Hell Or High Water

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Chapter 17  The White Family and Dock Marston

Before 1917, the White family knew nothing about the articles and books about White, except for the Kenosha Telegraph account which White had seen when he went home in 1869. They were totally unaware of the fifty-year-old controversy over his voyage. Dawson opened the door on these facts of life during preparation of his Senate document, and the discovery was a mixed blessing. When Dawson’s pamphlet was finally published, the family gave a collective sigh of relief and closed the Grand Canyon door that he had opened.

The post-1917 explorations of the Colorado River and the Grand Canyon held no interest for them. They were ignorant of Stanton’s feud with Dawson conducted in the pages of The Trail. Dr. William Bell, who had published Major Calhoun’s account in 1869–70 and defended and believed White’s journey, came to Trinidad on October 24, 1917. It was a brief visit, and although it pleased the family, it had little significance. In 1922, Ellsworth Kolb also came to Trinidad. He was a dedicated Colorado River runner about whom no one in the family had ever heard. This visit had less significance than Bell’s.
In 1920, White had one eye removed due to glaucoma but continued to work. Then, in 1926, he broke his hip; this injury made work impossible. He died on January 14, 1927, at his home in Trinidad and was buried with all due honors in the Elks’ Cemetery. His headstone includes the remarkable notation, “Co. E, Fifth California Volunteers.”

White’s children were by then widely scattered across the country. Some corresponded with one another; some never did. Some paid visits to each other or, rarely, Trinidad. Ven lived in Salt Lake City and never married. Carrie married a dispatcher for the Santa Fe Railroad, lived in Needles, California, and had no children. Em married a local man and lived in Trinidad all her life; she took care of her father and mother until they died. It also seemed she took care of everyone’s children at one time or another but had none of her own. Bertha married a railroad man in Hawaii and had one child, Esther Catherine. Mick married a telephone man, lived in Portland, Oregon, and had two sons, Palmer and Arnold. Flora married a construction worker; they lived all over the country, following the hazardous job assignments that were his specialty; I only recall Nebraska and Florida. They had no children. Arnold served in World War I; he then worked for and later owned Levi’s Department Store in Bisbee, Arizona. He and his wife had one son, Jimmy. Later, he owned a store in Long Beach, California.

Esther went to business college and worked in Denver. She married my father there; I was their only child. We moved to New York City when I was a year old and lived there until the stock market crash of 1929. I had extended visits to Aunt Em in Trinidad. After the crash, we, like thousands of others, drove across the country to Los Angeles, stopping to stay briefly with all the aunts along the way. We moved to Portland, Oregon, in 1932, and my father died shortly after. I moved to Seattle, Washington, in 1943, where, with a few breaks, I have lived ever since. My mother moved to Seattle when she retired and remained there until her death.

I offer this brief history to illustrate the disconnected nature of James White’s family. There were some strong sibling attachments but sadly, some equally strong, often overriding, antagonisms as well. Because these relationships were fragmented, White’s children never maintained his Grand Canyon journey as a vital and energetic family tradition. My mother and Aunt Em knew more about their father’s raft
journey, thanks largely to involvement in Thomas Dawson’s 1917 investigation for his Senate document. But forty years would pass before either of them gave further thought to the subject.

In 1959, my mother received a letter from an Otis Marston. Marston was, he explained, a Grand Canyon historian who was interested in researching James White and his disputed raft journey. Eventually we learned that Marston had been an engineer, naval officer, stockbroker, lecturer, and writer, but it was as a researcher that he made his appearance in our lives.

He had tracked down Arnold in Long Beach, California, Bertha in Los Angeles, and Em, who still lived in the family home in Trinidad. He interviewed and corresponded with them, but they all pointed him toward my mother. Marston’s primary interest was the behind-the-scenes work she had done in 1916–17 to help Thomas Dawson prepare Senate Document No. 42.

Marston’s not-so-subtle suggestion that she dig into the family past held little appeal for my mother. In fact his letter struck an oddly familiar chord with her: history about to repeat itself. It was a siren song she had heard before, and she was not sure she wanted an encore. Besides, she was slightly suspicious of Marston.

Although I had made that childishly spirited defense of my grandfather in the sixth grade, I’m not sure that I literally believed in his journey; I certainly made no effort to investigate it. When Marston came along, I still knew little about Grand Canyon history beyond Dawson’s pamphlet, but his letter intrigued me, and I urged my mother to respond. With more letters came more information. Marston turned out to be quite a remarkable gentleman.

He first ran the Colorado in 1942 as a passenger in a commercial boat and emerged as a dedicated Colorado River runner who was, as David Lavender observed, “wedded to the river.” He boated the Colorado in a variety of craft, ran a powerboat and a jet boat upriver, was the advisor on the Disney film, *Ten Who Dared*, and either knew more or (depending on your point of view) claimed to know more about the river and the canyon than anyone, alive or dead. He was better known by his nickname of “Dock.”

In an eerie replay of 1917, I inherited my mother’s role as inquisitor, digging into her memory as she had so relentlessly done
with her father. Reluctant or not, she supplied me with most of the White family history. She had a phenomenal memory; she had kept letters and carbon copies of replies, as well as some official documents—all of which came as a complete surprise to me, especially the materials she had retained from preparing Dawson’s pamphlet. Later, I was able to talk to my Aunt Em; she was considerably older than my mother and had a softer and more tolerant perspective on her father. These two were gold mines of information.

My relationship with Dock Marston had a quid pro quo: I supplied him with everything I learned about the family history, and he sent me a flood of letters and articles, even galley proofs of not-yet-published books on the Colorado River, the Grand Canyon, and all the players thereon and therein. From this snowstorm of data, I learned what the outside world, especially Colorado River runners, thought of James White and his raft journey; I began to see the shape of the controversy that eddied around both. I was shocked by the depth of the animosity aimed at White and astonished that these people’s opinions were considered gospel by so many and widely echoed in later attacks.

At some point, Dock suggested that I write a book about the man he called my grandpappy. Great idea, but in the face of so much negative data, it seemed as if there was little chance of successfully rehabilitating James White and his voyage.

Then, surprisingly sandwiched among all that negative stuff, Dock sent me the galley proofs of First Through the Grand Canyon by Richard E. Lingenfelter, published in 1958. Although the author, following Stanton’s lead, had assigned White a point of embarkation south of the San Juan River, he nevertheless set him firmly within the Grand Canyon. Dock himself had written the book’s foreword but warned me sternly not to believe in Lingenfelter’s conclusions. But of course I welcomed them and wondered, as I did more and more often, just which direction Dock was going.

Soon I received another small glimmer of light: a review of Lingenfelter’s book by Dr. Harold A. Bulger, published in 1961 by the Missouri Historical Society. He agreed that White had been in the Grand Canyon but proposed a point of embarkation north of the San Juan.

Then in 1969, after nearly a decade of reading, discussing, questioning, and arguing, I received a very significant letter from Dock:
About a week past at Omaha was the opportunity to talk with Robert C. Euler, Prescott College, Arizona, and the discussion went along the lines of a book about your grandpappy. Bob reviewed the Lingenfelter book. He has made water transits of the Grand Canyon several times and has choppered over and into much of it. . . . a copy of his review is enclosed.

The review had been written in 1959. Dr. Euler and his coauthor, Dr. Henry F. Dobyns, like Bulger, argued for a northern route from the San Juan River. This news was so exciting that I did not even stop to wonder why it had taken Dock ten years to send the review to me.

Within a few weeks, Euler himself wrote to me, declaring that he was looking forward to working with us on a book. With Dock I had easily accepted the role of acolyte, student, and/or water carrier. Now I had to become accustomed to associating with a scholar trailing a luminous string of accomplishments in the fields of anthropology, archaeology, and American Indian ethnohistory. I felt like a frog in a crocodile pond, but his letter convinced me that the crocodiles were friendly.

Dock, Euler, and I did indeed work together—sort of. In retrospect it seems like a slightly humorous and confusing collaboration. Dock continued to write letters (I never caught up with them) and send a multitude of articles, mostly by people with varying degrees of disbelief in White (but with the occasional pearl). Euler was always encouraging and, even better, was engaging in a series of aerial reconnaissances of the area northwest of the San Juan River at Comb Wash and pursuing some vital physical evidence.

Beyond the family investigation, I was doing some modest research of my own. Spurred by the Euler-Dobyns suggestions of stress, I started to dig into its effects on survivors of similar traumatic situations, mostly via various books on the subject, and finally enlisted the help of a psychiatrist who had done studies for the air force on survival in the Arizona desert.

By the autumn of 1972, I had completed a manuscript. It had some reasonably good research in it, but Dock tore it to shreds with an eleven-page, typewritten, single-spaced critique that curled my ego. Still, I have to admit that the kindest comment anyone could have made about the manuscript would have been “so-so.” Euler had written an excellent scholarly manuscript, and Dock had gathered
together a compilation of some of his earlier monographs on White, but it contained nothing new.

By 1976, Dock was drifting farther and farther away from our original concept. He may have felt overwhelmed by some of the evidence that was turning up in White’s favor, or he may just have been growing weary. In any case, we were unable to create a cohesive book. We continued to keep in touch, and we all remained friends, but it became obvious that this collaboration was not going to work. On August 30, 1979, Dock “ran his last rapid,” much to our sorrow.

Bob Euler and I tried to revive the book as a two-way project, but although we completely agreed with each other’s views, we seemed unable to come up with the magic formula for integrating them. Yet it is no exaggeration to say that this book could not have been written without his enormous contribution.

In 1992, my husband and I moved to Arizona. I wanted the experience of living on the Colorado River. Although we remained there—some seventy miles south of old Hardyville—for only three years, it was a remarkably enlightening experience. The Mojave Desert, the heat, the now-subdued but still-powerful Colorado River, even the grotesque remnants of the Hardyville cemetery and the drowned stone warehouse under Callville Bay—the ghosts of 1867 worked a kind of magic that produced two unexpected results: I got angry, and I actually began to consider going solo on a book.

The idea that this chapter of western American history should remain exclusively defined by men who portrayed White as either a villain or a joke was not acceptable. Many of us had worked hard over the years on what often seemed like a quixotic pursuit; now it seemed a betrayal to allow our research to go to waste. So thirty-plus years after Dock Marston jokingly suggested that I write a book about my “grandpappy,” I put away the excuses and set out to take his advice.