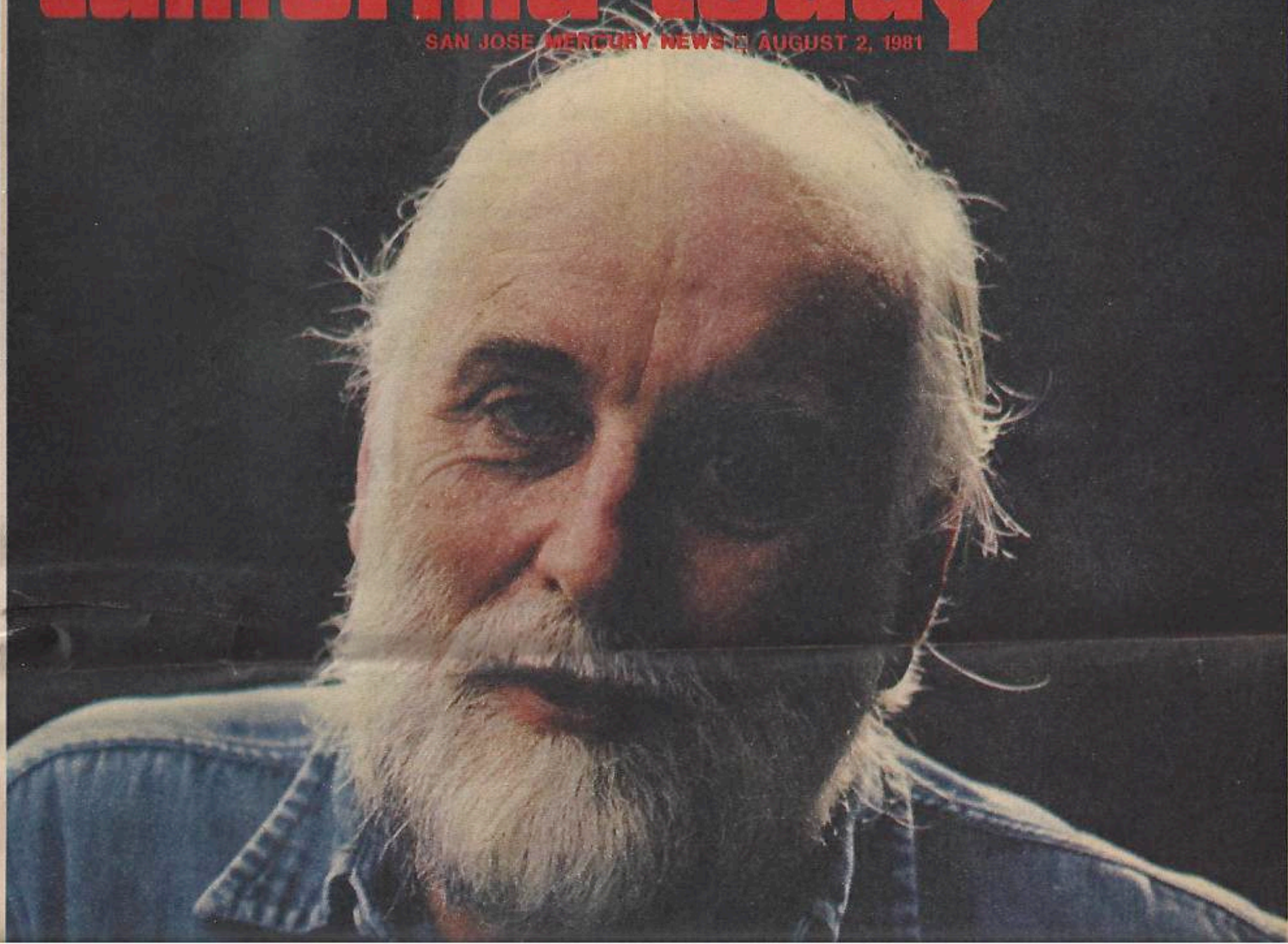


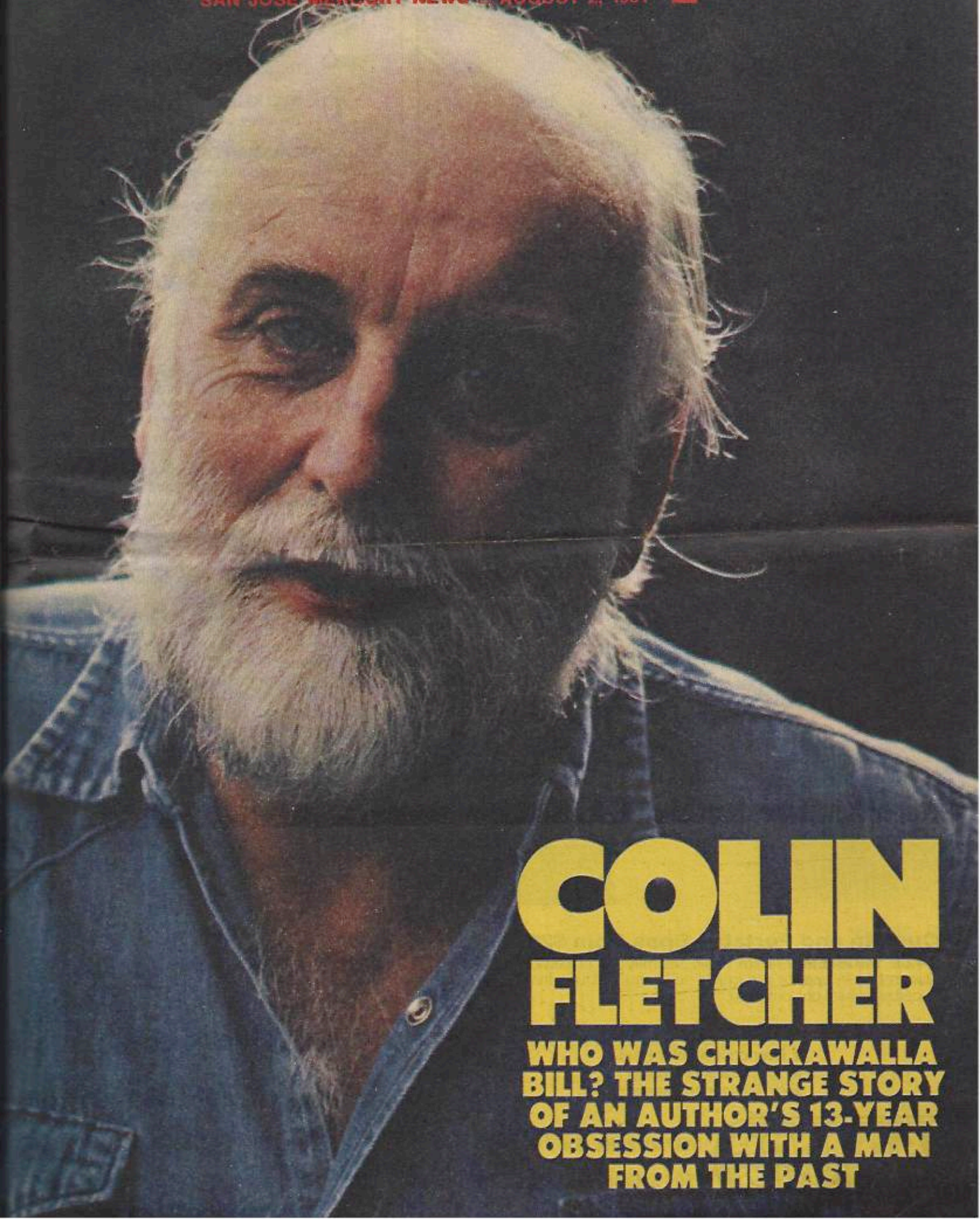
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SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS ■ AUGUST 2, 1981



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COLIN FLETCHER

**WHO WAS CHUCKAWALLA
BILL? THE STRANGE STORY
OF AN AUTHOR'S 13-YEAR
OBSESSION WITH A MAN
FROM THE PAST**

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SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

