Westwater Lost and Found

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Flat open space dominates the scene as one approaches the landing at Cisco. Canada geese generally gather on the small gravel islands upstream of the landing and on the farmland across the river. A few years ago the landing was dirt and mud; now it is a large concrete slab that makes derigging easy as boats and equipment can be thoroughly cleaned and easily loaded onto trucks. The conveniences are improving, with parking and toilet facilities at both the put-in above and take-out below. What is important though is the distance between these two points, which continues to allow us to experience wilderness on this stretch of the Colorado River.

Ironically, we have become the tourists that Westwater residents invited to the region, hoping to develop it and thereby survive in it. Although we came late, we are coming in droves through their magnificent back yard—Westwater Canyon—and like them, we hope to preserve the canyon for our posterity. Had we come sooner, perhaps we might have injected life into their economy and shared a special relationship with the residents. Certainly we would have enjoyed their stories of the region. But this was not to be, the town at Westwater faded into obscurity and gifted us with their solitude. Like them, we wake up to the sound of coyotes yapping at dawn, trains passing throughout the night, and Colorado River water slapping at the shores and we thank God that we have places like this to visit. Perhaps they didn't leave.
During two exploratory Westwater trips in 1998 and 2000, my colleagues and I were able to experience the canyon anew. One trip took us to a half mile inside the Utah border where we searched for evidence of Charles Brock's dugout. We studied old and new maps and read newspaper descriptions while trying to pinpoint the location of the dugout and recreate the scene of Captain Davis shooting Brock and his gang in 1892. Although our search was unsuccessful, we discovered plenty of evidence of human activity in the area. One member of the party even found what looked like the door to an old iron stove, with the name “DAVIS” inscribed on it.

The next morning as we floated toward the Westwater launch we discovered a large unidentified circular object lying flat on the river bank in the vicinity of a Champion Water Elevator that was used for irrigation and identified on an 1894 survey map. Further downstream we stopped at Westwater Creek and, after a struggle with mud and tamarisk, found a very faint pictograph. The area was rich in historical remains, including a rock panel with numerous names inscribed on it. Most of the names didn’t belong there and were fairly recent, but others had been inscribed by former cowboys and residents of Westwater, including E. C. Malin. There was also an old sheep-shearing yard with numerous sheds and corrals that extend between fifty and seventy yards and were likely built by former Westwater Ranch owner Emmett Elizondo or by J. W. Hardison, who in the early 1930s tried to rescue Westwater’s dwindling economy. The site is on private property and is not accessible without permission of the owner.

In addition to Wild Horse Cabin there are other historical structures in the vicinity. At Little Hole, instead of just the customary march up to the petroglyphs, we briefly combed the area looking for evidence of a bootlegging operation or copper mine. At Big Hole we found the barrel rings and the “CAMP” inscription. We left such discoveries intact for professional archeologists to interpret.

One morning while camped at Little Dolores, in preparation for the inner gorge rapids, our group read the 1916 Kolb and Loper account of their Westwater experience titled *Trip Thru Westwater Canon Was Like Tickling Dynamite with a Lighted*
The exaggerated descriptions they gave of the rapids, and particularly of Skull (Big Whirlpool) Rapid, entertained us. One guide suggested he wanted to begin a tradition of using the article on river trips just before tackling the whitewater.

These are new experiences we had with what had been to many of us unknown canyon history. The region came alive as we identified the human activity in each area we visited. From the state border to the takeout at Cisco, we imagined the goings on of a Westwater world that has been forgotten. The vision began before historic men and women arrived, then took on the elements of an old western movie, and continued to the time of the Great Depression. Can we ever look at Westwater the same?

Imagine 500 to 1,000 railroad workers in the valley spiking down railroad ties for the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad. Visualize the small obscure town at Westwater during the next drive along the railroad tracks on the way to the launch. In the town is a gas station, a store, a small hotel, a railroad station, a school, and a large sheep-shearing plant, with several section houses and ranches along the road. At the river there are additional ranches scattered upstream and downstream, and there’s Owen’s graveyard and a sanitarium. What about the dirt road you drive in on? Is it part of the old Salt Lake Wagon road built in 1858? At the launch, while making your way to the river to see what it’s running, imagine mounted Ute Indians crossing the Colorado River just upriver, traveling north and south between mountain ranges. Or imagine an earlier Archaic or Fremont Indian hunting party at Little Hole with bow and arrows—or perhaps an atlatl—stalking bighorn sheep.

There are fingerprints that people historically left at Westwater and that we are now identifying. Many details are missing but there is a foundation of clues for further research. It is highly unlikely that we have a complete chronology of Westwater boaters, and because the area was isolated, we may never find anyone else to add to the list. What we have though is the beginning of a long overdue awareness of the history of the upper Colorado River. Boaters’ earlier experiences with the river are invaluable for modern river runners. Knowing that boaters fear the canyon now—with all of the specialized equipment, maps, and accumulated experience with whitewater—we can
begin to comprehend what went through the minds of early boaters once they entered the gorge and realized there was no turning back.

Westwater Canyon has an exciting natural and human history that should not be ignored. We should not lose the opportunity to grab and save what little information still exists pertaining to Westwater. It is in these few places on earth that we still feel, because of a shared experience, within reach of those who traveled our route before. Each river trip recreates a pioneering experience, with new encounters and situations for each cubic foot per second change in the river. We can ride the roller coasters at 6,000 cfs and sweat from fear at the possibility of getting trapped in the Room Of Doom at 15,000 cfs. Our chances of successfully running the canyon have improved because we are more familiar with it after years of cumulative experience, but we are still prone to accidents and in the grasp of uncertain adventure once the steep black cliffs force us to go forward.

The history of the Green and lower Colorado Rivers has been extensively studied. The wonderful accounts and interviews
completed over the years by men such as Robert Brewster Stanton, Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, and Otis “Dock” Marston have left us with much knowledge. But they paid little attention to the upper Colorado River and its tributaries above the confluence with the Green. Westwater Canyon has had a legendary reputation since the first written reference to it, in 1889, which described it as “Hades Canyon where the woman drowned.” For many years, though, accurate information on the canyon was hard to come by. Now, seventy-five years after Westwater’s heyday as a small railroad town, most of those who then wandered the canyon by trail or boat have passed on. It is now that we need to preserve what we know about this place, before Westwater’s history recedes into legend or dies with the former inhabitants.