Hell Or High Water
Adams, Eilean

Published by Utah State University Press

Adams, Eilean.
Hell Or High Water: James White's Disputed Passage through Grand Canyon, 1867.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9399.

→ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9399

🔍 For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=203803
Chapter 7  The News Spreads East

Of all the Colorado River towns flourishing in 1867, few were more colorful than Hardyville. Created only three years earlier by an unlikely, but energetic, entrepreneur named William Harrison Hardy and backed by steamboat pioneer George Johnson, it soon grew from a simple trading post into a bustling crossroads community, with a ferry that linked the state of California to Arizona Territory and points east.

The steamboats and barges that opened the mines and settlements along the Colorado River included such wonderful ladies as the old Colorado, Mohave, Esmerelda, Nina Tilden, and Cocopah I and had recently been joined by the Cocopah II, whose clean lines, shiny paint, large paddle wheel, and shallow draft made her the newest “Queen” of the Colorado. The steamboats and their ungainly sisters, the barges, had carried soldiers, miners, ranchers, and merchants, as well as their equipment and products, into the territory and carried out millions of dollars in gold, silver, copper, and lead from mines hundreds of miles upriver.

These steamboats were remarkable; built in San Francisco or Sacramento, they were dismantled, loaded into sturdy brigs, and sailed around the Baja and up the Mar de Cortez (later renamed the Gulf of California) to the fanning delta of the Colorado River, where they were reassembled in the estuary. The shifting currents and the daily tidal bore—
that broad, six-foot wall of seawater whose roar was like a locomotive and whose inexorable power could and did capsize or ground small vessels—transformed these efforts into a dangerous and exciting business.

The rewards of this river commerce were great. The Picacho placers, the Planet Lode north of La Paz, El Dorado Canyon, Techatticup, and Queen City—all these and more were magnets that drew thousands to the Colorado River. But there were also disasters: the flood that swept away an entire town within a few hours, the erratic current that shifted and carved a new channel, leaving La Paz high and dry, miles from the new riverbank.

The joys, follies, and perils of steamboating on the Colorado were very different from those of the Mississippi or the Sacramento; on the Colorado, you could run aground even if your boat drew only two feet. The Colorado was disgustingly shallow and wildly capricious about the way it rearranged its sandbars. The one you avoided yesterday was gone today, but over there was a new one where none had ever been before. And navigating at night? Ah, well, that was foolhardy at best and disastrous at worst, which was why all boats headed for shore at sunset. Or a new rock just under the surface could sink your boat in minutes. It often seemed that steamboating on the Colorado was a form of entertainment; indeed, a captain’s most fervent prayer was that when he made a fool of himself (and he surely would sooner or later), it would not be in full view of a bunch of hooting spectators.

Hardyville had grown with the steamboats, and Hardy’s influence and reputation had increased with it. His appearance did not match his importance. A short, wiry fellow with a long, narrow head, big nose, jug-like ears, and a mouth well hidden behind a scruffy beard and mustache, he dressed like an ordinary worker and kept his straw-colored hair hidden under a battered felt hat. None of this fooled anyone; he had a finger in every pie and knew everyone in town and nearly all who passed through it, whether by ferry, steamboat, stagecoach, on horseback, or afoot.

Jim Ferry rode into Hardyville on September 10, made his usual stop at the post office, took advantage of the same amenities that Wilburn had enjoyed, and joined the captain and Bill Hardy over supper for another discussion of White. As expected, Hardy was avidly interested in the story; within a few months he would play a significant role in spreading it back east.
Later, Ferry and Wilburn met a young man named William Beggs, who, like everyone else on the river, was fascinated with James White and his raft voyage. Beggs wanted a scoop, and he intended to get it from these two rescuers who had heard the story straight from White himself. Beggs bragged that he could take the story straight to Prescott and get it published in the *Arizona Miner*—even promised to send the men copies of the newspaper that carried his article.

Beggs kept Ferry and Wilburn busy with questions. As Wilburn had discovered with Grandin and Kipp earlier, he and Ferry were still hazy about a few details, but their answers were straightforward, and credible to Beggs. After a couple of hours spent exhausting the men’s knowledge, he went back to his room and drafted his account. There should be no delay getting to Prescott now that the San Bernardino stage was back on a schedule; this year it had been interrupted often by the Colorado floods, the worst since 1862. He was sure that John Marion, the *Miner*’s new editor, would appreciate this story.

