That day in 1934, when the slender, soft-featured youth rode into town on his undersized burro, people stopped and took notice. There was something distinctly odd about the stranger's arrival. Fifty-nine years earlier, the Mormon hamlet of Escalante, in southern Utah, had been founded by ranchers homesteading in the vanguard of Brigham Young's great empire-building adventure. By the 1930s there was no town in the United States more remote from any center of civilization. It was a rare thing, then, especially in November, for an outsider to ride into Escalante. But Everett Ruess blithely made himself at home, pausing in the dirt streets to chat, camping a few nights under a gnarled cottonwood across the river on the edge of town.

WHAT HAPPENED TO EVERETT RUSS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUSSELL KAYE

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF A YOUNG ARTIST STILL HAUNTS THE SOUTHWEST 65 YEARS LATER.
The young boys of Escalante were delighted to spend time with the vagabond. With him they rode horseback along the nearby ridge, hunting for arrowheads, and the shared his campfire dinner of venison and potatoes. On his last night in town, Ruess (pronounced ROO-ess) took a couple of the boys to the movie theater, paying the dime admissions. They watched Death Takes a Holiday.

Norm Christensen was ten years old that November. Today, at he lives a few blocks from the house he grew up in. “Everett showed us how the Indians could make fire using sticks,” Christensen said. “We hiked the hills, showed him the Indian writings”—petroglyphs etched into sandstone walls by the Anasazi and Fremont people more than 700 years ago. “He didn’t brag on himself. Wasn’t a show off. Just a hell of a nice ordinary guy. He said he’d come out to lead the country over and make his paintings. In these boxes loaded in pack bags on his burros, he carried a lot of ‘spotted dog’—rice and raisins, with condensed milk. We gave him a bunch of potatoes. Offered him bottled fruit, but he just didn’t have room for it.

“I still remember him waving as he passed on down the river.”

From Escalante, in search of solitude and beauty, Ruess rode southeast along the Hole in the Rock Trail, which had been blazed by Mormon pioneers in 1879-80. Snow already dusted the top of the Kaiparowits Plateau, looming on his right. Within the fortynight screaming three-day blizzard would sweep the canyon country.

A week after waving goodbye to Norm Christensen, Ruess, who was 50 miles out, shared a campfire with a pair of shepherders. Shortly afterward that he may have run into another party, cattlemen riding Escalante Desert’s farthest range.

Then Everett Ruess disappeared from the face of the Earth. He was 20 years old.
This is the land whose austere beauty transfixed Ruess—and where he disappeared. In November 1934 he left Escalante (shown here in the upper left corner) and, over the next week, picked his way southeast along the Hole in the Rock Trail to Soda Gulch and, ultimately, Davis Gulch, where his two burros were later found.
During the last century and a half, dozens of wanderers have vanished in the labyrinthine canyons of the trackless plateaus of the stark and sparsely inhabited American Southwest. Many, like Ruess, have never been found. Ordinary newspaper stories, wrapped in the silent grief of those who loved him. But nearly 65 years after Everett Ruess disappeared on the Escalante Desert, you can rouse a lively debate in almost any bar between Santa Fe and Flagstaff over the possible ways he met his fate.

Ruess "lives" while others have faded from consciousness for a variety of reasons, not least among them the fact that his zeal for the wilderness, passionately expressed in the scores of letters he posted from wherever he found himself on his wanderings, makes him a natural avatar for anyone who has ever shared such longings for escape. That and the fact that he appeared before his zeal could wane.

Through many months during five consecutive years, Ruess wandered the West, often at the whim of his parents in Los Angeles, to his brother, Waldo, four years his senior, or to one or another of his friends. As he traveled, he painted the landscape in watercolors; back in Los Angeles, he converted his raptures into block prints.

In 1983, a Salt Lake City writer, W. L. Rusho, collected the letters and prints in a definitive book entitled *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty*. The book has become a Southwest classic. The 1996, Jon Krakauer devoted ten pages of his best-selling *Into the Wild* to the conundrum of Ruess's disappearance, seeing in the loner of the 1930s striking parallels to Chris McCandless, the 24-year-old idealist who had recently starved to death north of Mount McKinley.

Ruess's letters, often grandiose, always striving for the lyrical, reveal an aesthetic torturing by internal struggles:

> I have not tired of the wilderness; rather I enjoy its beauty and the vagrant life I lead, no less keenly all the time. I prefer the saddle to the streetcar and star-sprinkled sky to a roof, the obscure and difficult trail, leading into the unknown, to any paved highway, and the deep peace of the wild to the discontent bred by cities. Do you blame me then for staying here, where I feel that I am one with the world around me. It is true that I miss intelligent companionship, but there are the few who I can share the things that mean so much to me that I have learned to contain myself. It is enough that I am surrounded with beauty.

Writing in 1942, Wallace Stegner categorized the would-be artist as a "callow romantic." He added, "If we laugh at Everett Ruess, we shall have to laugh at John Muir because there is little difference between them except age." Ruess was, claimed Stegner, "one of the few who died—if he died—with the dream intact."

Ruess's disappearance on the far reaches of the Escalante Desert made him an enigma as tantalizing as any in the Southwest.

