’s project to reveal itself. When I was on the inside, there were just a handful of monuments planned. Her obsession must have grown enormously after her reelection. Or maybe the frogs spun out of control, again.

The faces on Mt. Rushmore were the first publicly visible signs of the projects. They all started to resemble Donald. Then someone noticed that Half Dome in Yosemite was starting to look like Jared. Mount Shavano in Colorado. El Capitan in Idaho. The Maroon Bells. The list kept growing. The remaining MAGA fanatics said loudly it was a sign from God. Most people were more suspicious, but there was no information leaking about the true story. The mountains continued to slowly evolve into giant busts of Ivanka’s “martyred” father and husband, with no clear explanation.

I knew the story would come out sooner or later. But I didn’t want to face the wrath of Ivanka, who was much smarter as President than her father had ever been. But now she’s out of office, and I’m out of the country. Where, I’m not saying, except that there’s at least one ocean between me and the Americas. I really don’t want to spend my golden years watching hills and mountains slowly evolving into the likenesses of Donald and Jared, and why should the frogs care about the borders of the USA?

You've got the scoop now. The only way to stop the Trumpification of America's mountains is to wipe out the frogs. Or maybe convince them to stop and reverse the damage. Or find them another project to obsess about? Good luck with the "talk the damn things out of it" approach, though. The Havasupai couldn't get the frogs to stop digging the Grand Canyon, and they tried for thousands of years.

I really don't know what can be done about it. Myself, I got a deal on barrels of Blue Label, and am sipping my way through them now (neat, of course). At least Scotland won't be affected by the frogs. I hope.