

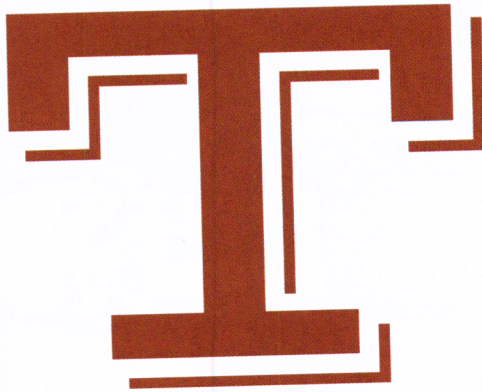
# Life on the Edge



In addition to the 4 million tourists who visit the South Rim every year, there's a small population of people who actually live there, tucked away from the spotlight of the Grand Canyon. It's a unique existence today, but in the middle of the last century, it was especially so. Back then, residents of "the village" didn't lock their cars, going out on a date was a hassle, gas was rationed, and weekend highlights included \$1 horseback rides. As one former resident puts it, life was "free and easy."

**BY KATHY MONTGOMERY**

**PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF CAROLINE KENNY AND  
GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK MUSEUM COLLECTION**



THE GROWL OF TWIN-ENGINE PLANES always sent 10-year-old Sammy Turner and his friends scrambling to their feet.

“Lockheed P-38 Lightnings, they were,” he recalls. “We could tell when they were coming up from Luke Air Force Base, and we’d all run up to the rim. They’d buzz the village, which the rangers didn’t like. We loved it.”

The planes flew out over the Grand Canyon so low, the boys could look down on them. Years later, Turner wrote about them for *Arizona Highways*. “With a twist and a turn,” he wrote, “they would stand on their tails and spiral up and away, barrel-rolling as they climbed toward the sun.”

Memories such as these define the war years at the Canyon for Turner.

For administrators, World War II and its aftermath were tough. Depression-era projects wound down just as the conflict heated up. As the park was feeling the loss of Civilian Conser-

vation Corps and Works Progress Administration workers, experienced National Park Service employees went off to fight. Because of gasoline-rationing and travel restrictions, visitation plummeted from 436,500 in 1941 to 64,500 in 1944.

By the end of the war, the park’s infrastructure had deteriorated so much, it was ill-prepared for the postwar boom that followed, with annual visitors surpassing 1 million for the first time in 1956. But, for Turner and other residents of Grand Canyon Village, World War II and the decade that followed represented a halcyon time of innocence, simplicity and freedom.

Turner and his family arrived at Grand Canyon Village in 1941, when his father, a rising star with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, became its station agent.

“Grand Canyon Village was absolutely dead,” Turner recalls.

**Grand Canyon National Park seasonal rangers pose at Hopi Point, on the Canyon’s South Rim, in this 1940 photo. Virgil Gipson, whose daughter contributed this photo, is the fourth ranger from the left.**

Before the end of 1942, the Fred Harvey Co. began closing its concessions, eventually shuttering all but El Tovar. Santa Fe discontinued its passenger rail service the following year.

“One time, my dad came down the steps from El Tovar to our apartment, which was

above the railroad station,” Turner recalls. “He said, ‘Well, they have three guests at the El Tovar tonight.’ Three! You could sit out in the middle of the road. You didn’t have to worry about traffic.”

“And gas was rationed, so you drove 30 miles an hour. It took two hours to get to Williams. My dad put a Band-Aid across the speedometer ... if you could see the needle on the right, you knew he was going too fast.”

Residents also planted victory gardens, 60 in all, at the rodeo grounds behind the school.

“One of the gardeners there was going to do it all scientifically,” Turner recalls. “He had it all measured and everything. Then, Porter Timeche [who managed Hopi House] came out with his Hopi planting stick, and he’d poke holes in the ground. His corn came up, it seemed like, overnight. It put us all to shame.”

Toward the end of the war, Prince Faisal of Saudi Arabia visited. Several Army groups were using the abandoned CCC complex as a recreational facility and had turned it into a military post. Faisal commandeered a jeep and took the kids for a ride.

“I got to ride in a tank, too,” Turner says. “That was fun. Those were things we did toward the end of the war.”



CAROLEE KENNY’S FAMILY returned to the Canyon after her father got out of the service. Her father, Virgil Gipson, managed Lookout Studio and was the Fred Harvey photographer.

Kenny remembers walking to Babbitt’s General Store, the only grocery store in the village, on a little path through the woods.

“We had coupon books,” she recalls. “We didn’t carry money.”

A whistle blew at 8 a.m., noon, 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. every day. It was like the village clock. Everybody went by it.

“Wherever you were when the whistle blew, you knew you had to come home,” Kenny recalls.

Life felt free and easy, Kenny says, and the Grand Canyon was her vast playground.

“My father never took the keys out of the car,” she says. “I don’t think anyone did. And we never locked our doors. I don’t even know if we had a key.”

The Gipsons lived in the Fred Harvey and Santa Fe housing that lined avenues A and B (now Apache and Boulder streets). The Park Service employees lived on a different hill, Kenny recalls. And the teachers lived in a building called the “teachorage.” The Supai kids, who came up from the Canyon during the school year, lived at Supai Camp, a mile or two out on a dirt road.

“They had horses,” she recalls. “On the weekends, kids would ride their horses into town, to the grocery store. We would pay them a dollar, and they’d let us ride their horses all day, which, to me, was the most exciting thing in the world.”

The schoolhouse was on a nearby hill, so in winter, Kenny would pull her sled to school and sled home for lunch.



A first-grade teacher conducts class at Grand Canyon School in 1953, the same year an addition to the schoolhouse was completed.

