Loyal Loner: The Life of Ronald L. Ives, Southwest Geographer

Bill Broyles

Introduction

He told me that at the age of six he read William Hornaday's *Campfires on Desert and Lava*. The book, a popular account of a scientific jaunt to the *terra incognita* Sierra Pinacate lava field, appeared in 1908, a year before Ronald Lorenz Ives was born.

For most of Ronald's life the Pinacate and its surrounding Sonoran borderlands were his focus. He traveled its ground, met its people, studied its riddles, and logged its answers. Of the over 600 technical articles he published (not to mention his 230-some "popular" articles), a full quarter of them concerned this desert region.

In 1934, at age 24, he wrote "Excursionando en los Pinacates," an essay that essentially mapped his life's work. He extolled the region's mysteries and vistas; he sketched its face and then probed its character. His last project, *The Life and Times of José Velásquez*, was published posthumously. It was his only book, though his friend Jim Byrkit later mustered an anthology of his papers. He left a list of 36 unfinished papers "in preparation."

Ives was a spare man of legendary energy. He never weighed more than 142 pounds at a height of 5 feet 9 inches, but desert animals are lean and wiry, and so was he. His health was never very good, as asthma, injuries, bad habits, hypertension, and poor lungs plagued him. His eyes weren't strong and during World War II a test-range bomb blast cost him much of his left ear's hearing.[1] He survived bouts with frostbite, losing one toe and having cold-sensitive feet thereafter. He survived

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several car accidents and perhaps plane crashes. He endured severe dehydration on several of his desert hikes. He was not an armchair explorer.

He wrote to a friend in 1962, "My doctors say that if I don't heal soon, I'll have to cut down my workdays to something less than the 14 to 16 hours I usually work." He'd punch in for the "company" all day, and then after work begin his own play of research and invention. He published on geography, electronics, geology, history, archaeology, meteorology, cartography, folklore, and horology.

I knew him the last couple years of his life, but as I interviewed acquaintances and family following his death, I came to realize that in some ways I knew more about the sum of his life than anyone, even his family or selected friends. This has become a burden that I can lay down only with publication of this biography. Because he and I never talked directly about his innermost feelings or personal life or motives, I can provide only glimpses of his own thoughts. Much of what others saw is what he wanted them to see—the quiet scholar in khaki work clothes, the mysterious technician who was sent by the military on secret assignments, the man who befriended priests and wrote about padres but tacked a "No missionaries" sign on his door, the mechanical genius who swapped funny stories with shopmates but relied on sarcasm and a sharp tongue to deal with foremen, the lonely eccentric who engaged strangers in long discourses about wind patterns, glaciers, and obscure Spanish explorers, the curmudgeon who relished search and rescue missions for lost hikers, the soldier who spoofed the army but was patriotic to a fault.

He told some people that his father invented television and his grandfather invented color film, and those stories are largely true, but he also told some people that he had survived airplane crashes in the Arctic and he implied that he was an espionage agent operating in Mexico, stories that may be spoofs to cover his own insecurities and deep privacy, or just a quirky sense of humor. Some details will remain forever unknown, but no matter. What is known underscores that above all, he was a man worth knowing, for few men better knew the Southwest desert borderlands and their history, and his trail of articles is cited in nearly every serious publication written about the desert Southwest.

In 1928 the Gran Desierto of northwestern Sonora could be traveled only by saddle or foot. There were no highways from Sonoyta to Rocky Point or to San Luis Río Colorado. The jeep wasn't born until World War II. The train tracks stopped at Hermosillo or Yuma. The road from

Ajo to Sonoyta was two ruts gouged by horse-drawn wagons and Model T Fords.

