It was a chilly day in November 1934.
The country had been mired in the Great Depression for more than five years, and no town felt the pinch of poverty more acutely than Escalante. Founded by Mormon pioneers 59 years earlier, the small settlement in southern Utah — then one of the most remote towns in the United States — had been stricken in successive summers by a plague of grasshoppers that ruined the crops and by the worst drought in nearly eight decades. In late autumn, the arrival of any visitor in Escalante was a rare occurrence. It was all the more surprising, then, when the thin, sandy-haired stranger rode into town from the west, saddled on one undersized burro, leading another that was packed with camping gear. His name, he told the locals, was Everett Rues. He was from California. And although he was only 20, he had been wandering all over the Southwest for the better part of the previous four years.
The young boys of Escalante took an instant liking to the vagabond. During the next several days, they rode horseback with him along the nearby ridges, hunted for arrowheads, and shared his campfire dinner of venison and potatoes. On his last night in town, Rues (pronounced ROO-ess) treated a couple of the boys to the local movie theater. They watched *Death Takes a Holiday*.
Then Rues rode alone out of town, headed southeast down the Hole in the Rock Trail toward the barren plateau the locals called the Desert. The day before, he had mailed a last letter to his brother in California. "It may be a month or two before I have a post office," he wrote, "for I am exploring southward to the Colorado [River], where no one lives."
Rues was launched on the next leg of his quest for beauty and adventure. A week later, 50 miles out, he sat around a campfire with a couple of Escalante shepherders.
And then, Everett Rues disappeared from the face of the Earth.

**IT WAS A WARLIKE DAY** in May 2008, Daisy Johnson had come from her home in Farmington, New Mexico, to Shippock to visit her younger brother, Denny Bellson. And to tell him a story he had never heard before — a story about their grandfather, Aneth Nez, that took place back in the 1930s.

Fifty-six years old last May, Johnson was a troubled woman. A year before, she had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She underwent a round of chemotherapy that nauseated her and caused her hair to fall out, but the cancer had gone away. Now, just in the past few weeks, it had come back. This time Johnson, a traditional Navajo, went to a medicine man.

"He told me this all came about because of our grandpa," Johnson said to her brother. She knew in a heartbeat that the medicine man must be right. How else had he known about her grandfather?

Bellson lives on the Navajo Reservation, just off U.S. Highway 191, not far from where he and his sister had grown up, and where their grandfather, Aneth Nez, had lived. Last May he listened to his sister's story in electrified silence.

"A long time ago," she said, "Grandpa was sitting up there on the rim of Comb Ridge [a sandstone uplift that crosses the Utah-Arizona border]. For several days he watched this guy — he was a real young Anglo dude — riding up and down the canyon below him. The guy had two mules, one that he rode and one that was packed with things dangling off the side. It was like he was looking for something."

One day, according to Johnson, Nez saw the young man down in the riverbed, only this time he was yelling and riding fast. Nez scanned the wash below and saw three Utes chasing the boy. "They caught up with him and hit him on the head and knocked him off his mule," she recounted. "They left him there and took off with the mules and whatever else the guy had."

As he watched the scene unfold, Nez stayed out of view. For centuries Utes living north of the San Juan River had been fierce enemies of the Navajo, whose homeland lay south of the river. As late as the 1930s, tensions between the groups occasionally broke out in violence. Nez's perch was only a few miles from that ethnic frontier.

When the Utes had gone, Nez descended some 300 feet from Comb Ridge to the bed of Chine Wash. The young man was dead by the time Nez got to him. Rather than looking for a burial site in the open wash, the Navajo hauled the body up to the rocky folds of the ridge, in all likelihood on the back of his horse. "Grandpa got a lot of blood on him," Johnson said. "That's what made him get sick later. Then he buried the young guy up there on the rim."

For more than three decades, Aneth Nez had told no one about this dark episode in his past. Then, in 1971, at the age of 72, he...
also had fallen ill with cancer. Nez paid a medicine man to diagnose his trouble. “He said,” Daisy Johnson recalled, “You had no business messing around with that body.”

The medicine man told Nez that the only way he could cure his cancer would be to retrieve a lock of hair from the head of the young man he had buried decades earlier, then use it in a five-day curing ceremony. “I was 19,” Johnson said. “I was home for the summer. That was the first time I ever heard anything about the young dude the Utes had killed down there in Chinle Wash.”

Johnson drove Nez out toward the Comb in a pickup. She waited in the cab for two hours, guessing that her grandfather was reconnoitering the land or perhaps even praying to prepare himself. He returned to the pickup empty-handed.

Later, Nez traveled back to the Comb with a medicine man. This time he retrieved a lock of hair from the grave. In the curing ceremony, Johnson said, the medicine man dusted the hair ashes—“so it will never bother the patient again.” At the end of the five days, the medicine man shot the lock with a gun, to destroy it completely.

