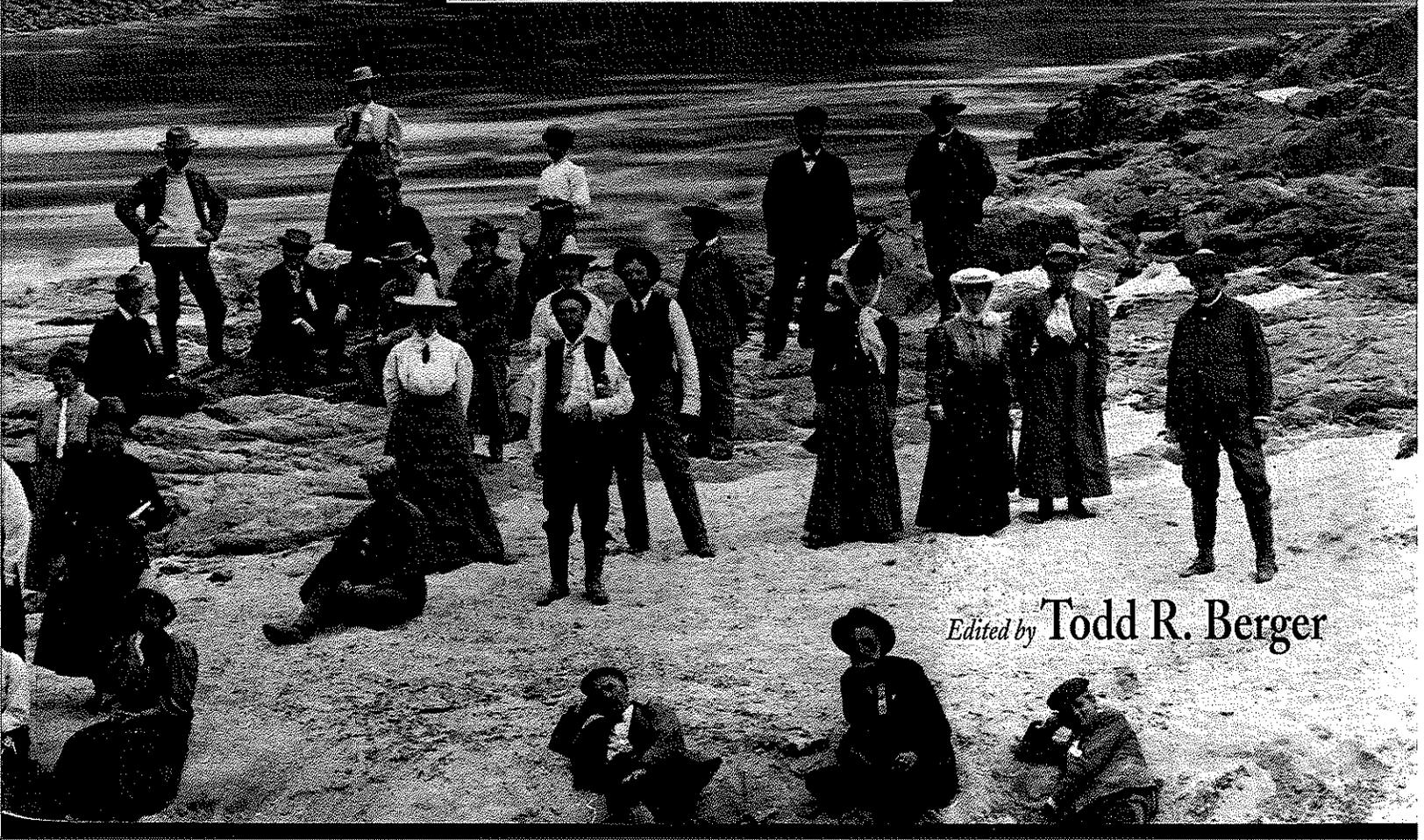
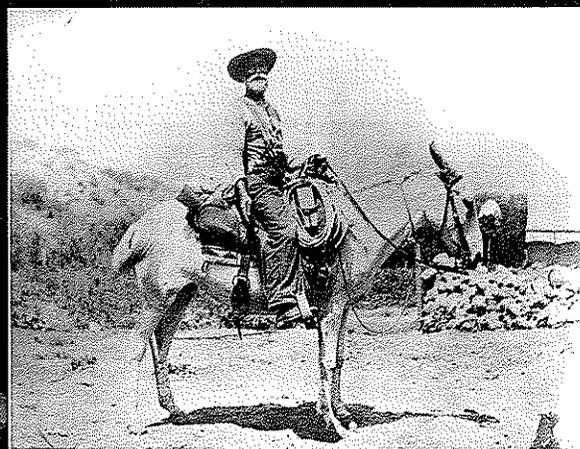


