

FIRST DRAFT

The mystery of Everett Ruess

Efforts to find young wanderer proved more difficult than anticipated

"I'll never stop wandering. And when the time comes to die, I'll find the wildest, loneliest, most desolate spot there is." — 1932 letter by Everett Ruess to his brother Waldo.

The first search for missing Los Angeles artist and poet Everett Ruess, began March 1, 1935. It was the most successful.

In a few days, searchers had found Ruess' two "fat and healthy" burros, a bridle and a halter, in a brush enclosure in Davis Gulch, not far from the Hole in the Rock above the Colorado River.

Several days later, they discovered the remnants of one of Ruess's campsites, his boot tracks in weather-protected sand and a rock etching that read "NEMO, Nov 1934."

What they didn't find was Everett Ruess — alive or dead — any of his camp gear, his journals or painting materials.

On March 15 the search ended. The man who organized it, Jennings Allen of Escalante, Utah, told Ruess's parents in Los Angeles, "We have searched the country good on this side of the Colorado River and haven't been able to find any fresh sign of Everett."

Ruess, age 20, was last seen Nov. 21, 1934, east of Escalante on the road toward Hole in the Rock. Because his parents were used to his solo wanderings, they didn't begin to worry until early 1935.

Everett may have used the pseudonym "Nemo" because it was Latin, meaning "nobody," Christopher and Stella Ruess informed Allen. Their son was also a fan of the antisocial Captain Nemo from "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea," they said.

The Allen-led search was the first of a half dozen 1935 efforts seeking Ruess. Even as Allen organized the first search, a man called "Captain" Neal Johnson contacted the Ruesses to say he could find their son. A miner from Hanksville, Utah, Johnson claimed to have won his military rank flying for the Mexican Air Force.

"Know Indian scouts. Know region well ... Search must start immediately," he wrote to the Ruesses. All he needed was some money to pay the Indian scouts. Christopher obliged.

Over seven months, Johnson sent at least 17 letters to the Ruesses, many asking for additional money as he claimed to have new information on Everett's whereabouts. But he failed to produce anything concrete.

The third search began at the end of March, after Allen contacted the Associated Civic Clubs of Southern Utah, and they agreed to pay for a new hunt.

Eleven days later, the Civic Clubs searchers had found another Ruess camp in a cave in Davis Gulch. They

also found size-nine boot prints and another rock carving saying "NEMO, 1934." But then the search was halted.

Next, federal officials prepared to look for Ruess. That effort "is being conducted by men of the erosion service, the national park service and the Indian service," the Salt Lake Telegram reported April 18. "The work is being directed by E.P. Levitt, superintendent of the Mesa Verde National Park." If the federal agents found anything, it wasn't worth a follow-up story.

In June, 1935, Christopher and Stella Ruess drove east to speak with people who had met Everett and to see the country he loved. They drove with Jennings Allen down the Hole-in-the-Rock road, toward where Everett was last seen. Then they returned home.

There was little news until late August, when the Salt Lake Tribune conducted its own hunt for Ruess, led by the newspaper's star reporter, John Upton Terrell.

Over two weeks, Terrell and "Captain" Johnson traveled by auto from Blanding, Utah, to Bluff and Mexican Hat, then on to Kayenta, Ariz., Navajo Mountain, and finally by horseback to Davis Gulch. They met with white Indian traders, Navajo leaders and a Navajo shaman. All were convinced that Ruess had not ventured into Navajo country. They hinted he had been killed.

Terrell's three-part series concluded on Aug. 28, 1935. "This is the result," he wrote. "Everett Ruess was murdered in the vicinity of Davis canyon. His valuable outfit was stolen. He never reached the Colorado River."

Utah Attorney General Joseph Chez reacted to the possibility of murder. "You may rest assured that the state will [get] to the bottom of this case and if a crime has been committed, swift prosecution will follow," he declared.

But it didn't happen. In December, Chez said the state lacked authority to undertake such an effort until county officials had exhausted their available resources to find Ruess.

After that, public interest in Ruess remained dormant until The Desert Magazine published a lengthy article about the young wanderer in September 1938.

The article prompted alleged sightings of Ruess from Mexico to Moab. Still, there was nothing definite. In a follow-up article in December, 1939, author Hugh Lacy concluded, "The riddle is still unsolved — as unreadable as the wilderness that swallowed him."