“And when the time comes to die, I’ll find the wildest, loneliest, most desolate spot there is.”

—EVERETT RUSSELL, 1933

“And then Grandpa got better,” Daisy Johnson said. “He lived another ten years.”

As he listened to her story, Bellson realized that the grave must lie not far from the house he had built in 1993. Thirteen years younger than his sister, Bellson has kept a close bond with the land on which he grew up. Now he was seized with a passion to find the grave where Nez had buried the “young dude” back in the 1930s.

Several weeks later, Bellson drove to Farmington to see his sister. He brought with him a USGS topo map. “I tried to get her to show me where she’d parked the pickup with our grandpa,” Bellson told me later. “When I showed her the map, she recognized a Y in the road near Colored Rock Woman’s house. She gave me real good directions.”

During the next few weeks, Bellson, a carpenter and craftsman, spent his free time out hiking Comb Ridge, looking into every corner and crack along the rim. Then, one day, in an obscure crevice just under the crest of the Comb, he found a grave. Bellson saw at once that the person whose bones lay in that unlikely tomb had been buried in haste, and perhaps in great fear. A traditional Navajo himself, Bellson did not touch a thing.”
FINDING EVERETT RUESS

When he got home, he called Johnson. “I found the grave,” he told her.

AFTER EVERETT RUESS disappeared in November 1934, nearly four months passed before anyone organized a search. The alarm went out only after Ruess’s parents in California received a packet of their letters to their son, returned as unclaimed.

On horseback, a band of Escalante men started looking out on the Desert, where the shepherders had sat beside Ruess’s campfire back in November. After several tries, they entered Davis Gulch by an old livestock trail and hit pay dirt.

According to Utah historian W. L. Rusho, author of Everett Ruess: A Vasabond for Beauty, the searchers discovered a makeshift brushwork corral that confined Everett’s two burros, still fat and healthy. On the brush fence the men found a bridle, halter, and rope. In a nearby alcove in the sandstone cliff they discovered empty cans, the impression of a bedroll in the dirt, and numerous footprints. But after intensive searching up and down Davis Gulch, the ranchers never came across Ruess’s camping gear, cook set, or supplies of food—or his beloved painting kit or the journal he scrupulously kept on every trip.

For decades, scores of wanderers in the convoluted Southwest have disappeared, and their remains have seldom been found. The mystery posed by their vanishing usually lasts for a few weeks in the newspapers. But Ruess’s disappearance launched what can only be called a cult. In bars from California to Colorado, the mere mention of his story could be counted on to provoke a heated debate over the possible ways he met his fate.

In 1940 a small California press published On Desert Trails With Everett Ruess, a handsome collage of excerpts from the young man’s letters home, his poems and essays, and his watercolor paintings and woodblock engravings. It was the first of seven books, along with two documentary films, to chronicle the explorer’s life and vanishing. Then, in 1996, Jon Krakauer devoted ten pages of Into The Wild to Ruess. Krakauer saw in the vagabond a kindred soul to Chris McCandless, the doomed young wanderer who had starved to death in the wilderness north of Denali. After Into The Wild Ruess’s cult status skyrocketed. By now, Ruess has emerged as the subject of pop song lyrics, as a T-shirt icon for adventure, and as the patron saint of an arts festival held every September in Escalante.

Ruess “lives” while other lost wanderers have faded from memory for several reasons, chief among them the fact that his intense passion for wilderness resonates deeply with every romantic idealist who longs to escape. In his flight from all things safe, familiar, and domestic, Ruess stands as the real-life counterpart to Jack London’s sordid adventures or Mark Twain’s Huck Finn. He disappeared, moreover, with his dream intact but his pursuit of it poignantly unfulfilled.

In the dozens of letters he sent home, Ruess’s writing soars with rhapsodic, even grandiose, evocations of the wilderness: “I have seen almost more beauty than I can bear.” But his aesthetic flights are balanced by a sense of despair and often a premonition of impending doom: “I must pack my short life full of interesting events,” he wrote to his brother from an Arizona outpost at the age of only 17. “I shall go on some last wilderness trip, to a place I have known and loved. I shall not return.”

Like many teenagers, Ruess was convinced that he was destined to be a lifelong loner. “My friends have been few,” he wrote to one confidant in 1931, “because I’m a freakish person.” Only days before his arrival in Escalante, he wrote to his brother: “I stopped off in a little Mormon town and indulged myself in family life, church-going, and dances. If I had stayed any longer I would have fallen in love with a Mormon girl, but I think it’s a good thing I didn’t. I’ve become a little too different from most of the rest of the world.”

In contrast to his writing, Ruess’s woodcuts and paintings are strikingly simple and vivid, condensing the landscape into a few bold elements with a Japanese economy: a pair of cypress trees tossed by the wind, a sandstone buttress thrusting into the sky. (The logo of the Escalante arts festival adapts Ruess’s vignette of a silhouetted youth leading burros off toward the unknown.)

