

FIRST DRAFT

Eccentric artist-adventurer remains missing in Utah desert after 88 years

The search for Everett Ruess began the first week of March 1935 in south-eastern Utah's rugged canyon country. It has continued ever since.

Ruess was a 20-year-old artist, poet and writer from Los Angeles who had four years of solo back-country experience under his belt when he disappeared in November of 1934. He was

last seen southeast of Escalante, Utah, on the road to the Hole in the Rock and the Colorado River.

However, because he wrote to his family in Los Angeles that he didn't expect to be near a Post Office for two months, his parents didn't begin to worry about him until late January. Then they began contacting everyone who might have seen or heard of Everett during his brief stay in Escalante.

Their calls and letters unleashed a flurry of efforts to try to find the young man — some sincere and some clearly designed to garner money from Ruess' parents or publicity for the searchers.

Almost immediately, quotes from some of Ruess' writings and information about his art began to accompany stories of his disappearance.

On March 12, 1935, a Salt Lake City newspaper printed Ruess' last known letter, to his brother Waldo. In it, he said he did not expect to return to civilization soon.

"I have not tired of the wilderness, rather I enjoy its beauty and the vagrant life I lead," he wrote. "I prefer the saddle to the streetcar and the star sprinkled sky to a roof ... the deep peace of the wild to the discontent bred by cities."

Ruess' poetry also highlighted his love of nature. "Pledge to the Wind" was written when he was just 15. This is one stanza:

"Here in the utter stillness,
High on a lonely cliff-ledge
Where the air is trembling with lightning,
I have given the wind my pledge."

These and other writings, along with his water colors and block prints, helped spark a cult of Ruess followers that continues to this day.

Over the eight decades since his disappearance, there have been numerous search efforts, many books and articles written, a couple of films produced and multiple disappointments for the Ruess family hoping to learn his ultimate fate. Although there have been tantalizing clues to his whereabouts and some of Everett's belongings have been found, his body has not.

Soon after his disappearance there were a number of alleged sightings of Ruess — in Mexico, Florida and California, and throughout the Southwest. These sightings fed one theory: that he was alive and well but didn't want to be found, or he had amnesia.

Early on, there were also stories that Ruess had been murdered — by cattle rustlers, Utes, Navajos or fellow wanderers.

Because some of his writings indicated deep depression and hinted that he thought of taking his own life on occasion, some people believe Ruess committed suicide.

But most prevalent is the idea that the adventurous young man, who said he often made dangerous climbs to ancient Indian sites, fell victim to the hazards of the desert

who had four years of solo back-country experience under his belt when he disappeared in November of 1934. He was



BOB SILBERNAGEL



Everett Ruess and his trail companion, Curly, as they appeared in 1932 from The Desert Magazine, September 1938. (Magazine is now defunct).

country he loved.

Ruess was born in Oakland, Calif., on March 28, 1914. His family moved several times when he was young, but by the time he was a teenager they were in Los Angeles.

He undertook his first lengthy expedition in 1930, when he was just 16, a trek along the California Coast, carrying a 50-pound rucksack. After that, he decided he would use horses or burros for his backcountry excursions.

In 1931, when he was 17, Ruess made his first expedition in the desert southwest, a months-long journey that took him to the Grand Canyon, Canyon de Chelly and Monument Valley.

Interestingly, he consulted with John Wetherill, who in 1889 with his brothers had stumbled on ruins at what is now Mesa Verde National Park. Wetherill, in his 60s when Ruess met him, suggested places for the young adventurer to visit to see the best ancient ruins.

Ruess returned home and graduated from high school. But much to his parents' chagrin, after one semester at college, Ruess announced he had no desire to continue higher education. Instead, he wanted to explore, to paint, to write, to search for beauty.

He spent long months in 1931, 1932 and 1934, until his disappearance, exploring the desert Southwest.

The summers of 1930 and 1933 he trekked along the California Coast and into Yosemite National Park. In all of these lengthy journeys, he was developing his art, his writing and his philosophy that sought solitude and the beauties of nature.

Other writers have worked hard to spread the Ruess mystique. A 1938 article in the now-defunct Desert Magazine proclaimed: "Wherever poets, adventurers and wanderers of the Southwest gather, the story of Everett Ruess will be told. His name, like wood-smoke, conjures far horizons." A 1983 book called "Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty," helped cement

his status as a latter-day Henry David Thoreau or John Muir. The book included many of the poems and prose that survived in Ruess' journals and letters home, as well as prints of some of his block art.

Famed Western author Wallace Stegner said of Ruess: "He was not a good writer and he was only a mediocre painter, but give him credit, he knew it, and he was learning."

Ruess' love of beauty and the desert attracted many followers after his disappearance. But while he was alive, he also displayed early bigotry toward Native Americans, insensitivity to his parents, wavering concern for his animals and glib dismissal of those who didn't follow his path.

In a 1931 letter to a friend he referred to Navajos "scrupulously dishonest" and claimed they "live in filth."

He acquired a reservation dog he named Curly that accompanied him for 18 months. But when Curly ate part of Ruess' campfire dinner one night, he beat the dog. It disappeared and was never seen again.

Although he sometimes wrote lovingly of the burros and horses he used, he showed little sympathy when they became weak, were injured or even died.

In letters, he repeatedly berated his brother Waldo and a friend in California for taking conventional jobs and not having the gumption to join him on his adventures. And he seemed unconcerned that those adventures were funded with monthly contributions from his parents, who were struggling financially in the depths of the Depression.

Ruess was also enamored of the Anasazi culture, but removed precious artifacts from ancient sites without compunction.

However, Ruess was not yet 21 years old when he disappeared. Even critics believe he would have matured artistically and emotionally if he'd lived.

Furthermore, no one can discount Ruess' courage and persistence in traveling through the desert wilderness alone.

"The peculiar thing about Everett Ruess is that he went out and did the things he dreamed about," wrote Stegner. "not simply for a two-weeks' vacation in the civilized and trimmed wonderlands, but for months and years in the very midst of wonder."

Next time: The multiple efforts to find Everett Ruess.

Sources: "Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty," by W.L. Rusho; "Finding Everett Ruess: The Life and Unsolved Disappearance of A Legendary Wilderness Explorer," by David Roberts; "Say that I Kept My Dream," by Hugh Lacy, The Desert Magazine, September 1938; "Mormon Country," by Wallace Stegner; <https://everettruess.net>; historic newspapers at <https://www.newspapers.com> and <https://digitalnewspapers.org>.

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BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

Everett Ruess was last seen alive near this rock formation, just off the Hole-in-the-Rock road east of Escalante, Utah. He camped with two sheepherders near here on Nov. 19, 1934, then headed to Hole in the Rock.

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