High Wide And Handsome

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A Note On The Sources

For all the impact that Norman Nevills had on the history of the Colorado River, sources on him are surprisingly scarce. The most obvious one for this book is the man himself. In 1988, Joan Nevills-Staveley, eldest daughter of Norman and Doris, decided to donate her father’s extensive collection of letters, records, files, and photographs to the University of Utah’s Marriott Library Special Collections Department. Included in that donation were several small, slim, penciled notebooks that contained his diary entries during several of his early river trips, namely 1938, 1940, 1941, and 1942. Also included were various other journals—including Doris’s published account of their 1940 expedition—and Nevills’s own typed transcriptions of almost all of his journals, which sometimes differ radically from the daily, on-the-river account in his notebooks.

I was happy to be the person assigned to arrange and describe the Nevills collection and spent almost two years going through every piece of paper. From the start, it was evident that Nevills was, as Joan describes him, a “squirreler,” meaning that he saved everything. Included in the collection, besides the notebooks and transcriptions mentioned above, were thousands of letters, receipts, applications for draft deferments, brochures, clippings; in short, a virtually complete record of the last decade of his life in Mexican Hat. The collection is contained in forty archival boxes. The family faced a terrible, heartbreaking tragedy when Norman and Doris were suddenly taken away. But if there is any silver lining in that dark cloud, it was that Norman left such a complete and comprehensive legacy in the form of his unpurged papers. The result is that today’s researchers have a perfect window onto the small world of river running in the early, formative years—from the top looking down—onto the premier riverman of his time.

Nevills kept his daily diary in small, spiral-bound notebooks, written almost without exception in pencil. His handwriting was hurried and cramped and can be hard to read. The entries were usually short and to the point. There was little hesitation in him, for a question mark rarely appears in any of his journals. Fortunately, during the long, cold, dark—no electricity—winter nights in Mexican Hat, he sat at his old Underwood manual typewriter and pounded out detailed transcriptions of the daily diaries, and it is these documents that form this book. They were at first a strict word-for-word transcription, but as the years went on, he increasingly
expanded on the events of that day—and indeed, embellished them too—while it was still relatively fresh, typing out the notes and adding other thoughts and observations. So instead of Nevills’s quick jottings from a pitching boat at the foot of a pounding rapid, we have his those notes plus later reflections on those same events. Yet even though it is not faithful to the primary original, in a way, the typed transcriptions are even more revealing of his character, for with them, he realized that they might someday become his legacy to his family and to history.

No original diaries exist for the years 1946, 1947, 1948, and 1949. Typed versions are in the Nevills papers for all those years save one, and from 1946 on they are increasingly polished and written to be read. For many years it was thought that there was no journal or transcription for the 1949 Green River and Grand Canyon trips. In the course of research at the Huntington Library in 1991, I found no trace of a 1949 diary, either the original or a transcription. However, while there on a Fellowship in 2004, during which I had more time to look, I ran across a handwritten transcription of notes he made on his maps during the 1949 Grand Canyon expedition. This is the only documentation from Nevills himself of the 1949 voyages. Obviously, as he had done with all of his previous journals, he intended to go back and type up his notes during the winter of 1949–50, but the unfortunate events of September 1949 precluded his doing so. No trace of the original nor of those for the previous three years has been found. Nevills’s papers were shuffled in the 1950s and 1960s, when an attempt was made to produce a biography, and the family has kept in their possession certain memorabilia, such as Doris’s diaries, but those original documents have been lost.

In the interest of readability, I have mildly edited the journals in the following ways: whenever Nevills simply listed the time and location, such as on July 7, 1938, when he wrote: “10:35 A.M. MILE 63¾. 11:00 A.M. MILE 61, 11:20 A.M. MILE 59...” and so on, these have been deleted. He was careful to note the time of arrival and departure at a given location, whether it was for camp, or a lunch stop, or at a rapid. He would note,—for example, on June 25, 1940, in Browns Park—“Stop here a few minutes to stretch. 3:15 P.M.—3:27 P.M.” Feeling that these would detract from the narrative unless part of a sentence, these references were deleted. Also, when he listed the passengers and crew at the beginning of each journal, he often put in their full addresses; this information is long out-of-date, and was deleted. I have left intact Nevills’s tendency to emphasize a rapid or name by putting it in all capital letters, and I did nothing to correct the tense jumps from past to present and back again, often on the same page. I have also retained Nevills’s spellings of certain words. Mileages given in the Green and Colorado River journals are in descending order downriver toward Lees Ferry, Arizona, and then in ascending order below that point. Lees Ferry is the official boundary between the upper and lower basin states of the Colorado River drainage area, and all river mileages are measured to and from that point.
Other than those corrections and deletions, the journals are essentially just how he wrote them. Any errors of fact or interpretation that appear in the annotations, however, can of course be laid at no door but my own.

