Hell Or High Water
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Chapter 9  Dr. Parry’s Report

Parry’s report was different from the newspaper articles of the time in that it was the result of a firsthand interview and represented the findings of a commercial survey rather than the usual piece of western journalism. It was strongly supported by a natural science society and subsequently published in its official journal. It began:

Account of the passage through the Great Cañon of the Colorado of the west, from above the mouth of Green River to the head of steamboat navigation at Callville, in the months of August and September, 1867, by James White, now living at Callville. Reported Jan. 6, 1868, to J. D. Perry, Esq., Pres’t of the Union Pacific Railway, Eastern Division, by C. C. Parry, Ass’t Geologist, U.P.R.R. Survey.

The report was divided into three parts: cover letter, narrative, and conclusions. Only the last two carry significant data, but the eloquent letter to J. D. Perry so beautifully exemplifies the nineteenth century approach to scientific endeavor that it would be a sin to omit it. Parry wrote:

Sir—The Railroad survey now in progress under your direction has afforded many opportunities for acquiring valuable additions to our geographical knowledge of the unexplored regions of the far West from original sources
not accessible to ordinary map compilers. Mining prospectors within the last twenty years, more adventurous even than the noted trappers of the Rocky Mountains, have scarcely left a mountain slope unvisited, or a water-course unexamined, over the wide expanse extending from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. Could the varied and adventurous experience of these mountain men be brought into an accessible form, we should know nearly as much of these western wilds, as we now do of the settled portions of our country.

Among the geographical problems remaining for the longest time unsolved, was the actual character of the stupendous chasms, or cañons, through which the Colorado of the west cleaves its way from its snowy source to its exit into the California Gulf. Within the last ten years public attention has been frequently directed to this subject, and various Government expeditions have imparted reliable information in reference to the upper and lower course of this remarkable river. Lieutenant Ives, in 1857-8, made a satisfactory exploration of the navigable portion of the Colorado, extending from its mouth to the Great Cañon, and since then a regular line of light draft boats have been successfully traversing these inland waters. Still the Great Cañon remained a myth; its actual length, the character of the stream, the nature of its banks, and the depth of its vertical walls, were subjects for speculation, and afforded a fine field for exaggerated description, in which natural bridges, cavernous tunnels, and fearful cataracts formed a prominent feature. Now, at last, we have a perfectly authentic account from an individual who actually traversed its formidable depths, and who, fortunately for science, still lives to detail his trustworthy observations of this most remarkable voyage. Happening to fall in with this man during my recent stay of a few days at Hardyville, on the Colorado, I drew from him the following connected statement in answer to direct questions noted down at the time.

Following this eloquent prologue, Parry revealed his enthusiasm for and obvious belief in White’s journey in his presentation of the results of his interview:

NARRATIVE

James White, now living at Callville, on the Colorado River, formerly a resident of Kenosha, Wisconsin, was induced to join a small party for the San Juan region, west of the Rocky Mountains, in search of placer gold diggings.
The original party was composed of four men, under the command of a Capt. Baker.

The party left Fort Dodge on the 13th of last April, and after crossing the plains, completed their outfit for the San Juan country in Colorado City, leaving that place on the 20th of May. Proceeding by way of South Park and the Upper Arkansas, they crossed the Rocky Mountains, passing round the head waters of the Rio Grande, till they reached the Animas branch of the San Juan River. Here their prospecting for gold commenced, and being only partially successful, they continued still farther to the west, passing the Dolores and reaching the Mancas, which latter stream was followed down to the main valley of the San Juan. Crossing the San Juan at this point, they continued down the valley in a westerly direction for about 200 miles, when the river entered a cañon. Here they again crossed to the north bank, and leaving the river passed across a mountain ridge aiming to reach the Colorado River. In a distance of 50 miles over a very rugged country, they reached this latter stream, or rather its main eastern tributary, Grand River.