The various scenarios offered over the years to explain Ruess's disappearance reduce to four distinct theories. The first, which can be dismissed out of hand, is that he wandered off the Escalante, resurfaced on the Navajo reservation, went native, and lived out his days under assumed identity. The second is that he committed suicide, concocting his end in such a way no one might find his body. The third is that he died in an accident: falling off a cliff, drowning in the San Juan or Colorado River, or freezing to death on some forlorn plateau, perishing in the three-day blizzard that hit late that November. The fourth is that he was murdered.
searches for Everett Rues's body after his disappearance. It stumled there was little left to discover about Rues's disappearance. Still, the more time I spent in the Southwest, the harder it became to shake my fascination with his tale. Finally, I headed out to Escalante last May to see for myself just how scattered lay the puzzle pieces of his vanishing—to see if the mystery could be solved.

On my first visit to the town, in 1993, I had been struck by just how insular and xenophobic it was. Most of the Mormon families in Escalante (pronounced by locals ES-ca-LANTH, rhymed with "slant") have roots in southwest Utah that reach back into the 19th century. The decades of wringing a living from its fields and pastures have bred a fierce distrust of outsiders.

Half a decade had done nothing to blunt the ferocity of that suspicion; no one was eager to talk—but just about everyone was polite enough to suggest someone else who might be. And one name that kept coming up was Melvin Alvey. There are not many people still alive in Escalante who met Everett Rues during those several November days before he rode off into the void. Alvey, still active and alert at 91, is one of the few.

"I talked to him over there in the street as he was leaving town," said Alvey, pointing out the front window of his house. "We talked quite a bit about the country. He had these two little burros. They didn't stand that high." Alvey flattened his hand four feet above the rug. "I don't think either one had 50 pounds [loaded] on 'em. I looked at those two little burros, goin' out in November. He never even had a tent. Didn't have a good camp stove.

"He said he was goin' to go down in the desert and stay six weeks. Claimed he was goin' down to be an artist and write stories. He had so little; he didn't have enough for one week, let alone six. I said, 'It looks like you're travelin' pretty light.' "Yes," he said, 'I don't need much.' I've thought about him quite a bit. Whenever it gets cold. To go down there and draw as an artist, in November, when you only got three, four or five degrees of decent weather in the day... I think he had some plans that nobody knew.

Everett's last letter, to his brother Waldo, is dated November 11, 1934. In it, he seems eerily to anticipate his vanishing: "As to when I shall visit civilization, it will not be soon, I think... This has been a full, rich year. I have left no strange or delightful thing undone that I wanted to do... It may be a month or two before I have a post office, for I am exploring southward to the Colorado River, where no one lives."

Three months later, Everett's parents received their own letters to their son, returned unclaimed from Marble Canyon, Arizona—the post office nearest the point where Everett had planned to resurface. Worried, they sent an inquiry to the postmistress at Escalante, where Everett's last letter had been mailed.

At the beginning of March 1935, the ranchers of Escalante launched a search. The two sheepherders who had bumped into Rues on November 19, far down the Hole in the Rock Trail, had camped at the head of Soda Gulch, one of the last right-bank tributaries of the Escalante River before it empties into the Colorado. The searchers combed Soda Gulch on horseback without finding anything; likewise, they poked the length of Willow Gulch, two miles northwest of Soda, with no results.

In Davis Gulch—the next tributary southeast of Soda—they struck pay dirt. An old horsepack trail enters Davis from the left, two-thirds of the way down its short but sinu-
The trail, in fact, is the only easy route in and out of the canyon. As soon as they reached the bottom of the horse trail, the searchers found Ruess’s last camp.

As W. L. Rusho put together the story in 1983, the men on horseback found Ruess’s burros enclosed in a brushwork corral. The animals were “fat and healthy,” the head of the search party reported—this despite the fact that they may have spent three months in their prison. The men also found, draped on the brush fence, a bridle, halter, and rope. In a nearby alcove, they came across empty cans, candy wrappers, the impression of a bedroll in the dust, and numerous footprints. But as they searched on, pushing as far as they could ride up- and down-canyon, they found no trace of Ruess’s camping gear, cook set, food, painting kit, or diary.

All theorizing as to what happened to Ruess must somehow reconcile these maddeningly contradictory clues. Had he hiked off on a multiday jaunt—to some lonely spot where he came to grief—he would not likely have left his burros confined. (Never before, in four years of horse- and burro-packing, had he left his animals for more than a few hours at a time.) If passersby murdered the vagabond, stole his gear, and disposed of the body, why would they not have gotten rid of the burros as well?

As Rusho reported the story, one of the searchers, Gail Bailey, took the burros back to Escalante, then later pastured them on a nearby mountain.

Sixteen years after Rusho’s sleuthing, as I talked to old-timers in Escalante, I was consistently told two things that sharply contradict Rusho’s informants. Far from being fat and healthy, the burros were emaciated, near starving, having grazed every blade of grass within their corral. And Gail Bailey found the animals not as he searched with the others, but on his own, before the search was even organized.

Bailey died in 1997 without straightening out this knotty matter. Apparently he dissembled to Rusho, leaving some pointed questions unaddressed. If he had found the burros earlier, why didn’t he spread the word that Everett Ruess must be in trouble? And if he found the burros, had he also found Ruess’s personal gear?

