

## Old Trails and New

Benjamin W. James

ca. 1938

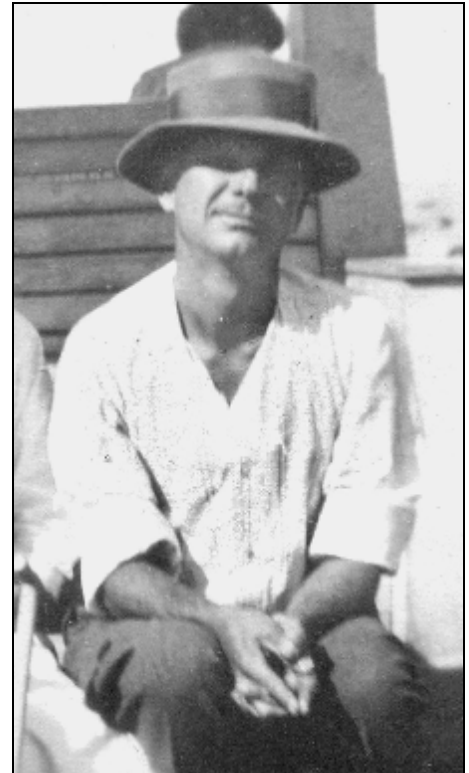
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Early in June a letter from Tub: “*Dad, I am going to take a vacation in July; can't we get together and visit some of those old places we saw years ago? I'd like to refresh my memory on some of them.*”

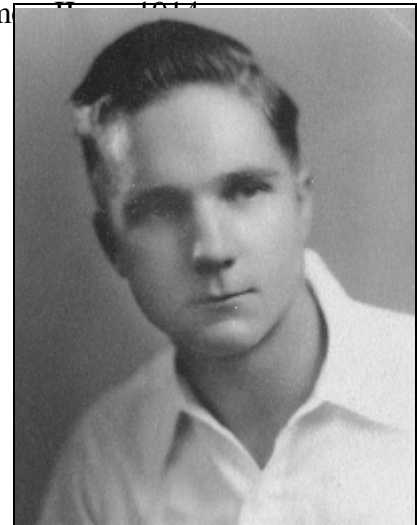
That started things - reminiscences, then plans. But to introduce Tub: Tub is a mining engineer much occupied visiting mines in the West; but, years ago, when he was a small boy, we would spend our vacations together rambling around anywhere we could put a car. We visited nearly all the National Parks west of the Mississippi; inspected the old abandoned mining camps slept in ghost cities and cliff dwellings; examined Indian pueblos on Hopi mesas, ancient ruins, natural monuments and watched the archeologists uncover the remains of a past age; in fact whenever we noted that some unusual place of interest was opened up to an adventuresome party willing to risk disaster, we put it on our list for early survey. Our religion was to get there early and avoid the crowds.

One of our first adventures was a trip to Death Valley during the period after mining had died and it was about forgotten. We traveled 'Main Highways' for 160 miles, slept by the grave of 'Old Bourbon' at Confidence Mill, and saw no one for a day and a half. The next night we camped in Rhyolite, the only souls in the town that had bragged 6000 population. Then down into Death Valley over a road, now hard surfaced, at that time unused for months and washed out for miles so that it was necessary to scout out a trail on foot ahead of the car. Near Furnace Creek from a small hill we took panorama pictures, several years later on again visiting the Valley we found a wonderful hotel being built on our hill. It is evident we were no tenderfeet.

