

# HE KNOWS WHAT HE'S TALKING ABOUT

At the age of 13, Adam Teller became the youngest guide at Canyon de Chelly. He likes to tell stories, but it's not all talk. His family has lived in the canyon for at least 200 years, and his great-great-great-grandfather Barboncito, a legendary chief and spiritual leader, created some of the pictographs on the walls at Running Antelope House. Mr. Teller has learned a lot through oral tradition, but he has a modern education, too: He studied cultural anthropology at the University of Arizona.

BY MATT JAFFE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN BURCHAM







Adam Teller makes his way back from a trip to Mummy Cave Ruins at Canyon de Chelly National Monument. Teller's family still has property in Canyon del Muerto, which branches off Canyon de Chelly.

**A**DAM TELLER EASES HIS JEEP WRANGLER INTO THE FLOW OF THE CREEK AT THE bottom of Canyon de Chelly. Swollen by rains, the creek is running high, and soon we're plunging axle-deep through the red, muddy water as Teller turns upcanyon.

The Jeep creates a wake, and I roll up my window a bit to keep dry. The engine's muffled hum plays off the splashing of the water as we cross and recross the creek. Neither of us says much at first, which is pretty much what I had expected.

I met Teller a few years ago, after hiring him for a tour into Canyon de Chelly. An entrepreneur, Navajo historian and storyteller, he wasn't one for false intimacies or forced levity. Today is no different. Before heading into the canyon, Teller had greeted me with a quick smile and handshake, but little in the way of ceremony. He's a pretty serious dude.

The 53-year-old Teller doesn't reveal much at first, other than that he clearly roots for the

Arizona Cardinals. A pair of wraparound Cardinals shades conceals his eyes, and his long hair is gathered into a loose ponytail that cascades out from beneath a black cap emblazoned with the team logo. Teller wears the hat pulled down low along his brow.

We catch up a bit, and Teller updates me on the latest Navajo tribal news, always a subject that inspires strong opinions from him. But the conversation doesn't settle into an easy rhythm until he points out a spot where another guide's Chevy Suburban got sucked down into the creek's quicksand — all the way to the hood — before locals helped winch it out.

"So, how do you keep a vehicle running in these conditions?" I ask.

"Magically," Teller laughs. "Brake pads don't last longer than four months. Some things, you can't keep an eye on, like starters and batteries. They go out unexpectedly, and occasionally you do get stranded. When that happens, I just tell people it's all part of the tour."

We almost didn't venture into the canyon because of the high water. A day earlier, after driving through a near-blizzard for the last 60 miles before Chinle, I had arrived to find snow along the mesas of Canyon de Chelly's south rim. Ephemeral waterfalls wisped down the cliff faces as lingering storm clouds cloaked Carson Mesa to the northwest in a black shroud of mist.

But today dawned clear and warm. Inside the canyon, many of the cottonwoods are already fully leafed out. The new greens play off the sandstone walls, their reds deepened by the moisture from the storm. Three wild horses walk along the banks of the creek, and sheep graze on fresh grasses. Orchards of peaches and apricots, descended from trees that Teller says were brought up from Mexico hundreds of years ago, are close to flowering.

Although we're only a few miles past the hardscrabble streets of Chinle, there's an Eden-like aspect to Canyon de Chelly. It is astoundingly beautiful, serene and seemingly pristine. But Teller reveals the canyon as far more than a latter-day paradise cut off from the outside world.

In 1864, it was here, in this sacred place, that a group of Navajos retreated to the top of Fortress Rock and held out against U.S. troops, led by Kit Carson, to avoid being killed or forcibly relocated from their homeland during the infamous Long Walk.

Canyon de Chelly is still a stronghold, a haven for old ways now vulnerable to the modern influences that threaten to undermine the traditional Navajo way of life.

"You want to live in the traditional world, but at times you have to live a contemporary life as well," Teller says. "There's a balance you need to know how to deal with. Just like being happy and being angry. You have to balance those two things out. To give your life a sense of duty, a sense of priority."

**T**eller's family has lived here for at least 200 years and still has property set back in Canyon del Muerto, which branches off Canyon de Chelly. Teller's relationship to these canyons proves the oft-quoted William Faulkner adage: "The past isn't dead. It's not even past." The lives of the people who dwelt here centuries earlier and Teller's ancestors' stories are inseparable from his own life.





In addition to his work as a guide, Adam Teller appears in schools and at storytelling festivals to help bring Navajo history and culture to life.

farther from tribal land than Gallup, New Mexico. He needed time to adjust, but the experience at the university awakened him to different ways of seeing the world.

“Growing up in a place like Chinle or the canyon here, you appreciate the quietness,” Teller says. “You hear the trees. You hear the water. You hear the birds, and you’re just in tune with nature. When you go to a city like Tucson, it’s like a disturbance to your balance, to your way of life. I needed some time to adjust to that before I could even get a good night’s sleep.