Everett Ruess was raised in Los Angeles in a family that took intellectual and artistic ambition for granted. His father, a probation officer, pushed Everett to read great literature and to ponder the eternal philosophical questions. (The syllabus of books Everett asked his parents to mail to him during his ramblings would have gladdened the heart of Mortimer Adler: everything from The Magic Mountain and The Brothers Karamazov to Rabelais’s Gargantua and Pantagruel and Apuleius’s The Golden Ass.) In his letters, he ostentatiously quoted his favorite poets, and he named one pair of burros Pericles and Pegasus.

Everett’s mother was a poet and artist; she taught him to make block prints, collaborating in their design. At one point she self-published a collection of poems, essays, and prints by all four members of the family, under the title “Ruess Quartette.” Along with painting and engraving, Everett grew serious about photography.

Ruess’s wanderings began in the summer of 1930 when, with his parents’ blessing, he hitchhiked up the California coast to Carmel. There, with a brashness unimaginable in most 16-year-olds, he knocked on the door of Edward Weston’s studio and introduced himself. Later, in the same fashion, he would barge in on Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange. Despite the boy’s forwardness, all three photographers took a liking to Ruess. Lange (Continued on page 168)
made some memorable portraits of him, and (if Ruess can be trusted) Adams "waxed very enthusiastic about my black and white work."

In January 1931, still only 16, Ruess graduated from Hollywood High School, and immediately set out on his first excursion into the Southwest. With a burro bought from a Navajo, he hiked for the better part of ten months, wandering from Phoenix to Canyon de Chelly, from Zion to the Grand Canyon. Though California still pulled at him, on this marathon journey Ruess discovered the landscape with which his soul truly resonated.

From the start, Ruess subscribed to the romantic credo that wilderness brings out the most profound elements of human nature. In his letters, he tried to convey his transport: "Music has been in my heart all the time, and poetry in my thoughts. Alone on the open desert, I have made up songs of wild, poignant rejoicing and transcendent melancholy. The world has seemed more beautiful to me than ever before. I have loved the red rocks, the twisted trees, the red sand blowing in the wind."

By the time he headed out onto the Escalante Desert, Ruess's increasingly daring solo journeys had taken on the nature of a quest. What the goal of that quest was, however, eluded his own analysis. "I am drunk with the fiery elixir of beauty," he wrote in one characteristic letter, and in another, "I have seen almost more beauty than I can bear."

But always, beneath his soaring hymns of joy and awe pulsed a dull throb of despair.

Ruess was further torn between the need to make a living, to develop a practical métier (he traded and sold his paintings as he hiked, but lamented the impossibility of living by art alone), and the urge to throw himself into an endless vagabondage.

And the young man agonized over a craving for love and companionship that was at odds with the conviction that he was too different from others ("a freakish person") to get along with them. "My tragedy," he wrote, "is that I don't fit in with any class of people." Despite a real knack for socializing, he concluded, "After all, the lone trail is best."

Suffused in all this romantic agony was a Werther-like longing for doom and death. Often he wrote in a kind of posthumous voice: "Oh, I have lived intensely!" To reach inaccessible Anasazi ruins, he took wild risks, and bragged about doing so: "Hundreds of times I have trusted my life to crumbling sandstone and nearly vertical angles. . . . One way or another, I have been flitting pretty heavily with Death, the old clown."

There are, in fact, undertones in Ruess's writing of suicidal thoughts. "I must pack my short life full of interesting events," he wrote Waldo in 1931. And, more tellingly, "What I would have missed if I had ended everything last summer!"

In April 1934, Waldo Ruess drove Everett to Kayenta, Arizona, and dropped him off. It was the last time the ever-loyal brothers would see each other.

The wanderings of Ruess's next seven months would constitute his most ambitious pilgrimage yet. From Kayenta he rode his burros into the little-explored Lukachukai Mountains of northeast Arizona; circled back through Monument Valley; wended his way west, far from any road, to Navajo Mountain; headed south to join an archaeological team probing Anasazi ruins in remote corners of the many-branching Tsegi Canyon; rode across Black Mesa to the Hopi villages, where he was allowed to participate in the Antelope Dance; moved on to Gallup, then all the way across Arizona to the Grand Canyon; then finally worked his way east and north to the Escalante country of southern Utah.

By now, Ruess had come to know the Navajos better than all but a few Anglos in the Southwest. He had picked up more than a smattering of their language. At Hubbell Trading Post, in Ganado, Arizona, he developed a brief crush on Alice, "the most beautiful Navajo girl I have seen." Just as he had felt no qualms at knocking on the doors of Edward Weston or Ansel Adams, on the reservation he sometimes walked up to a hogan in the late afternoon and effectively invited himself to dinner. Even more strangely, from the Navajo point of view, Ruess liked to camp in empty hogans, abandoned after their owners' deaths due to the Navajo dread of the spirits of the departed. Several times he burned abandoned hogans for firewood, once inciting the wrath of a Navajo woman passing by.

Ruess's passion for the Anasazi was more intuitive and aesthetic than intellectual. Again and again he sought out obscure ruins. Nothing in all his travels thrilled him more than the peril of "miraculous climbing on a nearly vertical cliff" to reach an untouched ruin; in a letter to a family friend, he defended his solo folly: "I . . . enjoy taking chances when skill and fortitude play a part."

