Hell Or High Water

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Despite White’s success in putting his army experience behind him and burying his court martial and imprisonment, he was fated to have his name and his Colorado River journey forever linked to two prominent army officers. These interconnections would create an indelible question mark over Grand Canyon history.

The first was General William Jackson Palmer. Despite his considerable accomplishments, he is not widely known. He was born in September 1836 in Pennsylvania, the eldest son of well-educated Quaker parents. He was a precocious child and had the advantage of an excellent early education; his parents were not considered well-to-do, but their families had many influential friends—and he was blessed with a rich uncle. His education as an engineer began at seventeen, sponsored by this uncle, who not only gave him a job but sent him abroad for further study. Palmer distinguished himself as a superb officer on the battlefield during the Civil War and even volunteered for more dangerous exploits, acting twice as a spy for the Union Army. He was captured but escaped before the Rebs learned his rank—to become a hero and a general at 29.
After the war, still under the aegis of his uncle but now recognized for his own talents, he went to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad, then for the Kansas-Pacific. Later on, he branched out to create the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, which had a checkered existence, surviving a long and monumental war with the Santa Fe. He then became the driving force and primary builder of the Mexican National Railroad during the Diaz presidency. During his western travels, he fell hopelessly in love with the Rocky Mountains, founded the city of Colorado Springs, and became its premier citizen.

During the year of 1867, Palmer led extensive surveys along the thirty-second and thirty-fifth parallels for the Kansas-Pacific Railroad (better known as the Union Pacific-Eastern Division). His activities on the survey were almost as adventurous as those he’d had during the war; he and his men were pursued and attacked by Apaches in the Little Colorado area, surviving by hairbreadth escapes and introducing his survey team to western American realities.

It was during this survey that General Palmer and various members of his team found themselves in Hardyville. The town was something of a hub, and, since the survey tended to fort-hop across the country, its proximity to Fort Mohave made it a logical meeting place for the team’s often scattered members. James White’s raft journey was major news in Hardyville; Palmer recognized its potential for broadening the survey data by including an eyewitness account of an area completely unknown not only to them but to the world. He was naturally eager to take advantage of such a fortuitous circumstance.

He wished to meet White and interrogate him himself, but the variables of distance and schedule could not be reconciled. Failing that, the general assigned a member of his party to interview White whenever it could be arranged. Of course, Bill Hardy was happy to oblige everyone in such an arrangement.

Two likely team members for the assignment were Dr. Charles Christopher Parry, a scientist with some prior knowledge of the territory, and Major Arthur R. Calhoun, a journalist. Not a lot is known about them. Dr. Parry, although reportedly a medical doctor, was actually signed on as the survey’s botanist. His duties were diverse and he apparently considered himself a geologist. Major Calhoun had been a
member of General Palmer’s Fifteenth Pennsylvania Cavalry (where he lost a leg in battle), which may explain his inclusion in the survey, but not his function on the team. There seems to be a difference of opinion as to who was actually assigned by the general to interview White; however, since Palmer’s interest in White’s journey was primarily in its usefulness to the survey, the choice of a scientist over a journalist appears logical. Whatever the reason, it was Parry who wrote the official survey report; Calhoun, who was not present at Parry’s interview, wrote an account of his own, which was published in both Philadelphia and England.

It was not until January 1868 that one of White’s visits to Hardyville finally coincided with one of Dr. Parry’s. The meeting produced the only recorded face-to-face interview in those early days; its subsequent publication in an academic journal influenced Colorado River and Grand Canyon history. By a strange twist of fate, it also provided some of the ammunition used to destroy the credibility of White and his voyage.

Although it was Parry who conducted the interview, White forever believed that it was General Palmer—a misapprehension perhaps caused by Hardy telling White that the general intended to interview him directly and failing to mention Parry.

The focus of Parry’s interview was naturally on the physical aspects of White’s journey, and he was determined to report all information as accurately and precisely as possible. Like any private about to be questioned by a brigadier general, White was eager to oblige; unfortunately, his recollections were not as precise as Parry had hoped.

Parry started with background questions, some of which (city, state, and the men’s names) had been incorrect in the Arizona Miner article; he put dates on the times of departure from Dodge and Colorado City, although it is likely that Parry defined these himself—White’s “middle of the month” became Parry’s “thirteenth”—dates were a matter of indifference to White. Strole’s name was corrected from Strobe (although George became Henry, for some odd reason), and the number of men in the prospecting party was corrected from three to four without Parry asking for further detail.

Like any good scientist, Parry took notes during his interview. They read as follows:
James—White—Kenosha Wisconsin—Started from Ft Dodge—13 April—with a prospecting party under Capt Baker Came to Colorado City—left 20th May—for San Juan—struck Animas—Dolores—Mancos Canon followed to San Juan down that 200 miles crossed to north side crossed over Mts to Colorado—50 miles went up 12 miles to canon. went down to Colorado—12.