In 1942 author Wallace Stegner took the measure of Ruess, offering a final word on his enduring legacy: What Everett was after was beauty, and he conceived beauty in pretty romantic terms.

We might be inclined to laugh at the extravagance of his beauty-worship if there was not something almost magnificent in his single-minded dedication to it. . . .

If we laugh at Everett Ruess we shall have to laugh at John Muir, because there was little difference between them except age.

IN MAY 2008 neither Daisy Johnson nor Denny Bellson had ever heard of Everett Ruess. After listening to his sister’s remarkable story about Aneth Nez, Bellson Googled “missing persons + Arizona/Utah + 1930s.” It was only then that he came across the story of the romantic vagabond who had disappeared near Escalante in 1934. The similarities with Aneth Nez’s sinster tale were too striking to ignore.

A few days after his discovery Bellson took his friend Vaughn Hadenfeldt out to the gravestones. A wilderness guide based in Bluff, Utah, and my longtime hiking companion, Hadenfeldt knew the Ruess story backward and forward. The next day
he called me. "It could be a Navajo crevice burial," he reported. "But there's something pretty weird about it." Hadenfeldt is well versed in the common Navajo practice of burying a body, along with certain precious possessions, in a natural fissure in the bedrock. Then Hadenfeldt relayed the details of the Aneth Nez story, as Johnson had recounted it to Bellson.

By the time he had finished, the book was set. I'd never met Bellson, but Hadenfeldt had spoken highly of his friend's sagacity about local lore. I decided I ought to head out myself and see what was going on along Comb Ridge.

Before I could get to Utah, however, Bellson called the FBI in Monticello. If by some remote chance the grave was that of Everett Ruess—or of some other Anglo who had been killed by Utes—it was thus a crime scene. Fearful of sidestepping the law, Bellson felt it his duty to notify the authorities.

I called up special agent Rachel Boisselle, who worked in the Monticello office. Over the phone, she seemed friendly. She, too, had never heard of Everett Ruess, so I filled her in on the 75-year-old saga. Boisselle was planning to head out to the site with Bellson in a few days. But she was plainly skeptical. "Denny's already dragged us out to another place down near Poncho House where he found bones coming out of the ground," she told me. "When we get there, we could see right away that it was an Anasazi mother and child. We covered the bones back up."

The Ruess story clearly intrigued Boisselle, however. "You can be sure we'll treat this new burial with the utmost respect," she told me just before we hung up. "We won't disturb a thing."

I phoned another friend, Greg Child, who lives in Castle Valley, Utah. In 2004 Child, Hadenfeldt, and I had hiked the full length of Comb Ridge. As we later realized, we had come within a hundred yards of the grave-site without having the faintest notion that there was anything interesting just above us, or the rim to our right.

Child drove down to Bluff and found Bellson, who took him out on the Comb. "At the grave. Denny didn't touch a thing," Child told me later. "And on the way out, he made me wash my hands in a spring. I had to wash them over and over again before Denny would let me get back in his truck."

At the site Child spent an hour photographing the burial. Outside the crevice Bellson had found a wooden srrrup, tattered strips of leather, and the frame of a saddle with a rusted iron pommel. Just inside the crevice, lying on the ground, was a black leather belt decorated with metal studs. Curiously, the belt was buckled, so it lay in a closed but empty loop.

Of the partially buried body itself, the most striking feature was the top of the skull, intact and fragile, protruding from the dirt, almost as if the victim were in a sitting position. Bellson and Child both observed a dent in the back of the cranium, suggestive of a mortal blow.

Child's photos, it turned out, would provide the only careful documentation of the burial site before the FBI team came in and trashed it completely.

SAYS DAISY JOHNSON,

IN BLUFF LAST SUMMER I met Denny Bellson. Forty-three years old, he had a quiet demeanor but, I sensed at once, an alertness that took in every nuance of his surroundings. Of medium build, with dark hair flecked with gray and a mustache drooping past the corners of his mouth, he squinted through the rimless spectacles of a professor.

With Hadenfeldt we drove south on Highway 191, then turned west on a gravel road. Bellson took one fork after another as the branching trails petered out in vestigial slickrock tracks. "When I was a kid," he said, "I asked my dad, 'Do people live out there?" He pointed through the windshield at the stark plateau ahead of us. "Dad said, 'Nope. You go out there and it

> For an in-depth look at the Everett Ruess investigation, visit ngadventure.com.
just drops off into a big canyon,' I thought it was like the end of the world."

Finally we parked the truck and started hiking. It was 96 degrees and windless, and within minutes my face and chest were covered in sweat.

We came to the rim. Now Bellson dropped one level, scuttled around a few corners, then stopped before a cranny so nondescript I wouldn't even have bothered to search it for potsherds.

"Who piled up those rocks?" Hadenfeldt asked, pointing at an assemblage that covered some six feet of crevice.

