Hell Or High Water
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In the spring of 1868, many of the young men of the Colorado River community began to set their sights on new and distant goals. In Callville Jim Ferry was the first; he sold his mail contract to Jim Hinton and headed for California. Hinton lasted only a few months before he, too, wanted out. Rumors of gold strikes up north in Sweetwater, spread by Adam Simon’s ex-army friend, Jeff Stanford, lured Simon and Hinton into the search for the yellow metal. Even James White was willing to give it another try. There were placer diggings nearby, but plenty of prospectors were filling up this local landscape, including soldiers from Fort Mohave and even the stalwart Captain L. C. Wilburn; it was getting too crowded. Sweetwater seemed to offer less competition; apparently it did not occur to them to wonder why.

By mid-May, the three men were in St. George, buying prospecting gear; for White it must have been a case of déjà vu. What turned out to be even more so was learning, halfway to their destination, that Sweetwater was a bust. Stanford turned west; the others kept going north.

Along the way, they heard about the Union Pacific Railroad—it was big news in that territory. Their savings were dwindling along with their prospects, and this mammoth enterprise offered a choice of
work. As they neared Salt Lake City, they discovered what it was: railbed grading (about which they knew nothing) or cutting and dressing railroad ties (about which they needed to know nothing). By the time they reached Ogden, they agreed that one of them should contract with the Union Pacific to cut ties; White was elected and lined up jobs to the north around Bear River.

It was backbreaking work and lasted through the summer. Decision time came when the roadbed moved farther west. By then they had accumulated some money and were sick of cutting ties. Hinton moved on to California; Simon bought White’s mule and went even further north to Montana; White stayed on as a Union Pacific wagon boss. Later, he drifted to Corinne, Utah, on the Bear River, where he bought a saloon.

The town of Corinne was like one big camp and, except that it was flat instead of hilly, may have reminded White of Virginia City. But where that crazy town had existed for silver mines, this one was dedicated to trains. The “buildings” were mostly box tents—flimsy wood frames, with or without plank flooring, to which canvas walls were nailed; his saloon was probably indistinguishable from the rest. But he soon found that the saloon business was worse than cutting ties and running wagons. In mid-November, he put it up for sale and gladly took what he could get from the first buyer to appear. It was nearly Christmas, and White was restless, possibly homesick. He headed east.

In the intervening seven years, Kenosha, Wisconsin, had changed, but the lake and the snow and his parents’ home had not. His father had died in 1865, but his seventy-five-year-old mother was in good health and living with his brother Josh, Josh’s wife, Margaret, and their sister Jane in the family home. His family was eager to hear what had happened to him through the years. His 1867 letter had given them some idea of his adventure, and they had more or less filled in the blanks by reading the account in the October 1 issue of the Kenosha Telegraph, which began,

Interesting Narrative of the Adventures of a former resident of Kenosha through the Great Cañon of the Colorado of the West . . . Mr. J. D. Perry Esq., President of the Union Pacific Railway, has furnished the following narrative of explorations, in a hitherto unexplored region, for the St. Louis Academy of Natural Science.
This was Parry’s report, and James had little to add to it. But, because they were family, they wanted to hear all the details.

So White attempted to tell them about the chaotic town of Denver, the crazy days of Cripple Creek, the weeks on the trail, the freezing cold of Virginia City, the raid on Mulberry Creek, and the burning heat and desolation of the western desert; needless to say, his brief mention of the army did not include the court martial. He had traveled over much of the vast country: from Kenosha to Denver; to Virginia City; to Sacramento, San Diego, Yuma, Tucson; to Texas and New Mexico. He told them about Eureka Gulch, Baker’s Park, the San Juan, and—probably with more vagueness than the Kenosha Telegraph—the raft, the muddy Colorado, and the rescue at Callville.
The article which appeared in the *Kenosha Telegraph* was one of a second round of accounts keeping White’s raft voyage fresh in people’s minds, most of them based on Dr. Parry’s report. The first was written in February 1868 by none other than Parry himself for the *Weekly Gazette* of Davenport, Iowa; others then cropped up sporadically in newspapers and periodicals across the West, Midwest, and East—notably *Lippincott’s Magazine*, the *Rocky Mountain Herald*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Daily Pantagraph*, the *Rocky Mountain News*, and the *New York Sun*. Except for the article shown to him by his family, White was unaware of these publications. He would be an old man before even a few of them were brought to his attention.

One small mystery is how James White’s 1867 letter to Josh ended up in the possession of Dr. Parry. Only one possibility makes sense: Parry, leaving no stone unturned, must have asked White whether he had written anything about his trip. When White acknowledged the letter, Parry probably asked if he could have it to complete his survey report, and White, thinking Parry was General Palmer, agreed. Josh duly sent the letter to Parry. Whatever the scenario, it ended up in Parry’s files.

White’s devotion to his family did not include remaining in Kenosha. In the spring of 1869, he was once again on his way west; the rough familiarity of the western territories and Barlow and Sanderson’s stagecoaches beckoned. By late that summer, White had settled into a much quieter job than driving stage: tending stock and coaches at Barlow and Sanderson’s Half Mile Station on the Arkansas River near Bent’s Fort in Colorado Territory, still on his old stamping ground, the Santa Fe Trail.

On August 9, he had visitors. General William Palmer was on his way from Colorado Springs to Fort Lyon and Sheridan along with a friend, Mr. Carr. Learning from their driver that White was at Half Mile Station, the general was determined to stop and meet the prospector who had run the mighty Colorado River and Grand Canyon. Palmer was already a believer in White’s voyage, but having missed him in Hardyville, he wished to meet White directly. White, who always believed it was Palmer who had interviewed him there, was pleased to see the general for what he thought was a second time. We can only conclude that either Parry bore a surface resemblance to
Palmer or White had a bad memory for faces because he persisted in his mistake for the rest of his life. He, Palmer, Carr, and the coach driver had a sort of picnic at the station.

