

HE TOOK

In 1903, a handsome, engaging and ambitious man named Ralph Cameron bought the rights to the Bright Angel Trail on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. That same year, he built a hotel, erected a gate and began collecting tolls. It was an aggressive move that led to a long series of legal battles and his eventual fall from grace.

BY KATHY MONTGOMERY



A TOLL

WHEN HUBERT AND C.D. RICHARDSON RENAMED THEIR MERCANTILE CAMERON TRADING POST in 1924, Ralph H. Cameron was at the height of his popularity. Handsome, engaging and ambitious, Cameron had made his name as one of the Grand Canyon's early pioneers, but also via a long and varied career in public service. As a Territorial delegate, he helped secure Arizona's statehood, and he returned to Washington as the state's first Republican senator.

While in Congress, Cameron got federal funding for not only the suspension bridge near the Richardsons' trading post, but also such high-profile endeavors as the Yuma Project irrigation system and Coolidge Dam. He was hailed as a rising star, and his potential seemed as expansive as the Western sky.

But while Cameron pursued federal dollars, he also fought government control, cultivating his image as a champion of the "little guy." For decades, he battled the Santa Fe Railway, the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service over control of the Canyon's South Rim. For a while, Cameron seemed unstoppable. But his self-described David-vs.-Goliath campaign ultimately led to his downfall, leaving him more a tragic hero than a biblical conqueror.

BORN IN SOUTHPORT, MAINE, IN 1863, CAMERON ATTENDED PUBLIC SCHOOLS and worked on schooners that trawled the Atlantic coastline before moving to Boston, where he took a job in a department store. After reading the account of John Wesley Powell's Colorado River expedition, Cameron, around age 20, quit his job and hopped a westbound freight, arriving in Flagstaff in 1883.

The area was as raw and green as Cameron himself, having had a post office established just two years earlier. But the rail-

LEFT: An early 1900s view of Kolb Studio, on the Grand Canyon's South Rim, shows the entrance to Ralph Cameron's Bright Angel Toll Road — known today as the Bright Angel Trail. The men in the picture are photographers Emery (left) and Ellsworth Kolb.

Courtesy of Grand Canyon National Park Museum Collection

RIGHT: Cameron is best known for his exploits at the Canyon, but he also had a long public service career that included two stints in Congress.

Library of Congress



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road, which reached Flagstaff in 1882, brought growth and opportunity. It was just the kind of place a young man could make his mark.

Attracted by politics early on, Cameron helped form Coconino County and aided Flagstaff's incorporation. Appointed county sheriff in 1891, he held that position for several years before serving on the county board of supervisors and becoming its chairman. But even then, Cameron had bigger ambitions, traveling to St. Louis in 1896 as a delegate to the Republican National Convention.

During their early years in Flagstaff, Cameron and his brother, Niles, worked as woodsmen and operated a sheep ranch and, later, a mercantile. But the brothers, swept up in a wave of prospecting fever at the Grand Canyon, soon poured their resources into mining claims in the area.

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Title to a mining claim required that a prospector discover minerals in paying quantities and actively mine them. Once a federal agent confirmed the claims, the prospector could receive a patent. But the laws didn't specify a time frame to prove a claim. As long as the prospector paid an annual fee, he or she could retain what amounted to a lease on the land.

Cameron took advantage of that loophole to tie up some of the most desirable land at the Canyon, locating claims along the Colorado River and much of the South Rim, at the Bright Angel Trailhead, at Indian Garden and at many other spots along the toll road, which he called the Cameron Trail.

Cameron invested thousands to improve the trail and extend it to the Colorado River, believing the railroad would run its spur to the trailhead. Instead, the Grand Canyon Railway struck a deal with Martin Buggeln to deliver tourists to the Bright Angel Hotel, moving its terminal to bypass Cameron's hotel and refusing Cameron's agents access to the station platform. The feud was on.

Cameron responded by filing more mining claims, including two that overlapped land the railroad had surveyed for its depot. The company contested those claims, but the local courts upheld them. Then, in 1903, Cameron erected a gate at his trailhead and began collecting tolls.

Financed by the railroad, Buggeln filed a lawsuit that eventually reached the Territorial Supreme Court. The suit claimed Cameron had no right to collect tolls, because those rights could not be sold or assigned. The court agreed. Cameron returned the trail to its original owners, but the case was just the beginning of a long series of legal battles.

In 1906, Berry's toll road franchise expired and ownership of the trail passed to Coconino County. By then, Cameron had been elected to the board of supervisors. He persuaded his colleagues to

assign the franchise to one of his associates. The following year, the board authorized Cameron to retake possession and ordered the sheriff to enforce its decision.

When the railroad filed suit to contest the county's authority, Cameron persuaded his friends in the Arizona Legislature to pass a bill ensuring it. The governor vetoed the "Cameron Bill," but the Legislature unanimously overrode his veto. Then, in 1908, Cameron won election as a Territorial delegate to Congress — where he lobbied for statehood and prevailed, boosting his political clout even further.

