

Near Miss: 1 of 2

Freddi Steele

One summer morning in Flagstaff, after enjoying breakfast at a favorite haunt, I pulled out a yellow notepad and pen. I wanted to share one of my “Man vs. Nature” experiences while in the service of our beloved American national parks. As I put pen to paper, my writing hand started to shake so badly that I had to stop. I’d never experienced anything like this. In my almost-60 years, I’d encountered some speed bumps in my professional and personal lives, but had never had such a reaction, even when journaling about some of those speed bumps. Later that day I resumed this story through my computer keyboard, somehow bypassing the part of my subconscious that apparently had never forgotten the true story I’m about to reveal. It’s been 25 years since this wake-up call in the boondocks. When Mother Nature finds out you ignored her memo, the one about mortality and tempting fate, “Be afraid, *be very afraid.*”

Northern New Mexico in the summer evokes the sweeping vistas of Kevin Costner’s 1991 movie, *Dances with Wolves*, with its endless green rolling hills and spectacular blue skies. Through this wild country snakes the Santa Fe Trail, carved into primeval grasslands by 19th century wagon trains originating in Franklin, Missouri, and terminating in Santa Fe, carrying the hopes of people long gone. This part of the U.S. is almost as it was 200 years ago, with only an occasional barbed wire fence or rancher’s weather-beaten pickup truck kicking up dust to break the spell. At the junction of the Mountain and Cimarron branches of the Santa Fe Trail endures Fort Union National Monument, with its

adobe ruins of a once-great Western military fort and remains of Civil War earthworks standing watch over the virtually treeless land.

In 1988 I transferred to Fort Union with the National Park Service to manage the park's administrative division as part of climbing the Federal service career ladder. I bought supplies in the small town of Las Vegas (30 miles away), wore a ranger uniform and dealt with visitors, executed service and construction contracts, kept the park's new fax machine and computer running, and served as acting Superintendent when the Superintendent was out of the park on vacation or on assignment in the Santa Fe regional office. After work I'd socialize with neighbors (there were only four), work on stained glass projects, and run on two-lane New Mexico Highway 161. Weekends I'd drive my 1983 yellow Nissan 2x4 pickup 90 miles to Santa Fe for groceries, and to see something other than prairie grass and red ruins. Monthly I'd head 150 miles to Albuquerque to stock up on stained glass supplies, do *real* shopping, and in the winter, thaw out from the bitter cold of the intermountain West.

Fort Union *is* one of the ends of the earth, where the Sangre de Cristo range of the Rocky Mountains and the Great Plains become acquainted. Turns out they don't always play nice, spawning some of the country's most violent weather. It wasn't unusual for local cowhands to find rain-drenched cattle electrocuted by lightning, or stout Pinyon Pines sheared off at the ground by twisters. I knew about the barbequed cattle; I didn't know about New Mexico's monsoon season between July and September.

One summer afternoon in 1989 I went running with a Walkman cassette player loaded with Phil Collins and Billy Idol hits tucked into a blue neoprene Tune Belt buckled around my waist. I was faster back then, covering the asphalt at about a 9 or 10 minute per mile clip. Since it was summer, I was attired in a singlet and racing shorts. I ran southeast out of the park over the narrow Wolf

Creek bridge to NM 161 to do four or five miles in order to be back in plenty of time for dinner. The warm, heavy air was absolutely still under a nickel gray sky. Lightning, so far away the thunder couldn't be heard, lit up darkening clouds to the east. Perfect afternoon for a run. Or so I thought. *To be continued...*

Freddi Steele and Dana Prom Smith edit Gardening Etcetera for the Arizona Daily Sun. Smith emails at stpauls@npgcable.com and blogs at <http://highcountrygardener.blogspot.com>.