During more than a decade of wandering the Southwest myself, I had crossed paths time and again with Ruess's itineraries from six decades before. Like him, I had ridden horseback into Canyon del Muerto, prowled among the ruins of the Tsegi, camped west of Navajo Mountain, probed the Lukachukai Mountains, and chatted with old-timers in the town of Escalante. But I had never been in Davis Gulch.

Last May, with photographer Ted Wood, I spent three days in the canyon where Ruess vanished. From the dirt road that retracts the Hole in the Rock Trail, 50 miles out of Escalante, we hiked two hours across a bewildering sea of sandstone domes and crevices. At its head, just beneath the 3,000-foot precipice plunging onto Kaiparowits Plateau, Davis Gulch narrows to a dark slot 200 feet deep. Rim-walking on thin air, we peered into this inaccessible chasm. Finally we reached the old stock trail by which Ruess had ridden into the gulch 64 years before.

The narrow canyon seemed a sandstone paradise, smooth orange walls arching gracefully, side by side, painted with black water strewn from the rim. The prickly pears were in bloom, their green pads bursting with waxy magenta flowers. Globe mallow and primroses sprouted from benches of fine sand. Near the end we found a splendid panel of petroglyphs in Glen Canyon linear style, bighorn sheep pecked out by artists more than 2,000 years ago. He was the beauty that once transfixed Ruess.

Less than a mile below camp, the waters of Lake Powell stopped our progress. Today, it is almost two miles of Davis Gulch lie underwater.

As we hiked upstream, the canyon revealed new wonders at every bend. One deep alcove had plainly been the home of Basketmakers and Anasazi, whose pits had become the rooms of the later Puebloans. Another alcove sheltered a masterly pictograph painted in red ocher: six and a half feet tall (o of the biggest pictographs I have ever found), sketches what archaeologists surmise may be mythical thunderbird—an eagle-like creature that dispenses lightning and thunder.

Aside from the stock trail, in the wth length of Davis Gulch I could find only the dirt routes in or out. These were the cowboys called "Moqui steps"—ladders of hand- and toe-holds gouged by some ancient architect with quartzite pounding stone. I switched to rock climbing shoes and started up one of these trails. Sixty feet up, I lost my nerve.

That night, as we sat in camp beside a teet- ing cottonwood, the full moon rose over the canyon rim. I pondered what our trip into Davis Gulch had revealed about Ruess's fate.

The obvious lesson, to my mind, was that likelihood Ruess had fallen to his death in the
was almost zero. There were only three places where a scrambler would even have been tempted to escape: those three dizzy lines of Moqui steps, one on the east wall, two on the west. Had Ruess fallen to his death from one of these, the searchers, even on horseback, would have found his bones in plain sight.

Before entering the gulch, I had imagined arcanic side canyons where a body could stay lost. But there simply were none in Davis, not even in the headwaters slot. There was no place a climber could have fallen where searchers would not have easily discovered his corpse.

As we hiked back out on the third day, I was convinced for the first time that if Ruess had died in Davis Gulch, it was not in a natural accident.

To entertain the notion that Ruess was murdered, of course, you need a motive. Simple theft is a possibility. Yet, except for the camera, Ruess’s belongings hardly amounted to the kind of booty that might incite murder. What would a rancher or a Navajo have done with a set of watercolor paints? And why would a murderer have left Ruess’s most valuable possessions, the two burros, to graze untended through the winter?

Yet 1934 was the middle of the Great Depression and perhaps nowhere in Utah did it hit harder than Escalante. That year, the state was afflicted with its worst drought since 1856. The year before, a plague of grasshoppers had swarmed the region. By 1935, two-thirds of the townspeople of Escalante were on government relief. In the midst of such destitution, perhaps even Ruess’s skimpily outfitted could have tempted a desperate rancher to serious crime.

In the course of researching his book in the early 1980s, W. L. Rusho had come across another scenario for the murder of Ruess. Rusho learned that, at the nadir of the Depression, small-scale cattle rustling on the Escalante Desert had risen to alarming heights. To put a damper on it, the local cattlemen spread the false rumor that they had hired a government agent to ride the range and gather evidence. In one of Rusho’s possible scenarios, Ruess had stumbled upon one or more rustlers butchering a stolen cow. Afraid that the vagabond was the secret agent, the rustler shot him and disposed of the body.

In the end, however, Rusho asked at the this theory on the grounds that, since “Everett must have looked about as dangerous as a puppy dog,” no rustler would have mistaken him for a government agent. Moreover, as several locals pointed out to me, Ruess wouldn’t have been to tell a rustled cow from one being legitimately butchered by its owner.

I was inclined to share Rusho’s scorn for the murder theory. But then I was hit with a
bombshell. I was wrapping up my interview with North Christensen, the Escalante old-timer who had befriended Ruess at age ten and gone to the movies with him on his last night in town. Christensen had spent an hour fondly recalling every detail of those November days.

"So what do you think happened to Everett?" I asked.

Christensen's eyes held mine; his face clouded. "I know what happened to him," he said quietly. "He was shot. The man who did it told me."

Was this the skeleton in the town's closet? As I snooped through town, I had been increasingly struck by how tightly-lipped some of the Escalante residents could be. "I don't know anything about that," an aged voice over the phone would respond to my Ruess overtures. "You'd be wastin' your time talkin' to me." Yet in their very demurrals, I began to sense that for more than 60 years, the town had guarded its secrets concerning the wanderer's disappearance. These inklings came home, for instance, as one graybeard, having agreed to talk to me, changed his mind. Gesturing for me to sit down on his porch rather than inviting me into his house, he explained cryptically, "Too many of the folks that might be involved, they still got kids and family around. It don't do nobody any good."

