Hell Or High Water

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Chapter 10  Major Calhoun’s Version

An astonishingly detailed account of White’s journey was written by Major A. R. Calhoun and published as “Passage of the Great Canyon of the Colorado River by James White, the Prospector,” the first of a series of stories that appeared in 1868 in a book called Wonderful Adventures. As a journalist, Calhoun would certainly have viewed the journey as good copy, but it was entirely as a “wonderful adventure” that it was presented here.

Calhoun begins with a vague description of the general region around the Colorado River and Grand Canyon as a romantic prologue for the story of James White and his raft.

Twenty years ago the trapper and the hunter were the romantic characters of the far West. They still figure in fiction, and there is a fascination about their daring deeds which is scarcely undeserved. They have trapped on every stream and hunted on every mountain side despite the opposition of the Indian and the barrier of winter snows. They have formed the skirmish line of the great army of occupation which is daily pushing westward, and they have taught the savage to respect the white man’s courage and to fear the white man’s power.

While the field for the trapper and hunter has been gradually growing less another class of adventurers has
come into existence—the prospectors in search of precious metals. Within the last quarter of a century these men have traversed every mountain slope from the rugged peaks of British Columbia to the rich plateaus of Old Mexico and have searched the sands of every stream from the Mississippi to the shores of the Pacific, stimulated by the same hope of reward that led the early Spaniards to explore inhospitable wilds in their search for an Eldorado. Could the varied and adventurous experiences of these searchers for gold be written we should have a record of daring that no fiction could approach, and the very sight of gold would suggest to our minds some story of hairbreadth escapes.

It has fallen to the lot of one of these prospectors to be the hero of an adventure more thrilling than any heretofore recorded, while at the same time he has solved a geographical problem which has long attracted the attention of the learned at home and abroad, who could but theorize before his journey as to the length and nature of the stupendous chasms or canyons through which the Colorado cleaves its central course. While on the survey before referred to and while stopping for a few days at Fort Mojave, Dr. W. A. Bell, Dr. C. C. Parry, and myself met this man, whose name is James White, and from his lips, the only living man who had actually traversed its formidable depths, we learned the story of the Great Canyon.

Calhoun’s claim that he, Parry, and Bell all participated in the interview at Hardyville was later denied by both Bell and White. Bell was not in Hardyville at the time of the interview, and White did not recall meeting or talking to Calhoun or anyone remotely like him. Because of the major’s obviously artificial leg, he would have been difficult to miss or forget. There were, however, several ways for Calhoun to have obtained his information other than the January 2, 1868, interview: the Arizona Miner, Bill Hardy, and/or Parry’s notes and survey report. It appears that all of the dates he used were taken from either the notes or the report; his distance estimates are either close to Parry’s or exaggerated. The Miner story included no specific dates and only two estimates, which probably indicates that Calhoun did not read William Beggs’s account of the raft journey.

The account continues,

James White now lives at Callville, Arizona Territory, the present head of navigation of the Colorado River. He
is 32 years of age, and in person is a good type of the Saxon, being of medium height and heavy build, with light hair and blue eyes. He is a man of average intelligence, simple and unassuming in his manner and address, and without any of the swagger or bravado peculiar to the majority of frontier men. Like thousands of our young men, well enough off at home, he grew weary of the slow but certain methods of earning his bread by regular employment at a stated salary. He had heard of men leaping into wealth at a single bound in the western gold fields, and for years he yearned to go to the land where fortune was so lavish of her favors. Accordingly, he readily consented to be one of a party from his neighborhood which, in the spring of 1867, started for the plains and the gold fields beyond. When they left Fort Dodge, on the Arkansas River, April 13, 1867, the party consisted of four men, of whom Capt. Baker, an old miner and an ex-officer of the Confederate Army, was the acknowledged leader. The destination of this little party was the San Juan Valley, west of the Rocky Mountains, about the gold fields of which prospectors spoke in the most extravagant terms, stating that they were deterred from working the rich placers of the San Juan only by fear of the Indians.

Baker and his companions reached Colorado City, at the foot of Pike’s Peak, in safety. This place was and still is, the depot for supplying the miners who work the diggings scattered through the South Park and is the more important from being situated at the entrance to the Ute Pass, through which there is a wagon road crossing the Rocky Mountains and descending to the plateau beyond. The people of Colorado City tried to dissuade Baker from what they considered a rash project, but he was determined to carry out his original plan. These representations, however, affected one of the party so much that he left, but the others, Capt. Baker, James White, and Henry Stroll [sic], completed their outfit for the prospecting tour.

There are several pieces of incorrect and misleading information here. The first is age; he was not thirty-two; he had in fact turned thirty just two months after his rescue at Callville. Another is the implication that this foray into gold prospecting with Captain Baker was his first, omitting White’s travels in the West over the previous six years. A third is the identification of Captain Baker as an ex-officer of the Confederate army: even today Baker’s background is hazy in that regard. The most fanciful is the representation that the people of
Colorado City attempted to dissuade the party from continuing and the fourth man was so affected that he dropped out. Had Calhoun interrogated White directly, he would have produced a decidedly different account.