Ives was a freshly graduated high school student in that summer of '28 when he took a mind to visit the Pinacate. Somehow, by train and hitchhiking, he got to Wellton, Arizona, then a watering stop for trains and now a small farming town along I-8, and headed into the desert. On foot. He refilled his canteens at a remote desert waterhole, Tinajas Altas, and, probably using hand-drawn maps from a book published in 1912, struck out for Papago Tanks on the west side of Pinacate Peak, some 40 miles away. He hoped to find water there, as had others—at least the lucky ones—who preceded him.

He had just graduated from high school, so he went during summer, the harshest of desert seasons. He got to where he could see the mountain...and ran out of water. His premise, then as later, was to hike until the canteen runs dry, and then hike back. Undoubtedly he was very disappointed to face retreat, but he had seen the mountain.

In 1931 he returned but approached the mountain from the east. He probably hitchhiked to Sonoyta and then set out afoot along the ephemeral Sonoyta River. From Emilia Tanks, an ancient waterhole where he could replenish his water, he climbed the peak and surveyed his domain. When he returned to Sonoyta, tired and dehydrated, he met Alberto Celaya and Ygnacio Quiroz, who were strong community leaders in Sonoyta and colorful figures in the books of William Hornaday and Carl Lumholtz. Upon their deaths in the 1960s Ives would pen eulogies in American magazines.

Selfshot photos from that trip show him building a cairn atop Pinacate Peak. He posed in his outfit: slouch hat, plain cotton work shirt, bloused work pants, and leather boots laced to the knees. That was the style for the rest of his days, though he later traded the knee-length full-lace-up boots for engineer's pullons.

He made uncounted trips into the area on foot. In 1962, at age 53 and thinking himself still in life's prime, he set out from the Batamote Bridges, 30 miles south of Sonoyta, to circle the mountain. He carried a pack full of cameras (three, at least), instruments to measure wind and temperature, and camping paraphernalia, but scant food and water. A few days earlier, a friend had specifically warned him that the Pinacate was unusually dry. Even the most reliable of tanks were parched. Ives went anyway. And he suffered. The tanks were indeed empty, and by the time he circled the mountain, he was flailed by the heat. He barely

Ronald L. Ives on expedition to the Pinacate. Sonoyta, Sonora, 1934.
(Photo courtesy the Ives family)

escaped to the highway and hailed a passerby who administered water and gave him a ride to Sonoyta. By the time he reached Tucson he was dazed and 20 pounds underweight. He had come close to dying.

When he bought the first of his jeeps, it was a war surplus job, already knocked about. With it he probed the Gran Desierto more frequently even though he lived in Palo Alto, California, at the time. He expanded his trips to include Baja California. Friends report that the jeep would return scuffed, muddy, and dusty. Broken wheels, flat tires, cracked fenders, and rock gouges in the undercarriage were expected and received. He followed his whim and curiosity. When the jeep could go no farther, he'd set off on foot.

He drove his jeeps flat out. Even on cold mornings he would pull the choke, turn the key, and rev the engine as he raced off to do his business. A coworker recalls that Ives seemed to defy the laws of physics by accelerating from zero to 50 without pausing for the intermediate speeds. People refused to ride with him more than once. Five-hundred-mile weekends on four-wheel-drive jeep trails were commonplace. Later, when he taught geography at Northern Arizona University, he regularly would leave Flagstaff after classes on Friday, drive six or seven hours to Sonoyta, and then explore as far as Adair Bay on Saturday. The next morning he'd press on and about noon retrace his steps, arriving back in Flagstaff late Sunday evening. He wrote to a friend that one such trip took him the usual two stops between Sonoyta and Flagstaff for coffee and fuel. If you've ever been bounced and battered by a hard-sprung jeep, you can imagine what these trips must have been like.

For example, to research one paper on Father Kino's 650-mile *entrada*, or trip, from Dolores, Sonora, to Casa Grande, Arizona, Ives reported studying all of the relevant writings and maps, and during 1968–1972 "a number of flights were made over the region, several hundred aerial photographs were studied, and some fifty days were spent in field work by Jeep and afoot covering over 2,500 miles of travel."[2] Such was his thoroughness.