It is essential to pause here to introduce eight highly significant words: “or rather its main eastern tributary, Grand River.” Parry’s interview notes, from which he produced his report, state: “crossed over Mts to Colorado” and “went down to Colorado,” describing the party’s land journey, and clearly referring to the Colorado River, specifically that portion of the river formed by the confluence of the Grand (which rose in Colorado Territory) and the Green (which rose in Wyoming Territory). In the portion of the notes covering their river travel, however, the phrase “passed Green 30 miles” suddenly appears, indicating that the men had been on the Grand—despite the fact that there is no mention of that river in the notes. In the report, Parry, without any explanation of how he arrived at this conclusion, places White and Strole’s point of embarkation on the Grand River, a statement that fueled more than a century of controversy over who was first through the Grand Canyon.

At the point where they first struck the river it was inaccessible on account of its steep rocky banks; they accordingly followed up the stream in search of a place where water could be procured. At an estimated distance of 12 miles they came upon a side cañon down which
they succeeded in descending with their animals, and procuring a supply of water. They camped at the bottom of this ravine on the night of the 23rd of August, and on the morning of the 24th, started to ascend the right bank to the table land. In making this ascent they were attacked by Indians, and Capt. Baker, being in advance, was killed at the first fire. The two remaining men, James White and Henry Strole, after ascertaining the fate of their comrade, fought their way back into the cañon, and getting beyond the reach of the Indians, hastily unpacked their animals, securing their arms and a small supply of provisions, and proceeded on foot down to the banks of Grand River. Here they constructed a raft of dry cottonwood, composed of three sticks, 10 feet in length and 8 inches in diameter, securely tied together by lariat ropes, and having stored away their arms and provisions, they embarked at midnight on their adventurous voyage.

The following morning, being on the 25th of August, they made a landing, repaired their raft by some additional pieces of dry cedar, and continued on their course. The river here was about two hundred yards wide, flowing regularly at a rate of 2-1/2 to 3 miles per hour. According to their estimate they reached the mouth of Green River, and entered the main Colorado 30 miles from the point of starting. Below the junction the stream narrows, and is confined between perpendicular rocky walls, gradually increasing in elevation. At an estimated distance of 40 miles from Green River they passed the mouth of the San Juan, both streams being here hemmed in by perpendicular walls. From this point the cañon was continued, with only occasional breaks formed by small side cañones equally inaccessible with the main chasm. Still they experienced no difficulty in continuing their voyage, and were elated with the prospect of soon reaching the settlements on the Colorado, below the Great Cañon.

The report continues with the crescendo of high drama:

On the 28th, being the fourth day of their journey, they encountered the first severe rapids, in passing one of which, Henry Strole was washed off, and sank in a whirlpool below. The small stock of provision was also lost, and when White emerged from the foaming rapids, he found himself alone, without food, and with gloomy prospects before him for completing his adventurous journey. His course now led through the sullen depths of the
Great Cañon, which was a succession of fearful rapids, blocked up with masses of rock, over which his frail raft thumped and whirled, so that he had to adopt the precaution of tying himself fast to the rocking timbers. In passing one of these rapids, his raft parted, and he was forced to hold on to the fragments by main strength, until he effected a landing below in a shallow eddy, where he succeeded, standing waist deep in water, in making necessary repairs, and started again. One can hardly imagine the gloomy feelings of this lone traveler, with no human voice to cheer his solitude, hungry, yet hopeful and resolute, closed in on every side by the beetling cliffs that shut out sunlight for the greater part of the long summer day, drenched to the skin, sweeping down the resistless current, shooting over foaming rapids, and whirling below in tumultuous whirlpools, ignorant of what fearful cataracts might yet be on his unswerving track, down which he must plunge to almost certain destruction; still, day after day, buoyed up with the hope of finally emerging from his prison walls, and feasting his eyes on an open country, with shaded groves, green fields, and human habitation.

