



About the Author

Mark Wade is active in hiking, writing, photography, and videography. He works as a tourism marketing consultant, for which he has won numerous awards. He is a weekly guest on the KSL Outdoors radio show. Mark is the former Director of Tourism for southwestern Utah and has served on the board of directors for various tourism associations.

Why Walkabout?

An important part of my youth was spent in the country of New Zealand among people of many cultures and countries. Originally settled by other peoples, including the Maori, Europeans began to actively find their way to New Zealand after Dutch explorer Abel Tasman (1647) and British Captain James Cook (1769) also discovered these islands. In 1770, Cook ventured west 1,100 nautical miles and with maps from earlier Dutch explorers, was the first to stand on Australia's east coast.

New Zealand seemed to be a gathering place for many people from the islands of the Pacific and from Australia. It was in New Zealand that I learned of the Australian aboriginal term walkabout, which, for me, came to mean going outside for personal exploration. The term walkabout was more widely introduced to America as a commonly used term in the popular Australian movie Crocodile Dundee. "Mick's gone walkabout" was the statement of the hotel doorman as he referred to actor Paul Hogan's character going out to explore America.

Full Circle to America

When I returned from New Zealand, my family settled in the state of Utah. and it is here that I have slowly discovered that these two locations share the common trait of world-class scenic diversity. I've subsequently spent over forty-five years going walkabout in Utah. These treks of exploration have led me to discover that the outdoors can be a great place for introspection and self-discovery.

Story of Healing: Axe Handle in the Alcove.

A few years ago, during a particularly difficult economic down-turn in America's economy, I was one of 350 people to be laid-off from a St. George-based company. The morning that I was informed of my termination of employment, I left my office, climbed in my car, and began to drive. Somehow, I found myself northbound on I-15. Near the Leeds exit, I determined to go to the community of Silver Reef as I continued to contemplate what was a devastating change in the financial future of myself, my wife, and my young family.

My choice for going to Silver Reef was based on the prospect that I knew I could find an out of the way place to walk and be alone with my thoughts. I parked my vehicle near the edge of the rock reef, for which the area is named, and wandered west. Crossing a small stream I wound my way through desert foliage toward a box canyon. My distressed thoughts of "what is next" consumed me for a while, but my contemplations were somewhat preempted as I began to find my way up the side of the canyon. I picked my way up a steep slope through boulders and native brush, climbing higher until I reached an upper ledge where the terrain opened up into a less arduous slope. Massive eroded sandstone formations greeted my foreground view, and the backdrop was the snow dusted Pine Valley Mountain.

Distressing thoughts began to return until I noticed a cavity of rock, half filled with sand, that was approximately ten feet long and four feet high. However, the object that most drew my attention was an axe handle that was protruding from the sand. Morbid thoughts immediately filled my brain, but curiosity led me closer. I tugged on the handle, but it wouldn't budge.

Wade's Finding Meaning and Healing in the Outdoors Walkabout

By Mark Wade



With the assistance of a flat rock, I began to excavate the sand, but the axe continued to imitate the sword Excalibur. Finally, I removed enough sand to get the handle to rotate forward and back, yet I could tell that something was holding it back. This reinforced my morbid suspicions, but with more effort, I discovered that the strap of an old bag was hooked over the blade.

I excavated further and removed an old pair of Levis Strauss pants, a wool blanket, a rusted coffee can, and the duffel. The blanket and pants were riddled with holes, and I cast them aside to search the contents of the bag. Within, I found a small pocket-size New Testament book and

a map. I'd like to say it was a treasure map, but it was simply a highway map dated 1954. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed.

It appeared to me that someone had been using this alcove, which was perfectly protected from rain, as a base from which to explore the area and perhaps to prospect for silver. This person's situation seemed far more tenuous than mine: meager supplies, sleeping in a sandy alcove, and apparently in need of much more in their life. Did this person find what they needed? Why didn't he or she return for their gear? Did they die somewhere nearby? I knew that all of these questions would likely never be answered, but perhaps my exploration had enabled me to acquire some personal insights.

I gathered up the axe and gear and found a less steep route back to my vehicle. This whole experience had the effect of taking my mind away from the loss of my job, if only for a few hours. My walkabout in the southern Utah back country lent some healing to my soul and perhaps cleared my mind for the journey ahead.

The axe still resides in my garden shed, and it reminds me that, despite my own challenges, there are others for whom life is more difficult. Perhaps we all have times when we can find a new path, not look back, and just start walking.



Photos courtesy of Bob Grove

In coming issues, we'll explore together, through stories and images, some of the lesser known places in southwest Utah, places where personal meaning and healing are found.

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