AUGUST 2, 1981

FEATURES

- 6 THE CHEERS DIE, THE PAIN LIVES ON** By Steve Marantz
Too often, the price of glory is a lifetime of agony
- 10 WHO KILLED MIKE HAMMER?** By Ron Base
The writer who kids weren't allowed to read is now writing for kids
- 16 CAVEMAN OF THE MOJAVE** By Ted Bredt
Why did this mystery man choose to live like his prehistoric ancestors?
- 28 EASY TOUCH** By Malcolm R. Hebert
The best palate-pleasers don't have to be complicated

DEPARTMENTS

4 Short Takes

25 Farrell At Large

30 Idol Talk

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

This week's cover subject, author Colin Fletcher, is one of California's most mysterious personalities—so mysterious, in fact, that, although his home is in Northern California, its location is known only to a small circle of friends. So it is hardly surprising that Fletcher should have become fascinated with an adventurer who, in his day, also was a man of mystery.

In his new book, *The Man From The Cave*, Fletcher describes how he first stumbled on the saga of "Chuckawalla Bill" during one of the solo walking tours that provide the material for many of his books. The scene of his discovery was a remote cave in the Mojave Desert, where a dusty trunk, makeshift bed and other items indicated that it had once been the home of a human being.

The author was intrigued. Who was this man who had chosen to live like some prehistoric cave-dweller in one of the world's hottest deserts? Fletcher decided to find out, and what he discovered is the subject of *Caveman Of The*

Mojave (page 16), by staff writer Ted Bredt.

Fletcher's sleuthing was worthy of a Sherlock Holmes or a Sam Spade. Or perhaps even a Mike Hammer. If you're over 30, chances are that you have read at least one of the blood-and-sex sagas featuring Mickey Spillane's controversial private eye. Spillane retired his hero nearly 10 years ago, but the old master of mayhem has not lost his touch, and recently published the first in a new series of adventure books for children.

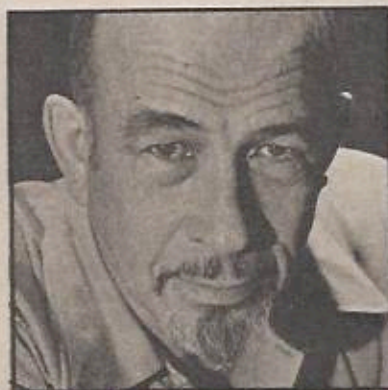
In an interview with Ron Base (page 10), Spillane talks frankly about his latest writing venture, his unusual marriage, and the lucrative Miller beer commercials that have introduced his famous porkpie hat and trench coat to a whole new generation of youngsters.

With the first NFL exhibition games scheduled this month, the football season is with us once again. On page 6, sports writer Steve Marantz focuses on one aspect of professional sports that receives little attention—the lifetime legacy of pain that many top athletes face when the applause and the big salaries end, and their achievements become just another statistic in the record books.

—J.P.

COVER:

Hiking through the desert, California author Colin Fletcher discovered a cave that had been occupied by someone years before. Who was the mysterious hermit, and what was he doing in the Mojave? In an extraordinary feat of detection, Fletcher spent seven long years seeking the answers. Photograph by Ted Streshinsky.



Ted Bredt

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It took 13 years to solve the riddle of Bill Simmons, an adventurer whose life was stranger than legend

CAVEMAN OF THE MOJAVE

In a world where the necessity to categorize has created the monster computer industry, *The Man From the Cave* must be giving book sellers fits. They don't have a marketing buzz word under which to pigeonhole it.