From acquaintanceship with members of the Field and Editorial Staff of the *National Geographic Society*, we had become much interested in the expeditions of Bernheimer and Wetherill to Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge, so when an automobile trail was built we started. However just beyond Red Lake a cloudburst had washed out the trail. A young man who had

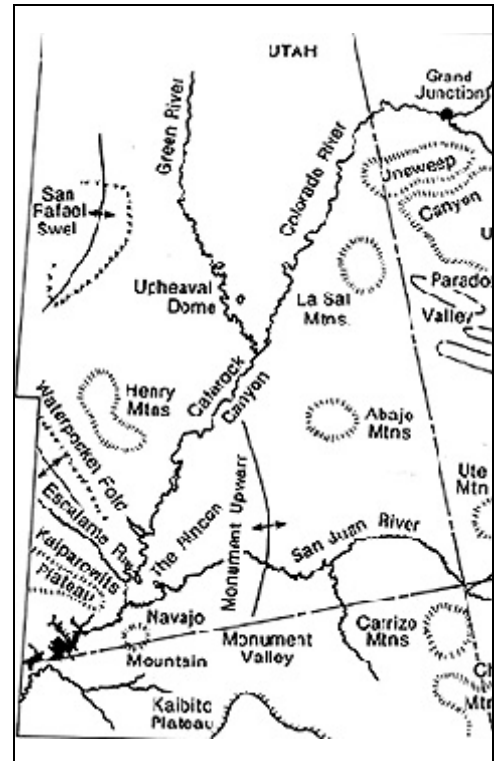


1. The author, Benjamin W. James



2. Allan H. James (Tubby) at Stanford, c. 1932.

nearly wrecked his auto coming out thought we might make it if we could follow his round-about route, but the storm had washed out his tracks and after several miles of exploration fresh tracks led us to where the Reservation Doctor was tearing down a navajo hogan in which a navajo huddled. He declared the route impassible but mapped a short cut to Marsh Pass and Kayenta. So on to Kayenta hoping to tie in with a John Wetherhill party only to find that he was away with a movie company. There was nothing to do but hike in to *Be-Ta-Ta-Kin*, sleep in the ruins, visit Monument Valley, and then to Canyon du Chelly and the Hopi village. Several times later we made plans to attack the Mountain and visit the Bridge, but storms or things interfered so diversions were made to petrified forests, Morro [sp.?] Rock, Ice Caves, Enchanted Mesa, and the ruins around the 'Four Corners' till our objective was the only place left unvisited.



3. Navajo Mountain on Arizona/Utah line, west of Four Corners. Rainbow Bridge is between the mountain and San Juan River. Source: Short & Blair. *Geomorphology from Space*.

Now after many years the opportunity presented. One morning in July after an early breakfast, the car loaded with sleeping bags, shovels and camping kit, found us on our way. Camp was made that night beside the Dinosaur Tracks, having made as much mileage in a day as formerly required three days over the rough and chunky roads then classified as the best trans-continental route.

This is in the Painted Desert, then the Hopi Town of Moencopi, Tuba City, Reservation Headquarters; Red Lake, Tonalea Post Office where we talk with Mr. Taylor, trader and postmaster. *'Yes the [road] was open when he last heard. Not much travel over it. If we are going up will we take the mail that has accumulated? We agreed that traffic was rather light when we saw the daily papers had accumulated from the 4<sup>th</sup> and it was now the 14<sup>th</sup>.*



4. Author's 1919 Peerless. He recommended carrying shovels, overnight gear, and ample provisions for such a journey.

The road to Kayenta is a partly graded State Road and a mile or so beyond Red Lake it

passes the Elephants Feet, huge, isolated erosions; six miles further the Rainbow Trail branches to Inscription House Lodge 22 miles over fair roads in dry weather. Soon it leaves the level valley and runs out on a narrow sandstone ridge separating Navajo and Piute Canyons. To the right are the many branches of Piute Canyon, somewhat wooded with pinon and juniper, and whose walls look steep and rugged until we look to the left hundreds of feet down the precipitous walls that drop off into the dead end gorges which unite to form Navajo Canyon.