Now, in measured tones, Christensen went on to recall an afternoon, sometime around 1948 or 1949, when several young men had gathered in Christensen's barn to drink. One of them was Keith Riddle, nine years Christensen's senior. Despite the age difference, the men had grown up together, passing each other often on the streets of Escalante.

Riddle and Christensen sat on a plank in one corner of the barn, out of earshot of the others. Drink had loosened the older man's tongue. "We were talkin' about cowboys stuff," Christensen recalled. "I said, 'Keith, just between you and me, what do you think happened to Everett?"

"He looked at me, and after a long pause he said, 'I killed the son of a bitch, and if I had it to do over, I'd do it again.'"

"I didn't say another word. I figured I'd pushed it as hard as I could, anyway. Keith was a very strong-willed man. He'd fight you at the drop of a hat, and drop the hat himself. If he liked you, he'd do anything for you. If he didn't, he'd have liked to knock you down and kick the guts out of you."

I drew a long breath. "Could it just have been a drunken boast?"

"No," said Christensen. "It wasn't said in a bragging manner. I believe Keith told the truth."

A light went on in my head. Rusho's book claimed that the last man known to have seen Ruess alive were the two shepherders with whom he had camped in Soda Gulch. But Melvin Abey—whose honesty was vouched for by everyone in Escalante—insisted that after parting from the shepherders, Ruess had met and camped overnight with two cattle ranchers: Keith Riddle and Joe Pollock.

I asked Christensen why he hadn't gone to the authorities with Riddle's confession. "There was nothing to be gained by telling on Keith," he answered. "He'd served his country well in World War II. And he'd herded sheep and cattle all his life." Then, I thought, was the close-knit Escalante solidarity against outsiders, in spades.

Christensen's extraordinary story, of course, did not clinch the case. Drunken or not, Riddle's confession might have been an empty boast. I pleaded with Christensen for any way of verifying the tale. Had anybody else heard Riddle confess? Christensen shook his head ruefully: Everybody was dead, all the original searchers, all the other boys who had shared Ruess's company that November on the riverbank.

I had thought that I was close to the end of my journey, that I had grasped the essential details of the story of a gifted wanderer whose vanishing was a mystery that would never be solved. Now I was at square one again. During the next months, fired with a zeal to pin down the elusive identity of Keith Riddle, I could not get the Ruess saga out of my head.

In Panguitch, the Garfield County seat, I pored over old records. And in Escalante, the simple phrase, "Some people think Keith Riddle killed Everett," now opened doors that had previously been shut to me.

Gradually I pieced together a sketch of Riddle's life. Born in Escalante in 1915, one of eight siblings, Keith had seen his father desert the family, leaving his mother to care for her brood. "Lordy," said Della Christianson, 90 years old, "I don't know how that woman raised that bunch."

Enter Joe Pollock. As he had for several other near-orphans, Pollock, who was 20 years older than Riddle, took the boy under his wing, teaching him to ride and rope and string fence, giving him work on his own range, way out near Davis Gulch. Pollock later married Riddle's older sister.

But the harsh childhood had taken its toll on Riddle. Everyone agreed that he was a tough kid, a born brawler. "He felt poor, picked on, left out," sympathized Della Christianson. Some say that Riddle later developed a drinking problem. "He was pretty handy on a horse and all," remembered Delane Griffin. "When he got out of the service, he drank, and he was meaner than strychnine when he was drunk."

Nearly everyone agreed that Pollock and Riddle rustled cattle: not large-scale rustling, just the occasional calf or cow that belonged to someone else. Though I failed to find any record of the case, everybody in Escalante remembered that Pollock had finally been convicted of rustling around 1937. Della Christianson recalled the story that trapped the cowboy. "The cattlemen took a calf, cut off its ear, and sewed a silver dollar into it. They found the calf with Joe Pollock's brand on it. The sheriff produced the silver dollar."

At the time Everett Ruess disappeared, Riddle was 19 years old; Pollock, 23. Riddle died in 1949, at the age of 68; Pollock 20 years earlier, at the same age. In their lifetimes, outside the shouting range of Escalante gossip, no one ever charged them with the murder of Everett Ruess. From their graves, the two can hardly defend themselves now.

I felt driven to find at least some shred of evidence. To this end, I managed to track down Loy Riddle, one of Keith's sons, Fredonia, Arizona. Born in 1930, Loy could not have known about the Ruess matter only from tales his father told him more than 20 years after it happened. Yet Loy had heard the rumors. Over the phone he told me, "On my father's deathbed he said, 'Dad, if you killed the little guy, let me know where he is, 'cause there's still a $10,000 reward out on him. Tell me, and I'll collect.'" Loy said, 'Hell, I never even met the guy.'"

Later, also by telephone, I found Dan Pollock, Joe's son, who had been born the year of Ruess disappearance. Dan confirmed that Ruess had moved into his father's camp not far from Davis Gulch. "My father was probably the last to see him. Della gave him some beans and a horse blanket, made old Levi's filled with cotton stuffed inside."

