In Plane View

Of Sedona's many scenic wonders, Vultee Arch is among the most impressive. Prior to a plane crash in 1938, however, few people, if any, had ever seen it.

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY LARRY LINDAHL

The winter cold cuts deeply into Oak Creek Canyon as Jean Kindig and I step across the stream, north of Sedona, onto the A.B. Young Trail. Before tackling 33 heart-pounding switchbacks up 1,996 vertical feet to the canyon rim, we listen to the melody of rippling and rushing cascades.

Jean spots a water ouzel (American dipper) among shiny wet rocks. She tells me about its transparent inner eyelids allowing the tiny dark bird to forage underwater.

"Come spring," she adds fondly as the dipper flits into the water, "both parents take turns tending the nest. It's one of my favorite birds."

In her early 70s, Jean's curiosity and youthful spirit keep her busy. She's an active hiker with the Sedona Westerners Hiking Club, and recently compiled into a book the history of each Sedona trail and landmark, an interest we share.

On today's adventurous 8-mile quest, we step into the Depression-era story of a man's passion for flight lifting him to international prominence, and then carrying him to death. His wrecked and rusting plane sits on the brink of the Mogollon Rim, somewhere on an outcrop called East Pocket Mesa that we'll access from the A.B. Young Trail.

Roughly 1,500 feet below the tragic site, and less than a mile as the raven flies, Sedona's most graceful sandstone arch hid—virtually unknown and without a name—until Gerard

FINAL RESTING PLACE The tarnished landing gear of Vultee's plane (above) has forever retired on East Pocket Mesa, an outcrop of the Mogollon Rim.

TALE OF AN ARCH The graceful sandstone arch was virtually unkown and nameless until Gerard Vultee's fatal plane crash on January 29, 1938, when it became known as Vultee Arch.
To order a print of this photograph, see information on inside front cover.

MOUNTAIN SILHOUETTE **Wilson Mountain casts shadows over the ridged chasms of Oak Creek Canyon (left). On the left horizon sits East Pocket Mesa, the site of Vultee's crash. The San Francisco Peaks loom in the background.**

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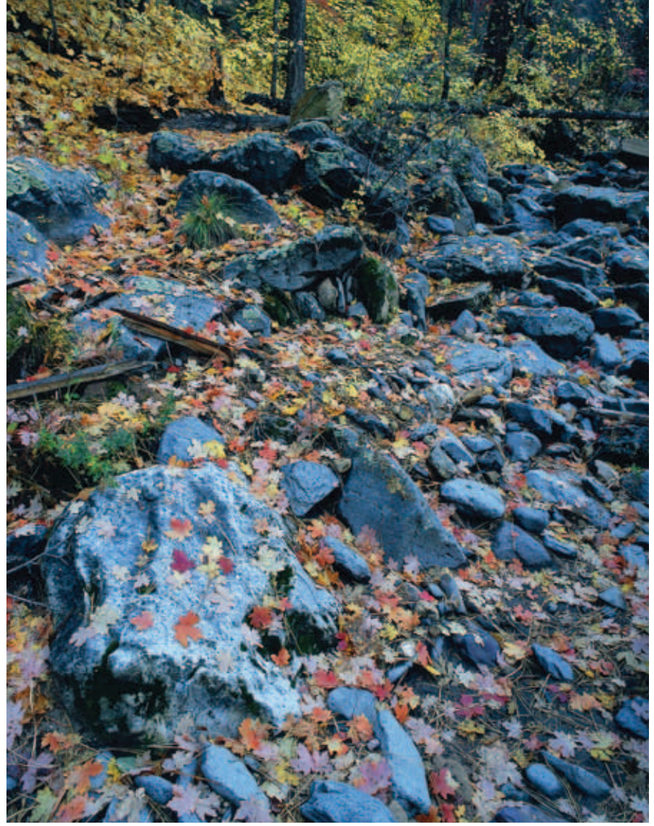

FALL SPRINKLES **Bigtooth maple leaves blaze small trails of autumn color on the floor of rocks that line Sterling Pass Trail (right).**

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Vultee's fateful day in 1938. Weeks before searching for the crash site with Jean, I had taken a solo journey into Sterling Canyon to visit the arch.

Traversing the banks of a gentle wash, the 1.6-mile Vultee Arch Trail follows an ancient Indian route through a scented forest of Arizona cypress northwest of Sedona. Ancestors of the Hopi people traveled Dry Creek Basin—evidenced by their stone shelters and pictographs hidden in the basin's many cliffs—over to the clear-running waters of Oak Creek Canyon and back again.

Scattered agaves, yuccas and manzanitas give way to a canopy of oak, spruce, maple and Douglas fir trees shading the sandy trail. As I approached a wooden sign pointing to a spur trail venturing left, a woodpecker rattled the silence between 6,810-foot East Pocket Mesa to the north and 7,122-foot Wilson Mountain to the south.