September 14, 1867, was a red-letter day for the new editor of the *Arizona Miner*. Marion, a dark, homely man of thirty, was an intense fighter against moral wrongs and mortal mistakes, whether just in Prescott or across the entire United States. He had come to the territory in 1863 on the brig *Hidalgo*, landing across the river from Fort Yuma in Arizona City, still queasy from the ride. There had been interesting options; he had investigated the new strike in Prescott, had hunted and mined gold, but had soon decided that he would rather be a newspaperman. In ’64, he became the new typesetter for the new *Arizona Miner*. Now he was both owner and editor.

His purchase of the newspaper was closely tied to the fact that in 1866, Pai Indians living in and around the south rim of Big Cañon had literally declared war on every white man in Arizona Territory. The Walapai attack in early February of ’67 had led directly to the unfortunate death of Marion’s predecessor, Emmet Bentley. Bentley’s arrow wound was not considered serious at the time, but tetanus, the common and deadly companion of such wounds, had killed him before the month was out.

Many of Marion’s observations as he walked along Montezuma Street that fall morning—like the patchy frost on the ground and the absurdity of Sheriff Bourke’s fall from his horse the night before—
would find their way into that day’s edition. And he clearly enjoyed contemplating the delicious jabs he would take, in print, at Jack Moore’s political aspirations.

The Miner, originally a biweekly, had just become a weekly. This created more work but did not affect the local news of the territory; it was the outside news that was the problem. Strange as it may seem, the national news traveled from the East all the way to California and then, by stagecoach, back to Prescott. When the Colorado was in flood, as it had been this spring, the coaches could not make the crossing, and the news had been limited to the local Indian predations, mining stories, and general trivia. But now things were back to normal; as a bonus, he had the governor’s message to offer this week. And he looked forward to the extension of the telegraph lines that would make this news gathering a less awkward and frustrating exercise.

William Beggs arrived in Prescott just in time to make the deadline for the September 14 edition. As predicted, Marion was more than ready to accept White’s route from the Green-Grand River area through Big Cañon as a completely reasonable one. Marion was an avid reader of Denver’s Rocky Mountain News, whose coverage of Colorado’s mountain regions was excellent, and he had a good grasp of western geography. Although he claimed no special knowledge of the unexplored parts of the West, he was aware that there were few routes open to White that could bring him to Callville on a raft. The events of the past year, with the Pai on the warpath (and who knew better than he?), had shown with great clarity what a price any white man paid for being caught in their territory south of Big Cañon, even in groups and with armed escorts. He had little trouble believing that the Colorado River, however cruel or turbulent, offered a lone white man better odds than the Walapai.

Beggs’s article was set almost immediately in a prominent position on page two:

**NAVIGATION OF THE BIG CAÑON**

**A TERRIBLE VOYAGE**

Sept. 14, 1867

Wm. J. Beggs, who arrived here today from Hardyville, brings us the following account of the first passage, so far as is known, of any human being through the Big Cañon.
of the Colorado. He derived the particulars from Captain Wilburn of the barge *Colorado*, who arrived at Hardyville on Monday last, and James Ferry of Callville, who arrived on Tuesday:

In April last a party, consisting of Captain Baker, an old Colorado prospector and formerly a resident of St. Louis, George Strobe [sic], also from St. Louis, and James White, formerly of Penosh, Iowa, and late of Company H, Fifth California Cavalry, left Colorado City to prospect on San Juan River, which empties into the Colorado between the junction of Green and Grand rivers and the Big Cañon. They prospected until the middle of August with satisfactory success, and then decided to return to Colorado City for a supply of provisions and a larger company. They set out to go by the mouth of the San Juan, with the double purpose of finding a more practicable route to Green river than the one they had traversed, and of visiting some localities which Captain Baker had prospected some years previously. On the morning of the 24th of August, while encamped about a mile from the Colorado, they were attacked by a band of about fifty Utes. Captain Baker was killed, but Strobe and White secured their carbines and revolvers, some ropes and a sack containing ten pounds of flour, and ran to the Colorado, where they found a few small drift logs, which they hastily lashed together, and embarking on the frail raft, started down the river in the hope of reaching Callville. On the second day they came to the first rapids, in passing over which they lost their flour. On the third day they went over a fall ten feet high, and Strobe was washed from the raft and drowned. White had lashed himself to the raft, which although shattered by the shock, sustained him, and he hauled it up on an island below the fall, repaired it, and proceeded alone. He had not much hope of getting through alive, but he thought his body might go through, and, being found, furnish a clue by which his friends might learn his fate. He describes the course of the river as very tortuous, with a constant succession of rapids and falls, the latter varying in height from four to ten or twelve feet. Sometimes when he plunged over a fall the raft would turn over upon him, and he would have much difficulty in extricating himself from his perilous position. For a few days he found on bars and islands in the river sufficient mesquite to allay the pangs of hunger, but for seven days he had nothing to eat but a leather knife scabbard. He saw a few lizards but was unable to catch them; and he looked from side to side in vain for any mode of egress from the Cañon, the
perpendicular walls of which were in many places a mile and a half, as well as he could estimate, in height.

He floated on an average, about ten hours a day, hauling up at night on the bars which were formed by the eddies below the falls. For about ten days he was without hat, pants or boots, having lost them while going over a fall. On the afternoon of the 6th inst. he passed the mouth of the Virgin river, and a party of Pah-Utes swam off and pushed his raft ashore. They stole one of two pistols which he had managed to preserve, and he bartered the other to them for the hind quarters of a dog, one of which he ate for supper and the other for breakfast. On the 7th he reached Callville, and was taken care of by Captain Wilburn and Mr. Ferry. He was much emaciated, his legs and feet were blistered and blackened by the sun; his hair and beard, which had been dark, were turned white, and he walked with difficulty, being unable to stand erect. He remains at Callville, and although in a precarious condition, will probably recover.

From his actual traveling time, and the rapidity of the current, it is estimated the distance through the cayon, from the mouth of the San Juan to Callville, is not much short of five hundred miles.

Beggs was as good as his word; he sent the promised copies of the September 14 issue to Wilburn and Ferry in Hardyville on the next westbound stage.

Back in Callville, White got to know Ferry’s assistant mail agent, Adam Simon, which led to a fine friendship in the long run but at the time seemed about as exciting as watching the mesquite grow. There was nothing to delay his recovery and few distractions. He grew restless and decided to write to his brother back home in Kenosha, Wisconsin, although he did not exactly look forward to the task.

Many of the problems that eventually surrounded White’s raft trip lay in his inability to translate his thoughts and experiences into written words. The inevitable result was that much of that traumatic event remained forever locked away in his memory. This simple fact made him vulnerable to criticism and disbelief. He had grit and courage in abundance, but neither could replace the education he did not have; now that he had something worthwhile to write home about, he found he did not have the words to do it justice.

The letter he finally wrote still exists in the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, California, and is reproduced here (see figures 3 and 4).
Here, complete with its literary warts, is a straight translation from the handwritten text (an edited version of the letter appears in appendix A):

**Navigation of the Big Canon**

A terrible voyage

Callville September 26, 1867.

Dear Brother, it has been some time since I have heard from you. I got no answer from the last letter that I wrote to you for I left soon after I wrote. I went prospected with Captin Baker and gorge Strode in the San Won montin. We found very good prospek but nothing that would pay. Then we stared down the San Won river. We traveled down about 200 miles. Then we crossed over on Coloreado and Camp. We had over one day. We found out that we could not travel down the river and our horse was sore. We had to leave the mines to turn back. When we were attacked by 15 or 20 utes indes they killed Baker and gorge Strode. And my self took fore ropes off from our hourse and a ax ten pounds of flour and our guns. We had 15 milles to walk before to Colarado. We got to the river just at dawn. We built a raft that night. Wee got it built about ten oClock. We had good Sailing for three days and the third days fore day gorge strole was Wash of from the raft down that left me alone. I thought that it would be my time. Next I then pool off my boos and pants. I then tied a rope to my Wase. I went over falls from 10 to 15 feet. My raft Wold tip over three and fore time a day the thurd day. We lost our flour and fore days. Seven days I had noth to eat. I had to eat a railhide nife. Caber the 8.9 days I got some musKit beens. The 13 days a party of indis frendey thay Wold not give me noth eat so I gave my redy pistols for nine pards of a dog I eat one of for super and the other breakfast. The 14 days I rive at Callville. Where I was tak Care of by James ferry. I was ten days. With out pants or boos or hat I was soon bornt so I Cold hardly Wolk the ingis took 7 head horse from us. Josh I can rite yu Halfe. I under Went I see the hardes time that eny man ever did in the World. But thank god that I got throught saft I am Well again. And I hope the few lines will fine. [illegible] you all Well I sned my beCk respeCk to all Josh anCer this. When you git it.