It must be said at this point that Nevills was often accused—in life and after his death—of exaggeration, of molding facts to suit his stories and his ego, of self-aggrandizement, and of downright lying about his origins, accomplishments, and river career. This would seem to make the journals a poor source for information about the man and his life. But many of these accusations came from enemies that he had made at certain points in his career. Some were the result of his tendency to hog the spotlight. Some were personality clashes brought about by too many days on a low-water river trip. And some were simple jealousy of his place as the preeminent river runner of his time. Nevills, for his own reasons, would exaggerate the speed of the river, the height of the waves, and the danger of the rapids. He said he did this to make people aware of the need for safety and to make them feel better when they were through the rapid. Some people just shrugged this off, but others were offended by his lack of concern for facts and figures. Likewise, he tended to tell wild stories about places they visited, to make up new names so that his passengers could feel they had “discovered” the canyon or arch, and to build a whole mythos around river running. For instance, in camp at the mouth of Forbidding Canyon, where he would lay over for a day to hike to Rainbow Bridge, Nevills would stage a spectacular show by pushing a bonfire off the cliff near the camp, then booming out a wholly fabricated story about Yogi, the River God. Passengers loved this, but again, some of his contemporaries felt that by doing these kinds of stunts, he was making light of the river. Gaylord Staveley, his son-in-law, wrote of him: “Besides being preoccupied with passenger safety, especially on-river, he worked very hard to make every trip a mixture of adventure, exploration, games, tall tales, and stunts.”

There was no denying he was a show-off; in calm water, if they came upon a large drifting log, Nevills would climb onto the log and do handstands while the cameras clicked. Onshore, he was famous for climbing cliffs and slopes that others hesitated to try, even if it sometimes got him into trouble, as his hazardous climb of Diamond Peak in 1948 demonstrates. Even though he was terrified of rattlesnakes, if one was found in camp, he would pick it up just to show off. So, while some of these stunts make it into his journals, the basic facts found in them are more than corroborated by information found in letters, journals kept by passengers and boatmen, and later research.

Finally, it must be said in his defense that such tale-telling has a long tradition among those who seek the outdoor life—from the mountain men to the keel-boaters to modern commercial boatmen—of which it could also be said that many of them never let facts get in the way of a good story.

To annotate the journals, I have drawn on a wide variety of resources, from the most primary to the most modern. First and foremost were the
letters of Nevills himself; these are, in fact, the bulk of the Nevills Papers. Written on the same manual typewriter that he used to transcribe his journals, Nevills kept not only the original but also carbon copies of virtually all of his replies—a fact almost unheard of in archival research. They are long—up to eight single-spaced pages—detailed, and fascinating. The letters, in fact, give an even clearer impression of the man than his journals do, for they were written spontaneously and mailed: “fire and forget” we might say today. He wrote to potential clients, he wrote to potential sponsors, he wrote to his friends and his family. Obviously, Nevills spent a great deal of time on his correspondence. It was essential if he wanted to maintain his contacts among friends and potential clients; although there were building-to-building telephones in Mexican Hat, there were no outside lines. Indeed, given the volume of correspondence, one cannot help but wonder how much he spent on typewriter ribbons and carbon paper. Many of the quotes and other facts found in the notes come from these letters.

Another source from the Nevills Papers are copies of diaries and journals sent to him by passengers on his trips that are, in some cases, very revealing of how Nevills ran his trips and what kinds of people went on them. During his meteoric career, many local and national publications featured articles about Nevills; he was big news in certain circles and copies of virtually all of these articles are found in the Nevills Papers. They represent publications of all kinds, from the *Green River (Wyoming) Star*, *Salt Lake Tribune*, and *Deseret News* to national publications such as *Life*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *National Geographic*, *Desert Magazine*, *Arizona Highways*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*. Among the authors of the journals and the articles are some of the best-known names in America, such as Barry Goldwater, Wallace Stegner, Randall Henderson, and Ernie Pyle.

