PORTALS LARGE AND SMALL « MARIA MELENDEZ

№6

HOME SWEET HOLE « PINAU MERLIN

№16

FRAMING THE WEST « AUDREY GOODMAN

№24

A POSTCARD GALLERY « PORTABLE PORTALS

№36

WINDOW ON THE PAST « WAYNE RANNEY

№38

AROUND THE PLATEAU « PORTALS

№46

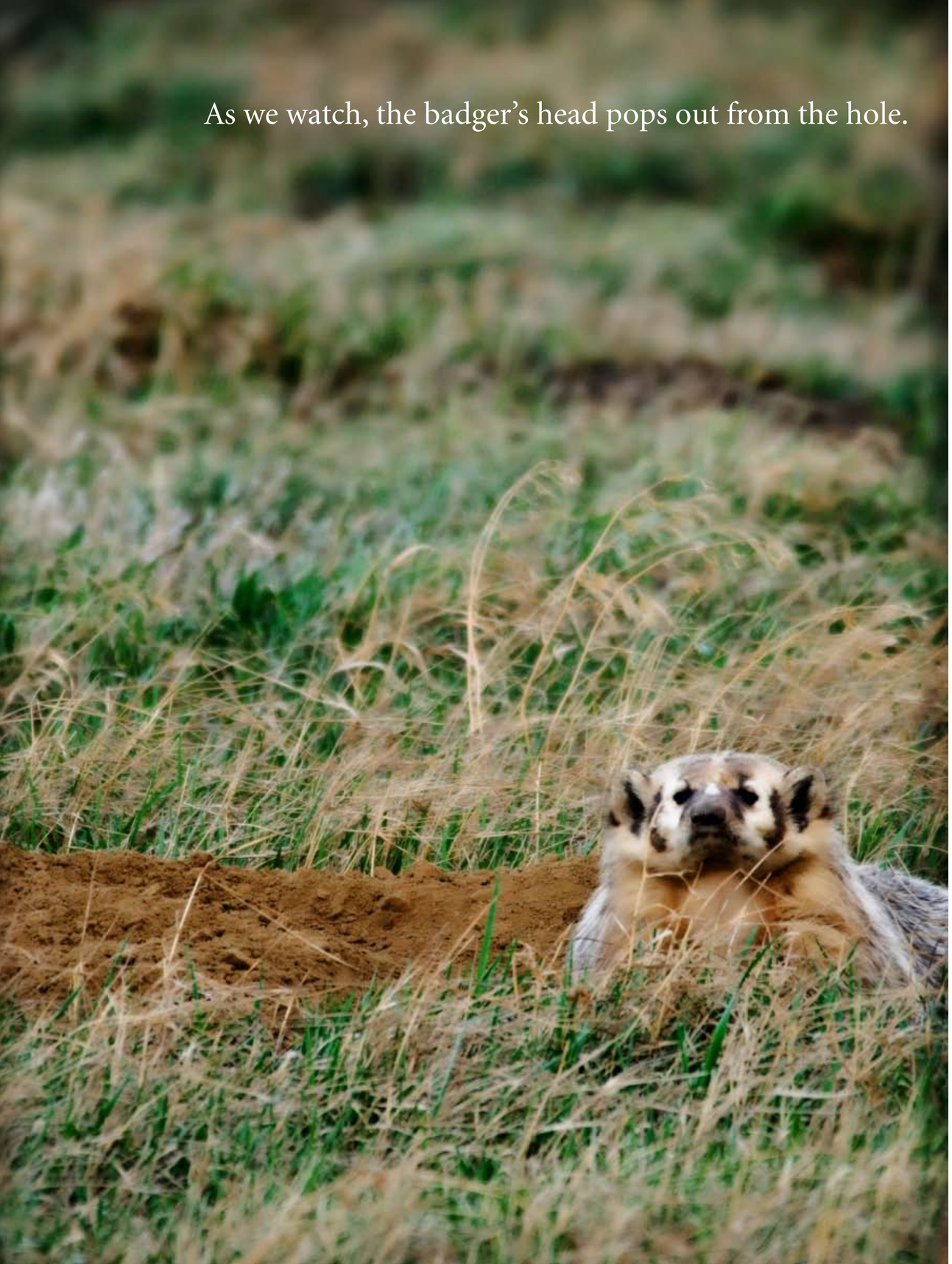
(Sojourns

Top: The sun is reflected on a watery canvas in a depression at Navajo National Monument. Bottom: A universe of stars is created by dropping pebbles into a still pool. Photos by John Running

