A Bewitching Realm Reopens

Tahquitz Canyon Had Been Shangri-La to Hippies, Hermits and Evil Spirits. For Decades Its Dangers Made It Off-Limits. Now the 'No Trespassing' Signs Are Coming Down.

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I WAS LUGGING BOXES into my new Palm Springs home and needed a break from unpacking. Parking my car not far from the spritzing misters downtown, I walked up the flood-control channel toward a massive gash, a door into the mountains: Tahquitz Canyon. Coming toward me down the trail was a lone man. At first I was happy to encounter another hiker, but as he got closer, I picked up an unmistakable scent of evil. He glared at me sideways out of psychotic blue eyes, spraying sweat and spitting out a malicious incantation. A few months later I saw a mug shot of the same fellow in the paper and read that he'd tried to push a group of hikers off a precipice into the canyon.

I felt lucky to have survived the man's wrath, of course, but more than that I felt privileged, as a newcomer, to have met the wrathful spirit of Tahquitz. It was like attending the ultimate insider bash your first week in town. I'd known—in some vague, folkloric way—about the curse of Tahquitz my whole life. Growing up in the San Gabriel Valley, I simply assimilated the notion that there was an awesome canyon out in Palm Springs and weird things happened there. California kids know this.

"There are a thousand stories up there," affirms helicopter pilot Steve de Jesus, who has assisted in many Tahquitz rescues. "It's kind of infamous for deaths." Since the Palm Springs Mounted Police Search and Rescue squad was formed in 1949, its members have pulled 30 corpses from the canyon, says Capt. Ken Piner. An astounding 90% of rescues are in Tahquitz—though the canyon is just a sliver of the wilds surrounding the Coachella Valley.

The guy to blame for all the mayhem would be Tahquitz, or Tah- kwish, as he is also called. To the Cahuilla Indians, he is a malevolent spirit who resides in a transparent boulder, emerging in various forms—ball of light, flash of lightning, madman on the trail—to devour souls. Many visitors have reported encounters. A travel writer in the early 1900s, J. Smeaton Chase, slept with his ear to the ground and was awakened by Tahquitz making sounds like boulders crashing down the mountain.

Newcomers have put a fresh shine on the old legend, ascribing strange events in the canyon to The Witch of Tahquitz. If you find yourself at the Palm Canyon Starbucks some morning, go out back and glance toward the hills, where you'll see the distinct broom-riding profile of a witch stretched across Tahquitz's portal. If you look up from your latte to see that clouds have obscured the shadow, watch out, because that means the witch is whisking around town, snacking on souls.

But witches and curses alone do not a power spot make. What gives Tahquitz its charge is its blend of malevolence and beauty. The canyon's most photogenic waterfall earned it a starring role in Frank Capra's 1937 film " Lost Horizon," and many seekers since have found in Tahquitz their personal Shangri-La. In the 1940s, Brooklyn- born orphan and songwriter Eden Ahbez moved into the canyon and became a prototype of the flower children who later flooded Tahquitz. Ahbez was so inspired by the canyon's splendor that he sat down on a boulder and penned these words: "There was a boy, a very strange enchanted boy . . . ." They were the opening lines to "Nature Boy," a song made a No. 1 hit in 1948 by Nat King Cole.

Along with evil and beauty, there's another ingredient to Tahquitz's appeal: inaccessibility. For 30 years, Tahquitz has been officially closed to the public by decree of the Agua Caliente band of Cahuilla Indians, who own most of the canyon. That changed this month when the tribe reopened the canyon to the public—for a fee. For years, though, the "No Trespassing" signs have only added to the canyon's appeal. "It's like you don't want to go up there—but you do want to go up there," explains Jennifer Maese, a 29-year-old mother of three who now lives in Cathedral City. "You want to see how far you can get past those 'Keep Out' signs."

Anyone who defied the signs could be pretty sure something would happen to them. Maese was badly injured when she fell 150 feet down a cliff. Others, like hermit-scholar "Mountain Bob" Hepburn, are baptized in the canyon's beauty and achieve a sunny glow. You never know which way things will go, but you know something will happen. As an ad for a local resort promises: "Come as you are, leave different." "In Tahquitz, people go mad or find the Lord," says Doug Batchelor, a former Tahquitz cave dweller who graduated from the canyon to direct a worldwide television and radio ministry based in Sacramento. "By virtue of its desolation and extreme terrain, the canyon either kills people or helps them find themselves."

During spring break, 1969, l.a.'s beaches were off-limits because of twin disasters—pollution from floods and an oil spill—so teenagers in search of adventure headed for Palm Springs. There was a pop music extravaganza planned that year, with Ike and Tina Turner, Canned Heat, Taj Mahal and other bands appearing at the Palm Springs Drive-In. But an equal draw was Tahquitz. Of the 20,000 kids who flooded the town, many wound up in the canyon, leaping naked into icy pools and dancing on boulders. It turned into a national news story, as 125 police officers clambered into the canyon to evict the masses. "A beautiful scene before the pigs showed up," a teenager told The National Observer. "A real Eden scene."