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# Reflections of Grand Canyon Historians

Ideas, Arguments, and First-Person Accounts



*Edited by* **Todd R. Berger**

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Cover background photograph: Grand Canyon visitors along the Colorado River at  
the end of the Bright Angel Trail, November 14, 1906. Photograph courtesy of the  
GCNP Museum Collection (#13655)

Cover inset photograph: Louis Boucher atop his mule, Silver Bell, circa 1910.  
Photograph courtesy of the GCNP Museum Collection (#5972)

*It is the mission of the Grand Canyon Association to cultivate knowledge,  
discovery, and stewardship for the benefit of Grand Canyon National Park  
and its visitors. Proceeds from the sale of this book will be used to support  
the educational goals of Grand Canyon National Park.*

# THE CASE FOR JAMES WHITE'S RAFT TRIP THROUGH GRAND CANYON: THE STORY OF WHITE'S STORY

BY BRAD DIMOCK

*Much of the plausibility (or lack thereof) of James White's tale rests on who said what and how that morphed over time. Once White recovered enough to speak, he told his story to James Ferry of Callville and Captain Wilburn, a barge pilot on the Colorado. He was only able to tell them his party left the San Juan, headed north, and hit the Colorado, where the Indian attack and raft launch took place. White estimated that the float took two weeks. He never named the side canyons he passed, nor the names of any of the main canyons he passed through.*

Ferry and Wilburn carried the tale downriver and told passersby at Hardyville: E. B. Grandin, William Beggs, and J. B. Kipp. These men wrote of White's journey and their accounts were published in San Francisco; Prescott, Arizona; and San Bernardino, California, respectively. As well, White wrote a letter to his brother Joshua telling of his adventure. Sometime that fall General William Palmer's survey crew visited the area and one member, Dr. Charles Parry, interviewed White. His notes from that interview survive. It is significant that all five of these earliest accounts are quite similar.<sup>1</sup>

But it was not long until the story began to shift substantially. Parry later wrote up a long report of White's journey with many geographic locations added, apparently all guesswork by Parry. A companion of Parry's, Maj. Arthur Calhoun, wrote an even more elaborate account of White's journey, adding much drama and detail that appears nowhere in the original five accounts. Much of the geography added by both Parry and Calhoun was, as later river explorers found out, impossible.

As a result, the most widely spread versions of White's

tale—Parry's and Calhoun's—came to be the standard, and the implausible story subsequently came under fire from river runners and historians. Maj. John Wesley Powell, Robert Brewster Stanton, and others dismissed it as fiction. Historian and Powell expedition member Frederick Dellenbaugh called White a "champion prevaricator."

One of these men, Robert Brewster Stanton, took his skepticism to extremes, and in 1907 went so far as to interview White at his home in Trinidad, Colorado. He hired a local stenographer, Roy Lappin, to transcribe the conversation. Afterward, Lappin typed up his notes on eleven pages and turned them over to Stanton. Stanton then edited them, claiming Lappin's notes were, "not verbatim but simply a good skeleton of the interview." Consequently, Stanton expanded the interview to thirty pages, and in an effort to validate his work, had Lappin swear to the final transcript's accuracy. But he did it in a very suspicious manner.

Rather than send his final typescript to Lappin for review and approval, Stanton mailed it to his former boating partner, William Edwards, instructing him to take it to Lappin for verification, but advising him not to let White

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1 Eilean Adams, *Hell or High Water: James White's Disputed Passage through Grand Canyon* (Logan: Utah State Univ. Press, 2001). This book was the primary source for this article and will lead the

reader to many other important works that are quoted and referenced herein.