"Dad always thought the guy fell off one of those ledges, maybe trying to get out of a storm. Maybe he froze to death in that three-day blizzard. We lost a lot of cattle in that storm."

For months, I turned over every stone I could find for some proof of Christensen's account of Riddle's confession. At last, as
talked on the telephone with Ken Sleight, the veteran horsepacker who had been the inspiration for the character Seldom Seen Smith in Edward Abbey's The Monkey Wrench Gang, I stumbled on a lead. Sleight's crony on the Colorado had been a longtime river guide named Harry Aleson, who, Sleight said, had spent years searching for clues to Russ's fate, to little avail. Aleson had even guided Russ's mother into Davis Gulch. As an afterthought, Sleight mentioned that Aleson, who died in 1972, had left all his papers to the Utah State Historical Society.

I spent two days in Salt Lake City poring over an archive that, while a scholar's treasure, was also a monument to a pack rat's hoarding of every piece of paper that had ever had even the slightest bearing on his life. A self-taught historian of all things southwestern, as well as a full-time guide for more than 30 years, Aleson had made carbon copies of every letter he ever wrote (and he often wrote a dozen in one day). I thumbed through daily meal recipes for three-week river trips, receipts for hardware and fuel, cover letters pitching his homespun adventure stories to pulp magazines and B-movie directors, raw copy for his rafting brochures, and passionate love letters from the wife of an Aleson associate with whom he carried on a clandestine affair for several years.

Then, in a long letter to Aleson's close pal, Southwest history buff Otis "Dock" Marston, I happened upon several paragraphs that electrified me. The letter was sent on December 14, 1952, from the Johnston Hotel in the sleepy Mormon town of Richfield, where Aleson was making ends meet as a desk clerk:

> In strictest confidence I write the following:
> After fourteen years of continued interest . . . I heard firsthand on Pearl Harbor Day this year, some startling statements—from a man of that area, pretty much "in his cups."

> The boy was shot. Killer was named to me. Killer died seven years later. Two others threw the body in the Colorado R. Both are living. One served time in Utah Pen for rustling. I've been seeing and talking to him off and on for several years. For some weeks now, he has kept a room here. Not more than 20 feet between our beds. Nothing re the murder could be proved in court.

> While the parents, whom I know, are living, I'm inclined to say nothing—let the secret of RR disappearance die with them.

> Three months later, Aleson wrote to another close confidante, California editor Randall Henderson:

> "As past winter I learned RR disappearance"

> Much of the details of final hours.
The names of the men involved.
The way the murder was committed.
EVERETT RUSS

The disposal of the body in the river... One of the men is dead.
One of the other two would have to testify against the other.
Perhaps a deathbed confession will come.

Aleson's cryptic revelations set my mind racing. Much of what he hinted at coincided with Norm Christensen’s story about Keith Riddle. Joe Pollock had not only gone to the “Utah Pen” for rustling, but I knew he had moved in later life to Richfield. Without a doubt, it was his bed that stood 20 feet from Aleson’s in the Johnston Hotel in 1952.

But Riddle lived until 1984, and so could not have been the killer who, according to Aleson’s informant, had died seven years after Ruess’s disappearance. And who was that informant “in his cups” on Pearl Harbor Day when he spilled the beans to the river guide?

I plowed on through Aleson’s papers. At last I found another paragraph, in a 1956 letter to Dock Marston:

“Yes, I have a few names of persons suspected of murdering Everett. I have two stories, from opposite factions, which attempt to cast blame on the other. The ruddiest of the stories was told to me while the narrator was fairly much “in his cups.” I am not yet ready to give these names. The written records are in my files—and you or Randall Henderson would recognize a semi-code.

But where was that “semi-coded” document? After two days at the historical society, I thought I had scanned every piece of paper in Aleson’s sprawling miscellany, without coming across it. Had the river guide changed his mind later in life and destroyed the record that named names?

One detail in Aleson’s letters dovetailed with a persistent motif in the gossip of the old-timers I had grilled in Escalante. From four different sources, I heard the rumor, always repeated in the same exact phrase, but without attribution, that Ruess’s killers “had thrown his body in the river.” Norm Christensen had said, “There’s so many places out there to dispose of a body—tie a couple of rocks on him, throw him in the river. After three, four months of catfish and carp feeding on him, there wouldn’t be much left.”

But how might Ruess’s killers have gotten the body the six miles from Davis Gulch to the Colorado River? I had mapped the geography of the Escalante Desert in my mind. In 1934, the Baileys herded sheep on the plateau just west of Davis Gulch. Gail Bailey was in the habit of wintering some of his sheep at the bottom of Davis, driving them in via the convenient stock trail; this was how he had discovered Ruess’s burros in early 1935. On the other, east side of Davis Gulch, Joe Pollock’s outfit ran cattle, and perhaps rustled the odd calf. On that barren quadrangle of tableland bordered by Kaiparowits, Davis Gulch, the Escalante, and the Colorado, Pollock rode the desert’s remotest range.

For Ruess to have run into Riddle, Pollock, and/or someone else out on their winter range, I would have to have left Davis Gulch on a hike to the east. Perhaps he had managed to climb one set of Moqui steps on the east wall of Davis though I had blanched at the thought as I stood beneath it. From the Pollock range, I assume the only route to the Colorado was the Hole in the Rock Trail. With Ted Woods in May, I had hiked down this astounding 300-foot cleft, dynamited 1880 by the Mormons, who had then managed to rope 82 wagons down to the river and float them across. As Ted and I scrambled down the trail marveling at Mormon pluck, we saw that there was no possibility of a rider on horseback navigating the trail today. Nor, I guessed, had there been such a possibility in 1934.