The invasion prompted the 30-year closure of Tahquitz. But the canyon's mythic allure had already filtered back to the little brothers and sisters of the Tahquitz partyers and back to my Covina high school. Reports of a hippie Shangri-La became tangled with the ages-old legend of Tahquitz.

One kid who couldn't resist the rumors was Gordon Kennedy, a young Anaheim surfer. He hitchhiked out in 1974, arriving at Tahquitz on a hot June morning. Ridge after spiny-backed ridge zigzags toward the interior of the mountain, concealing a series of ascending canyons or valleys. Once you penetrate the granite-walled coliseum, the first canyon opens into a sycamore-shaded paradise, culminating in the "Lost Horizon" waterfall. As far as the first falls, the hiking is easy enough even for barefoot hippies tripping on jimson weed. Past that point the climb becomes a dangerous scramble over cliffs and boulders. In some places the trail is so narrow and the drop-offs so extreme that hikers must hold on with both hands. Those who chicken out and try to take the easy exit down the stream bed soon find themselves unable to continue either down the canyon or up. They're trapped like a beetle in a bathroom sink.

Those who make it to the higher canyons—as Kennedy did that day in 1974—find a wonderland of emerald pools, waterfalls, rushing streams, hot, basking boulders and ancient Indian ollas. "We walked up early in the morning to the second falls, and I just fell in love with the place," says Kennedy, who today, at 44, looks like a faded version of a redheaded, freckled schoolboy. He came across a tribal community of 50 or 60 dopers, Christians, Vietnam vets, flower children, vagabonds and bikers all living in the canyon full time. They bathed in pools and lived in caves; their bedroom walls were etched with Indian petroglyphs, covered over in many cases with modern glyphs in praise of Tahquitz: "Tahquitz is a Tonic to Life and Freedom. " "Tahquitz Belongs to God Not to Man."

Strung across the canyon was a clothesline on which the residents pinned their bell bottoms to dry. To Kennedy, it was a memorable sight. "I'm 18 and I'm reading 'Be Here Now' and Hermann Hesse," he says, "and I look down at that clothesline going across the canyon with all these madras prints and it felt like I was in Tibet or something. I couldn't believe there was a place like this."

His amazement was compounded by his first sighting of the ultimate Tahquitz family—Sunny and Jim and their baby, Tewey Tahquitz, born in a cave in the third valley. Sunny, a former varsity swimmer from the suburbs, wandered around naked and barefoot, her olive skin burnt nearly black by the sun. In contrast to the dark-haired mom, the baby slung in a papoose on her back had a shock of electric blond hair. Father Jim skittered up and down the sides of boulders, his bare feet like hardened hooves. Forget about college, Gordon decided. "I knew this was the place I needed to be. It had the same climate those millionaires pay so much money for, and seven months of the year you didn't need any clothes. It took my life in a whole different direction."

Like the others, Kennedy eventually had to leave. He went on to make a life for himself growing organic mulberries in Ojai. But he'd been imprinted with something even better: a vision of Eden. "Everybody's always trying to get back to paradise," says Kennedy.

Doug "Caveman" Batchelor left Tahquitz after he found a dusty Bible in his cave, had a canyon conversion and went out in the world to share the news. Yet he, too, longs to return. "Not a week goes by that I don't yearn to shrug off my responsibilities and go back to Tahquitz," he says. The only way not to be haunted by Tahquitz forever, it seems, is to stay, and only one man has managed to do that.

I drove as near as i could get to the great portal on a 114- degree day, and a compact man with bare legs the color of mahogany came walking out of the off-limits canyon to greet me. Because "Mountain Bob" Hepburn doesn't have a phone, I'd arranged the meeting by scrambling up the rocks to a perch where he watches for Tahquitz trespassers. Now we dropped by a liquor store to get him a jumbo Gatorade, then sat and talked with the AC on as Hepburn told me about his own first meeting with Tahquitz.

The San Fernando Valley native was a young Marine stationed at Twenty-Nine Palms, just returned from a tour of duty in Vietnam. One hot summer day, after hearing about Tahquitz at a gas station, he wandered up the canyon. Drenching heat, icy pools, broken boulders that fit together like puzzle pieces—it was a vision that sustained him for years as he returned to civilian life and a series of odd jobs.

In 1984, Hepburn returned to Tahquitz and purchased some rare private land high in the canyon, a 17-acre plot with its own waterfall. His idea was, he'd live as a hermit and concentrate on his self-appointed work: translating the Book of Revelation from the ancient Greek. No one but this self-taught scholar could have seen a use for the land.

An average hiker, starting out near the frozen yogurt shops on Palm Canyon Drive, would take five or more hours to make the climb; Hepburn's commute takes him 90 minutes, and he often makes the trek more than once a day.