Henry Strole. Capt Baker killed—went back into Canon unpacked took 10 lb flour & coffee—24 Aug fight—went to mouth canon. built raft—8 inch 10 ft. tied up with lariats river wide and still small bottom. 25 th stopped. and repaired raft passed Green 30 miles—after leaving Green Canon travelled 40 miles to San Juan. laid up night 26th travelled all night 40 miles 27th all night—28th 4th—came to rapids and Strun [sic] was washed off & drowned 3p.m. lost provisions kept passing rapids—25 or 30 a day passed Colorado Chiquito 4th in evening continuous rapids—to 100 miles above Callville—Rock in Canon. White Sand Stone 2 days in foot of Canon Volcanic reach Callville 8th [sic] Sept—line of high water mark 30 to 40 ft width of river in canon narrowest 100 ft height 3000 ft rapids caused by fallen rocks one fall 10 ft ?—many whirlpools & eddies stopped in an edy [sic] mouth of C chiq 2 hours prayed out shape of Canon perpendicular for several 100 ft then flares out course of river very crooked—raft bumping on rocks—Same character of rock through the main Canon.

White had no trouble defining the early stages of the prospectors’ route: from Colorado City to the San Juan Mountains and the Animas River, across to the Dolores River, and thence down the Mancos Valley to the San Juan River, then traveling west along the river (with a brief description of activities), and finally turning north when they were unable to continue along the San Juan. He gave a brief and vague description of the terrain over which they traveled to the side canyon of the river, estimating several distances, probably at Parry’s prompting. The notes state, “went up 12 miles to canon. went down to Colorado—12.” White’s letter of September 1867 clearly called this river the Colorado; so must he have named it to Parry in January 1868.

In most situations, the interviewer leads the subject, and this was no exception. After White’s bare-bones recital of the Ute ambush, Baker’s death, and the escape to the river, Parry first tried to pin down
the exact date of the Indian attack. As we have seen, White’s dates were vague since they were useless on the trail; however, the date of his rescue at Callville was well known, and that, combined with White’s absolute insistence that he was on the river for exactly fourteen days (which Parry, like White’s rescuers, accepted without question) led to August 24 as the day he began his voyage. But White’s answers, beginning with the description of Baker’s death, and especially the time after Strole’s death, became increasingly sketchy and vague; however, the interrogation elicited some estimates as to the width of the river, rate of flow, and other details.

Parry now attempted to nail down exactly where White and Strole began their voyage, considering such information crucial to a railroad survey. White doubtless told Parry that the Grand River was Baker’s ultimate destination, and Parry began to focus upon the descriptions and distances which might establish their actual point of embarkation. Parry knew, academically, that the Grand and Green Rivers join to form the Colorado, but beyond that, his actual knowledge, like everyone else’s at that time, was purely speculative. There are several rivers which enter the Colorado between the Green-Grand confluence and Callville (later bearing historical names like Escalante and more colorful ones like Dirty Devil and Bright Angel), as well as numerous streams (Navajo Creek and Diamond Creek). Any of them might have been the ones White described. At that time, neither White nor Parry, nor anyone else, could possibly have known one from the other. That, and Parry’s assertion that the men embarked on the Grand, indicated by his notation, “passed Green 30 miles—after leaving Green canon,” casts doubt on the process by which he concluded that the prospecting party had reached the Grand instead of the Colorado. It was a classic case of the blind leading the blind.

White’s description of the canyon was wildly variable. Elements like the distances run, rate of travel, character of the river course, fall of the river through a rapid, or cause of a rapid were pure guesses. High water marks and the whirlpool at the mouth of a stream were unambiguous and clearly described; overwhelming phenomena such as the number and size of the continuous rapids, height of the awesome walls and cliffs, and his vague and highly unlikely identification of the canyon walls as white sandstone were muddled and uncertain.
It was unfortunate that Parry, notwithstanding his scientific education, knew no more about stress, starvation, and sheer terror than the local river men. But it was the nineteenth century, and Parry’s expertise—or lack thereof—was standard.

Parry’s confident assertion that White and Strole had entered the river some thirty miles up the Grand from the Green-Grand junction produced the original error which in turn spawned the cumulative downstream errors. But flaws and errors aside, Parry managed to get a remarkable amount of information that was not challenged by later explorers. The interview itself, because of its closeness in time to the event and White’s willingness to answer questions on the mistaken assumption that the interviewer was General Palmer, probably represented White’s core expression of his experience insofar as he himself knew or understood it.

Using his extremely sketchy notes, and apparently a lot of information that does not appear in them, Parry wrote a comprehensive official report.