"FBI," Bellson answered.

As we pulled the camouflaging stones away from the grave, Hadenfeldt groaned, and I cursed out loud, having seen Child's photos of the site before the Feds had gotten there. "What the hell did they do?" I asked.

In a deadpan voice, Bellson described his outing a week before with the FBI. The team had consisted of Boisselle, two Navajo criminal investigators, and the San Juan county sheriff, who had invited his three teenage sons along. "One of the CIs tried to lift the skull," Bellson recounted, "and it broke into pieces. The FBI lady decided right off that it was a Navajo burial. They acted like I was wasting their time."

I was staring at the desecrated grave. The saddle frame, the stirrup, and other odds and ends that Bellson had originally found on the ledge in front of the crevice had been jammed into the tight space, further damaging the skeleton. When they were done, the team, including the teenagers, had piled up stones to hide the grave.

"Sounds like they thought they were out on a goddamned picnic," I muttered.

Bellson smiled. "It kinda was."

"You just sat there and let them do it?"

"WASN'T up to me. They're the F.B.I."

The three of us sat on boulders, surveying the wreckage. I wiped my brow with a bandanna. "I can smell those bones," Bellson said. I couldn't, but Hadenfeldt nodded. "I could smell 'em when I got here the first time," Bellson added.

"How did you find the grave?" I asked.

"Came around that corner there," Bellson pointed north. "I saw part of the saddle. That led me to the crevice."

"Was it exciting?"

"No. Spooky."

From the rim we could see Chink Wash stretching north into the distance. Bellson pointed to a pair of tall cottonwood trees 300 feet below and a half mile away. "I think that's where the kid was killed by the Utes." I asked Bellson, "You think the saddle was Aneth's?"

He nodded. "It would've been contaminated."

I hesitated before asking what felt like an intrusive question. "Denny, is it dangerous for you to come here?"

"It is," he answered right away. "Doesn't matter if this guy is white, Mexican, or Navajo. It will probably affect me later."

I thought about that. "Why are you willing to take Vaughan and me here?"

"I want to find out who this guy is," Bellson stared at the crevice. "Well, he sure picked the loneliest place to die."

I was impressed. Bellson had been doing his homework. On July 12, 1932, Everett Ruess had written to his brother, Waldo, "And when the time comes to die, I'll find the wildest, loneliest, most desolate spot there is."

**THE NEXT DAY I Drove** to Farmington to talk to Daisy Johnson. We met for lunch at the International House of Pancakes. She had dressed up for the occasion, wearing a bright red blouse and a brooch made of concentric rings of turquoise stones. Her face bore a frown of anguish—the residue, I guessed, of her months of suffering from a cancer that would not go away.

Johnson recounted Nez's story in great detail.

Since I'd first heard it, I had wondered why the medicine man thought that Johnson's own illness was connected to her grandfather's burial of the white man so long ago. Was it simply because in 1971 she had driven Nez out toward the Comb in the pickup?

"When Grandpa brought the lock of hair back, it was in a plastic bag," Johnson explained. "I saw it later for just a second. Maybe I wasn't supposed to see it. Maybe I wasn't supposed to know what Grandpa did with that white man."

"Out here,"
ARCHAEOLOGIST RON MALDONADO SAYS, "Navajo oral tradition is pretty accurate. Based on that tradition, I think there's a good chance this is Everett Ruess."

"I have wit sea Ru the on ne,"
But there was another, and more grievous, cause for Johnson’s trouble. “Ten years later—it was 1981,” she told me, “Grandpa got old again, I went to Cortez to drop in on him in the hospital. There was a nurse coming out of his room. She said, ‘I just took his temperature. You can visit him, but he’s not talking much.’

“I went in, and Grandpa had already passed. His mouth was open. I started shaking him. He was already gone, but I kept shaking him, and saying, ‘Grandpa! Grandpa!’ He didn’t answer.”

Johnson sighed deeply. “This year, when I went to the medicine man, I told him about shaking Grandpa in the hospital and calling out to him. He said, ‘That would have done it. You don’t ever touch the dead or talk to the dead. You don’t mess with death.’”

There was a long silence. Johnson hadn’t eaten her dessert. “How do you feel about the possibility this could be Everett Ruess?” I asked. By now, Johnson knew the story of the vagabond who had disappeared in 1934.

“I hope it is,” she answered. “He was such a young guy. What was he doing out here all alone? I hope they take him back to wherever he came from. He’s got family there.”

TEN YEARS AGO, on assignment for the premiere issue of ADVENTURE, I spent months pursuing my own search for clues to the Everett Ruess mystery. At one point, I thought I had solved the puzzle, even discovering a mound of earth that I thought might have been the Ruess grave. But with time and distance, I had to concede, as W. L. Rusho had in 1983, that Ruess’s fate remained unsolved, and perhaps unsolvable.