Calhoun continues in much the same vein:

On the 25th of May they left Colorado City and, crossing the Rocky Mountains through the Ute Pass, entered South Park, being still on the Atlantic slope of the continent. After traveling 90 miles across the park they reached the Upper Arkansas, near the Twin Lakes. They then crossed the Snowy Range, or Sierra Madre, and descended toward the west. Turning southerly they passed around the headwaters of the Rio Grande de Norte, and after a journey of 400 miles from Colorado City they reached the Animas Branch of the San Juan River, which flows into the Great Colorado from the east.

They were now in the land where their hopes centered, and to reach which they had crossed plains and mountains and forded rapid streams, leaving the nearest abodes of the white man hundreds of miles to the east. Their work of prospecting for gold began in the Animas, and though they were partially successful, the result did not by any means answer their expectations. They therefore moved still farther to the west, crossing the Dolores Branch of Grand River to the Mancos Branch of the San Juan. Following the Mancos to its mouth, they crossed to the left bank of the San Juan and began their search in the sands. There was gold there, but not in the quantity they expected; so they gradually moved west along the beautiful valley for 200 miles, when they found the San Juan disappeared between the lofty walls of a deep and gloomy canyon. To avoid this they again forded the river to the right bank and struck across rough, timbered country, directing their course toward the great Colorado. Having traveled through this rough country for a distance estimated at 50 miles they reached Grand River, being still above the junction of Green River, the united waters of which two streams form the Colorado proper.

Some of the dates and distances match Parry’s, as does the designation of Grand River; however, Calhoun cannot resist the kind of embellishment that implies close personal knowledge of the prospectors’ activities.
At the point where they struck the river the banks were masses of perpendicular rock, down which they could gaze at the coveted water, dashing and foaming like an agitated white band, 200 feet below. Men and animals were now suffering for water, so they pushed up the stream along the uneven edge of the chasm, hoping to find a place where they could descend to the river. After a day spent in clambering over and around the huge rocks that impeded their advance, they came to a side canyon, where a tributary joined the main stream, to which they succeeded in descending with their animals and thus obtained the water of which all stood so much in need.

The night of the 23rd of August they encamped at the bottom of the Canyon where they found plenty of fuel and grass in abundance for their animals. So they sat around the camp fire lamenting their failure in the San Juan country, and Stroll began to regret that they had undertaken the expedition. But Baker, who was a brave, sanguine fellow, spoke of placers up the river, about which he had heard, and promised his companions that all their hopes should be realized and that they should return to their homes to enjoy their gains and to laugh at the trials of the trip. So glowingly did he picture the future that his companions even speculated as to how they should spend their princely fortunes when they returned to the “States.” Baker sang songs of home and hope, and the others lent their voices to the chorus till far in the night, when, unguarded, they sank to sleep to dream of coming opulence and to rise refreshed for the morrow’s journey.

But the best is yet to come.

Early next morning they breakfasted and began the ascent of the side canyon up the bank opposite to that by which they had entered it. Baker was in advance, with his rifle slung at his back, gayly springing up the rocks toward the table-land above. Behind him came White and Stroll, with the mules brought up the rear. Nothing disturbed the stillness of the beautiful summer morning but the tramping of the mules and the short, heavy breathing of the climbers. They had ascended about half the distance to the top when, stopping a moment to rest, suddenly the war whoop of a band of savages rang out, sounding as if every rock had a demon’s voice. Simultaneously with the first whoop a shower of arrows and bullets was poured into the little party. With the first fire Baker fell against a rock; but, rallying for a moment, he unslung his rifle and fired at the
Indians, who began to show themselves in large numbers, and then, with blood flowing from his mouth, he fell to the ground. White, firing at the Indians as he advanced, and followed by Stroll, hurried to the aid of his wounded leader. Baker with an effort turned to his comrades and in a voice still strong, said: “Back, boys; back; save yourselves; I am dying.” To the credit of White and Stroll be it said they faced the savages and fought till the last tremor of the powerful frame told that the gallant Baker was dead. Then slowly they began to retreat, followed by the exultant Indians, who, stopping to strip and mutilate the dead body in their path, gave the white men a chance to secure their animals and retrace their steps into the side canyon beyond the immediate reach of the Indian’s arrows.

Great drama, suitable for any adventure series, but not very accurate. Still, it has the flavor, as does most of Calhoun’s narrative, of being a firsthand debriefing of the central character. The most interesting statement involves the party’s ascent up the opposite bank of the side canyon; at a later date, this piece of misinformation was corrected by White when he maintained that there was no way out of this canyon except by the way they had entered; a fact suggested by White in his letter to his brother: “Wee had may up our mines to turne back.” Parry’s report says, “[they] started to ascend the right bank to the table-land,” which indicates more than anything else that details of the Indian ambush were missing from all the early accounts, including White’s. The Miner article makes no specific mention of it.