I took the left turn and climbed the quarter-mile onto red rock terraces where the trail stops. Here, the south-facing rampart steadfastly holds the graceful 40-foot span of Vultee Arch.

Scrambling up a short, rough route far below the East Pocket rim, I crossed a cactus-studded chaparral slope with an awkward final descent onto the arch. Triumphantly sidling across sandstone only 8 feet thick, I warily eyed the sharp drop and the ground 35 feet below. The bird's-eye view of Sterling Canyon and a landscape where deer and mountain lions still occasionally roam make this a special place indeed.

The mountain rising beyond was named for the respected pioneer Richard Wilson, who was mauled and killed by a large grizzly bear in 1885. Sterling Canyon, I later learned from Jean, gained its name from settler Charles Sterling, reputed for hiding out in Oak Creek Canyon counterfeiting money when he wasn't stealing cattle. But who was Vultee?

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FOR A MAN NOT YET 40, Gerard "Jerry" Vultee had amassed an impressive résumé. He worked at Douglas Aircraft, and then Lockheed Aircraft, which promoted him to chief engineer at age 28. Vultee designed the Sirius plane for Charles Lindbergh, sporting a top speed of 185 mph, and innovated the fully retractable landing gear. He left Lockheed in 1931 and joined E.L. Cord, whose empire included three automobile companies (Cord, Auburn and Duesenberg), five engine-manufacturing companies and the Airplane Development Corp. of which he named Vultee vice president and chief engineer.

Vultee's fast planes began setting speed records, including one he set himself in 1934—while on his honeymoon with his wife, Sylvia, a Hollywood debutante he met while surfing in Southern California.

A year later, Jimmy Doolittle—who would lead the U.S. air attack on Tokyo near the beginning of World War II—flew a Vultee aircraft coast to coast in the record-setting time of 11 hours, 59 minutes. Wiley Post, Amelia Earhart and Charles Lindbergh all adored Vultee's planes.

American Airlines bought 10 Vultee V-1A eight-passenger commercial air transports, each with a top speed of 235 mph, but the Depression slowed commercial sales, and Vultee changed focus to military planes. He began selling Vultee V-11 dive-bombers to China, the Soviet Union and Turkey. With sales going well overseas, he flew to Washington, D.C., hoping to interest the U.S. Army Air Corps in a new plane design. He took Sylvia on this trip, and they flew in his small Stinson monoplane.

On the return flight, they landed in Northern Arizona at Winslow Airport, which served as one of TWA's transcontinental stopovers, and slept in town overnight. After refueling on

WILDERNESS GRAVEYARD The rusting tail section of Vultee's plane disintegrates near Barney Pasture on East Pocket Mesa.

HIKERS' RETREAT The 40-foot-long, 8-foot-thick Vultee Arch (above) makes a perfect resting spot for hikers.

when you go

Location: Coconino National Forest, about 125 miles north of Phoenix.
Getting There: To reach Vultee Arch Trail, drive west 3.2 miles on State Route 89A from its intersection with State Route 179 (the Y intersection in Sedona). Turn right (north) onto Dry Creek Road, drive 5.2 miles and turn right onto Forest Service Road 152 labeled as Dry Creek Road, but also called Vultee Arch Road. Drive 9.6 miles on this rough, dirt road to the trailhead. To reach Sterling Pass Trail from the Y intersection, drive 6.2 miles north on State 89A toward Flagstaff. Park on the east side of the road opposite Manzanita Campground. To reach A.B. Young Trail from the Y intersection, drive 8.8 miles north on 89A toward Flagstaff. Park along the road near Bootlegger Campground. The trail begins across Oak Creek. To drive to East Pocket Lookout from Flagstaff, drive west 2.6 miles on Historic Route 66. Turn left onto Woody Mountain Road (Forest Service Road 231). The first mile is paved, and then it becomes a dirt road. Follow the signs to stay on FR 231 for 27.7 miles. The gate may be closed a half-mile from the fire tower. If so, park off the road so other vehicles can pass, and walk up the road to the tower. The tower is open to visitors in the summer only.
Fees: Red Rock Pass, $5 per day, $15 per week, $20 annual pass.
Travel Advisory: *Vultee Arch Trail*—Hiking distance to Vultee Arch is 3.2 miles round-trip (300 feet elevation change). A bronze plaque near Vultee Arch commemorates the plane crash.
Sterling Pass Trail—Hiking distance to Vultee Arch is 4.8 miles round-trip (1,000 feet elevation change).
A.B. Young Trail—Hiking distance to East Pocket Lookout is 5.7 miles round-trip (1,996 feet elevation change). A Red Rock Pass is required for recreation on National Forest Service land in Red Rock Country. The passes are widely available throughout the Sedona area.
Warning: Roads may be impassable or closed during winter or wet weather.
Additional Information: Coconino National Forest, (928) 527-3600; www.fs.fed.us/r3/coconino; Red Rock Ranger District, (928) 282-4119; www.redrockcountry.org; Sedona Chamber of Commerce, toll-free (800) 288-7336; www.visitsedona.com.