Ahead in the distance is our objective, Navajo Mountain, still far away. It stands out by itself a solitary mountain, the only high mountain in a vast area and eminently the '*Home of the Navajo Gods.*' Further to the left through the glasses the course of the Colorado may be approximated with the Vermillion Cliffs discernable on the far side. That gap to the Northwest may be where the Pariah enters between the head of Marble Canyon and the foot of Glen Canyon, and where lies 'Lonely Dell' with the old log cabin ferry house of Lees Ferry fame recalling to us memories of a wonderful night spent far from neighbors; directly west is the Kaibab Plateau breaking down abruptly 2000 feet to what appears a level plain to one standing on a promontory east of the V.T. Ranch, and staggering through this plain is a dark fissure like a gigantic crack dividing the reddish brown surface. This is the Marble Canyon through which some 2000 feet lower down flows the turbulent Colorado unseen. In distinct contrast to this is another view point near the exit of the Grand Canyon miles to the west, where from Tuweep Point the River appears rushing afoot [?], vertically 3000 feet below the observer, and it's foaming rapids may be seen for miles both up and down stream.

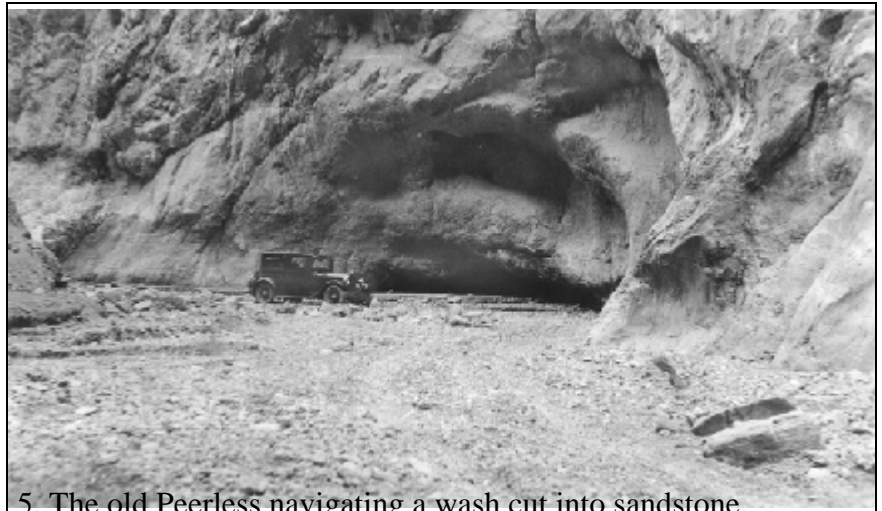
For a number of miles the road braves it's way along the narrow ridge over a jumble of bare sandstone hills and canyons. On each side are steep cliffs, narrow dead end canyons with walls hundreds of feet high suggesting interesting searches for cliff dwellings. The few pinons and junipers thin out to the west - no green appears against the walls of the White Cliff to the Southwest; in the distant east Black Mesa appears well forested, so also does the top of Old Navajo Mountain whose 10,600 feet guarantees plenty of moisture in this arid desert. Rain and snow play some importance in the erosion of the nearby sandstone but the wind has been a major factor in carving the fantastic figures often seen. The road drops down several rather steep grades with the corresponding ascents apparently less steep. Why? Or is this an optical illusion in this country of illusions and dreams? However, the return trip demonstrated this as characteristic of the topography, it being often necessary to drop back and charge a hill to make the grade.

A young engineer of the Indian Service we meet, shows us his aerial photographic maps of the Navajo Reservation, which is as large as a good slice of New England. This method of airplane mapping accomplishes a survey impossible under the old methods of instrument use and hand chaining, giving topography and forestry, with little fine lines showing roads and trails while to some extent the practiced observer may determine the geology and mineralogy of the country.

From Inscription House Trading Post is 35 miles. Well, the first half of that is about 100 miles from point of time taken in traveling and observation, then ten miles of straight tracks, in a desert valley, aimed directly at Old Navajo Mountain. Now an Indian

Service windmill and water tank providing water for Navajo flocks, beyond is a fork, 6 miles on the left to Rainbow Lodge and the same on the right to Navajo Mountain Trading Post. Being desert rats, not dudes, we go the Traders where we meet Mr. Owen who arranged for Indian mules and pack animals and for his brother to act as guide for a trip around the Mountain and to the Bridge.