From the original writings to the digital world, the next source for annotations was an e-mail list consisting of Colorado River historians, scholars, bibliographers, academics, and recovering boatmen—sometimes in the same person—and others with a wide and deep interest and body of knowledge about the history of running the Colorado River. By a cyber-river and around a virtual campfire, they collectively know more about Colorado River history than just about anyone in the world, and I can never thank them enough for their quick and reasoned answers to many e-mail queries. Cort Conley, historian of Idaho rivers and places, deserves an extra thanks for reading through the 1946 journal and notes, and saving me from the embarrassment that can come to a historian who is writing outside his field. Finally, a special thanks to Earle Spamer, Dr. Al Holland, and Brad Dimock, a close collaborator in this project. I never would have done it without them.

In 1991 I spent a week at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, an institution with beautiful buildings and grounds, and some of the richest collections of books, art, and archival papers in the world. What can only be described as a posh neighborhood might seem an odd place for
a voluminous jumble of materials about river rats, but that’s where to find the collection of Otis Reed Marston. Marston set himself up as the historian of the Colorado River, and over several decades collected—by fair means and (according to some) foul—diaries, letters, official records, maps, films, photographs, and oral histories; anything and everything that would add to the great, all-encompassing book that he was forever planning to write about those who braved the rapids and canyons of the Colorado and the Green. Alas for history, the book was never published, and the Marston Collection remains essentially unplumbed despite the efforts of several historians, myself included.

For certain annotations in the Nevills journals, I relied on my notes from the Marston Collection made during the 1991 visit and another in 2004, when I returned for a longer stay. Even though I was researching another topic, tidbits about Nevills kept cropping up. No matter what one might say of Marston, he was an indefatigable collector and keeper. Like Nevills, he too was a “squirreler.” During that decade-old research, as well as my more recent visit, and through letters and e-mail, the curator of the Marston Collection, William Frank, has been unfailingly helpful and informative. The small world of Colorado River history owes Frank an immense debt for making sense out of the jumbled mess that first came to the Huntington shortly before Dock’s death. Other archival sources that contain information about Nevills are the Colorado River collections in Cline Library Special Collections at Northern Arizona University, including the papers of P.T. Reilly, Bill Belknap, Tad Nichols, and the Kolb brothers. The Cline also houses a remarkable series of interviews with former boatmen and river runners, including Joan and Sandra Nevills, and Lois Jotter.

Published sources that mention Norman Nevills, besides the articles mentioned above, are few. He figures prominently in David Lavender’s River Runners of the Grand Canyon, and was the subject of a slim biography by Nancy Nelson called Any Time, Any Place, Any River: The Nevills of Mexican Hat. In 1987, William Cook wrote a brief account of the 1938 voyage called The Wen, the Botany, and the Mexican Hat: The Adventures of the First Women Through Grand Canyon on the Nevills Expedition. Additionally, a chapter about their San Juan River trips appeared in The Inverted Mountains, edited by Rodericky Peattie.

Both of Norman and Doris’s daughters, Joan Nevills-Staveley and Sandra Nevills Reiff, reviewed the manuscript for accuracy, and contributed personal and family information that only they could know. Another good source by someone who knew him well is, “Norman Nevills: Whitewater Man of the West,” an article in the spring 1987 issue of Utah Historical Quarterly by P.T. Reilly. Reilly was a boatman for Nevills in the late 1940s. In the summer 1993 issue of Blue Mountain Shadows, I published an article titled, “‘Never Was Anything So Heavenly’: Nevills Expedition on the San Juan River.” Finally, in the spring 2004 issue of the Boatman’s Quarterly Review—the official publication of the Grand Canyon River Guides Association—
Gaylord Staveley wrote a lengthy article about Nevills, excerpted from a forthcoming book about the history of river running. Other than that and some tributes published after his death, little else can be found in the literature. It is to correct that lack of information about this fascinating, complex man and his world that the present volume is presented.