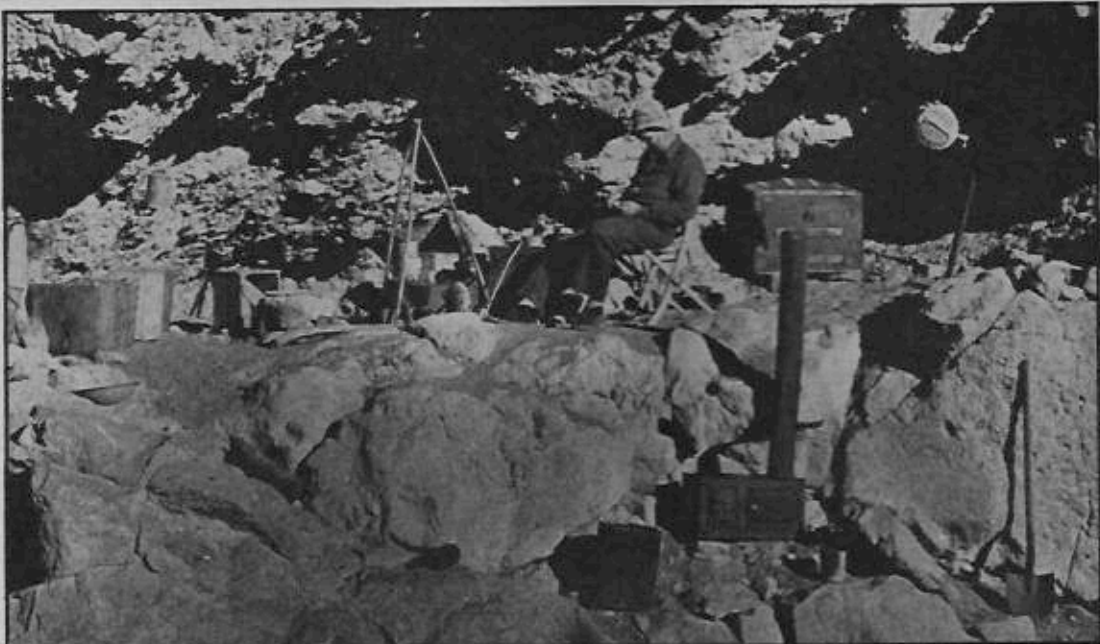
It is a curious book because it qualifies as a corking good adventure yarn, as an amazing detective story, as the rather raucous biography of a turn-of-the-century rogue, and, with only slight between-the-lines acumen on the part of the reader, the autobiography of a contemporary author whose most obvious assets are pit-bull-like determination and the ability to write extremely well.

Colin Fletcher is the creator of this, well, treatise. He is the same Fletcher who, for the past couple of decades, has achieved fame for having pursued other personal fantasies to extraordinary lengths. His name is usually followed by such qualifying phrases as "the high priest of American backpacking" or "the guru of walking." *Smithsonian* magazine once called him the "most famous solitary walker in the world."

It could very well be true. That he has a preference for solitude is evident in the fact that he keeps the address of his Northern California residence a secret. On

continued

BY TED BREDT



Author Colin Fletcher at the mouth of the cave he discovered on a walk in the Mojave Desert. Inside was evidence that someone had lived there for quite awhile. Fletcher's search through the past for that "someone" resulted in his latest book

ing about, and then letting it cool for a year or so before writing about it."

The actual full-time writing and research for *The Man From the Cave*, he claims, began in 1974 and lasted nearly seven years. But the idea began germinating in 1968, during a desert hiatus the author was taking to clear his mind before sitting down to write the African book. He had decided to plan a future walk (and a book) along the entire length of the Colorado River. That required

occasional spot-check forays into the Nevada Mojave to plot his approach and the techniques required.

It was on one of these tentative thrusts that Fletcher discovered, in an isolated rock basin, the discards of a previous resident. He estimated from the evidentiary remains that, whoever it was, had spent some time in the area, living in a nearby cave—probably as long ago as 50 years.

Most people would only have been slightly

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CAVEMAN

intrigued with such a discovery, wondering or fantasizing—just as Fletcher was at first. The idea of a man living in such a wasteland and at such a time certainly piqued Fletcher's curiosity. Who was he? What was he doing there? But the author ignored the urge to totally throw himself into the investigation, since he had other projects to conclude.

Still, a year after his initial find, he returned to the site again, packed up the more substantial residue left by the mysterious "caveman" (it was eventually given to the National Park Service) and returned to civilization to finish writing his Africa adventure.

When Fletcher was again free to pursue the identity of the mysterious caveman, the search, the research and the writing of that experience would completely involve him.

tered remains of magazines and newspapers, one of which was dated 1912. Decades of dust covered everything.

In the cave where Trunkman had apparently spent a lengthy period, Fletcher also settled in to cogitate and psych himself up for a meticulous sleuthing into Trunkman's identity, even though he was still unaware that he was embarking on yet another book.