Now it might be thought that a trading post as far as this one from centers of population would be a crude and rough and tumble establishment such as seen in 'Westerns.' Well, it is located a short distance from an Indian school with phone connections to the outside world. The trader's house is a solid stone walled building with an immense living room



5. The old Peerless navigating a wash cut into sandstone.

carpeted with choice Navajo rugs and fitted with "Lazy Man's" furniture so restful to one who has spent the day in the saddle. A radio gives metropolitan programs in the evening and maintains touch with the outer world. Mrs. Owen takes delight in showing her dining room and kitchen where gasoline and kerosene take the place of gas and electricity; here refrigerator produces the finest of ice creams as well as ice cubes and the range under Mrs. Owen's direction brings forth a dinner of credit to any chef; a hot water heater supplies showers and general use. Chickens, cows and Navajo herds provide eggs, butter, beef and mutton, and her garden produces vegetables, corn and melons leaving little to be wished for. But the pride of the establishment is little Miss Owen, who with her scant three years, takes full charge of everything and everybody. She is the queen and she knows it as she rules her subjects as she will rule you a short time after you arrive.

The Post has two pleasant guest cabins but we chose to make ourselves at home under the large cottonwoods where Zane Grey wrote up his notes for the '*Riders of the Purple Sage*.' Now when it comes to doing something for someone else or for hire, the Navajo is not an early riser, so our early start did not materialize until nine. About 8:30 the Indians came trooping in with the saddle stock, which had to be fed. Our guide, Ray, Mr. Owen's brother, naturally took a light grey mare. Naturally? Why? Because mules and horses will follow a light colored mare and when hobbled out at night will not stray far from her, expediting morning starting, and who likes to hustle the stock on foot for three or four miles through the brush in the morning? Jinney, the pack mule, appeared almost lost under her load of sleeping bags and panniers filled with grub - we took ample to supply us in case of delays; Tub looked over the animals and selected the best looking horse, who he dubbed Pedro; Dad simply smiles and from long experience in the saddle took the remaining mule, Jack, a rather large, old and experience animal who lived up to Dad's judgement in that he was not to be stampeded nor was he going to risk any falls on

the rock. For surefootedness and wisdom on the trail a mule with experience is not to be excelled. Dad next appropriated the saddle belonging to Mr. Dunn, Mr. Owen's partner. Dunn knew his business, for comfort it was a rocking chair, high behind and bucking rolls in front prevented slipping while traversing the many staircases found on the trail, and there were no race tracks along the trail either.

All dunnage packed we were off, an Indian leading the pack mule past her home grounds. The route led to the East past Lost Mesa on top of which with the glasses could be seen the remains of ancient ruins. A little further Ray detoured to show us a small cliff dwelling with a painted 'pictograph' instead of the usual stone chiseling but poor light prevented photographs. Our Indian left us when we passed his hogan, grateful for a handful of Mexican cigarettes. No more habitations for 50 miles. Crossing a ridge Ray stopped and pointed out our old friend, Piute Canyon, now grown to



6. Packing in. Allan H. James (Tubby) at left on Pedro. Jinney the pack mule (center) and Ray on light grey mare. Photo by BWJ, c.1938.

full size and lined with walls, spires and pinnacles carved out of the colored sandstones. In sight were several hundred square miles of jumbled sandstone erosional phenomena that baffled description. In front Piute Canyon, beyond might be traced the course of the San Juan, then, further, the famous Cataract Canyon of the Colorado. All lost in an impenetrable maze. Ray's description was the most descriptive: 'There is an awful lot of no good land out there.'