When the general was once again on the road, he wrote a letter to his fiancée, Queen Mellen, about the meeting.

On the coach between Ft. Lyon and Sheridan
August 9th/69

My darling Queen

When Mr. Carr and I reached Bent’s Fort on the Arkansas yesterday, we found unexpectedly that there was no coach to Sheridan until Monday morning—so we stopped at the Fort all night—took a delightful and refreshing bath in the Arkansas River the next morning, and after breakfast got the stage people to drive us down in a buggy to Fort Lyon (18 miles). —It was a very warm day, but that pleasant breeze which so constantly blows across the plains, cheered us and made the ride of three hours as delightful as we could have wished. —On the way we stopped at a stage station known as “1/2 mile Point”, where we had an interview of three hours with a very remarkable character. I do not know that you have ever heard me tell of James White—the man who came through the Colorado Canon alone on a raft just two years ago, —and whom our surveying party met in Arizona shortly after—when we learned his story—The account he gave was so wonderful and dramatic that very few people in the United States have ever believed the story or the fact that he ever really traversed this terrible cañon—four hundred miles of journey at the bottom of a trough of rock, from 20 to 30 times as deep as Niagara is high and with walls nearly precipitous and affording no outlet for nearly two weeks as he sailed on a raft of rude logs tied together with lariats. —I did not get to see White in Arizona, so I was very glad to have the opportunity of meeting him here—where I could ask him questions to my heart’s desire and satisfy myself from his replies and manner as to whether or not the perilous journey on which Powell has since set out had actually been made alone by this man. —I cannot of course tell you his story by letter, but I will, sometime when it will not have so far to travel—there were many interesting points brought out as we sat on the sill of the stable for which he was acting as stocktender—matters that have never been referred to before, and very likely that it had never occurred to him to mention before. Suffice it to say that from his entire
appearance and manner and his prompt, spontaneous way of replying to sudden questions, Mr. Carr and I came to the conclusion that without doubt this man was telling us the truth. Then there was outside confirmatory evidence in the fact that our driver knew him when he left the valley of the Arkansas where he was driving coach in March/67 . . . and three frontiersmen . . . picked him up in a starved almost insane condition at Colville [sic] in the following August after he had completed the strange passage, with no clothing on him but a coat and shirt, the rest of his body being one mass of blister, from the scorching rays of the sun . . . and from the buffeting of the water in “running the rapids” . . . sometimes there were dozens of these rapids to “run” in a single day . . . . There were four of them in the little party that started in the Spring from Fort Dodge—one was killed by Indians, one was drowned from the raft in descending the cañon. —The fourth I had never heard accounted for, and had often wondered why White had never referred to him. One gentleman in my presence threw doubts upon the whole story, because this last individual was never accounted for—I availed myself of this opportunity to ask White the question direct—“What became of the fourth man”. He hesitated a moment and then said “I shot him” —It was in a quarrel on the Arkansas in which he said the other had given the first and repeated provocation. This accounted for his never having mentioned him before.

An account of the shooting turned up in a letter written to James White in 1916 by T. J. Ehrhart, then chairman of the Colorado State Highway Commission. Ehrhart was a young boy in 1867 when his family was living at Brown’s Creek; the curious T. J. was an eyewitness and in this letter described the shooting. Ehrhart apparently did not know who the shooter was. He said he later learned of the prospecting party’s disaster and of White’s survival and when, in 1916, he saw a newspaper article stating that White was living in Trinidad, he “wrote Mr. White something about my impressions concerning the party while camped in the old schoolhouse on Browns Creek, to which Mr. White replied, proving to me, without question of doubt, that Mr. White was a member of this party.”

Critics have suggested that the shooting proves White had a violent temper and that he, not Indians, killed Baker and Strole. It is true that White never mentioned Joe Goodfellow in his first talks with
Ferry and Wilburn; the Grandin and Kipp letters and the Beggs article, all based on what these two men related, list White, Baker, and Strole as the only members of the prospecting party; Parry’s account reports four men but lets the fourth disappear without further mention. In 1917, with Ehrhart’s letter in hand and the shooting confirmed (but the shooter still unidentified), White stated only that Goodfellow had been shot and left behind at a farmhouse. Rather than assigning a sinister motive to White’s failure to mention his role in the shooting, it seems likely that he was following his usual path: offer little information, answer only what is asked, and stick to the truth. Had he been attempting to hide the episode, White could easily have made Goodfellow vanish altogether simply by never mentioning a fourth man to Parry at all.

The general, having mentioned earlier in his letter “the perilous journey on which Powell has since set out,” now told Miss Mellen,

White said that Professor Powell had endeavored to see him before starting on his expedition this Spring, to induce him to go along—but they had failed to meet. He said he would have gone willingly—and would have gone again through the cañon, as he thought from his experience he could make the trip safely,—he was just the kind of adventurous man that I know would have hailed such a renewal of danger with delight.

General Palmer’s Civil War experience as the commander of a difficult and rebellious cavalry unit had shown him to be an able judge of men. His previous acceptance of White’s journey had rested largely on his confidence in Parry’s opinion; this face-to-face meeting convinced him that White “was the very opposite in every way of a man who would either think of, or be able to concoct, such a story out of whole cloth.” He accepted White’s statement about Powell and his expedition without question. How and where White acquired this knowledge, Palmer apparently did not think it important to inquire—although one might wish that he had.