For the burial site on Comb Ridge to be that of Everett Ruess, a couple of logical problems would have to be resolved. The most troublesome has to do with the burros themselves. As Rusho reported, the searchers in March 1935 claimed to have found Ruess’s pack animals in Davis Gulch. Why would the Utes have stolen the two burros in Chinele Wash, only to ditch them 60 miles away in a side canyon near the Escalante River?

If the animals found in Davis Gulch were not Ruess’s, however, that problem vanishes. Indeed, in 1999, I had unearthed some odd contradictions that made Rusho’s whole story about the burros unreliable. According to the historian, after the search team recovered the pack animals, one man, Gail Bailey, had led them back to Escalante and pastured them on a nearby mountain. But when I talked to old-timers in Escalante 16 years after Rusho had done his research, I was told again and again that Bailey had found the burros on his own, before the search had even been organized. Bailey, who died in 1997, and had evidently lied to Rusho. No one I talked to could verify that anyone except Gail Bailey had ever seen the burros, and so no one could be certain that those pack animals (if they existed) had belonged to Ruess.

This helps resolve the second puzzle: the fact that Ruess would have had to cover more than 60 miles as the crow flies between Davis Gulch and Comb Ridge, maybe 90 miles as a hiker might wend his way. In four years of exploring the Southwest, Ruess had never been known to stray far from his pack animals. But if he took his burros with him, there’s nothing improbable about that final trip eastward. The young man had once ventured 400 miles by burro in just six weeks.

A string of graffiti left by Ruess may furnish a startling corroboration of that last journey. Like Chris McCandless, who in his final years gave himself the alias Alexander Supertramp, Ruess toyed with pseudonyms. For a while in 1931, he signed his letters “Lan Rameau,” while he transferred the name “Everett” to one of his burros. Later that year, he became “Evert Rulan.”

Downstream from the burro corral in Davis Gulch, the searchers in 1935 found two inscriptions, one on the sill of an Anasazi granary, the other below a pictograph panel. They read: NEMO 1934.

Ruess’s father interpreted the alias as a joint allusion to Odysseus’s role of calling himself Nemo (Latin for “no man”) when trapped in the Cyclops’s cave, and to Captain Nemo of Jules Verne’s Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, one of Ruess’s favorite books. (The inscriptions are gone today, lost beneath the waters of Lake Powell.)

More than three decades later, horse packer Ker Sleight, who was fascinated by the Ruess mystery, discovered another NEMO inscription carved in the mud wall of an Anasazi granary in Grand Gulch, 45 miles east of Davis Gulch. As far as anyone knew, Ruess had never explored Grand Gulch.

Hadenfeldt and I hiked into the granary to look at the inscription ourselves in 1999. By then it had faded almost to illegibility, but Hadenfeldt, an expert in reading historic signatures, saw the four block capitals in the mud. The splayed out “N” and the shallow-troughed “M” were identical to those in the photos from Davis Gulch—which were first published a decade after Sleight’s discovery. Sleight’s NEMO was clearly no copycat graffito.

Since Ruess had only started signing himself NEMO in late 1934, did the Grand Gulch inscription prove that he had wandered there after carving his name in Davis Gulch? And if so, was he on his way to his demise in Chinele Wash? A comment in Ruess’s last letter to his parents, written on November 11, 1934, dovetails strikingly with this itinerary: “I am going south toward the Colorado river now, through some rather wild country. I am not sure yet whether I will go across Smokey Mountain to Lee’s Ferry and south, or whether I will try and cross the river above the San Juan. The water is very low this year.” (Continued on page 101)
Hadenfeldt, Bellson, and I met Maldonado at the café cum convenience store that amounts to the town of Mexican Water, Arizona. With Bellson leading the way we once again drove the maze of roads out onto the slickrock plateau, then hiked to the rim. The day was as hot as on our previous foray, and my mouth was parched long before we arrived.

FBI agent Boisselle had called Maldonado before heading out to the Comb, and I had forwarded him Child’s photos of the grave as it looked when Bellson found it. Now, as Maldonado peered into the crevice, he drew in his breath, “Rachel promised me they wouldn’t move anything,” he said. “I’m really ticked off.” Gently he removed the saddle and the other artifacts from the crevice. “In a crime scene,” he said, “you don’t just shove the goods into the grave.”

For the next hour, lying awkwardly on his side, sweating profusely, Maldonado reached into the crevice and expertly wielded a trowel to pick the dirt away from the bones. He too avoided touching any part of the skeleton. Instead, he studied its layout. As he had two days before, Bellson sat ten yards away, watching and saying little.

After a while, Maldonado commented,

“It’s definitely a full-size skull. But it’s still growing. It looks like a guy in his 20s.” Many minutes later: “He’s not facing east. As far as I can tell, he’s facing to the southwest. If it was a Navajo burial, he’d be facing east.”