Descending the trail now followed a rough and irregular wagon road used by a few Navajos to their fields near the River where they raised some corn and melons. Wagon road? Well the Indian horses are raised in this wilderness of rock and brush and think nothing of pulling a rickety wagon over a trail that a coyote in more southern parts would scorn. The trail now leaves this track and climbs a ridge which elsewhere would pass for a small mountain, and drops into another valley - by this time the smaller canyons were dignified by comparison into valleys - here a good place to lunch by a small stream. Then all took to some pot holes the stream had made in the rock where the water cascading down from Old Navajo had established roomy bath tubs with shower bath falls. This was in Beaver Creek, but a few miles further on at Oak Creek came a surprise, two Notre Dame boys, with their packs, hiking the circuit where foot travelers are almost never seen, who had visited the Natural Bridges in Utah, then across country to Navajo Mountain where they had spent several days at the River and Rainbow Bridge. One was a football player but both now looked tired and hungry as their grub was getting low, but they were nearly out now on the last lap of the circuit.

A little further we came on the Bald Knobs - smooth rocks where previous travelers had

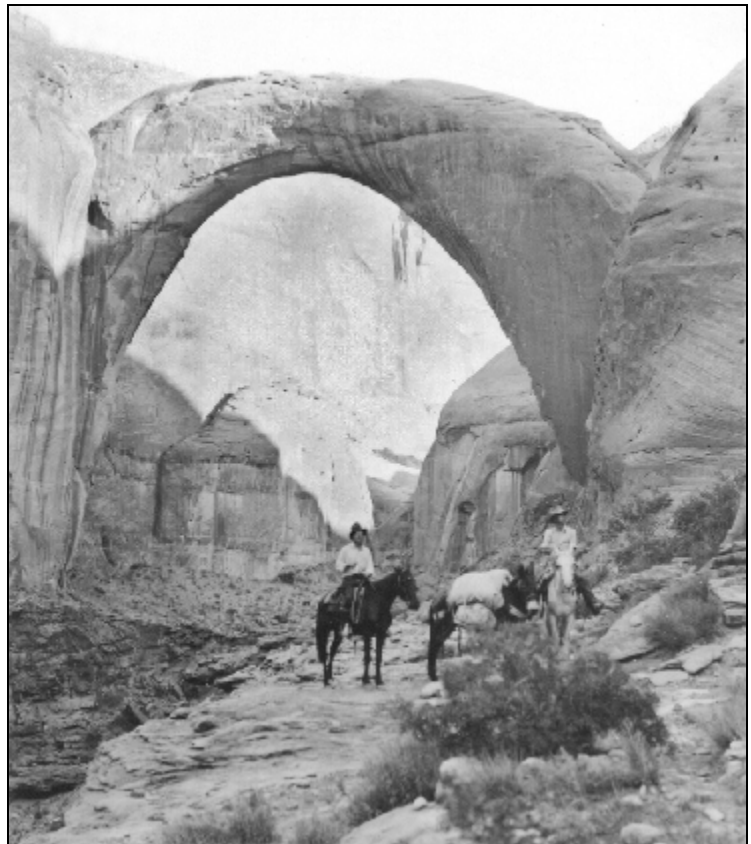
cut notches in the slippery sides of the dome to keep the animals from slipping - needless to say we dismounted and walked over this. Then Surprise Valley - where the book says the hero and heroine lived happily ever after - that is after they had closed off the Valley to marauding visitors by blasting the sides of the pass down into the passage way to close it off. no hero or heroine welcomed us as we camped for the night in the delightful valley beside a stream that gurgled a greeting. From the side walls of the valley could be seen Lost Horse Mesa also made famous by Zane Grey, in the distance across the Colorado. Further to the North the Escalantes were dim on the horizon and the Pink Cliffs, concealing Bryce Canyon, appeared mistily over vast stretches of disturbed landscape - reminders of visits there when our now nearby friend, Navajo Mountain, was searched out as an important distant landmark.