Calhoun continues,

Here they held a hurried conversation as to the best course they could pursue. To the east for 300 miles stretched an uninhabited country, over which if they attempted escape in that direction the Indians, like bloodhounds, would follow their track. North, south, and west was the Colorado with its tributaries, all flowing at the bottom of deep chasms, across which it would be impossible for men or animals to travel. Their deliberations were necessarily short, and resulted in their deciding to abandon their animals, first securing their arms and a small stock of provisions and the ropes off the mules. Through the side canyon they traveled due west for four hours and emerged at last on a low strip of bottom land on Grand River, above which for 2,000 feet on either bank the cold gray walls rose to block their path, leaving to them but one avenue
of escape, the foaming current of the river flowing along
the dark channel through unknown dangers.

Note that Calhoun tells us that the Colorado with its tributar-
ies lay north, south, and west, but by traveling “due west,” the men came
upon the Grand and its “foaming current.” The narrative goes on to
describe the raft building; the number and dimensions of the logs agree
with Parry’s notations, but then Calhoun describes their embarkation
upon “angry waters” and “amid blacking shadows” that do not appear
in anyone else’s descriptions. Calhoun adds even more details:

then, seizing the poles, they untied the rope that held the
raft, which, tossed about by the current, rushed through
the yawning canyon on the adventurous voyage to any
unknown landing. Through the long night they clung to
the raft as it dashed against half-concealed rocks or
whirled about like a plaything in some eddy, whose white
foam was perceptible even in the intense darkness.

He describes the following day with estimates that agree with
Parry and places the two men at the confluence of the Grand and the
Green Rivers, where he states,

At the junction, the walls were estimated at 4,000 feet
in height, but detached pinnacles rose 1,000 feet higher
from amidst huge masses of detached rock confusedly
piled, like grand monuments, to commemorate this meet-
ing of the waters. The fugitives felt the sublimity of the
scene, and in contemplating its stupendous and unearthly
grandeur they forgot for the time their own sorrows.

At this point, Calhoun indicates that the men have “entered the
Grand Canyon” with its “gray sandstone walls” increasing in height.
He states that “Baker had informed his comrades as to the geography
of the country, and while floating down they remembered that
Callville was at the mouth of the Canyon, which could not be far off
. . . a few days would take them to Callville.” This is an interesting
observation since Callville was only founded in 1864 and then only as
a small Mormon settlement; it was highly unlikely to have been
important enough to have filtered east to Captain Baker’s attention.

Calhoun’s narrative continues, using Parry’s numbers and basic
information but embellishing the story, especially the death of Strole.
After this event, he quotes White as resolving “to die hard and like a man.” The next event was the whirlpool at the mouth of the Colorado Chiquito. Parry’s notes state succinctly that White “prayed out” of this whirlpool; in his formal report, Parry expands this to say that White was “entangled in an eddy for two hours,” quoting him as saying that he was rescued “by the direct interposition of Providence.” Major Calhoun heightens the event with his usual exciting prose, ending with

Then, for the first time, he remembered that there was a Strength greater than that of a man, a Power that “holds the ocean in the hollow of His hand.” “I fell on my knees,” he said, “and as the raft swept around in the current I asked God to aid me. I spoke as if from my very soul and said, ‘O God, if there is a way out of this fearful place guide me to it.’”

Here White’s voice became husky as he narrated the circumstances, and his somewhat heavy features quivered as he related that he presently felt a different movement in the raft, and, turning to look at the whirlpool, saw it was some distance behind, and that he was floating down the smoothest current he had yet seen in the Canyon.

The remainder of the account is relatively straightforward except for the identification of the Indians at the mouth of the Virgin River as Yampais. The *Arizona Miner* article identified them as Pah-Utes and mentioned that they had given White parts of a dog to eat. Since Calhoun supplies his own Indian tribe and makes no mention of a dog (which would surely have appealed to him), it is safe to assume that he did not read that paper.

William Bell, a fellow survey member, included Calhoun’s account as part of his book, *New Tracks in North America*, which he compiled and subsequently published in 1870. He made two additions to Calhoun’s account. One is a description of White’s physical condition when rescued, which was, surprisingly, omitted from the earlier publication. The second involves the whirlpool:

This statement is the only information White volunteered; all the rest was obtained by close questioning. One of his friends who was present during the examination smiled when White repeated his prayer. He noticed it, and said with some feeling: “It’s true, Bob, and I’m sure God took me out.”
Although probably not intended, these accounts had a negative effect on the credibility of James White’s story and his journey; for one thing, Calhoun insisted that he had met White in person and learned his story “from his own lips,” and two, his consistent inclusion of supposedly actual quotes from White’s own testimony persuaded many critics to accept Calhoun’s exaggerations and vivid rhetoric as White’s, giving them an excuse to call White a liar, “yarn spinner,” and “monumental prevaricator,” probably the only time the messenger was spared and the message vilified.