Hell Or High Water
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Published by Utah State University Press

Adams, Eilean.
Hell Or High Water: James White's Disputed Passage through Grand Canyon, 1867.
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The next morning, September 8, at first light, the barge *Colorado* cast off, caught the current smartly, and was soon on her way downriver amid farewells from shore.

Captain Wilburn was pleased; last night the entire male population of Callville, plus Tillman, McAllister, and himself, had crowded into Ferry’s little house and listened to White’s account of his raft voyage. Curiosity overwhelmed their natural concern for an injured man, and they were eager to hear his story.

Ferry had spruced White up, helped him into a clean shirt, and propped him up on his cot. What the men saw now was a man of medium height, about five foot, seven inches, with a broad stocky build and massive chest; despite obvious weight loss, he was well muscled, attesting to recent hard physical labor. He had a broad, high forehead, a wide mouth, fleshy lobed ears laid flat against a large skull, and a strong, aquiline nose. His complexion was fair, with deeply set, heavily lidded blue eyes, shielded by unruly eyebrows bleached nearly to invisibility. His demeanor apparently held no clues to his thoughts.

Like Ferry, the settlers and riverboat men had the usual frontier experience with physical illness and a typical nineteenth-century attitude toward the delicate subject of insanity. At the moment of White’s
rescue, they had all seen signs which prompted one of them to offer the homely diagnosis of “some loco’d”; even the Paiutes called the haiko Ya-Na, which meant “crazy.” But now he seemed completely normal; he spoke coherently, if with hesitation, apparently in full possession of his wits. In any case, the men took him at face value, ready to forget their earlier impressions.

White’s story was brief: He told them about the prospecting party and the two other men with him, about digging for gold along the San Juan River, about turning north to find a shortcut to the Grand River; described their ambush by the Indians, and how Captain Baker was killed coming out of a side canyon. He told them that he and his friend, George, had taken ropes and supplies from the horses and escaped by walking down to the river, where they built their raft and set off; that they had had good sailing for awhile, until George was washed off in a rapid and drowned. He paused, the men waited for him to continue, but White merely stared off into the distance and remained silent.

So the questions began. The settlers were curious about the river upstream and the rapids White had been through, and for very good reason. Just a few months earlier, Jacob Hamblin and a couple of other Mormon men had come downriver from the Grand Wash Cliffs, through Boulder Canyon, to Callville—roughly a sixty-mile trip—in two days. Their little jaunt had produced none of the effects the men had seen in White. That trip had not resulted in anyone being injured or driven anyone “loco.” So they wondered exactly where White had come from and how far he had traveled. No one knew what was upstream of Grand Wash; it was that completely unknown territory called Big Cañon. If that was where White had been, it surely meant that he had to be the first person to see this mysterious canyon. They wanted every last drop of information about it.

They asked first where he and his partners came from, then who the Indians were and why they did not follow the escaping men to the river. How had he built his raft? What did he mean by “rapids”; how many were there and how big were they? If he was in a canyon, how high were the walls and was there any way out? What did he have to eat? White’s answers were hesitant and vague. When they asked how long he had been on his raft, his obvious weariness cut off further questions.
Most of the men were satisfied, knowing there would be opportunities later to find out more, but Wilburn knew he had no other chance to find out the details White had omitted, especially and specifically how long he had been on the river. When Ferry left the settlement—curious to investigate White’s statement that Indians had taken his gun in exchange for some dog meat—Wilburn convinced White to tell him more about the river voyage.

When Ferry returned later that night, he heard what the captain had managed to elicit from an exhausted White: fourteen days on the raft, hair-raising descriptions of turbulent rapids, and the awesome canyon landscape. These, and White’s condition when rescued, strongly convinced them that this stranger had come through the unknown Big Cañon. They were sobered by the implications, believing firmly that this was more than an ordinary journey. After rehashing what they had learned, they agreed that Ferry should question White further to settle some of the confusing points before making his usual mail run to Hardyville.

Wilburn arrived at the mining town of El Dorado Canyon by afternoon. Here a lively audience could usually be found: miners, workers from the stamp mill, a couple of old timers from the Techatticup mine, steamboat crews, and the occasional stranger—like the gentleman named E. B. Grandin.

Captain Wilburn related White’s adventures in a straightforward, undramatic manner. The usual lore of the Colorado consisted of tales of Indian raids and ambushes, flash floods that wiped out whole towns, mine and mill accidents by the dozens. But the story of White and his raft was different. Here was a man just like themselves who had solved, however unintentionally, the mystery of Big Cañon, beaten the odds and Mother Nature, and lived to tell about it.

Later that evening Grandin wrote a letter to his friend, Frank Alling, back in San Francisco:

El Dorado Canyon, Sept.

A man by the name of White arrived at Callville on the 7th instant, who has come all the way from Green River on a raft. He was badly bruised, nearly starved, and almost entirely naked. Judging by his appearance he has had a rough time, and according to his statements he has had many hairbreadth escapes. He gives the following
account: He was in company with two men, who were formerly residents of St. Louis, Missouri; one of them was known as Captain Baker and the other was named George Strode [sic]. They were prospecting together on a branch of the Colorado that they called San Juan River. It is between the Little Colorado and the Green Rivers. I think it is sometimes called “The Blue.” About the 24th of last month they were attacked by Indians. Captain Baker was killed at the first fire, White and Strode got away, and succeeded in gathering some rope and some ten pounds of flour, and with their guns made for the river. At the river they were fortunate enough to find some drift wood, with which they made a raft, and embarked, preferring to trust to the river rather than to stay there and lose their scalps. Some three days after starting Strode was washed overboard and lost. White continued on alone and after running fourteen days reached Callville. Soon after starting the flour was either washed overboard or spoiled by getting wet, and he was seven days at one time with nothing to eat. Then he luckily struck some Indians, from whom he bought a dog, giving the Indians his revolver. He managed to make out on dog meat until he reached Callville.