It was a small school, with two grades per classroom, and only went through the eighth grade.

Steve Verkamp remembers classes in the home-economics room — literally a kitchen. “We actually had desks in the kitchen,” he recalls. “Every once in a while, some teacher would come in for a cup of coffee or to boil some water.”

When identical twins Harley and Charley Marquis started first grade, they couldn’t speak English, recalls Paul Schnur, whose father was the village doctor. They lived in a remote area at the bottom of the Canyon and invented a language only their mother could understand.

**M**ARY HOOVER ARRIVED at the Canyon in 1946 on the *Grand Canyon Limited*. She and a handful of other girls transferred from the Harvey House in Hutchinson, Kansas, which was closing. One of the first people they met was a supply-truck driver who was wearing a woman’s hat on his head.

When they met the manager of Bright Angel Lodge, he asked,

“Can you girls work all day and dance all night?”

“We looked at one another,” Hoover recalls. “We were just out of high school, and we said, ‘I guess we can.’”

The girls were assigned rooms in the dormitory.

“We were two girls to a room,” Hoover recalls. “We had two single beds and a couple of dressers, two closets, a wash basin and a desk. The desks were all metal. I had never seen metal furniture before. And we had a community shower and restroom.

“I had different roommates. And I had one who used to think I needed my sleep and she’d turn my alarm clock off. The only time I was late for work was one of the times she did that.”

Hoover spent the first three days pining for Kansas. “If someone had said, ‘Mary, come on home,’ I would have got on the first train,” she says.

Ultimately, Hoover stayed more than 40 years. During the ’40s, she waited on trainmen who sat at the lunch counter at Bright Angel Lodge. In those days, the lodge had a beauty parlor and a barbershop, and the only park entrance was on Center Street, near a Chevron station.

"They had a little log building," she recalls. "Every once in a while, somebody would get too close and knock the building down. You had to watch when somebody was coming down that street going fast and get ready to run."

Later, Hoover worked as a housekeeper at El Tovar, where she saw her share of celebrities.

"We were told not to bother them," she recalls. "You could say hello, but you weren't supposed to get a conversation going. Every once in a while, you'd hit somebody who really wanted to tell you all about their life and the movies they were in."

"One [celebrity] walked around with his hat pulled over his eyes. He took the whole wing upstairs, on the second floor, for his friends, but he didn't go out with them. He'd sit on the porch with his hat over his eyes."

Then, of course, there were politicians.

"[Barry] Goldwater loved the Canyon," Hoover recalls. "He liked to stay at the Brown Building. They used it mostly for the help or the Santa Fe, but he'd like to stay there. And he'd get up real early and go for a walk."

"One day, we were up at the El Tovar and this man said, 'Would you girls like to have a drink?' So we went in and sat down at a table, and he came over and said, 'You know, I'm Senator So-and-So, and everybody knows me.' We looked at him real blank. I have no idea, to this day, who that man was. But he thought he was important."

**T**HE VERKAMPS OCCUPIED some of the best real estate in the village, living above their store, which was perched on the rim.

"We would sit on our roof and watch the tourists," Mike Verkamp recalls. "We saw rainbows and double rainbows and inversions that went down into the Canyon. The clouds would fill in the Canyon, and it looked like you could walk across the clouds."

"We saw powerful storms, and we even saw, in the '50s, flashes from the atomic blasts in Nevada. It was really something. You'd see the flash, and then you'd feel this temblor shake about seven or so seconds later. It shook the whole building."



Grand Canyon Village residents enjoy a banquet at Bright Angel Lodge. The man standing is Jack Verkamp, the owner of Verkamp's Curios, and the woman standing on the far right is his wife, Mary.



**ABOVE:** The 1953 Grand Canyon School baseball team poses for a photo.



**LEFT:** General Dwight D. Eisenhower visits the Canyon's train depot on July 17, 1950. Eisenhower would be elected president in 1952.

Of course, there were disadvantages to living above the store. "If you had an argument or a fight, it was all transmitted down," Verkamp says.

And every now and then, tourists would climb the stairs into the living quarters, asking for permission to take a photo from the roof. "By golly, if my dad occasionally didn't let them do it," he says. Things got more interesting as the five Verkamp kids got older. "You're essentially locked in at night because you had to secure the store," Verkamp recalls. "That became kind of hairy when you'd go out on a date. And there'd be two or three of us going out. We got to where we'd put the key under the mat in a certain spot so the other guy could come in."

**J**UST ABOUT EVERYONE who lived in the village recalls certain events. One in particular is the visit by General Dwight D. Eisenhower on July 17, 1950. Paul Schnur was working for Virgil Gipson and got "wonderful photos."

John Verkamp, with brothers Mike and Steve, ran down to meet Eisenhower's train. John got the general's autograph and took pictures of him signing it.

Later, park superintendent Dr. Harold Bryant brought Eisenhower into Verkamp's Curios.

"As he was leaving, my brothers and I picked up a piece of petrified wood and went running across the parking lot," John recalls. "I said, 'General Eisenhower, here's a gift from Verkamp's.'"

A couple of days later, John received an Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway envelope forwarded from Bryant. Inside was a handwritten letter that read: "Dear Red, I hope you know how much I appreciated your bringing me the piece of petrified wood. I shall keep it as a fine souvenir of my visit to Grand Canyon."

The experience deeply impressed John. It followed him through his own career in public service, including 10 years in the Arizona Legislature, where people kidded him that he must have taken his political direction from Eisenhower.

Life at Grand Canyon Village back then left an indelible mark on its residents, though they've all since moved on. As Schnur wrote, "The current residents are there only temporarily, and they, too, will soon be gone. Only the timeless beauty of the Canyon remains." **AH**