Later still: “It just doesn’t look like a Navajo burial. They would have put the saddle in the crevice with him.”

Bellson spoke up. “They would have killed the horse too. Hit it with an ax, and left the ax handle in the grave.

“Smell the bones?” Bellson asked.

Maldonado sat up, trowel in hand. “Yeah. You can smell them even when they’re a thousand years old. It gets into the dirt. It’s a smell I can never forget. This guy I used to work with calls it ‘people grease.’”

We took a break to sit in the shade and eat lunch. Maldonado mused: “Look at that crevice. It’s not a likely place to bury somebody. You could make a much better burial right over there, or there.” He pointed to a pair of ample slots in the rimrock cliff just behind us. “He may have been trying to hide the body in a hurry,” Maldonado went on. “Just stuff him in there, then maneuver him around. He had to get him in the ground before sunset.

“It all makes sense. The 1930s were a
FINDING EVERETT RUSS

really volatile time on the reservation. The government had started wholesale livestock reduction, killing thousands of Navajo sheep and cattle. They were hauling the kids off to boarding schools. Here’s a Navajo guy who witnesses a murder. Your grandpa, Maldonado nodded at Bellson, “doesn’t want the remains just lying out on the ground. In the 30s, if a white guy gets killed on the rez, they call out the cavalry. Round up a bunch of Navajos, pick a suspect, and lock him in jail. I can see why your grandpa would have tried to hide the guy. And then I can see why he wouldn’t tell anybody about it for 37 years.”

After lunch, Maldonado went back to work. Finally, toward late afternoon, we sat in the shade again. The archaeologist lowered his head and wiped his brow as he pondered, silent for so long that he seemed to be meditating. Finally he spoke: “It just doesn’t look like a Navajo burial. Who else lives in this area?”

“Nobody,” said Bellson.

“Who else could be buried out here?”

Bellson shook his head. He had asked his neighbors. There were no stories of gravesites on this part of the Comb, “Mom and Dad,” Bellson added, “always told us to stay away from here. They never told us why.”

According to Navajo Nation policy, Maldonado said, “we’re supposed to protect graves, whether Native American or not. But we’re also supposed to try to find the lineal descendants if there’s an unidentified body.” He turned to me. “Who’s the relative you talked to?”

“Brian Russ. He’s Everett’s nephew,” I replied.

“Ask him to request a DNA sample.” It was obvious that Maldonado’s decision had not come easily to him. He stood up and hoisted his fanny pack. “Out here,” he said, “Navajo oral tradition is pretty accurate. Based on that tradition, I think there’s a good chance this is Everett Russ.”

BRIAN RUSS CONFERRERED with his three siblings. They agreed to request the DNA sample. According to Greenspan of Family Tree, Everett’s nieces and nephews (his closest living relatives) were genetically too distant to yield good results for a mitochondrial DNA test. The only useful source was Waldo—but Everett’s older brother had died the previous year. In the end, Brian’s sister Michele carefully wrapped and sent Waldo’s favorite hairbrush, which his widow had kept after his death. Still caught in the bristles were some strands of Waldo’s hair.

On July 22 Ron Maldonado went back out to the site with Bellson and Child. Maldonado started excavating as gingerly as he could. Meanwhile, Child discovered an artifact we had previously overlooked. Lying loose in a cranny in front of the crevice was a 1912 dime that had been converted into a button. The thing struck all three men as a very Navajo kind of relic (antique Navajo belts made of silver dollars fetch high prices). But we also knew that Russ loved to wear Indian jewelry. In any event, the button gave us a terminus ad quem: the burial could not have taken place before 1912.

Almost at once, to his relief, just inches below the surface Maldonado came across two loose molar teeth. With great care, he removed and packaged them. There would be no more digging that day.

As soon as he got back to Window Rock, Maldonado emailed me about a bizarre event that had occurred as the men returned to their truck: A dust devil (whirlwind) started at or near me, violently sending dust into the area. It seemed that it visited each of us individually and slowly meandered down the road, lingering, appearing to die out, then starting again. It is all very strange and definitely associated with the burial. Bellson stated that it was Mister Ruess. Such things are associated with the dead and should be avoided at all costs. It has been a strange day.

It took weeks for the results of the DNA testing to come back. Finally, on September 30, Greenspan reported that the molar DNA was “European in origin and not Native American.” Maldonado’s intuition was validated—the gravesite on the Comb was not a Navajo crevice burial.

But Greenspan went on to explain in an email that the DNA from the hairbrush did not match that from the molars. A white guy, but not Everett Ruess? Who else would have been out there in the 1930s?

Later, over the phone, Greenspan admitted to me that he was not at all happy with the hairbrush sample. A mitochondrial DNA test required an exact match, but the DNA from Waldo’s hair was “degraded,” and it might have been contaminated by being handled by others. The mitochondrial reading from the molar was reliable, but the test using the hairbrush was far from conclusive.