"People began to notice me because I started to take unusual loads over the cliffs," Hepburn recalls. On a trail impassable to most, Hepburn hauled hammers and two-by-fours, the front door of a mobile home, a bed frame, mattresses, a couple of guitars, a set of iron weights and an enormous biblical linguistic library to aid him in his translation work. Parched and wild-eyed hikers would sometimes stumble down the seemingly uninhabited canyon only to find Hepburn, the canyon's sole resident, sanding a bookshelf out in front of his homemade cabin, or playing Beatles songs on his guitar. Hepburn began to aid lost or injured hikers, and to help the search- and-rescue teams. When 66 firefighters needed to fight a blaze in the upper canyon recently, Hepburn was the man who led them in.

It's been 16 years now that Hepburn has lived in Tahquitz's embrace. The canyon's curse seems to run off him like water over the falls; what sticks is a share of Tahquitz's power and beauty. "What happens to people who challenge this canyon and these rocks is it brings something out in them, in their spirit," he says.

Like a lot of people, I'm drawn to Hepburn's untamed exuberance. I like to be around him the same way I like to be near that big gash in the mountain.

When I went to meet Jennifer Maese, I expected she might bristle at my infatuation with the canyon that almost killed her. A dark- haired, slender woman with a calm aura, Maese met me at the door of her Cathedral City home. She seated me on her couch, piloted her wheelchair near me and immediately pressed for news of Tahquitz, like someone inquiring after a lost lover. I told her the news from Kennedy, Hepburn and other Tahquitz folks, then gingerly brought up the notion of the curse.

The curse. Of course, everyone knows about the curse. For a teenager growing up in Palm Springs, Maese said, Tahquitz was like the local McDonald's, a hangout—but with a twist. Always there was talk of witchcraft, crazed druggies and an ancient evil emanating from the canyon. "I always had an eerie feeling walking in there."

The threat was also a lure, and Maese had been lured in plenty of times—and returned without mishap—before that February day in 1994 when she and a friend decided to tempt the spirit of Tahquitz once again. Maese was 22. When she and her friend climbed past the first falls, Maese was struck, as always, by the lush beauty of the upper canyon. It's like you're in a different world from the desert below, she recalled. Then, as they were walking on what seemed to be a safe section of trail, Maese's friend slipped. Maese has never understood how it happened. Her friend just fell. Maese called after her. When there was no reply, she panicked, moved closer to the edge and herself plummeted 150 feet over a cliff.

When Maese regained consciousness, she was sprawled on her back on a boulder. There was a pack with food and water near her feet (left by her friend, who was injured but had gone for help), but she couldn't move to retrieve it. When it got dark, Maese forced herself not to think about her three children. She forced herself to sleep. To this day, some insist that the accident that disabled Maese was caused by the curse of Tahquitz. If the demon Tahquitz was acting up that February day, however, then the canyon's flip side—beauty and mercy—was in evidence as well.

A search party looking for three boys just happened to wander up the canyon the day after Maese fell. Maese had been without food or water for 24 hours. Her blood pressure was dangerously low and she was in the early stages of hypothermia. Rescuers said it was unlikely she would have survived the coming night. She suffered a broken wrist and a severed spinal cord and was hospitalized for four months. The fact that she was found at all was so providential that her story was featured on "Rescue 911."

Once i identified Tahquitz as the central coordinate in my Palm Springs life, I trimmed the oleanders out back so I could keep a watch on the canyon from my yard. In recent months, I've noticed something going on. For an e ntire day lightning bolts pounded the recesses of the canyon. On several occasions, I grabbed binoculars when I saw billows of smoke, then firefighting planes bombing in. Also, four times I watched helicopters buzz the canyon in search of lost hikers. Some of the hikers exited via what must have been a heart-stopping ride on a steel cable beneath the vibrating chopper.

A man who lives in a 7,000- square- foot luxury home at the base of the canyon told me that recently a hawk flew into his plate- glass window, and he has found several rattlesnakes on his lawn. Despite the snake-proof fencing around his place, a baby rattler managed to squeeze into his bedroom.

Tahquitz has cause for tantrums. Construction crews plowed a road, widened trails and erected a visitors center in anticipation of the reopening. The graffiti proclaiming Tahquitz a free zone was blasted off with high-pressure hoses. Tons of trash were hauled away. Never again will an impressionable 18-year-old like Gordon Kennedy wander through Tahquitz in the dark and hear voices calling out the nicknames of canyon residents: Sycamore, Spirit, Caveman, Packrat. “Adam Aquarius—is that you?”

“It’s all entering a new chapter now,” says Kennedy. “They’ve managed to corral the whole place. It’ll be very tidy and organized, and you won’t be able to go beyond a certain point. They’ve tamed Tahquitz. They’ve given Tahquitz a face-lift.”

Yet Maese, for one, doesn’t believe a few groomed paths can dim Tahquitz’s intensity. Six years after her fall, Maese has adjusted to life without the use of her legs. To support herself and her kids, she operates a day-care center out of her home. She’s never been back to Tahquitz. Her children know something about the canyon’s dark side; she thinks it’s about time she shows them its fairer face. To those who haven’t been there, Maese’s desire seems irrational—but there it is: She’s hoping the new trails into the dangerous, beautiful canyon will accommodate wheelchairs.