Fig. 20-1. James White, 1869. Photograph courtesy White family, Greg Adams

or Lappin actually read it. He wrote, “[I]n writing out this report it is not an exact copy of the words but it is absolutely exact in facts. Now I fear if I send this to [Lappin] . . . either he would go to White with it and White would want him to change it or object to his verifying it at all.” Here we have Stanton’s admission that he cooked the books: the transcript was exact in Stanton’s facts, not White’s. Thus it is no surprise that Stanton’s interview holds many details and contradictions available nowhere else. Stanton, as it turns out, had an ax to grind. If a lost prospector could survive the trip on a log raft, it trivialized the deaths of three of Stanton’s men on their Grand Canyon expedition and made Stanton’s surveying trip far less impressive. Sadly, Stanton’s interview, containing the most elaborate descriptions of the journey, cannot be trusted to conform to White’s stated words, and must be dismissed.

The last significant account of White’s journey came when a Coloradan named Thomas Dawson set about to claim White, also a Coloradan, to be deserving of the honors bestowed on Powell as the first through Grand Canyon. Yet his correspondence with White and his daughters indicates that he, like Stanton, wanted White’s tale to conform to his own rendition of the voyage. In Dawson’s case, he wished White to state outright that he had launched on the Grand River. White refused. In fact, his response to

Dawson was perhaps the most explicit indication of where White believed he had launched his raft:

I have come into knowledge of the fact that a charge has been made that I did not reach the Colorado River above the San Juan, but below it. You will notice from the account that I sent you of my trip that when our party started on our prospecting trip we were headed for the Grand River, as Baker said there was gold in that part of the country; but Baker was killed before reaching the Grand River in a canyon between the San Juan and the Grand. . . . Mr. Baker also carried a compass and kept us informed as to the direction we were traveling, and he told us that we were going north to the Grand River.

Baker was killed after we crossed the San Juan River in a canyon between the San Juan and the Grand, being *north* [White’s emphasis] of the San Juan.

I guess the story will be attacked when printed, but I am willing to talk to anyone and convince them that I entered the Colorado River *above* the San Juan and *not below it*. [White’s emphasis]<sup>2</sup>

## WHITE’S ACTUAL STORY

White died in 1927 just shy of ninety years old. His story never changed much, and he never tried to make anything of it, nor denigrate the claims of those who had run the river after him. He died certain he had floated through Grand Canyon, and everyone who actually met him, from the time of his river journey until his death, believed him to be telling the truth to the very best of his comprehension. No one who talked to White believed he was making anything up. With that in mind, it is helpful to remove the filters and agendas of Parry, Calhoun, Stanton, and Dawson, and return to the original five accounts of White’s journey.

The common themes of those accounts are as follows:

- Charles Baker, George Strole, and James White crossed to the north side of the San Juan River and traveled overland about fifty miles.
- They arrived at a cliff overlooking the Colorado. Unable to descend, they backtracked twelve miles up a side canyon, and descended into a side canyon for the night.
- Upon leaving the next morning they were attacked by Utes; Baker was killed.

2 Adams, *Hell or High Water*.

- Strole and White fled to the river with lariats, flour, and little else and built a log raft.
- They launched around August 24 and spent three to four days drifting on flat water.
- They then hit rapids. Strole was drowned and the flour lost.
- White ran many rapids each day, staying on the river twelve to fourteen hours each day. He tied to shore at night.
- He went over one ten-foot fall. He was caught for a long time in a big eddy and prayed his way out.
- White spent fourteen days on the water (maybe sixteen). He had no food for a week. He suffered many inversions, but had tied himself to the raft with a long lariat and was able to reel himself in and climb back aboard. The rapids finally ended.
- He visited with Indians and traded his pistol for the hindquarters of a dog.
- He reached Callville the next day.