Returning to civilization, the author wrote a story of his find for the *Las Vegas Sun*, offering a \$100 reward for information leading to Trunkman's identity. Reprinted in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the article produced an intriguing and, as it turned out, most important lead.

It came from Grace Mazeris (nee Mason), an early-day Hollywood stunt girl and sometime actress, singer and companion to many men.

Grace claimed that she had 'taken up' with a part-time prospector during the 1930s, and had lived with him in the desert

It would require him to traverse the United States and prod such austere depositories of history as the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the U.S. War Department, the British War Office and others for information.

"Trunkman" was the name Fletcher had given the mysterious cave dweller, because his first find in the basin was a weathered trunk of turn-of-the-century origin and design. In the trunk were two empty paper sacks. Scattered nearby were other evidences of human occupation—an ancient canteen, a washbasin, a piece of rusty stove pipe, a shovel, a bucket, two empty five-gallon cans and a sun-bleached measuring tape.

A bit further on, against the face of a cliff, Fletcher discovered a cave. Inside was further testimony to long-ago human occupancy—a stool and a small table made from wooden boxes, a sheepherder's stove and chimney, a rectangle of withered grass that had been a bed, an assortment of boxes and metal cans, a frying pan, a coffee pot, a heavy-iron Dutch oven, a wooden folding chair and a pair of very small and tattered green shoes sans soles. There were also the tat-

Grace, then a feisty 80, was residing in a Santa Cruz retirement hotel. She claimed, in a letter to Fletcher, that she had "taken up" with a part-time prospector named Bill Simmons during the early 1930s, and had lived with him in the Southern California desert for a number of years. She also claimed that Simmons had often talked about a former camp in Nevada, where he had left a trunk and other utensils.

Fletcher's interview with Grace provided him with several things sufficiently accurate-sounding to half-convince him that her Simmons and his Trunkman were the same person.

As Fletcher recounts it, he still didn't feel the Trunkman story merited a book—until Grace began recounting how, during the time of her relationship with Bill, several of her acquaintances chided her about the affair—Simmons was 60 at the time, and Grace was 40.

"You know," Grace told Fletcher, "they told me it was a funny time in a woman's life. They said, 'Grace, what about your menopause?' So I said, 'Oh, yeah, one afternoon in Riverside.'"

"Grace threatened to take over the story," Fletcher admits, "and I had to discipline myself very hard to prevent it."

Fletcher was sufficiently convinced that Grace's story was true, and he paid her the \$100 reward before going down to the Palm Springs-Salton Sea area to check the leads she had provided. Unfortunately, Grace would die a short time later and never see what an afternoon of remembrances with a stranger had created—a book in which she herself figures prominently.

For the next seven years, Fletcher tracked down and interviewed old prospectors, their children and grandchildren. He checked mining claims, post offices and census records. He went back into the desert mountains on tips that Simmons had once lived in the area, and found evidence to support the claims. His major discovery was an abandoned rock cabin with one of Simmons' aliases, "Chuckawalla Bill," scratched in the concrete foundation. It was a place that Grace had shared with Simmons, located in the Little San Bernardino Mountains, northeast of the then-sleepy town of Desert Hot Springs.

He tracked down Simmons' birthplace in Braddock, Pa., where he was born Anthony William Simon. He talked to surviving family members, gaining sufficient knowledge of Bill's birthplace to include a history of the town in the final book.

Fletcher contacted the still-existing manufacturers of the paper sacks he had found in the trunk, and the weathered measuring tape, attempting to pinpoint the exact time of Simmons' residency in the desert cave. Each new lead furnished by Fletcher's interviewees required meticulous cross-checking, and each, in turn, indicated other directions his research would take. Early on, Fletcher was not at all confident that Simmons was really Trunkman, but as the data came in, most of it fit into place. Today, Fletcher is still short of positive that Trunkman and Simmons are the same person. To the reader, however, a positive identification is not necessary. The search story remains a whopping good one.