THINK OF OUR STEADY, reliable sun as an esteemed professor. And imagine each day's energy output as his illuminating lectures, delivered to us continually, dawn to dusk. We expect a seasonal chill in the lecture hall, not because our prof has neglected us, but because we've turned away, planetarily, for a bit—the equivalent of sending a quick text or doodling in our margins. But now imagine that, after countless generations of focused, energetic output, the mind of our prolific orator, Professor Sun, begins to wander. In mid-sentence he pauses to scratch his head and gaze out the window. He turns back to the class. He announces, out of nowhere, "Strawberry's my favorite ice cream," and then, "Someone should develop a theory of solar repose."

A SENSE OF AIMLESSNESS and ennui takes hold of the room as his shoulders slump and his maundering turns to self-pity. "Will you people please permit me my 2:30 PM? My batteries are low; I'm ill-disposed to be sunny." And suddenly we in our plastic chairs know he's become one of "those" faculty members. The ones that put forth only the bare minimum of listless effort, not caring whether torches of wisdom are passed or fires of curiosity lit.

THOUGH THIS NEED for a solar siesta sounds like science fiction, our analogy actually corresponds to a period in astronomical history known as the Maunder Minimum. For about seventy years, starting in 1645, the earth suffered an episode of extremely low temperatures as the sun entered a period of unusually low energy output. Discussed in papers as early as the 1890s and definitively described in the 1970s, the phenomenon came to bear the name of a nineteenth-century solar astronomer, Edward W. Maunder (really!). The lesson of the Maunder Minimum is that the sun not only directs our waking and sleeping, but undergoes, itself, patterns of "waking" and "sleeping."



He sniffs the air, gathering the day's news . . .

. . . and we watch from a distance with our binoculars so as not to disturb him. We had discovered the badger-shaped hole earlier as we were searching the area. My friend Arlene and I had embarked on a holey quest to observe wildlife by finding their holes and burrows. We were sure the badger using this hole was at home since the wide fan of dirt at the hole's entrance was fresh and it showed the badger's track going in but not coming out. So we sat down to watch, waiting for darkness to bring the world to life.

The badger emerges and wanders off, shambling along on his search for gophers, prairie dogs, ground squirrels, snakes, lizards, insects, or other dinner entrees. He will travel widely as he hunts for comestibles, digging and leaving many holes in his wake. Any hole is valuable real estate, and the badger's diggings provide homes for many creatures.

Burrowing owls, kit foxes, coyotes, snakes, and all kinds of other animals quickly move into these vacancies. Knowing this, a badger often doubles back some time later to eat the new occupant. These holes are a self-replenishing food resource for the badger.

Using holes and underground burrows makes excellent sense. A burrow provides shelter from aridity and extremes of heat and cold. Living just a few feet underground ensures increased humidity and a stable climate (the temperature in desert packrat houses have been shown to vary only fifteen degrees Fahrenheit over the course of a year). This may mean the difference between life and death, especially for small creatures that have large surface-to-body-mass ratios. Burrows are so valuable that there is lots of borrowing or commensal use between species. Researchers excavating packrat houses have found twenty-two different species all using one house along with the packrat innkeeper. Burrows also provide some shelter from predation. When snakes or other visitors come in a front door, a rodent often escapes out one of the several back doors. Life at the bottom of the food chain necessitates many escape routes.

Facing: Badger holes are half moon shaped, about 12 inches across by 8 inches high, with a broad fan of dirt at the entrance. Smith/Shutterstock. Inset above: Wolf spider burrows are distinguished by a collar of small twigs and debris bound together with silk. Photo by Pinau Merlin.