As far as Maldonado, Hadenfeldt, Bellson, and I were concerned, the answer was still out there.

NOW THAT GREENSPAN had proved the bones Bellson had discovered were Caucasian, Maldonado had decided to complete the excavation in hopes of coming up with
further clues to the young man's identity.

In November I was in Boulder, Colorado, having dinner with my friend Steve, the most brilliant Southwestern archaeologist I have met. I told Lekson about our Comb Ridge quest. He didn't know much about Ruess, but his eyes lit up. "You can do a lot more than just "DNA," he said. "A forensic anthropologist can tell all kinds of things from bones. What kind of bones have you got?" At the end of the evening, Lekson gave me the email address of a colleague at the University of Colorado.

Dennis Van Gerven ignored my first two messages. Later he admitted he was doing his best to stiff-arm my inquiries, since he tended to get bombarded with pleas from nutcases who had watched too many episodes of CSI. His first communiqué had annoyance written all over it: "In short a study of the [bones] from my point of view would be quite pointless," he signed off.

I persisted. "Would there not be some chance you might see something the DNA test couldn't tell us?"

Meanwhile, on the Internet I had found the report of one of Van Gerven's cardinal triumphs. In 2007 the professor led a team that exhumed a body in Kansas that had been at the center of a legal dispute stretching back to 1879. When the excavation failed to turn up sufficient DNA material, Van Gerven used 47 bone fragments and a technique called facial superimposition to ID the corpse, which was long considered unidentified. Reading the report, I realized that Van Gerven was something of a forensic genius.

I hammered away, emailing a detailed account of Everett Ruess and our efforts so far on Comb Ridge. Slowly, Van Gerven warmed to the challenge. By the end of the month, he and his grad-student assistant, Paul Sandberg, were fully on board. On January 24, having driven from Boulder to Bluff, they joined Ron Maldonado and Vaughn Hadenfeldt at the site, where they excavated the crevice completely.

Piece by piece, the anthropologists retrieved one rib and vertebra and toe bone and tooth after another; they also salvaged many fragments of the young man's skull. Each bone was gently handled and wrapped for transport to a university lab. The only artifacts the men found were scores of beads—yellow, orange, white, and blue, made apparently of coral or shell—and a metal button, embossed with
the word "mountaineer" curving around the rim above an "X." We later learned that the button could have been produced only by one of three manufacturers, all of which were out of business by 1936.

**BACK IN BOULDER**, Van Gerven and Sandberg's first task was to stabilize the very fragile pieces of bone—especially the skull fragments. Many of the bones were sunbleached and eroded after decades of exposure to the elements. But the anthropologists were heartened to find, as Sandberg wrote to me in late February, that "three fragments of the face, two of them with teeth still in place, were tightly embedded and protected in the dirt, and we had a nearly complete mandible. It seems as though a previous attempt to force the skull out of the dirt by the FBI had left much of the face intact under the surface."

From the very start, Van Gerven and Sandberg were able to make what they called a "biological profile" of the victim. "The shape of the pelvis told us that the individual was male," Sandberg explained. "The degree of developmental maturity of the bones told us that he was between the ages of 19 and 22, and measurement of the femur gave us a stature estimate of approximately five feet eight inches."

The facial fragments were critical to reconstructing the dead man's physiognomy. Joining the stabilized bones with clay, the scientists painstakingly rebuilt pieces of the skull. For comparison, they had two of the splendid portraits of Ruess that his friend, the famed photographer Dorothea Lange, had shot in 1933, one face-on, one in profile. As Sandberg explained, "Using Adobe Photoshop CS, we blended images of Ruess and the bones together. This technique is good at excluding people, almost too good because it can easily exclude the right person due to distortions that arise in photography."

When the two men had started their work, Van Gerven warned me, 'I'd be just as happy to disprove the match as I would to prove it.' But day by day, he grew more animated. "I have a really good feeling about this," he said in early February. A few days later: "So far, there's nothing exculpatory."

Finally, at the end of February, Van Gerven phoned me with his verdict. "All the lines of evidence converge," he said. "This guy was male. Everett was male. This guy was about 20 years old. Everett was 20 years old. This guy was about five foot eight. Everett was five eight."

"Everett had unique facial features, including a really large, jutting chin. This guy had the same features. And the bones match the photos in every last detail, even down to the spacing between the teeth. The odds are astronomically small that this could be a coincidence."

Van Gerven paused. "I'd take it to court. This is Everett Ruess."

**AS THIS ISSUE** went to press, a second DNA test, comparing yet another molar from the grave with saliva samples from Ruess's two nieces and two nephews, was under way. If there is even a 25 percent overlap in the genetic makeup of the tooth and the saliva, Van Gerven explained, that would absolutely clinch the case.