In 1941, a Navajo man claimed to have killed a young white man, but the story proved false. A body found in New Mexico that year was thought to be Ruess', but dental records proved otherwise.

In 1957, men surveying for Lake Powell discovered the remains of a camp in a canyon near Davis Gulch. There were pots, pans, a cup, spoon and fork. But Stella Ruess said she didn't believe they were Everett's.

In the 1960s, famed Utah river Ken Sleight discovered another rock carving of, "NEMO." But this was in Grand Gulch, west of Blanding. Did Ruess make it that far east?

Interest in Ruess was renewed in 1983 when W.L. Rusho published "Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty." The book contained many of Ruess's letters to his family and friends, some of his poetry and copies of his block prints. Rusho also told of search efforts to that time.



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SALT LAKE TELEGRAM, THOROUGH WWW.NEWSPAPERS.COM

This photo of members of the Associated Civic Clubs of Southern Utah, along with Everett Ruess' two burros shortly after they were recovered, appeared in the Salt Lake Telegram in late March, 1935, as the group was preparing to conduct the third search for Ruess.



COURTESY OF BILL HARRIS

This rock inscription of the name "Everett" was found in northern Arizona in 2013. It is similar to at least one other "Everett" inscription that has been discovered. Both are believed to have been made by Everett Ruess on earlier journeys, before his 1934 disappearance and before he began using "Nemo" as a pseudonym.

Then it was mostly quiet again until the early 2000s, when a Navajo man found a makeshift grave on Comb Ridge west of Bluff. He said his grandfather had told of witnessing two Ute men kill a young white man there in the 1930s. Author David Roberts worked with the National Geographic Society and University of Colorado forensic experts to have DNA samples taken of the skeleton and compared to Ruess' nephew, his closest surviving relative.

In April, 2009, a press conference was held to announce that the Comb Ridge corpse was definitely Everett Ruess. But it was another false alarm.

A skeptical Utah state archaeologist challenged the findings, and more DNA tests were conducted, this time by military forensic officials.

They determined that the skeleton was not Everett Ruess, but a Native American.

A 2016 book suggested that bones wedged in a crevasse in Davis Gulch and supposedly found by a hiker in the 1970s, but since disappeared, may have been Ruess. But there was no proof.

In the end, Ruess' brother Waldo explained Everett's disappearance as well as anyone, in a 1935 letter to his parents: "He has undoubtedly driven himself beyond his physical endurance and died, beautifully and alone in the desert."

Sources: "Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty," by W.L. Rusho; "Finding Everett Ruess," by David Roberts; "Bears Ears: Landscape of Refuge and Resistance," by Andrew Gulliford; "What Became of Everett Ruess?" by Hugh Lacy, The Desert Magazine, December, 1939; historic newspapers at www.newspapers.com. Bob Silbernagel's email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com.



This photo of Everett Ruess accompanied an article about Ruess that appeared in the now defunct Desert Magazine in September, 1938.

Bill proposes lower rate for media public records requests

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DENVER — As Colorado's fall neared in 2021, reporter Jesse Paul wanted to peek behind the curtain of state prisons, submitting a request for a swath of documents regarding inmate deaths, injuries and staff violations — public records made available to ensure government transparency.

But then the bill arrived, and Paul, a reporter at The Colorado Sun, shot off a cheeky email to his editors: "You guys cool if I drop \$245,000 on this?"

In a concession many journalists know well, Paul gutted his admittedly large request, leaving most of those government documents shrouded from the public's sight. Those types of financial

barriers are partly why Colorado state lawmakers are considering legislation that would give the news media privileges when requesting public records, including lower fees and stricter deadlines to produce documents.

But the draft legislation kicked off a hullabaloo on Twitter, with some concerned that favoring news media was unfair,

while others found the mere idea of politicians defining who is and who isn't a journalist unsettling.

Most states do not differentiate between the general public and media organizations, and the Colorado draft bill's definition of the news media would effectively exclude news startups in their first year of operation

— raising their public records costs.

The proposal comes as some states push in the opposite direction. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis is seeking an agenda that may limit access to public records and lawmakers across the country are trying to shield the disclosure of personal information for elected officials and public employees.

The Colorado proposal has yet to be introduced, and could change as the final kinks get worked out, said Democratic state Sen. Chris Hansen, the bill's sponsor. Hansen, in defense of the definition, said burgeoning news groups would still be able to submit requests and the temporary higher cost wouldn't be a "significant burden."