He describes the Big Cañon of the Colorado as terrific, a succession of rapids and falls. Some of the falls, he thinks, are fully ten feet perpendicular. His raft would plunge over such places, rolling over and over, and he was compelled to lash himself fast to keep from being washed away from it altogether. He says that there are rocky cliffs overhanging the river that he believes to be a mile and a half high.

White thinks that they were in the vicinity of what will prove to be good mines there, on the San Juan River, judging from the prospects they obtained.

Yrs, etc. E. B. Grandin

Next morning Captain Wilburn set off on his run to Hardyville; it was late afternoon when he nosed the Colorado into the muddy riverbank by the town. Here he found the usual bustle of activity: barges and steamboats either docked or heading in and out—upstream or more likely downstream; the stagecoach from California headed east to Prescott; miners, surveyors, ranchers, soldiers, and transients busily transacting their business. After taking advantage of the amenities of Hardyville (which included a bath,
clean clothes, and a good meal), he was soon telling White’s story to a new audience.

He provided accurate information where he could and made guesses about things to which he had paid scant attention during his talk with White. He had good reason to stick to the truth; his listeners were by and large natural skeptics, suspicious of tall tales. But they found his graphic description of White’s physical condition, spectral appearance, tangled white-hemp hair and beard, and empty eyes—all of which he had seen himself—authentic. One particularly avid listener was J. B. Kipp, a regular traveler between San Bernardino and Prescott, who asked a lot of questions.

That night Kipp wrote a letter to Simon Wolff in San Bernardino, giving him all the details he could recall:

Hardyville, Sept. 10

Sir:
Capt. Wilbern [sic] arrived here last night from Callville with a load of salt and lime, and reports the arrival of a man by the name of James White, at that place, who has traveled some seven hundred miles on a raft, where a white man has never traveled before, and who sets the question forever at rest about the big Canon spoken of by Capt. Ives as being navigable. He says no boat can ever be got through the canon, as he passed over rapids ten feet in height.

Mr. White says his company consisted of Captain Baker, George Strobe [sic] and himself. Capt. Baker and George Strobe were from St. Louis; Mr. White is from Panosha, Iowa. The party left Colorado city to find placer diggings; they arrived at the San Juan river without accident, and commenced prospecting; sunk a shaft fifteen feet deep but found no bed rock; they tried the dirt and got twenty-five cents to the pan; a short distance from that place they sunk another shaft and found a hard cement, in which they obtained gold. Shortly after this they were attacked by about fifty Indians, and Capt. Baker and the mules were killed at the first fire. Mr. White and Mr. Strobe caught up some ropes, a hatchet and about twelve pounds of flour and ran for their lives toward the river. On their arrival at that point, they had but little time to consider over their misfortunes, as they expected the Indians to make their appearance every minute, and they immediately constructed a rude raft and started on their
perilous journey down the Colorado, some seven hundred miles. Three days after they started, in going over a rapid, Mr. Strobe lost his hold, fell off from the raft and was drowned. The flour, all the food they started with, was also washed off, and Mr. White was left without a mouthful of anything to eat. Mr. White lashed himself to the raft, and, as he describes his feelings, “he was bound to keep above the water dead or alive.” He traveled from twelve to fourteen hours each day, and at night he would tie up his raft to some shelving rocks and fasten himself to it, knowing that if it got away from him, there was no hope of his saving his life, as it was impossible for him to climb the walls of the canon—there was but one way for him, and that was to continue his course down the river. He saw some lizards in the canon, and caught a few and ate them. He lived on two rawhide knife-scabbards for two days, and for seven days he had nothing to eat, but continued his course. At times in going over the rapids, he was under water so long that he had no strength to assist himself, but the friendly rope kept him safe until his strength again returned. His hair and beard has turned a reddish white from exposure; he is about thirty-five years old, but looks as if he was seventy; he cannot stand erect, on account of the position he was in on the raft; he is one sore from his hips to his feet. On his arrival at the mouth of the Rio Virgin he saw some Indians, one of whom swam off to him and pushed his raft ashore; he had two pistols; the Indians stole one of them and also his hatchet, the other he traded for the hind-quarters of a dog, one of which he ate for supper, and the other he had for breakfast on the day of his arrival at Callville. On his arrival, Mr. Ferry summoned the chiefs to appear at his house, and when they came he told them of the treatment Mr. White had met with from the Indians, and told them unless they sent and got the pistol and hatchet, he would send to Fort Mohave for one hundred soldiers. The chiefs immediately sent Indians out for the missing articles.

Mr. Ferry will attend to all the wants of Mr. White, as his hand is always open to suffering humanity. Mr. White wishes the papers to publish his account, so that the friends of Baker and Strobe may hear of their sad fate.

Yours, J. B. Kipp

Living so close to the mystery of Big Cañon, Wilburn’s audiences in Hardyville were like those of El Dorado Canyon: They saw in
White a frontiersman like themselves—a man of the West, not an eastern scientist or explorer—and they identified with him and the harrowing escape that had brought him down the river to Callville.

The steamboats and other barges soon departed, carrying the exciting news of the raft voyage to the downriver Colorado River community—Fort Mohave, Iretaba City, Liverpool Landing, Aubrey City, Ehrenberg, Mineral City, Castle Dome, Fort Yuma, and Arizona City.