### A PLAUSIBLE ROUTE

The only geography that works with this scenario has White entering the Colorado River somewhere in Glen Canyon. Grand Canyon anthropologist Robert Euler took a particular interest in this puzzle and did extensive aerial reconnaissance of White's potential routes. He settled upon Moqui Canyon, 125 miles above Lees Ferry, as the only spot that fit all of White's descriptions.<sup>3</sup>

With a logical launch point, the question of White's journey boils down to three questions: Was it possible? Did he have time? Why didn't he leave the river?

### WAS IT POSSIBLE?

With no way to investigate White's journey directly, it is worth looking at several historic adventures to see what happened to others.

- 1869: Maj. Powell's trip encountered many upsets and swims. But although the men (other than Powell) wore no flotation, no one drowned. Significant variable: warm, moderate, late-summer flows.<sup>4</sup>

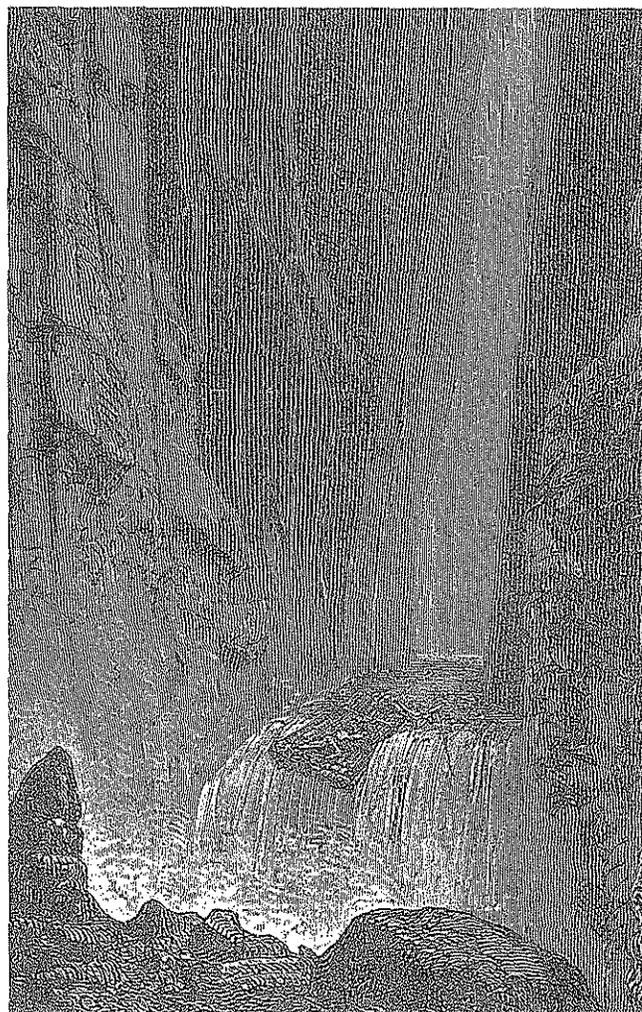


Fig. 20-2. Etching depicting James White's trip in Grand Canyon published in *New Tracks in North America: A Journal of Travel and Adventure Whilst Engaged in the Survey for a Southern Railroad to the Pacific Ocean in 1867-1868* by William A. Bell (New York: Chapman and Hall, 1869)

- 1889: Three drownings occurred in the first twenty-five miles of the first Stanton trip. Significant variable: high summer flows.<sup>5</sup>
- 1940s: Harry Aleson and Georgie White made two attempts to swim and/or log raft the lower part of Grand Canyon. They had poor luck, and were unable even to get the log raft out of their launch eddy. Significant variable: high water, 30,000-50,000 cubic feet per second (cfs).<sup>6</sup>
- 1947: Joe Desloge Jr. and historian Otis "Dock"

3 Robert C. Euler, *First Through Grand Canyon: An Ethnohistorical and Geographical Approach to the Saga of James White*, 1973, unpublished, author's collection.

4 Michael P. Ghiglieri, *First Through Grand Canyon* (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Puma Press, 2003).

5 Robert Brewster Stanton, *Down the Colorado* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965).

6 Richard E. Westwood, *Woman of the River: Georgie White Clark, White-water Pioneer* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997).