If you compare Parry’s opening paragraphs and this passage with James White’s letter to his brother, the poetic license which dramatizes this report and colored Parry’s scientific precision might seem amusing. Still, the nineteenth century rhetoric does not eclipse the value of the report.

The mouth of the Colorado Chiquito was passed on the fourth day, in the evening, the general appearance of which was particularly noted, as he was here entangled in an eddy for two hours, until rescued, as he says, “by the direct interposition of Providence.” The general course of the river was noted as very crooked, with numerous sharp turns, the river on every side being shut in by precipitous walls of “white sand rock.” These walls [sic] present a smooth, perpendicular and, occasionally [sic], over-hanging surface, extending upward to a variable height, and showing a distant line of high-water mark thirty to forty feet above the then water level.

His estimate of the average height of the Cañon was 3,000 feet, the upper edge of which flared out about half way from the bottom, thus presenting a rugged crest. The last two days in the Cañon, dark-colored ingenious [probably igneous] rocks took the place of the “white sandstone,” which finally showed distinct breaks on either side,
till he reached a more open country, containing small
patches of bottom land, and inhabited by bands of
Indians. Here he succeeded in procuring a scanty supply
of Mezquite bread, barely sufficient to sustain life till he
reached Callville, on the 8th [sic] of September, just four-
teen days from the time of starting, during seven of which
he had no food of any description.

When finally rescued, this man presented a pitiable
object, emaciated and haggard from abstinence, his bare
feet litterly [sic] flayed from constant exposure to drenching
water, aggravated by occasional scorchings of a vertical sun;
his mental faculties, though still sound, liable to wander,
and verging close on the brink of insanity. Being, however,
of a naturally strong constitution, he soon recovered his
usual health, and is now a stout, hearty, thick-set man. His
narrative throughout bears all the evidences of entire relia-
bility, and is sustained by collateral evidence, so that there is
not the least reason to doubt that he actually accomplished
the journey in the manner and time mentioned by him.

This report became the basis for a multitude of spin-off
accounts, used alternately as proof that James White did not traverse
the Great Cañon of the Colorado of the West and proof that he did.

From the specific details elicited from White, Parry drew the
following conclusions:

CONCLUSIONS

The following may be summed up as some of the new
facts to be derived from this remarkable voyage, as addi-
tions to our present geographical knowledge of the
Hydrography of the Colorado River:

1st. The actual location of the mouth of the San Juan,
fourty miles below Green River junction, and its entrance
by a cañon continuous with that of the Colorado.

2d. From the mouth of the San Juan to the Colorado
Chiquito, three days’ travel in the swiftest portion of the
current, allowing a rate of four miles per hour, for fifteen
hours, or sixty miles per day, would give an estimated dis-
tance of one hundred and eighty miles, including the
most inaccessible portion of the Great Cañon.

3d. From Colorado Chiquito to Callville, ten days’
travel was expended. As this portion of the route was
more open, and probably comprised long stretches of still
water, it would not be safe to allow a distance of more
than thirty miles per day, or three hundred miles for this
interval. Thus, the whole distance travelled would amount to five hundred and fifty miles, or something over five hundred miles from Grand River junction to head of steamboat navigation at Calville [sic].

4th. The absence of any distinct cataract, or perpendicular falls, would seem to warrant the conclusion that in time of high water, by proper appliances in the way of boats, good, resolute oarsmen, and provisions secured in water-proof bags the same passage might be safely made, and the actual course of the river with its peculiar geological features properly determined.

5th. The construction of bridges by a single span would be rendered difficult of execution on account of the usual flaring shape of the upper summits; possibly, however, points might be found where the high masses [sic] come near together.

6th. The estimated average elevation of the Canon at 3,000 feet, is less than that given on the authority of Ives and Newberry, but may be nearer the actual truth, as the result of more continuous observation.