But while he was in Washington, Cameron lost ground at the Canyon. He was forced to shutter his hotel around 1910. And while the railroad, challenging the county's authority, lost its final appeal to the Arizona Supreme Court, the secretary of the interior invalidated many of Cameron's claims, finding they lacked commercial-grade minerals. Cameron appealed the ruling but otherwise ignored it.

The year Cameron was elected delegate, President Theodore Roosevelt created Grand Canyon National Monument, which fell under the control of the Forest Service. With the support of that agency, the railroad and concessionaire Fred Harvey blocked Cameron's plans for a scenic railway along the South Rim.

Cameron retaliated by delaying construction on the Hermit Road and Hermit Trail, intended as an alternative to the Bright Angel. Until 1913, the road was paved only to Hopi Point; from there, it continued onto Cameron's claims as a dusty, rutted path. Eventually, the railroad quietly paid Cameron \$40,000 to complete the project.

Meanwhile, Cameron proposed other Grand Canyon development, including a hydroelectric dam on the Colorado River. But he had neither title to the land nor permission from the government, so his scheme never materialized.

WHEN THE CANYON BECAME A NATIONAL PARK IN 1919, THE BILL

authorizing the park instructed the Interior Department to negotiate the purchase of the Bright Angel Trail. Cameron no longer served on the Coconino County Board of Supervisors, but its board members refused to deal with the government's representative. "In view of your previous attitude and discourtesy to the members of this body," the board wrote, "they do not care to make any proposition to or through you."

Soon after, though, the board had no choice. In 1913 — the year before Cameron lost a bid for governor — the federal government filed a series of suits to get control of



Emery Kolb made this photo of Cameron on horseback on the Bright Angel Trail around the 1910s. Northern Arizona University Cline Library

Cameron's claims. It finally won in 1920, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the claims invalid and declared Cameron and his associates trespassers.

That year, Cameron, then 57, saw his opportunity to run for U.S. Senate, vowing to get funding for a reservoir on the Gila River near San Carlos. He also pledged to resettle war veterans onto the Colorado River Indian Reservation and restore tribal lands to the public once the tribes had been "civilized." With the support of all the major newspapers, Cameron won, becoming the first Republican senator from Arizona.

One of his first moves as senator was to try to oust Stephen Mather as director of the National Park Service. When that failed, he managed to cut the proposed appropriation for Grand Canyon National Park. He convened a Senate committee, called the "Cameron Inquisition," to investigate the Interior and Agriculture departments, and he bitterly opposed the government's attempts to purchase the Bright Angel Trail, which resumed in 1923.

He also sponsored legislation authorizing \$5.5 million to fulfill his promise to build a dam on the Gila River, which earned him praise in Arizona. But he soon ran into trouble. A lawsuit accused Cameron of misconduct with another man's wife, and he was indicted over campaign funds he received from G. Henry Stetson, son of the eponymous hat manufacturer.

Cameron attributed the suits to political foes, and both were ultimately dismissed. But his feud at the Grand Canyon eroded his support at home. By then, conditions at Indian Garden had become intolerable, with just two deteriorating tents and a contaminated water supply.

At the urging of local businessmen, Congressmen Louis Crampton of Michigan and Carl Hayden of Arizona met with representatives of the Coconino County Board of Supervisors, the Park Service and Fred Harvey at the Canyon's El Tovar Hotel. They negotiated the sale of the trail in exchange for an appropriation to improve the primary road into the park. But despite the support of Flagstaff's newspaper, *The Coconino Sun*, a 1924 referendum authorizing the sale failed decisively.

Around the same time, Cameron found himself in court again, this time facing charges of contempt for not vacating his mining claims. Cameron lost, and his agents at Indian Garden fled just ahead of park rangers. They had been illegally operating a still there and left behind several gallons of mash.

Cameron tried to rehabilitate his image and support at home by fighting to waive grazing fees for ranchers, using the occasion to attack the federal government. His rhetoric brought wild applause from stock growers, and he ultimately got fees reduced by half. He also fought, unsuccessfully, for a tariff on imported copper. But it wasn't enough. A series of damning articles in the *Los Angeles Times* helped drive the final nail in Cameron's political coffin. He lost his re-election campaign to Hayden in a landslide.

Cameron left Congress in 1927, the same year lawmakers made it easier for the government to acquire the Bright Angel Trail. The deed was executed the following year. During his final hours in the Senate, Cameron delivered a warning against the proposed Boulder Dam — now known as Hoover Dam — and what he saw as the threat from "Asiatic coolies" who would take over "the fertile shores of the Pacific" if the dam were built. Uncharacteristically, his colleagues responded with catcalls.

Cameron ran twice more for Senate but never again held public office. He moved to Philadelphia and pursued mining interests in Georgia, North Carolina and California. He was promoting a resort near Yuma when he was hospitalized in Washington, D.C., while on a business trip in 1953. He died there at age 89 and was buried in the Canyon's Pioneer Cemetery.

For all his high-profile battles, Cameron has largely been forgotten. So it seems both ironic and fitting that a remote outpost east of the Canyon is where you'll find Ralph Cameron's most enduring namesake: a trading post he never even owned. **AH**