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Hot beverages with a touch of history: Celebrating Walnut Canyon's centennial

Megan Troutman Mar 3, 2015



#766 Ranger Robert Wallace gives a talk on Saturday, Feb. 21 at Walnut Canyon National Monument. Walnut Canyon is located about 10 minutes east of Flagstaff. (Photo by Robert Tyler Walker)

Robert Tyler Walker

Coffee and Hot Chocolate with a Ranger kickstarted more Walnut Canyon centennial events throughout the year. Locals gathered Feb. 21 to learn about Walnut Canyon's rich history from Park Ranger Robert Wallace. Joining the Walnut Canyon community in April, Wallace was excited to share his knowledge with Flagstaff locals.

“It’s nice to introduce people to the park and get them excited about visiting these places,” Wallace said. “Hopefully, by having a fun activity with coffee and hot chocolate, they can learn a little about the canyon. Then it might make them excited about taking care of the place that they are coming to visit.”

Walnut Canyon National Park was created in 1915 in order to preserve and maintain ancient cliff dwellings from the Sinagua culture. As a prehistoric farming culture, the tribe created artifacts such as fire starters and clay pot fragments that were left behind in the cliffs.

Wallace explained this elaborate culture with artifacts for the attendees to see firsthand. He also explained that this was the reason the National Monument was established — for locals to learn about the lifestyle of the people who lived here and “have some kind of connection back to our roots and back to our ancestry.”

Instilling the desire to learn more about the world at large is Wallace’s mission, and he aims to help people cultivate their own desire to experience nature.

“You can build up a passion for this place,” Wallace said. “That’s what these parks are about — building a passion for nature.”

Flagstaff locals Doug and Carol Thomey wanted to learn more about the Native Americans who lived on the land 700 years ago. This was the first ranger talk that the couple has attended, but they enjoyed learning more about the canyon’s history.

“We’re just finding out who lived before us,” Carol said. “I just can’t even comprehend what they have to do in a day’s period of time.”

Wallace informed locals at the event about everything the Native American Sinagua tribe had to endure, talking about how each day was spent gathering food from the cliffs, traveling down the canyon to their dwellings, preparing the food and finding water.

“Every time we hike down there you see cliff dwellings and you think, ‘why would you settle here?’ Everything looks difficult here to me,” Carol said. “There’s other land down the road that would be easier to occupy.”

Not only did the tribe have to gather food from the cliffs, but they fashioned throwing sticks to catch rabbits and other indigenous animals.

“I had assumed that they grew most of what they ate so the invention of throwing a stick at a rabbit is neat,” Doug said. “The idea that they were actually able to catch game here has never occurred to me before.”

Most individuals are aware of the Grand Canyon and its historic relevance, but most do not realize the beauty of Walnut Canyon is only ten minutes away from Flagstaff.

“The Grand Canyon is so close and most people are en route to the Grand Canyon, so just making people aware that it’s here is certainly important,” Wallace said.

With scenic trails and a rich history, Doug insists that the canyon “seems impossible to ignore.”

“Living in Phoenix for most of my life, you’re 144 miles away from anything like this,” Doug said. “After living in ‘the big city’ for all those years, I just find it fascinating to learn about this area.”

After attending the Coffee and Hot Chocolate with a Ranger event, the Thomeys are excited to visit more ranger talks in the future.

“I just wanted to learn more about the Native Americans that actually occupied this area,” Carol said. “After being in the desert after all that time, yes there’s culture and there’s nature, but here is just beautiful wide-open space; there is such a sense of community here.”