He lived on coffee with sugar, no cream. A breakfast was three cups' worth. He'd put the sugar in first ("Enough so that the spoon would stand up by itself," recalls his niece) and then the coffee. He might not stop for lunch, and dinner could be a few bread rolls and a bowl of soup at the local diner. He used doses of vitamins, but some colleagues knew him for decades and never saw him eat or heard him talk about food.

And Ives seldom talked about personal matters to anyone, either, but he does report in one letter that he found that chains on all four tires

worked best in the desert dunes and he notes that his shovel was well worn from digging out. That's what interested him. When he explored the sandy "Sterile Zone" of the Gran Desierto, he exhausted himself digging his jeep out of the sand. That place is uniquely cratered with animal burrows. Even afoot it is a severe sweep of sand. It's the only place I can remember plunging through three tiers of rodent burrows while hiking.[3]

No one went with him on these trips. He was a loner by choice and, besides, who could keep up with him? He made scores of trips to the Gran Desierto. He knew the lavas. He studied the estuaries. He ventured into the treacherous mud flats of delta. He plotted the first geologic map of that area. He courted the people. He gave the church at Sonoyta its bell. He helped send don Alberto's grandkids to college. He took thousands of photos.

It was as if the Gran Desierto were his personal laboratory. Anyone who began research in the area, and there have been many, started with him or his papers. His correspondence reads like a *Who's Who* of southwestern scholarship. And frequently he'd ask them more questions than they did him. Nor was he afraid to be wrong. When Julian Hayden challenged his map of Kino's travels in the Pinacate, Ives didn't sulk. He said, "Show me." Hayden recalls that incident as the beginning of their friendship.

He seldom made personal comments about his trips. He always talked about things and asked questions about the details of what he saw. Scholarly talk dominated his conversations with colleagues and friends, for with few exceptions they were one and the same. His nephew gives us a clue. "We were brought up to believe that our personal feelings weren't worthy or proper conversation. We were still Victorians long after the good Queen died, long after Victorianism should have died."[4]

But he fits the man that Alfred, Lord Tennyson called "Ulysses," especially the lines "And this gray spirit yearning in desire / To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."

Just as it was his purpose in life, Ron's monument in death is the array of facts and ideas nurtured in his articles. He was a man of questions. He was disciplined to discover answers. His emotions, private life, and even personal comfort were pale, detached shadows. Learning was his soul. He literally lived to learn.

A typical visit with him was a late-evening phone call. "Ives here. Anything to report? I've been thinking. And the evidence should bear me out. Those dunes near El Gulfo are rock fragments, but the ones north of Puerto Peñasco are largely shell fragments. Check it if you like.

Have fun." For him study was fun. It was life itself.

Any good man takes with him to the grave many things we'd like to know. Ives took more than most. Here I hope to chronicle many of those little-known facets of his life and to tell you about the fuller person we missed knowing.

What follows is his story. One of his friends, atmospheric physicist Stuart Grinnell, used to ask if a listener wanted the 5-minute answer to a question or the 20-minute version. This is the 20-minute narrative. Along the way, you'll meet some of his friends and family in person; you'll hear them in first-voice. You'll learn more about the compartments of Ronald Ives's life than any one of his family or friends ever knew in sum. They never saw the full picture. You'll hear the full life he was so very reluctant to share.

What follows is a table book, not in heft or artwork or classic writing, but "table" as an afternoon around a cordial dining table, sitting in comfortable chairs, drinking from cups or bottles, listening to bright confident voices. It is a long conversation, full of wit and laughter, the wake that Ronald never had. It is not breezy; rather it is a full discussion by mature adults—peers, really—deserving of their own biographies. It is a discussion about the worth of a man, the merit of a career, the depth and height of ourselves. The interviews are with people worth knowing in their own rights. Meet Ronald Ives, a distant but loyal loner as he follows his own father into the laboratory and religious Fathers across the Southwest.