The man to emerge from all this research was only comparatively strange. Simmons, Fletcher found, was born in 1875, and had spent his early maturity in the U.S. Army, but had not distinguished himself particularly in the Spanish-American War, though he became a sergeant. His service in the Philippines in action against post-war insurgents is well documented and indicates Simmons was, at the very least, a "good soldier."

After his enlistment was up, he remained in the Philippines for a year as a civilian, and then reenlisted, probably, Fletcher speculates, to get a free ride home. Discharged again, Simmons bummed around the country until 1907, when he again signed up, only to desert in October, 1908. That terminated his Army experience for good, except for several years later when a bit hard up (a situation that plagued him often) he had the nerve to apply for a military disability pension—and get it.

Simmons also served in the British army during WW I. To accomplish that, he had to swear he was a British citizen. He did, and was sent to England to train as a sapper. When the war ended, he swore just as adamantly that he was an American citizen and entitled to his return home and honorable discharge.

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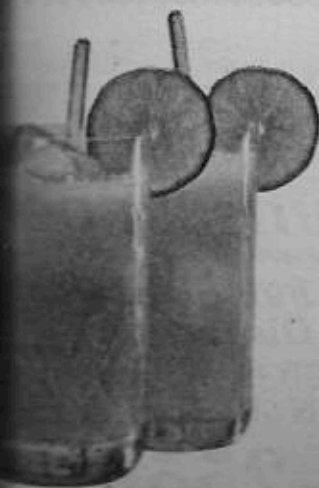
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Between the wars, as a civilian, Simmons bummed around the country, periodically returning to his home in Pennsylvania. But after WW II, he extended his travels into the far west—Colorado, Montana, Washington, Oregon, California and Nevada were all states who knew his residence at least once—and his visits home became less frequent.

As Fletcher discovered, there was a quixotic streak in the Simmons character. He changed his name several times during his life for what apparently were only fanciful reasons. He was Bill Simoyne for awhile, and Simon at times. He adopted nicknames like Blackie and Chuckawalla Bill, and was known as "Uncle Bill" to Grace—as well as to the children of some of his friends. For most of his later life, however, he was plain Bill Simmons.

Fletcher's "Trunkman" character was an obvious drifter. To support that habit, the jobs he held were not likely to lead to promising futures. At various times, he was a camp and restaurant cook, a railroad hand, a bartender, a caretaker and a teamster. He'd work for awhile and raise a stake, and off he'd go into the desert. Extensive research indicates that, in 1916, Simmons had indeed occupied the cave that Fletcher later discovered.

Simmons staked numerous claims after that date, according to the mining partners Fletcher was able to interview. Simmons was not above salting them a bit to make them attractive to less knowledgeable greenhorns interested in owning "their own mine" for a few hundred dollars. Most of the time, the new owners would let their claims lapse, so Simmons would reclaim them and offer them for sale again.

Simmons was a free spirit, a magnificent storyteller and a master embellisher of facts. Practically everyone Fletcher talked with told him, "You couldn't help but like Bill."

Officially, Simmons died alone and broke in 1950 at the age of 81. His death certificate, filed in Los Angeles County by officials of a Veterans Administration hospital, lists no next of kin. He had never been married, his occupation was listed as "unknown," he had no Social Security number, and his last postal address was given as "General Delivery."

But unofficially, Bill Simmons becomes quite something else through Fletcher's research—an uncommonly common man in many ways, but one with a streak of independence that made him stand out from the crowd of his time. Fletcher, too, brings his Trunkman to vivid life—probably because Simmons reflects so many attitudes shared by Fletcher.

Fletcher admits he became obsessed with the search. "It was like a glorious affair, surging wonderfully. I intended to write this book objectively, but it didn't work out that way. I had to inject myself into it because I became so much a part of it."

It is obvious that Fletcher found in his Trunkman a kindred spirit. As one reviewer has commented, if Fletcher had not found Simmons, he would have had to invent him. As the pages flow, delineating the facts of Simmons' life, more and more of Fletcher appears. The author's philosophy becomes Simmons' motivation at certain biographical turning points not otherwise explainable by hard evidence.

That, however, is not a bad thing at all. In fact, as the author emerges more and more in the later pages, the reader begins to feel as Fletcher did when he discovered the trunk in the desert: He wants to learn more. □