Intersecting with this confusing business was another piece of old news. Melvin Alvey had told me that a long-dead local who had participated in the search had told him that somebody had found unexplained footprints in the mud at Jackass Bar, on the Colorado. But where was Jackass Bar, and how did you get there?

No one in Escalante seemed to remember. More than 40 years ago, they had turned their backs on the farthest reaches of the Escalante Desert. Pollock’s range languished unused. At Delane Griffin told me, “All the guys who knew that country’re in the cemetery today.”

Then, unexpectedly, through a filmmaker named Diane Orr, who has spent ten years making a movie called The Magnificent Obsession of Everett Ruess (to be released later this year), I got hold of a photocopy of Aleson’s fugitive “semi-coded” document. It was a most peculiar thing, in the form of an unsent Western Union telegram from Aleson to himself at the Johnston Hotel. The words were run together in a strange, halfformed effort to disguise their import. It was dated December 6, 1952:

TOWARD SOLVING OF MYSTERY
LAYADALIN ONEOFAST TOSEEER
IVE TOLD TOHLABY BAILEY HUGH KILLED BY SHOT AVLEY EMERON ... TB.DEVELOPED DECEASED WB 194243 RIDDLE KEITH AND POLLOCK JOE THREW BODY IN THE RIVER PROBABLY OFF JACKS BEACH NEAR HOLE IN THE ROCK.

Allowing for misspellings, Aleson's telegram made it clear that Hugh Bailey, one drunken night in Richfield, had told Aleson ("I'lla") what Addlin Lay had long before told him. Lay was one of the two sheepherders with whom Russ had camped at Soda Gulch, just before he found his way into Davis Gulch. But according to Bailey's account, Riddle and Pollock were guilty only of helping dispose of the body. Someone named Eomer Avley had pulled the trigger. In all my conversations with the locals, this name had never come up.

I called Norm Christensen. He remembered Emmam Alvey and recalled that he had died in 1944. But to the suggestion that Alvey could have been the killer, Christensen responded, "That's an outright lie." Another old-timer in Escalante had the same view: "Somebody's got their wires crossed. Emmam didn't even run cattle with Pollock and Riddle. And Emmam couldn't have killed anybody."

Aleson's bizarre telegram both excited and baffled me. As a source, Hugh Bailey might well be suspect. He had ample reason to implicate the Pollock gang, with whom his family had feuded for decades. Joe Pollock had once nearly kicked him to death in a fight (according to Pollock's son). Perhaps Bailey (or Addlin Lay) had thrown in the name Emmam Alvey as a red herring, for by 1952, dead for eight years, the man was beyond the reach of the law—as Riddle and Pollock were not.

Nor did Aleson's telegram deliver all of what he had assured Randall Henderson he knew—"the way the murder was committed" and "the details of final hours." Aleson must have taken those details, which we would give much to unearth, to his grave. Nor did the telegram identify a motive for the murder. The old hypothesis, that Russ had blundered on a rustling scene and been mistaken for the phantom government agent, made perhaps the best sense.

Yet I thought the Aleson document, together with Riddle's confession to Christensen, went a long way toward proving that Everett Russ had neither died falling off a ledge, nor frozen to death in a storm, nor hidden himself away to commit suicide. I believed now that he had indeed been shot to death, probably by Keith Riddle, and his body dumped in the Colorado River.

Was this the end of my trail? The one thing I still hoped to do was find the way to Steamboat Springs, Colorado

One of the most beautiful places on earth. Why shouldn't it have its own instruction manual?

Call for a free color brochure.

Steamboat
IN THE SUMMERTIME
800.922.7272
www.steamboat-chamber.com

The Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

Our Indispensable Black Travel Dress is 100% wrinkle-proof and perfect for any occasion.

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

NEW! Sizes XS-SMALLER

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!

Indispensable Black Travel Dress®

FREE CATALOG and FREE OUTFITTING GUIDE with suggested packing lists and complete advice for the trip you're planning!
Jackass Bar. In the withering heat of mid-July, I went back once more to Escalante.

When I had first tried to talk to McKay Bailey, Gail's son and Hugh's nephew, he had shut me off cold. Now, on my second attempt, he greeted me on the porch of his house. He shook hands reluctantly, and said irritably, "I don't know what you want, but you're wasting your time and mine."

But as we talked more, he softened. I started asking about the lay of the land out near Hole in the Rock. To my surprise, although Bailey hadn't been near it in more than 30 years, he knew where Jackass Bar had been before the waters of Lake Powell had swallowed it for good. "Joe Pollock used to put cows down on the bar," he drawled. "Probably Joe built the stock trail down to it."

I got out a map. Bailey squinted at it, then drew a line across the brown contours, showing me the trail to Jackass Bar.

Three hours later, I inched my rented four-wheel-drive Bronco across the last six miles of what could only jokingly be called a road, a gamut of teetering slickrock ramps, the pits and crevices filled with chuckstones other drivers had baled into place. Across the last 30 miles of desert, I had not seen another soul. Outside, the orange and purple sands shimmered under a pitiless sun.