Dad was selected as cook, which he accepted from self protection rather than ability; Ray was to rustle the stock while Tub was to gather the fire wood and wash the dishes. This worked out quite well, no one starved, the dishes were passably washed and Ray had but one kick when the first morning out it was found that the grey mare had slipped her hobbles sufficiently so that she led the stock off about a mile. All slept well, the soft sand, fluffy by comparison with quartz sands of river and washes, made an excellent mattress, permitting the sleeping bags to conform to body contours, and no grumbles were heard the morning after the first day in the saddle.

The exit from the Valley was through the famous pass which failed to show any traces of the blockade the book described; in fact it would have required a train load of dynamite to have accomplished such a job. The author may not have expected future visitors to question the story.

Owl Bridge was passed - Why named Owl? Well that seems to be the translation given the Navajo name, then the upper reaches of Bridge Canyon, with a slowly descending trail to an abrupt turn with the first view of the bridge. Only the top was visible from this point and that dwarfed by the high canyon walls - almost disappointing and a relief when that little was concealed by the nearby ridges. In the dead end canyon of the horseshoe was a good spring and the corral of the Rainbow Bridge Outfit. However it was a mile to the Bridge - our objective, and in a side canyon just back of the Bridge was a more convenient, and to us, better camp site. The bridge loomed up above, a small spring furnished water for camp and stock and a projecting cliff formed a typical cliff dwellers cave at our side usable in case of rain. A few pottery fragments indicated early use of the cave by prehistoric visitors, but in general both the ancient and modern tribes seem to avoid this area. When the Government advanced funds to build a train to the top of the mountain, they fled from the job at the first powder blast saying the explosions offended their Gods who made the Mountain their home.

But back to the bridge. This has been described so often and so well by poets, by philosophers, world travelers, Irvin Cobbs, J.B. Prestleys, Theodore Roosevelt and the lowly guides, cooks and mule punchers who attended their expeditions that nothing we might say could possibly better advertise its grandeur. To those who demand more explicit description the files of the National Geographic Magazine are suggested for details of its 309 feet height and 278 feet span. We basked under its shadow, took what pictures the shaded canyon walls permitted, bathed in the sandstone cavities of Bridge Creek about the Bridge and rested. [material omitted]



7. Rainbow Bridge. Photo by B.W. James, 1938

Our night under the Bridge was free from incident - no rain threatened; however to those who follow a word of caution: If storms threaten select higher camping ground and in any case when sleeping in a wash in desert or mountain country, before going to sleep, select a quick exit that may be used in dense darkness if necessary. Sometimes a storm that contribute but a few drops at your camp may squeeze out a deluge a few miles higher up to descend upon you with scant warning to carry off your bedding and equipment even if you escape. These sudden summer storms in the desert make up for brevity with fierceness.

The deep canyon shaded out the morning sun affording an excuse for late rising and after again visiting the Bridge we saddled up and started back up Bridge Canyon. In a few miles the trail branches off to the west side of the Mountain and up Red Bud Pass where the Bernheimer Expedition spent some time blasting out the narrow walls so they could get through. In spite of the widening there are still places where one riding a full chested mule will have to lift his knees or have them skinned but that is not the only peculiarity of Red Bud pass; it goes up like a steep staircase - only more so. The rocks once placed like steps have slipped and the procedure is to dismount at the foot of the Pass, take a club and influence your animal that it is safer to proceed than remain and follow up the reluctant beast to the top - there take a good look down the other side and proceed as before, but of course a four footed animal take more time descending than ascending. Even a mule, who in such a case shows a relationship to a cat, will descend slowly and cautiously - a mule has great regard for his own safety and about the only time he makes a mistake is when he stretches out too far over the edge of a cliff-side trail for a greedy bite, and often such a mistake is the last and only one he makes.