7th. The width of the river at its narrowest points was estimated at 100 feet, and the line of high water mark thirty to forty feet above the average stage in August.

8th. The long continued uniformity of the geological formation, termed “white sandstone” (probably Cretaceous), is remarkable, but under this term may have been comprised some of the lower stratified formations. The contrast, on reaching the dark igneous rocks, was so marked that it could not fail to be noticed.

9th. Any prospect for useful navigation up or down this cañon during the season of high water, or transportation of lumber from the upper pine regions of Green or Grand Rivers, could not be regarded as feasible, considering the long distance and the inaccessible character of the river margin for the greater part of its course.

10th. No other satisfactory method of exploration, except along the course of the river, could be adopted to determine its actual course, and peculiar natural features, and James White, as the pioneer of this enterprise, will probably retain the honor of being the only man who has traversed, through its whole course, the Great Cañon of the Colorado, and lived to recount his observations on this perilous voyage.

The report contains two intriguing statements: “I drew from him the following connected statement in answer to direct questions noted
down at the time,” and “His narrative throughout bears all the evidences of entire reliability, and is sustained by collateral evidence” (italics are mine). The notes do not support these observations. Critics often point to this discrepancy as evidence of falsification by Parry, but the other contemporary reports by Grandin, Kipp, and Beggs are too similar to Parry’s to seriously credit such an allegation. Parry’s first statement is admittedly untrue, unless he made other notes which have not turned up—unlikely but not impossible; the second may well have been true, but since White’s voyage was accepted without question at the time, it probably didn’t seem necessary to include the details within the report.

As for Parry’s conclusions, no matter how they were formulated, they are equally intriguing:

First, the distance from the Green-Grand confluence to the San Juan is 138.5 miles, not 40, a mistake of considerable magnitude; however, the point of embarkation proposed in this book is 47.5 miles upstream of the San Juan.

Second, from the mouth of the San Juan to the Little Colorado is 140 miles, not 180; this was not a bad guess.

Third, the distance from the Green-Grand confluence to Callville is 620 miles; given Parry’s precision, 120 miles seems excessive to be described as “something over five hundred miles.” Moving the point of entry just under one hundred miles downstream, however, makes the five hundred remarkably close.

Fourth, concluding that the absence of cataracts or perpendicular falls meant that the river could be safely navigated with proper provisions, boats, and “resolute oarsmen” is obviously reasonable, considering that is what Major Powell did in 1869.

Fifth, concluding that bridge construction in the Grand Canyon would be difficult is also reasonable when you consider that the original Navajo Bridge across Marble Canyon, built in 1929, and the new one, built next to it seventy years later, are unique in the canyon.

Sixth, concluding that White’s estimates of elevation might be nearer the actual truth than those of Ives and Newberry is, of course, nonsense; the latter gentlemen were on an official scientific exploration. White was at every moment in danger of losing his life and in no condition to be accurate about anything within the canyon, let alone the perpendicular and flaring walls. His guesses are irrelevant.
Seventh, the estimates of the narrowest river width and high water marks are reasonable, even if they were simply guesses by White.

Eighth, the description of white sandstone walls was the result of White’s desperate condition and was accepted by a man who lacked the knowledge to recognize the problem. Parry’s speculation of what type of rock this might be merely reveals that he, along with the rest of the world, knew nothing of the Grand Canyon’s inner geology and incredible technicolor display.

Ninth, to conclude that “useful navigation” (profitable?) or “transportation of lumber” would not be feasible because of the “long distance and inaccessible character of the river margin” is reasonable. Indeed, no one transports lumber or anything else—except people—through the Grand Canyon, and Parry could hardly have foreseen today’s multi-million-dollar river-running industry.

Tenth, concluding that only exploration “along the course of the river” would be satisfactory “to determine its actual course and peculiar natural features” is also entirely reasonable; as for White being the only one to make the trip, that is romantic speculation, as Major Powell was shortly to prove.