"HERE ARE MY POEMS, NOT FINISHED TEMPLES, NOT GRACEFUL ARCHITECTURE, BUT GREAT NATURALNESS AND RUGGED POWER—PRIMITIVE NATURE." ~ WALT WHITMAN

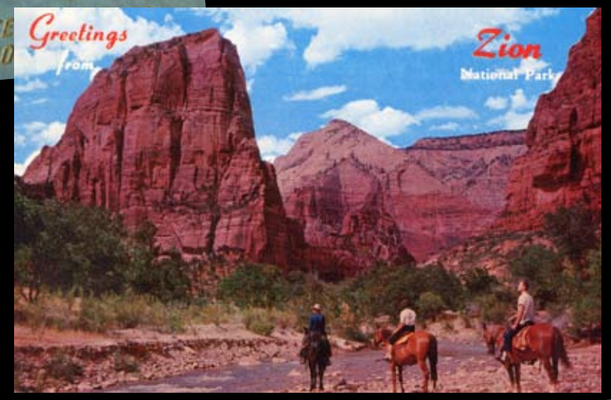
The moment when the beloved nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman referred to mountains as "poems" could well mark the beginning of the modern era of tourism in the American West. In the following decades, travelers would be encouraged to see the land as simultaneously wild and romantic, monumental and intimate, ancient and transformative. Whitman (1819–1892) never captured his impressions with a smartphone camera. Nor did he live to witness the final spike driven into the transcontinental railroad or take a "detour" organized by the Fred Harvey Company. But as a poet who experienced the American landscape in the context of an imagined future, he may not have been surprised by the beginnings of motor parks, or even by seeing a helicopter land on a deep canyon floor. He sensed already what travelers to the Colorado Plateau would discover in the early twentieth century: that, regardless of how they arrived, there was no substitute for seeing the western landscape for oneself—and no way of deterring those who had seen it from attempting to express their wonder in poems, pictures, or stories.

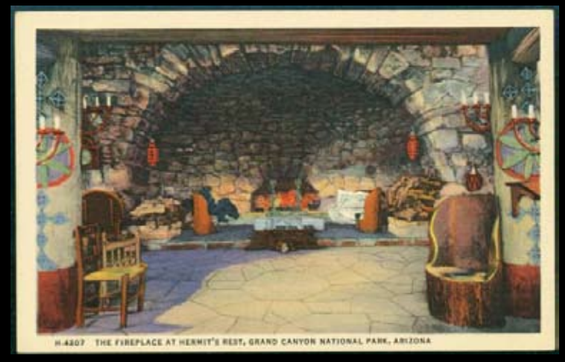
Eyewitnesses

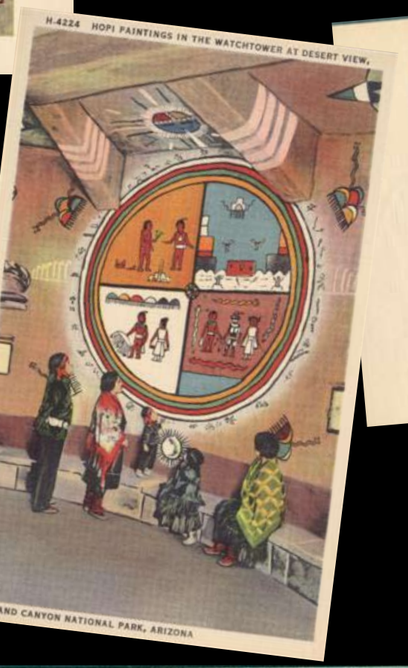
What was it like to see the natural wonders of the Colorado Plateau for the first time? The explorers of the Southwest following the Civil War had a nearly unprecedented thrill of discovery—as well as the frustration of trying to communicate their experience. When they weren't professing their inability to describe places like Mesa Verde, Zion, Arches, and Rainbow Bridge, they struggled to construct new mental frames for looking at territory many considered barren and forbidding. At the same time, these first tourists urged their readers and viewers to step between the lines and through the frame to immerse themselves in wilderness and architectural remnants. They saw in the West great opportunities for all to re-make their bodies, renew their understandings of nature, and recalibrate their sense of time.