Down Red Bud then up Cliff Canyon with many rests breath. From the Divide - to the north extends the high walls of the canyon we have just ascended, the Colorado - no not basin but jumble, and the further expanse of Utah. Turn around and there is another vista of sandstone canyons of varied color to the west, extending also to the Colorado, now running north and south after making a bend some 50 miles away. Again we see the old friends of the Vermillion Cliffs and Kaibab in the dim distance. Lunch, a short rest, on down and up, over numerous ridges and canyons till the 15 miles to Rainbow Lodge is completed, todays trails the hardest of the trip. The road takes the place of the trail for a distance and then a short cut trail along the south side of Old Navajo, who, to us, now has become a distant relative, the mules nearing home quicken their pace; Jimmey recognizes friends in range stock we pass and leads Ray a merry chase for a mile. Finally the Trading Post appears in its little valley, and, after a much needed shower, all hands sit down to the dinner Mrs. Owen has prepared - a dinner that all will remember for a long, long time; Dad did his best but he cannot compete on the trail with a refrigerator that furnishes ice cubes and ice cream, nor with cows that furnish real - not canned cream, nor with hens that lay eggs fresh every day and with chickens that Mrs. Owen has cooked to an epicure's satisfaction; and then there is the little Lady to greet us like old friends. No, Dad will have to pass it along that he cannot compete as a chef or host.

After the long-to-be-remembered meal we smoke, visit and feel we have been friends for years, then to bed and up for an excellent breakfast - such appetites the trip has made. The car is loaded and pointed south after the good byes have been said.

The trip out is made without event other than an occasional retrial at some steep ascent. At the Junction we turn north to Kayenta, having completed the Rainbow Trail part of our vacation. At Kayenta a short visit with Mr. and Mrs. John Wetherill who send their wishes to Dr. Neil M. Judd, whom we expect to see later in Washington and when we do report to him there he is much pleased to hear that the wish he expressed when he opened the Register at the Bridge - That the Bridge and the Canyon Walls would not become plastered with advertising signs - had been respected.

The road from Kayenta to Shiprock, over the northern part of Arizona, is not shown on most maps, maybe advisably so as we had to dig out of the drifting sands six times, delaying us so that we camped for the night on the high banks of a coulee where could be seen in the distance glimpses of Monument Valley.

The next days are spent in the mining regions of Colorado and in crossing the highest (12000 foot) passes over the Rockies to Denver where our joint vacation ends. We have accomplished more than we attempted years ago, and easier but we still congratulate ourselves on being desert rats 'who can take it.' [material omitted]

Rainbow Bridge (*NaGeeLid NonneZoshi* in Navajo) was discovered in 1909 by John Wetherill - whose brothers discovered the Mesa Verde Ruins - in company with Professor Byron Cummings; the trail around the Mountain and to the present Lodge was made by the National Geographic Bernheimer Expedition guided by John Wetherill with our old friend Jess Smith as packer for their 28 animals. Very good descriptions of the



route and bridge may be found in the files of the *National Geographic Magazine* for February 1923 and other numbers. [material omitted]

The trip implies no severe hardships and experience parties frequently hike in from the Lodge to the Bridge and River. The Bridge is classified by those competent to judge as an 8<sup>th</sup> wonder in the World's list, no one to whom such phenomena appeals, who can stand the trip should fail to see it; no one in such classification who has done so has regretted the visit. 30 years since discovery it has been visited by few and is comparatively unknown; in examining the register which showed about 2700 names it was noted that so many were duplicated that it would appear not many over 1000 white persons had seen it, exclusive of guides, Indians and camp attendants.

*Benjamin W. James, b.5/22/1875; d. 1958 Los Angeles. B.S. Univ. Wisconsin, Madison, 1898.  
Allan Haines James, b. 1911. B.S. in Mining Engineering, Stanford, 1932; Ph.D., MIT, 1947.*

*[This account was transcribed into a computer text file and graphics added by L. Allan James, May, 10, 2003. No changes were made other than three or four spellings, a dozen punctuation marks, and - in this version - a few paragraph breaks and omitted passages as marked in the text to improve readability. Cousin Ted James provided the text and cousin Betsy James provided BWJ's photographs of the trip. Photographs of the car, pack animals, and the Bridge, are originals taken on this journey by BWJ. Maps, photo-portraits, and satellite images are from various other sources. - LAJ]*