DreCk you letter to Callville Arizona

....James White
Figure 3.
James White’s letter to his brother Joshua, 1867
(Courtesy of the Bancroft Library)
Figure 4.
Second page and envelope of James White’s letter
(Courtesy of the Bancroft Library)
This was the only account White ever wrote; there were no other letters, no diaries, no journals. The letter’s fourth-grade spelling and grammar unfortunately tend to obscure an innate, practical intelligence. The letter conveys a powerful sense of White’s mental distress in dealing with the death of his partners, as well as his confusion over dates. The story he relates is dramatic but not imaginative.

The headline that is so prominently and meticulously written at the top of the letter is obviously from Beggs’s article in the September 14 *Arizona Miner*; since it is in White’s handwriting, it seems safe to conclude that he copied it there himself. The date, 26, was clearly squeezed into the gap between September and 1867, so a good guess is that the headline was added at the same time. There are several logical scenarios that would account for his being sufficiently impressed with the headline to add it to his letter. Whatever the reason, he certainly recognized the truth of the words—it had indeed been a terrible voyage.

About this time, Ferry offered White a job carrying the mail between Callville and Hardyville/Fort Mohave. White’s recovery had been swift but unremarkable. Once he was rescued, his physical injuries were no longer life threatening; nineteenth-century frontier medicine took care of the sores and bruises, and the Mormon settlers fed him well. All things considered, he seems to have handled his emotional trauma remarkably well; whatever it may have cost him internally, he managed to present to the world the culturally correct, stoical image of the macho frontiersman.

Ferry’s offer was a second rescue for White, who was growing desperate. He had lost everything, and his prospects in Callville were hopelessly dead-ended. No amount of work performed in aid of the settlers, whether carrying heavy loads or currying horses, repairing damaged wagons or shoring up jerry-built houses, could distract him from worrying about how to get back on his feet.

With Ferry’s job, there was hope. Almost immediately, Ferry encouraged White to ride to Hardyville with him. There he enjoyed the lively activities that were missing in Callville: the rough-and-tumble population, the colorful parade of steamboats and barges on the river, and the familiar rumble of the stagecoaches as they passed through town on their way between Prescott and San Bernardino.
His reception in Hardyville was respectful; people were generally awed by his survival. As far as the usual questions were concerned, White had become comfortable with his two-week schedule and the events he so neatly fitted into them; he was also getting adept at evading or blurring the memories he needed to put behind him.

Bill Hardy was convinced, along with everyone else in town, that White had made the journey through Big Cañon. Hardy knew a railroad survey was in progress in the territory and that the surveyors were interested in any information about the Colorado River and Big Cañon. General Palmer, the leader of the survey, and several members of his party had been in and out of Hardyville at various times, and Hardy was quick to pass White’s Big Cañon story on to them.

Hardy boasted about his knowledge of the survey and said that the general himself had been very interested in interviewing White. Hardy’s lively description of Palmer was typical: a general in the Pennsylvania Cavalry at the youthful age of twenty-nine, prominent in some eastern railroad or other (the Pennsylvania), and now a real big shot with the Kansas-Pacific. Hardy also bragged that he could arrange for White to meet the general.

In late September, the two letters written by Grandin and Kipp appeared in some California newspapers. These and the Miner article were the earliest published accounts, but their circulation appears to have been confined largely to the West. White’s own letter would not surface until 1907.