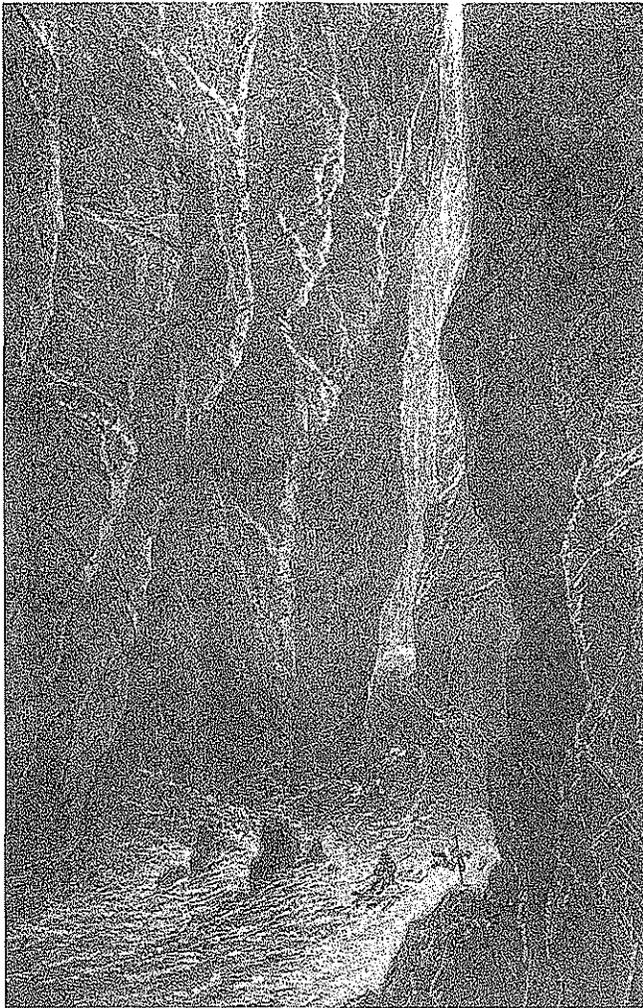


Fig. 20-3. A second etching of White's journey, published in *Wonderful Adventures: A Series of Narratives of Personal Experiences among the Native Tribes of America* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1874)

Marston, on one of Norman Nevills's commercial trips, swam Deubendorff Rapid, with no life jacket. Significant variables: warm, moderate summer flows of 21,000 cfs. Marston said, "It is all in the breathing. Any strong swimmer who knows how and when to breathe will come through without trouble at this stage of water when there is no danger of collision with rocks."<sup>7</sup>

- 1955: Bill Beer and John Daggett swam Grand Canyon

with waterproof bags under their arms, life jackets, and swim fins. Although they had a rough go of it, they survived the trip. Significant variables: moderate flow of 10,000–20,000 cfs; rubber suits to protect from cold water.<sup>8</sup>

- 1988: Manfred Kraus swam the length of Grand Canyon in eleven days. Significant variables: moderate flows of 10,000–20,000 cfs; wet suit to ward off cold post-dam water.<sup>9</sup>
- My own experience of thirty-five years in Grand Canyon watching rookie boatmen rowing aggressively in the wrong direction into the worst possible places—places a log raft could never get to. Yet they all survived.

The fact is, the Colorado River through Grand Canyon is surprisingly benign. In statistical studies by Tom Myers, Grand Canyon boating, per participant, ranks between swimming and waterskiing for injuries, and between bicycling and horseback riding for fatalities.<sup>10</sup> And historically, the common denominators for successfully swimming its rapids boil down to two things: warm water (or good insulation from cold water), and moderate flows around 10,000–20,000 cfs.

As far as temperature goes, for the period of record for the Green and Colorado some miles above Grand Canyon during late August and early September, it ranges between seventy and eighty degrees. Bathwater. So there was no hypothermia issue. But we can never know exactly what flows White had. There is, however, a certain amount of tangential evidence:

- During the pre-dam period of record, the Colorado during late August/early September was far too low to float through the canyon nearly 75 percent of the time. In a few other cases, it was too high. But nearly 25 percent of the time, it ranged between 10,000 and 20,000 cfs—these years mostly being unusually high-water years.<sup>11</sup>
- 1867 was an unusually high-water year, and one of only three known years during that century when the river overflowed into the Salton Sea. High spring floods caused ferry closures on the lower river. The water level did not begin to drop until July 10.<sup>12</sup>

7 Randall Henderson, "Grand Canyon Voyage," part 3, *The Desert Magazine* 11, no. 3 (January 1948): 13.

8 Bill Beer, *We Swam Grand Canyon* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1988).

9 Manfred Kraus, *Grand Canyon, Ein Schwimmer trotz dem Colorado*, VHS video (Munich: Komplett-Video, 1990), liner notes.

