



Set in STON.

Childhood memories lead to
new explorations of Chimney Rock

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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MANY TEENAGERS would balk at the idea of riding shotgun for nearly 1,000 miles across Nebraska and back in a car with their father. Despite visions of National Lampoon's *Vacation* movie, when my State of Nebraska employee dad was tasked with a business trip to Scottsbluff, I jumped at the chance to get away from our Omaha neighborhood and see something new. Must be the photographer in me.

Mile after mile we told corny jokes, played games – and talked about the usual things that fathers and their sons talk about – sports, school, work and girls. We were more than 400 miles into the trip, cruising on U.S. Highway 26 west of Bridgeport, when we spied Chimney Rock in the distance. Dad asked me if we should stop. I was always up for an adventure.

THERE WAS NO visitor center at Chimney Rock back then. The year was 1994 and I was a high school senior. Dad

turned the car left down one dusty road and then right on another one until we found a sign scrawled with "Chimney Rock" pointing west. We followed the sign to a small parking lot near an old cemetery.

We started our hike from there on a narrow trail through the sagebrush and yucca plants, winding our way up and down over the hills. Although it appeared diminutive from the road, the spire of sandstone, ash and clay began to appear more prominent as we approached. I could see why Chimney Rock had become an important signpost for pioneers during their westward journeys. I did not know that it would become important to mine.

Dad and I arrived at the base of the rock where a small pedestal marked the site. We stood for a moment in silence taking in the history and surroundings. In my youthful desire to climb, I couldn't be still for too long and I bounded up the side determined to get as high as I could.

About the author: Derrald Farnsworth-Livingston is a photographer living at the edge of a small lake near Papillion with his wife, Holly and their daughters Leela and Riley. The girls have joined their father on the shoulder of Chimney Rock.



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My dad grinned as I tried one route up and then another. After a while I realized what I am sure he already knew, there was really no way to climb to the top, at least not without actual climbing gear. I stood on the shoulder of Chimney Rock, the product of years of sediment washed down along the sides. I looked to the east, from where we had come and then to the west, where we were headed. I could barely imagine traversing these plains without roads and in rickety wagons with little else than hope for a better life.

I climbed down and rejoined my dad. Smiling and laughing, we headed back down the trail toward the car. We continued to Scottsbluff for a couple days before returning across the state back home to Omaha.

Although I did not know it at the time, that would be the last trip my dad and I would take together where it was just the two of us. He passed away two years later.

Since then, I have traveled past Chimney Rock many times, either on my way somewhere or headed back from someplace. I rarely stop for long, if at all. Last

May was different, and I felt compelled to dedicate some time to exploring that place from my childhood memories once again.

I passed the new visitor center and found my way to the parking lot near the cemetery. Storm clouds were building in the west. Undeterred, I found the same path my dad and I had hiked and began my journey to the spire. As afternoon became evening, I climbed as high as I could. I looked toward the east and back to the west. Although no one else was there, I was not alone. As Chimney Rock's shadow stretched out across the plains, I felt my dad's presence with me.

Chimney Rock was a landmark to the westward pioneers and Nebraska's early settlers, a rocky waypoint that inspired hope during what for them was the journey of a lifetime. For me, Chimney Rock represents a landmark memory of my father and me and our bonding journey all those years ago, a memory that I know will remain for my lifetime.