“Everything was exciting and new. For me, it was a new world, a beginning. Everything was challenging. New foods to explore. New places to go. New friends to meet. Each day, there was something else I could look forward to and learn about.”

Teller also began to find his voice. Sometimes, archaeology professors asked him for a Navajo perspective on what was discussed in class. “I learned how to tell a good story in the Navajo way, to entertain people,” he says. “And some of the students came up to me and said that my stories were more important to hear than the theories. Which made me feel good — that the other kids felt I told important aspects of the history that were not covered in the books.”

Some of that history is recorded on the canyon stone. We arrive at Running Antelope House, his family’s property, and Teller points to a series of pictographs on the walls. Barboncito drew a circle with a cross inside to symbolize a peace treaty, and there’s also a rainbow higher on the cliff face. But most striking are the four pronghorns that give this spot its name. The animals were painted in 1867 by one of Teller’s ancestors, Chief Who Wore Lamb Skins on His Hat, to symbolize his hope for the eventual safe return of the four Navajo clans to their homeland after the Long Walk.

In addition to his guiding services, Teller appears in schools, and occasionally at storytelling festivals, to bring age-old Navajo legends and history to life. “They’ve been told for hundreds of years, and I want to get these stories out for the rest of the world to understand,” he says. “I have to learn every aspect and every detail, but my most important job is to translate from Navajo to English. The language is very complicated — so complicated that you can change the meaning if something isn’t put in exactly the right context.

“Sometimes I have to improvise a little bit as well. But basically, the story is there. All you have to do is put it in your heart, learn it by heart and understand that people have been telling these same stories for centuries.”

After saying goodbye to his relatives at Running Antelope House, Teller works the Jeep back down Canyon del Muerto,

easing past a fresh rockfall. Once we’re in Canyon de Chelly, he again finesses the creek, attacking the crossings to maintain the Jeep’s momentum and avoid any hesitations that might result in water getting sucked into the engine.

As we drive, Teller opens up and talks about many things: drug problems on tribal land, the lack of economic opportunities, changes to families. Grandparents, who once were central to teaching Navajo ways and lived with their grandchildren in multigenerational homes, no longer play as central a role. Teller worries about the possible loss of Navajo culture and language.

“Once your identity goes, your land goes. Your history goes,” he says. “So it’s very important, even if just a few people keep the culture alive for future generations, to at least give them a chance to pick it up again someday.”

Not long before we emerge from the canyon, I ask Teller about his plans for the evening, one of those small-talk questions that typically elicit equally empty answers. But not from

Spring, winter, spring and winter again: March can’t make up its mind this year, and as I drive out along the north rim of Canyon de Chelly the morning after seeing Teller, temperatures have yet to creep out of the 30s. The clouds are building again, and another storm seems imminent as the road climbs toward the nearly 7,000-foot Mummy Cave Overlook and, beyond it, the town of Tsaile.

Teller had told me that he has a few places on the north rim where he likes to escape — “places to sit and think and get away from the world for a few minutes or a few hours. At some point, you have to cut off the technology, to be with yourself. It refreshes you.”

Only one car is in the parking lot when I pull up, then heed Teller’s advice and walk out to a quiet spot along the rim. When you’re on the floor of the canyon, there’s an intimacy, a feeling of being cradled by the earth. From here, the scale of the landscape becomes more apparent. Tucked into alcoves a few hundred feet above the ground, the cliff dwellings



At Running Antelope House, Teller’s family’s property in Canyon del Muerto, his ancestors added pictographs to this sandstone wall.

Teller. He’s going over to a neighbor’s property for a traditional cleansing and healing ceremony. A family will march an effigy depicting evil to a medicine man, who will attempt to heal a patient by using a sand painting that serves as a kind of X-ray or diagram of the victim’s body. According to tradition, by casting the evil or source of pain out of the sand painting, it will also be cast from the patient.

“All of these songs are sung to invoke the holy ones to come and help with the healing that’s taking place,” Teller says. “All of the people are praying at that time, too. It’s the power of the people, not just the medicine man. The power of the people comes through the power of the god.”

I’m a little embarrassed when he asks me what I’ll be doing: “Watching basketball, I guess.”

at Mummy Cave, some three stories tall, are reduced to insignificance. A stand of mature cottonwoods, still bare in early spring, traces a gray, serpentine course along the creek and across the canyon floor.

When I return to the parking lot, someone inside the other car beckons me over. He has a door open and is in the back seat, staying out of the cold while working on acrylics of local rock art that he paints on sections of pine. He’s selling the paintings, including one depicting a herd of pronghorns. “They’re from the cliffs above Antelope House,” he says.

“Yeah, I was there yesterday,” I say. “With Adam Teller.” “Oh, that’s good. Adam. He knows a lot.” 