10 Thomas M. Myers, Christopher C. Becker, and Lawrence E. Stevens, *Fateful Journey: Injury and Death on Colorado River Trips in Grand Canyon* (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Red Lake Books, 1999).

11 All water levels and river temperatures quoted in this article are from the U.S. Geological Survey at [waterdata.usgs.gov](http://waterdata.usgs.gov).

12 Daniel Trembly MacDougall, *The Salton Sea: A Study of the Geography, the Geology, the Floristics, and the Ecology of a Desert Basin* (Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1914).

- During the time of White's arrival, the river was no longer high enough to run steamboats up as far as Callville, indicating that flood season had passed, but the barges were still servicing Callville, indicating a moderate flow of enough to run a freight barge.

So there is more than a good chance that White stumbled into a remarkably benign stage of river for both temperature and flows. In answer to the first question I laid out above, yes, with good luck, White could have done it.

### DID HE HAVE TIME?

White maintained that he completed the entire journey in fourteen days. Was this possible?

- Glen Canyon, from Moqui Canyon to Lees Ferry, is 125 miles. White's testimony indicated that he took 3.5 days to cover it. At his average of thirteen hours per day, that would amount to 2.75 miles per hour. Plus, he floated all of the first night.
- Grand Canyon is 277 miles long, and White's timetable allots about eight days. That's 2.67 miles per hour.
- From the foot of the Grand Canyon to Callville is sixty-one miles. White claimed about two days, which comes to 2.35 miles per hour.
- At 10,000–20,000 cfs, the Colorado averages four miles per hour. That leaves sixty-six hours (4.5 per day) to spin in eddies, rebuild rafts, negotiate for dog hips, pray, and grow increasingly delirious. Yup, White had plenty of time.

### WHY DIDN'T WHITE LEAVE THE RIVER?

Skeptics occasionally question why White stayed on the obviously hazardous river rather than hiking overland. Why would he stay on the river?

- There were no Utes on the river, and the land-bound Utes now had his horses.
- The last obvious escape route at Lees Ferry was above the rapids. And it was not that obvious—even Maj. Powell missed it.
- By the time the rapids started, White was cliff-bound, and soon, shoeless.
- White had, five years earlier, spent a year at Yuma when steamboat traffic was running 400 miles upstream. He likely expected to reach the steamboat terminus at every bend.

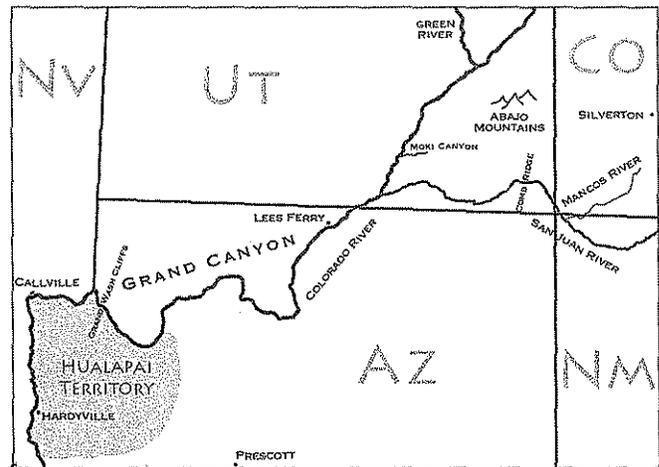


Fig. 20-4. Map of the Four Corners region with major landmarks in White's story indicated. Map courtesy of the author

In short, the river route was:

- improbable, but actually possible;
- inhospitable, but the timing was good;
- a frightful choice, but logical.