At the top of the Hole in the Rock cleft, I parked the car, stuck a candy bar and three water bottles in my pack, and started hiking toward the line McKay Bailey had drawn on my map. After an hour, I stood on the rim above the Colorado River, utterly stumped. A 500-foot sheer cliff plunged to the blue waters of Lake Powell; in the distance, houseboats lolled on the artificial lake.

So Bailey's memory had played tricks on him, I mused. Whatever Pollock's trail might be, it was manifestly not here. The heat pounded against my back and shoulders. I had already drunk a quart of water, and I was tempted to head back to the Bronco. But I decided instead to rim-walk north, just to see what lay beyond.

Through a maze of sandstone billows, ridges, and cirques, I worked my way onward, threading a route that few, I guessed, had ever walked. Gradually, the distant lake drew nearer. After two hours, I had managed to descend to 200 feet above its surface, and I thought I could see a hiking route the rest of the way.

Then I came to the first cairn, a two-foot pillar of stacked rocks. A hundred yards beyond it, I found another, then another. I followed the cairns, as they wound obscurely downward. In the desert, where lichens grow at an achingly slow rate, where 700-year-old pictographs look as if they were painted yesterday, it is almost impossible to judge the age of a pile of rocks. These cairns, I realized, could be the work of boaters climbing up from Lake Powell within the last decade, or of pioneer ranchers a century ago. Some had collapsed, and now and again I lost the trail.

Then, just above the lake, I found the broad steps, hacked with axes out of the bedrock, coated with the brown patina of the decades, of a classic western stock trail. I realized I had discovered Pollock's route to Jackass Bar. McKay Bailey's memory had only been off by a mile or two.

A tiny cove at the lakeshore marked the end of my sleuthing. I stared into the opaque water, trying to see down to Jackass Bar, drowned under 400 feet of reservoir and silt. Then I took off my clothes and bathed for 20 minutes, grateful for the relief from the heat.

At 3 p.m., I started back up. The temperature was over 100°F, and as I climbed, my thighs cramped and a leaden exhaustion sapped my will. Foolishly, I had forgotten to refill my empty water bottle at the lake. Soon I was down to a quart. But I climbed back past the first cairn I had spotted, then slowly traced the sketchy route above.

The trail was a marvel of route-finding, as it took the only line among the slickrock domes and prowls that livestock could negotiate. Here the way zigged left, traversed a ledge, climbed more hacked-out steps, then jogged back right.

By the time I had reached the rim again, I was starting to get dizzy. Vaguely I knew that I needed to get out of the heat, to hide in the shade until the sun got lower in the west. But I was in the grips of my own quest.

I started south toward the Hole in the Rock cleft. As I passed behind a small butte, still following cairns, I saw three logs lying on the ground, bleached white by the sun, but plainly showing the cuts of the axe-blows that had hewn them to size. No living tree grew anywhere nearby. Beyond the logs, I spotted a rusty tin can and picked it up. It looked like a condensed milk can, with a pair of tiny holes gouged in the lid, beside two PUNCH HERE legends embossed in the tin.

Clearly, the place had been an overnight camp, the cans tossed aside, the logs never burned. I decided to "borrow" the can, vowing to someday return it, for I knew it could be used to date the camp. (Later, I sent the can to an acquaintance who was an expert at such dating, without telling him anything about its context. He estimated it to be from 1933, plus or minus a year or two.)

About to hike on, anxious to reach the safety of the Bronco, I noticed a strange pile of rocks not far from the discarded logs. The more I stared at it, the more I was convinced that the mound was man-made. Oddly, about a foot and a half high, and 12 feet across, the pile was plainly old, for a gnarled blackbrush grew out of it. It looked like the kind of pile of flat rocks that might build to cover something.

A wild supposition seized my thoughts. I saw My mind leapt to Ruess's diary. What if this pile of rocks hid the answer to the puzzle of his fate?

Everett Ruess, having escaped Davis Gulch and explored the plateau to the east, stumbling into fatal encounter with the men it was his bad luck to meet. I pictured them loading his body on hot back to carry it to the Colorado. Then, weary with their bloody toil, or caught short by the early nip of November, they stopped here to camp.

It seemed improbable that the mound before me could be Ruess's grave: Surely if his kill had decided to hide his body rather than throw in the Colorado, they would not have interred it on the trail. But what if the mound had some of his belongings, paraphernalia the critters did not want to trust to the river? My mind leapt to Ruess's 1934 diary: By now, we would give more to find that journal than even I bones. What if this pile of rocks hid the answer to the puzzle of Everett's fate?

Added with the heat, I knelt and seized the topmost stone. But just as I started to haul loose and dig through the dirt below, something stopped me. What first gave me pause was an odd odial for, no one else had ever had the chance to stare at the mound, and wonder What if?

I drank the last of my water, hoisted my pack, and started back toward the Bronco. As I turned for a last look at the old campsite, I thought again about Ruess. If the vagabond had indeed met his end somewhere near here, there was something fitting about that demise, no matter how it had unfolded. For when the time came to die, Everett Ruess had found, as he had prophesied to Waldo, the wildest, loneliest, most desolate spot there was. . . To participate in an online forum about Everett Ruess, log on to Adventure's Web site at www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure.