Hell Or High Water
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White put his Grand Canyon journey behind him when he returned to the West. He was apparently able to reduce his experience to a manageable adventure. For two years, he worked at various Barlow and Sanderson jobs throughout the southeastern corner of Colorado Territory. When he decided to settle down, he took the traditional and practical first step.

In 1871, he married a sixteen-year-old girl fresh out of a convent school, Octaviana (Tavvy) Johnson; she was tiny, dark haired, dark eyed, and part Mexican. The marriage took place in Red Rock (Colorado Territory) on November 6, 1871, and Antonio Johnson’s name appears on the marriage certificate as a witness. This brother appears to be something of a mystery. Dock Marston hinted that Antonio had committed a crime and was executed. Wherever or from whom Marston gained this information—he never cited a source—it was not from the White family.

For a few more years, White continued with his usual Barlow and Sanderson jobs, although their actual locations remain as vague as most of the family history of that time. In 1872, a son, Edward, was born.
and died shortly afterward. It was not until the summer of 1875 that a second child arrived; by now there was a family bible to keep track of things—in a way. It lists this newcomer’s name as Ven Delas, but in spite of that, some of his siblings insisted that his name was really Benjamin.

White and his family, now enlarged by the arrival of Carrie in 1877, settled for good in the town of Trinidad, Colorado, seven miles north of the Raton Pass from New Mexico and a busy stop on the mountain leg of the Santa Fe Trail. It is a small, quiet town, nestled at six thousand feet against the Sangre de Cristo range of the Rocky Mountains; to the northwest rise the Spanish Peaks, to the east lies the plateau and mesa country. The Purgatoire river runs through it. The air is clear, the snow is delicate and powdery in winter, and the heat dry and bearable in summer.

White started a drayage business and built a house on State Street, combining the only two professions he knew: carpentry (from his father) and horses (courtesy of the U.S. Army). Here Emilia (usually called Emma) was born in 1878 and Flora in 1879. In 1883, he built another house on College Street, finishing it just in time for Bertha, who arrived in October of that year, followed by Bonnie in 1885, and Michaela (or Mitchola or Mick) in 1887. They seem to have had a lot of trouble with their names.

In 1888, White broke his arm and was unable to work for several months. His rich friend, Dan Taylor (later the mayor of Trinidad), held the mortgage on his home, and when White let the payments lapse, Taylor foreclosed. The family stayed on, but the house was no longer theirs. When White recovered, he built a new house, and he and Taylor remained the best of friends. The new house was on Short Street and had a barn for horses and a wagon. Another girl, Esther, came along in the spring of 1890 and finally another son, Arnold, in 1892. Daughter Bonnie died of scarlet fever a few years later. All in all White sired ten children, of which eight survived into old age.

In his prosaic and unexceptional way, White was respected in his community as a hard-working and honest man. He had a great many friends, among them the rich and influential of the town; he used to play poker with them every week at the Bloom mansion. Fame and fortune clearly escaped his grasp; actually, he sought neither one. He related the story of his Grand Canyon adventure to his family, his fellow townsmen, and their children. It was accepted as he was: without
question. His listeners said he had to be coaxed into telling the story and never dressed it up.

In 1894, a reminder of his Grand Canyon experience drifted into White’s life in the form of a chance meeting with William Hiram Edwards, a boatman on the 1890 expedition led by Robert Stanton. It was brief and seemingly of little significance; however, thirteen years later, it produced the most perplexing of all White’s encounters.

In 1889, Robert B. Stanton was chief engineer of an expedition led by Frank Brown, the president of the Denver, Colorado Canyon, and Pacific Railway. After portaging Soap Creek Rapids (a few miles below Lee’s Ferry, the traditional start of the Grand Canyon), Brown was washed overboard and drowned at a spot known as Salt Water Wash. At Mile 25 Rapid, two other members of the team also drowned; the survivors thereupon abandoned the railroad survey and the river.

In 1890, Stanton reappeared on the Colorado with new boats (and life vests) and set out to complete the survey; this time he was its leader. As far as the Grand Canyon transit was concerned, it was successful, but the survey backers were unimpressed and dropped the
project; Stanton was not able to rekindle their interest. During the late 1890s, he took a huge dredge into Glen Canyon to mine gold from the gravel bars, but his venture, like all similar efforts to capture the Colorado’s elusive “floating” gold, failed.

Stanton, however, could not bring himself to abandon altogether the Colorado River or the Grand Canyon. For the rest of his life, he immersed himself in its lore, amassed a boxcar of data, and wrote a prodigious number of words on the subject; it became an obsession with him. He seemed especially driven to point out the errors and foibles of others, emphasizing his own knowledge, expertise, and ability. And, adopting the bizarre chronology of the Grand Canyon initiated by Powell, he declared,

As early as 1892, I set forth my position in the matter:
Major Powell’s expedition of 1869 was undoubtedly the first, and I, having successfully concluded a survey of all the canyons of the river in 1889 and 1890, lay claim to the distinction of being second down the great river.

When Stanton’s boatman, Edwards, read an article in the 1907 Outing Magazine which contained Dr. Parry’s report and a copy of White’s 1867 letter to his brother, he recalled his 1894 meeting with White in Pueblo, Colorado. He immediately wrote to Stanton, advising him of White’s whereabouts and recounting their meeting thirteen years earlier.

Stanton, still gathering information on the river and canyon, wrote to James White, asking if he had written the letter and/or the Outing Magazine article. White replied (in a letter written, as usual, by one of his daughters), assuring Stanton that there must be some mistake since he had never written anything for publication. The letter ended on a cordial note: “[I] would very much like to see you on your way East, if you will let me know when that will be.”

Stanton had summarily dismissed White in his customary manner by calling him a “veritable Munchausen.” Now, forty years after White’s journey and seventeen years after his own, Stanton was on his way to confront the man whom he considered to be an interloper in Grand Canyon history—surely a severe test of objectivity.

He arrived in Trinidad early on the morning of September 23, 1907, booked a room in the hotel, hired a local stenographer named Roy Lappin, and arranged to interview White. That evening Stanton
and Lappin arrived at 401 Short Street. When the amenities had been
taken care of, Stanton invited White to tell his story. The notarized
transcript of this interview contains five basic points about this story
that require close scrutiny:

First, except for getting his years mixed up, White gave a
straightforward account of the preliminaries leading up to the river
journey. Then, according to the transcript, White said, “We crossed the
San Juan River and continued our journey southwest from there until
we struck the head of a canyon.”

White, according to Parry’s report, stated quite clearly in 1868
that his party had prospected for gold along the San Juan River and then
turned north when the San Juan entered a steep canyon. It seems
inconceivable that Stanton was unaware of this report, yet he made no
effort here to reconcile these conflicting accounts. He noted that he
made a sketch in his notebook, showing this southwesterly direction,
identified the rivers, and repeated White’s statement. White replied,
“Yes, sir.” No further questions on this subject appear in the transcript.

Second, White’s response to Stanton’s question about the dis-
tance from the San Juan River to the side canyon was “It took us two
days to get there.” Here, however, according to the transcript, the “two
days” is followed by the note “[actually forty-five days],” which sug-
gests an enormous time differential. Any discussion of this surely would
have been included as part of the interview, yet the transcript reveals
no such discussion. This note could only have been inserted by Stanton
after the interview, yet it appears here in the notarized transcript of
what Stanton claimed was a verbatim interview.

Third, White related the launching of their raft “on the Grand
River.” Stanton, who often contended that White was misled by others,
surely knew that it was Parry who had identified the Grand River, and,
having been down the Colorado himself, also knew that White had not
embarked on the Grand. As an engineer, might he not have used a map
to demonstrate the northerly direction of the Grand from the San Juan
and question the obvious impossibility of going southwest from the San
Juan to reach the Grand? But Stanton did not do that; although the
Grand was discussed later, the discrepancy itself was not.

Fourth, White described his first three or four days on the river
as smooth water, without rapids. Again, Stanton knew that this
description did not fit Cataract Canyon, immediately downstream
from the Green-Grand confluence. Stanton did not respond at this time to this discrepancy. Later on, however, he berated White for not knowing of these dangerous rapids and went on to describe the smooth waters of Glen Canyon, where, he said, “you might have traveled on your raft with some safety as far as Lee’s Ferry.” Why did it not strike Stanton that these Glen Canyon waters quite accurately dovetailed with White’s description of these first days on the river?

Fifth, White described the first rapid as a “small one.” His description of the next rapid was more a recitation of George Strole’s death. From then on, he followed his ritual fourteen-day schedule, minimizing the size of the rapids but continuing to speak of “many rapids.”

Here Stanton focused on White’s comment about “one big rapid” and failed to pursue White’s several mentions of “many rapids . . . every day.” The investigative portion of the interview ended in a sort of shouting match about rapids, distances, height and color of walls, and the like. Stanton’s somewhat pedantic lectures on the USGS surveys apparently weakened White’s stubborn resistance and hammered home to him how wrong he was about the Grand, the Green, and especially Cataract Canyon. It ended with White’s reluctant admission that maybe he had been lost after all.

Stanton continued with eloquent descriptions of the colors and shapes and heights—“piled up walls and cliffs, brown, red, yellow, green, and flaming scarlet, six thousand feet high”—and scolded White for his paltry descriptions of low walls and white sandstone. He berated him: “Have you never in all these years taken the trouble to look at a government map to find out the truth?” and “Did you never look it up on a map and see that the San Juan empties into the Colorado about 145 miles below the mouth of the Green and figure out the distance you traveled?” He had clearly stopped listening since there is no mention of White’s answers to these questions.

Stanton’s final revelation was

I will tell you two more things and these in utmost kindness, I intend to defend you against the charges made, but do you know that most of the people who know anything about the Colorado River think you (and you are so mentioned in several books and pamphlets) the biggest liar
that ever told a story about the Colorado . . . and further it has been believed by some very distinguished men that you murdered your two companions and told your story in 1867 to cover up your crime.

“I didn’t kill them!” White said.

And that is all he said. He was hearing for the first time in his life the accusations of lying and murder that had been made against him, not only verbally but in print, by “very distinguished men.” According to the transcript, these four words were his only response. They seem incredibly mild considering the magnitude of the accusations. But, according to the transcript, there followed not a single question from White about them, nor any defense against them, nor further response of any kind on the subject. Stanton’s reply was “No, I know you didn’t, and . . . I am going to defend you from both charges,” and this was apparently so gratifying to White that he begged him, “Don’t go. I like you. Stay another day.” But Stanton declined the offer. The transcript carries Stanton’s final comment: “So we bade each other good-night with a hearty shake of the hand.”

After the interview, Lappin returned to his office, where he had only a few hours to type up a rough, eleven-page transcript of his notes. Stanton had brought with him a Santa Fe Railroad book describing the glories of the Grand Canyon; he autographed the fly-leaf and left it with Lappin to give to White. At 2:30 a.m., Stanton boarded the eastbound Santa Fe train.

So, apparently, ended the famous Trinidad interview; however, several letters have come to light which add a somewhat curious postscript to the interview itself and the Stanton-Lappin collaboration. On September 25, Lappin wrote to Stanton: “As per your request, I am herewith sending you the facts of the first part of the story of James White” (who White’s employer was, where they quit Barlow and Sanderson, where they stole their horses, etc.). On October 3, Stanton wrote to White asking further questions (the year of his journey, who interviewed him in 1868, Strole’s first name, etc.), including, “Do you wish to change any points of the interview?”

On October 12, having received no reply to his letter, Stanton sent a letter to Lappin, telling him he had written to White “to make some inquiries” and then adding, “If you have an opportunity I shall
be obliged to you if you could suggest to him a prompt answer to my letter.” He also advised Lappin: “In a short time I will send you a copy of the interview for inspection through a friend of mine in Trinidad.”

On October 24, White’s daughter wrote (for her father) to Stanton with the answers to his questions. Probably in response to the question about changing points in the interview, White did indeed change his point of embarkation to the Green River; his letter states, “It was the mouth of the Green river, instead of the mouth of the Grand river that I passed. Studying the map makes me more certain . . . that I was not lost.” In retrospect this statement reveals White’s confusion in the wake of the interview: if he had been so sure that he had gone southwest from the San Juan River, as the transcript reports, why was he now discussing an embarkation to the north of the San Juan? It was a question which Stanton apparently did not ask.

On November 1, 1907, Stanton sent the formal transcript of the interview not to Lappin but to William Hiram Edwards in Greeley, Colorado, asking him to “take this document down to Trinidad and get the stenographer . . . to swear to it, in the prepared affidavit on the last page.” He explained,

The reason I ask you to do this, rather than for me to send it to Trinidad is this: I picked up this stenographer, the only one I could get in Trinidad, to take down the interview in shorthand. He proved to be two things: First; a very poor stenographer for such work, and his notes which he wrote out for me afterwards, while being pretty accurate as far as they went, were not verbatim, but were simply a good skeleton of the interview; so, that in writing out this report it is not an exact copy of the words but it is absolutely exact in facts. Now, I fear if I send this to him . . . either he would go to White with it and White would want him to change it or object to his verifying it at all, for the reason that . . . this stenographer, which I did not know when I hired him, was White’s next door neighbor, and an old personal acquaintance of the family . . . now if you will go down there and see him, without of course telling him anything I have written you . . .

In 1916, Stanton wrote a letter to Thomas Dawson with a different version:

years ago, I knew White personally and spent some time with him at his home—heard the story from his own lips;
Figure 7.
James White, age seventy, 1907
(Photo taken at request of R. B. Stanton, courtesy of the White Family)
paid him $25.00 for the telling; hired and took with me a stenographer; took down verbatim every word of White’s and mine, spoken in the interview, and had the transcript of the notes sworn to.

The affidavit attached to Stanton’s transcript reads as follows:

I, Roy Lappin, being duly sworn, do depose and say as follows: I am a public stenographer doing business in the City of Trinidad, Colorado. On the 23rd day of September, 1907, I was employed by Robert B. Stanton of the City of New York, to take down in shorthand an interview which he had with James White, residing at No. 401 Short Avenue, in the city of Trinidad, Colorado, and on the evening of said day did go with the said Stanton to the residence of the said White and there took down in shorthand said interview, and furnished the said Stanton a typewritten copy of my notes, and further, the foregoing twenty-three pages contain a true and correct transcript of that said interview, together with the conversation had between the said Stanton and the said White, with certain corrections in grammar and other minor details, which in no way change the meaning or intent of the interview or statements made by the said White.

[signed] Roy Lappin

Edwards obliged, traveling from Greeley to Trinidad and back, evidently to Stanton’s satisfaction, as expressed in his letter of November 13, 1907: “You have won my everlasting gratitude . . . for the prompt and excellent manner in which you succeeded in getting Lappin’s affidavit. That incident is closed.”

But was it?

When Stanton had told White he had not been in Cataract Canyon, White had asked “Where was I then?” Although Stanton replied that he “would come to that after awhile,” he never did respond to the question during the interview. In 1908, however, when he added this encounter to his burgeoning manuscript, that answer emerged loud and clear. When Chalfant’s edited version of Stanton’s work was finally published in 1932, long after the major players had departed from the fray, it revealed nine distinct references to the Grand Wash Cliffs as White’s point of entry to the Colorado river, culminating in Stanton’s final, unambiguous conclusion: “[White] did float on a raft or rafts a distance of 60 miles from a point near the Grand Wash Cliffs to Callville, Nevada.”