



October 2009 Secret Canyon Solitude

On a fine day a short time ago, a small group of "Hotshots" from the Friends of the Forest journeyed up Secret Canyon on a backpacking trip. The ostensible purpose of the trip was to do trail repairs and cut out several large trees that had fallen down blocking portions of the trail. But the individuals who participated in this trek came away with much more than just memories of trail work.

For starters, the canyon itself provided a spectacular backdrop of contours and colors from the rugged cliffs bordering each side of the canyon and the ever-changing shapes, textures, and colors of the abundant plant life found in this riparian zone. Maples, sycamores, and cottonwood trees were in full glory, particularly when backlit by the early morning sun. The weather was perfect. The solitude was immense. But best of all was the companionship of four like-minded fellows who enjoy the wilderness, enjoy working together, and enjoy contributing to the wilderness experience of others by helping to keep a quality trail open in one of the best canyons around.

Bob Tener, Rick Zabor, Kevin Harding, and I started into the canyon armed with the tools of trail maintenance. Picks, mclouids, loppers, wedges, and two different types of saws were all carried in along with our backpacking gear. Many people are surprised to learn that in designated Wilderness Areas one cannot use a chainsaw to remove large trees from the trail, except during emergency fire conditions. So we carried in "Big Bertha." This two-man saw is over four feet long, with aggressive, 3 inch teeth. It is so heavy that we carry it with a padded strap over the shoulder, the saw hanging out in front and rear.

During the first day, we went into the canyon some four miles and established camp up on a perfectly situated shelf surrounded by centuries-old ponderosa pine, gamble oak and big-tooth maple. The flat area was covered with bracken fern and had an old ponderosa log, three feet in diameter that provided a great table-bench combo. After dropping off some of our gear, we traveled on up the canyon with the maintenance tools to the "end" of the maintained part of the trail, which is about six miles in. From here we worked back down the trail toward our campsite, cutting out several large ponderosa pines which had fallen across the trail. As each tree usually takes two cuts to remove it from the trail, this can take some time! We also cut out brush from the sides of the trail, and repaired the trail in a large side canyon where it had been completely washed out by heavy summer rains.

We arrived back at our campsite around four-thirty, with plenty of time to set up camp and cook the traditional backpacking gourmet meal of boiled water and pouch surprise. We then settled back to enjoy a well-deserved evening of comradeship and talk around the campfire. With a retired engineer, a CPA, a high-school teacher, and a psychologist in the group, there was no lack of opinions. I can assure you that we resolved most of the world's pressing problems that evening!

Next morning after breakfast, we all took a short trip up a side canyon to look at a two-room Sinagua ruin and small granary situated up very steep slickrock in a large alcove. The setting was spectacular.

After striking camp, we moved on down the trail, repairing and cutting as we went. The idea was to work our way out to the trailhead with our packs in tow. Along the way we cut out several more trees and repaired a number of drainage features which are essential to the long-term health of a good trail.

We came upon one serious trail issue which was beyond our current tool and manpower capabilities. A large ponderosa pine had fallen across a very steep section of the trail at an acute angle. It was over one hundred feet long and probably weighed several tons. Cutting it would have risked having it roll over one of us, so we decided to take the conservative route and construct a temporary trail around it instead. In the future, with more manpower, rope, pulleys, and a "come-a-long" we will go back in and remove the tree from the trail.

It is important to restore a trail to its original path, wherever possible, to avoid having multiple trails going through the woods. This preserves the land better, minimizes destruction of vegetation, and reduces the possibility of people unknowingly walking over archeological sites. Before any approved system trail goes in, an extensive study of the proposed route is done, including an archeological survey to ensure that the trail does not destroy an ancient site.

If you are interested in making a difference, consider joining the Friends of the Forest. For more information, visit www.friendsoftheforestsedona.org or contact the Red Rock Ranger Station at 203-2900.

Roy Julian is President of the Friends of the Forest and an avid forest hiker.