Meanwhile, thanks to the brilliant sleuthing of Denny Bellson, a 75-year-old mystery, which hundreds of investigators have set out to untangle, seems at last to have been solved. Only a handful of lost American adventurers in the 20th century—Amelia Earhart among them—have stirred so much passion and speculation. And from beyond the grave, Aneth Nee's haunting story, which he kept secret most of his life, stunningly confirms the veracity of Navajo oral tradition.

Yet even now, Ruess's final days pose further mysteries. What happened after Davis Gulch? Why did the vagabond, exploring through the winter, make his way to Chine Wash? What went wrong that day when the Utes hunted him down and took away his dream?

What was Ruess looking for? And what did he find before he died?

In the last letter he ever sent, from Escalante on November 11, 1934, Everett wrote Waldo, "As to when I shall visit civilization, it will not be soon, I think. I have not tired of the wilderness. . . ."

Pending DNA confirmation, Brian, Michele, and their two siblings have planned the final disposition of their lost uncle's bones. They will not be returned to the crevice on Cumb Ridge, for if they were, the site would inevitably become a pilgrimage shrine—like the bus rusting away in the Alaska tundra in which Chris McCandless died.

Instead, Ruess will be cremated, his ashes strewn across the waters of the Pacific Ocean near the Ruess home, just as Waldo's were in 1907, and just as his parents' were after their earlier deaths. In the end, Daisy Johnson's plainspoken wish for the young wanderer may come to pass. Ruess could be going back to where he came from. He's got family there.
need to know

How can we get out of that bubble?
It's hard for 25- or 35-year-old Americans to suddenly learn how to put on their game face and think like they're in a war zone. But there are some things you can do to be safer. Steer clear of big tourist hotels. Wear dull colors—khaki or black. I always black out the logos on my clothes. I put my backpack in a UN flour bag. I wear a cheap watch. And if I carry a camera, I try to tuck it under my arm out of view. I always tell people the wrong thing if they ask me what I'm doing tomorrow or where I'm going next week. Sometimes I'll even confuse my guide by telling him one thing and then, the next day, changing plans. It may piss him off, but if he decides to sell me out and help a terrorist group kidnap me, I've foiled his plan. I never really tie to people to invent an identity, though. Don't tell your new friends that you're Irish or Canadian, because they're going to figure it out.

So does all this mark the dawn of a more Pehrson-like breed of adventure travel?
Well, yeah. A lot of what people call adventure travel is bull. It's become cool to go someplace that has the cachet of danger, but nobody is prepared to handle real danger. You know, it smells bad, it hurts. And so the tourism industry often tries to isolate people from cultural realities, even going so far as to re-create these realities inside hotels. Travelers enter a foreign country, have a little native show to start off with, then basically ignore the people in that country. But now the situation has changed, and they can't do that anymore. People are going to have to get out of the tourism rut and look at the reality in front of them if they want to be safe.

Have the terrorist attacks and military actions affected your travel plans? Join our online forum at www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure. AOL Keyword: NatGeoAdventures.

Soren Jesperson (Age 24, Utah)
On April 26, 2001, Soren Jesperson walked south from the North Rim of the Grand Canyon and headed out on a solo trek around the Colorado Plateau. He hoofed through Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado and into Utah, where he ended his hike—after 1,700 miles—on September 3. Jesperson's odyssey was inspired by the legendary nomad Everett Ruess (see ADVENTURE. Spring 1999, "What Happened to Everett Ruess?"). He read Ruess's journals as a teenager and was soon tracing his routes through canyon country's sandstone mazes. Like Ruess, Jesperson craves the emptiness of the region. "I want to see as much of the plateau as possible before I gets chewed up and spit out by roads, subdivisions, and mines," he says. —Lin Aber

Siberian Sojourn

Canadian Colin Angus and Russ Quinter and Aussies Ben Ford and Tim Cope became the first to navigate the entire length of the world's fifth longest river—Siberia's 3,442-mile Yenisey—on September 23, after five months afloat. Between 24-hour stints of rowing along theundra-lined waterway in a leaky, 15-foot wooden canoe, the four learned to crave omul, a foot-long whitefish, served raw, gutted, and sprinkled with salt.

Ocean Bray

On September 5, after a 76-day Atlantic crossing, Peter Bray beached his 27-foot kayak on the Irish shore.

Xixabangma Solo

No American had soloed an 8,500-meter peak before September 24, when Chris Warner summited Tibet's Xixabangma in a single 17-hour, 20-minute rush. The Maryland guide saw only three other climbers on the peak, a welcome change from his spring Everest expedition, when he and 88 others topping out on the same day.

The Long Walk

Super-hiker Brian Robinson (right) raised the bar for distance trekkers on October 27, when he completed his 7,371-mile hike of America's Triple Crown—the Appalachian, Continental Divide, and Pacific Crest Trails—in a single calendar year. The American's secret: light loads. His pack weighed just 19 pounds in winter and 13 pounds in summer, allowing him to tick off up to 40 miles each day.