### THE ALTERNATIVE: STANTON'S OVERLAND ROUTE

Robert Brewster Stanton spent a great deal of effort trying to prove that White did not pass through the Grand Canyon. But that created a new problem. It was undeniable that he was plucked from his raft on September 7. And there was corroborating evidence that White, Baker, and Strole were in the San Juan Mountains that summer. So if White did not pass through Grand Canyon by raft, how did he get there?

Stanton proposed an alternative path. Rather than going north from the San Juan, White had gone south. And rather than entering the river in Glen Canyon, he entered at the foot of Grand Canyon. In White's interview, when he described going overland from the San Juan to the Colorado in two days, Stanton inserted, "[actually 45 days]."

The main problem with this, other than the time and space discrepancies, is the Hualapai War. In March 1866 Chief Wauba Yuma was murdered by whites, sparking open warfare between Hualapais and the U.S. Cavalry. Miners, soldiers, mail-riders, and travelers were shot on sight when found on Hualapai land. It was not until spring 1869 when Chief Leve Leve made peace with Maj. W. R. Price that overland travel was again practical in northern Arizona.<sup>13</sup>

13 Henry F. Dobyns and Robert C. Euler, *The Walapai People* (Phoenix: Indian Tribal Series, 1976).

Fig. 20-5. White (front row, second from right) and his family, circa 1906. Photograph courtesy White family, Greg Adams



Once again, all who spoke to White believed he was telling the truth to the best of his ability. It was just that some, like Stanton, felt he got a few details wrong. He had mistaken forty-five days for two. He had mistaken south for north. He had mistaken 450 miles for 50. And he had mistaken a sixty-mile stretch of mostly placid, steam-boatable river with one rapid (a stretch it took Jacob Hamblin thirteen hours to cover on spring flows in 1867) for something that White recalled taking two weeks to cover, going twelve to fourteen hours a day through many bad rapids. Those are quite some mistakes.

### WEIGHING PROBABILITIES

Both the river route and the overland route are improbable. Which is more so? Can statistics help? Because hundreds of millions of people can attest that they have never been elected president, does that mean it cannot happen? Because dozens die each year trying to climb Everest, can we say it cannot be summited?

In a simple exercise, James White's great-grandson and I began a trip at Lees Ferry a few years ago and launched, in our minds, 100 imaginary James Whites on one hundred imaginary log rafts. At each rapid or navigational hazard we decided how many out of our remaining James Whites we killed. Some rapids were pretty ugly. At the end of Grand Canyon we had killed off most of our James Whites. But not all of them. And it only takes one.

What do these statistics mean? Nothing at all, actually. As the sample approaches one, the relevance of statistical odds approaches zero.

14 Source as described, copy in author's collection.

### WITNESSES

In the end White's point of departure may always be a matter of opinion. White's much-witnessed river terminus remains undisputed, but we are dependent on White's sketchy story to hypothesize his launch site. A witness to the launch would clinch it. But Baker and Strole died, and other than White, there was no one else there.

Or was there?

What about the Utes who allegedly killed Baker and looted his body and belongings? Why not ask the tribe if there is any record of if, and where, that happened? As it turns out, someone did. At the San Juan County Historical Society in Silverton, Colorado, is an unpublished manuscript entitled, *The First We Know: The Pioneer History of the San Juan*, by Robert J. Bruns, dated 1898. On page 54 Bruns stated, "Bob Dwyer, ex-sheriff of Durango,—who is the first settler of what is now La Platta County—in an interview and narrative told me in November 1996, when questioned on the subject, that when in the Blue Mountains in 1875 with Captain John Moss and Harry Lee, the Utes there had told him that 'not many years ago,' Col. Baker had been killed 'down there by the river,' pointing in the direction of the junction of the Colorado and San Juan rivers. The Ute Indians knew Col. Baker, and an Indian never forgets."<sup>14</sup>

If a raven were to fly directly from the Blue Mountains to the confluence of the San Juan and Colorado, shortly before arriving it would pass directly over the lower reaches of Moqui Canyon, from which Robert Euler and Eilean Adams, White's biographer and granddaughter, agreed that he launched his raft.