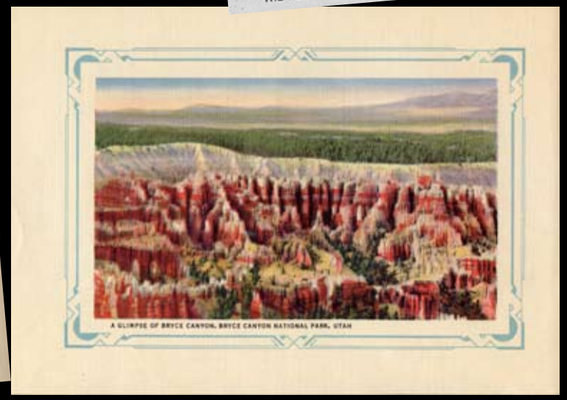
The eye was the initial means of perceiving the power of the Colorado Plateau, but Anglo-European explorers knew that seeing was only the beginning of believing. Charles F. Lummis,

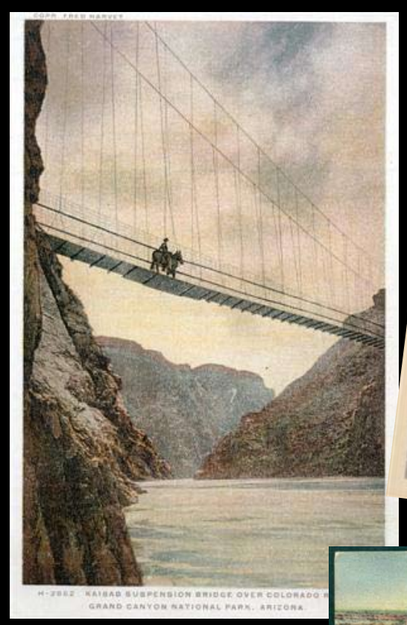
The Grand Canyon viewed from a portal on the North Rim. Photo by Richard Maack.

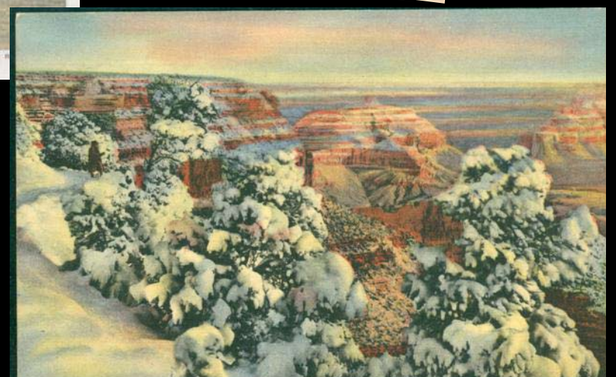












Windows Sent By Mail

Picture postcards have been in circulation for well over a century. The earliest record of a posted card dates to 1840, when Theodore Hook mailed a hand-painted card from London to himself as a practical jok It bore a 1-cent "penny black" stamp. The first commercially prod American picture postcards appeared in 1893, featuring buildi World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. These were intende souvenirs and quickly became valued collectibles. Postcards big business, estimated to be over $200 million in pre-infla the first decade of the twentieth century alone!

Souvenir "view cards" played an important role in advertising exposing eastern populations to its "bizarre" landscapes. They w inexpensive way to share a snapshot of one's travels and surroun all in a handy package that mailed without an envelope.

A POSTCARD GALLERY
PORTABLE PORTALS

WINDOW ON THE PAST « WAYNE RANNEY

Paleo = Greek,meaning “old” or “early”
Paleo-geography = Ancient geography

The Grand Staircase, stretching from the depths of the Grand Canyon to Bryce Canyon, exposing 1.8 billion years of Earth history. Photo by Michael Collier.
Inset: Opalescent wood at Petrified Forest National Park. Alex Neauville/Shutterstock.

Look at any map showing historical wagon routes across western North America and you can’t help but notice a huge blank spot between southern Wyoming and Arizona, a chunk of our continent that, it seems, did not exist. It certainly did not exist for westbound farmers traveling by wagon in search of new arable land. Its bare rock exposures and an in-your-face landscape were a portal to trouble. But look at any modern-day map and instead of a giant blank spot, you’ll see an abundance of symbolically colored national parks, monuments, forests, recreation areas, preserves, and wilderness. More than half of the Colorado Plateau is held in public trust. What once threatened people now hosts their modern quest for beauty, solace, and inspiration. The rocks that once repelled now invite.

I am one of the latter-day pilgrims to this land. Driven out by the heavy blanket of smog that choked the Los Angeles basin, I became enamored with the dazzling light and brilliantly colored rocks of this mostly undisturbed plateau. My first visit provided an epiphany, and when I came back a second