LEAFY MOSAIC Along Sterling Pass Trail, the sun peeks through the mixed-conifer forest (right) that includes ponderosa pine, bigtooth maple and dwarf canyon maple trees.

REMEMBERING VULTEE Located at the end of the Vultee Arch Trail, a bronze plaque (right), erected in 1969 by the Sedona Westerners and the Vultee Club of California, commemorates the plane crash.

the fateful morning of January 29, 1938, Jerry and Sylvia lifted off—both anxious to get back to their 6-month-old baby in Downey, California.

On her hand glistened her wedding band, set with multiple diamonds, and a large diamond-solitaire ring, along with an expensive bracelet of carved stones. A ruby ring sparkled on his hand, and he wore the watch he received from the Los Angeles Athletic Club after his 1925 rescue of passengers from a sinking boat in Newport Channel.

But neither his wealth nor accomplishments could help him on that winter morning. About 60 miles southwest of Winslow, a snowstorm overtook them, and suddenly in the blinding, swirling whiteout, the Vultees were engulfed in trouble over the cliffs of the Mogollon Rim.

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With a slow but steady pace, Jean and I tackle the chaparral-covered western slope up the A.B. Young Trail to the Mogollon Rim. Like many trails out of Oak Creek Canyon, Jean tells me, this route was originally used to move cattle between seasonal pastures and for transporting goods to and from Flagstaff. Early pioneer families had carved these routes, later improved by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the 1930s. Retaining walls shoring up this trail serve as reminders of their labor under the leadership of Arthur "A.B." Young.

As the A.B. Young Trail climbs, the views expand, revealing Slide Rock State Park far below. Above us a scrub jay squawks before flying from our sight toward huge sandstone columns that give false hope of the Rim being near.

Tackling several more switchbacks, Jean and I finally crest the Rim. Under tall ponderosa pines, we rest and study Jean's topographical map on which the crash site is hand-marked. We resume our hike through oak groves to the wooden fire-lookout tower crowning East Pocket, to find it locked up tight for winter.

In the summer, the platform offers views of West Fork Canyon, the San Francisco Peaks, Dry Creek Basin, Wilson Mountain and Sterling Canyon. But our destination is still 45 minutes away.

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VULTEE DESPERATELY TRIED to escape the blinding storm, flying a crisscross pattern seeking a break in the clouds. But flying without instrument training, he soon grew fatally disoriented. Three miles north of Wilson Mountain, 37-year-old Gerard Vultee flew his plane into the ground, igniting a huge explosion.

Earl Van Deren heard the boom from his ranch in Dry Creek Basin, and saw the rising smoke. Rancher F.A. Todd heard the plane go down from Oak Creek Canyon. He joined the sheriff's search party offering his knowledge of the rough country, while his wife made coffee and sandwiches for the searchers. The snow-covered, thickly wooded terrain proved difficult, and after hours without success, darkness overtook their effort. Not until noon the following day was the crash site located.

"The wrecked plane was found near East Pocket, Barney Pasture, just a few hundred feet from the canyon brink leading into the deep, rocky chasm," reported Flagstaff's newspaper The Coconino Sun.

Forest Service Ranger H.C. Fosburg, along with Edward Robinson and James Honea Jr. from the Civilian Conservation Corps, discovered the crash site. Vultee's charred body still bore his watch, which had stopped at 9:56 A.M.

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Southwest of the fire tower, Jean and I begin hiking cross-country along a ridgeline, spotting the fresh tracks and moist, dark pellets of elk. Bending around undergrowth and fallen trees, we bushwhack to an abandoned dirt road, and bear left to parallel the distant rim of Dry Creek Basin. A stone cairn marks a turn taking us toward the pale-blue basin appearing like a vast ocean through the trees.

Jean suddenly grabs my arm.

At first I look for an elk in the clearing. But then I see it. A hundred feet from the rim, the tail section of Vultee's plane rests peacefully near an old juniper. The tragedy of two young lives cut short causes us to pause and feel the sudden chill of mortality.

The pale winter sun rakes across the broken plane's framework. Scattered metal parts lie among pine needles and snapped twigs, the rusting colors and texture matching their surroundings as the old plane slowly returns to the elements.

Looking down from the edge of the Mogollon Rim into a land of red rocks and ancient Indians, I realize that despite the tragedy, the spirit of Gerard Freebairn Vultee lives on. And tucked into the canyon far below, a gravity-defying arch endures, forever carrying his name. AH

Larry Lindahl of Sedona wrote and photographed the recent Arizona Highways *book* Secret Sedona. *He first learned of the Vultee story by talking to the ranger at the East Pocket Lookout.*