Hell Or High Water
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By 1975, my husband, Bob, and I had been long and seriously involved with my grandfather and his odyssey. We were ready to attempt a firsthand field trip. This was the best kind of research—neither scientific nor scholarly but certainly the most rewarding. Armed with a decade and a half of Dock-oriented lore, mountains of data, research into stress, survivals, and lunar ephemera, and, best of all, the possibilities of Bob Euler's Moqui Canyon, we planned a “JW vacation.” Our intention was to get as close as possible by airplane and car to the land of White’s preriver prospecting journey.

Sightseeing through Utah ended at Page, Arizona, where we chartered a small airplane. From Page we flew east/northeast as far as Cortez, Colorado, taking pictures all the way. Our desire to go farther, all the way to Silverton (or Baker’s Park), was foiled by its 9,300-foot altitude; it was too high for our Cessna Cardinal. So we flew on toward the Dolores River, then turned south to fly along the Mancos River, enjoying the birds-eye view of the awesome beauty of Mesa Verde.

Where the Mancos enters the San Juan River, we circled to study the north embankment. There is no question that this feature would have forced Baker’s party to cross to the south side of the San Juan, but as we continued to follow the course of that river, it became
clear that progress along only one side of the river was impeded by the distribution of sandbanks and bottomland. It looked very much as though the party would have had to cross and recross the river several times to do any prospecting.

We found the high vertical cliffs which capture and entrench the San Juan River and which in 1867 made further bottomland passage impossible for the party. We found Comb Wash with its companion Comb Ridge; its spectacular formation and color were, like so much of this magnificent land, incredible. We had asked our pilot, Jeff Murphy, to follow along the Red House Cliffs south of the Bear’s Ears and turn west at Clay Hills Pass. We had the sky to ourselves and the land below as well, so when Jeff wanted to get his bearings, he merely swooped down to read the road signs. I was too busy taking pictures to notice, and Bob is a pilot so it didn’t bother him, although he did remark later that he was glad Jeff wasn’t nearsighted.

He took us, as requested, to Lake Powell where Bullfrog Creek and Hall’s Creek meet and then flew north to the entrance to Moqui Canyon. We asked him to fly up the canyon for about twelve miles and find some stabilized sand dunes on the south side, with sheer walls to the north. He seemed skeptical but flew on, and, at just about the twelve-mile point, he exclaimed, “There they are!” as though we had just discovered the New World. And in a way, we had. There had never been any doubt about Bob Euler’s research, but actually seeing the dunes made us feel like partners in the discovery.

We had now seen everything possible for this flight, so we returned to Page via Lake Powell, with a short detour over the Glen Canyon Dam and downstream to Lee’s Ferry. It was rewarding to discover that this flight had taught us much that we had missed in all the years of reading books and maps. White’s journey now took on reality that it had lacked before.

The next step was to cover on land what we had seen from the air. Starting at Durango, Colorado, we rode General Palmer’s Denver and Rio Grande narrow-gauge steam train along the Animas River to Silverton. In Durango, we stayed at the General Palmer House (and imagined we were staying with a friend of the family). We found tempting maps of jeep trails across to the Dolores River; although our car wasn’t up to them, they proved that horses had no trouble, now or in 1867.
We followed the Mancos River as far as the boundary of the Ute Reservation but did not have enough time to seek permission to go farther down the valley. Later on, coming to the Four Corners, we stopped just to admire this land; it is all so magnificent in its spectacular grandeur and unearthly silence—so desolate, so harsh, so forbiddingly empty, and so beautiful.

We followed the San Juan River, sometimes near, sometimes far, and actually ventured into Comb Wash, where we stood in dry quicksand, a sensation close to standing on glare ice, and hoped our car would make it back up to the road. We located and literally begged local guides to take us all the way down Comb Wash to the San Juan, but they looked at the sky to the north and declined; flash floods, they said, turn Comb Wash into a roaring nightmare, and they were unwilling to chance it that day. Northwest of Mexican Hat, we encountered Cedar Mesa and enjoyed (!) the terrifying ride up twenty-six hundred feet of switchback red dirt road, without guard rails—happily without any traffic.

Along the Red House Cliffs, State Route 276 runs straight and lonely. At many points, it appeared that there might be a way through, but the first opening was indeed Clay Hills Pass. We paused at Greenwater Spring, admired the lizards, and from there headed west over the harsh stony plateau leading to Lake Powell and Hall’s Crossing. To the north lay Moqui Canyon, but we did not see it; to our earthbound eyes, the plateau seemed unbroken.

At Hall’s Crossing, we rented a twentieth-century motorboat and went north to Moqui Canyon. Buoyed at the mouth was a sign that read “Moki Canyon.” Since then I have found both spellings on various maps, and I have no idea which one is correct. Later in my research, I learned that there are two spellings for Pierces Ferry, or Pearces Ferry, near the end of Grand Canyon, so maybe James White was not the only one with spelling problems.

We went up the canyon as far as the flooding waters of Lake Powell would take us, seeing a vista of caves, redrock cliffs, drowned treetops, hidden coves, desert scrub and saltbush, and the remarkable sand dunes. Some bore the unmistakable footprints of a few hardy souls who had earlier climbed around them. When we ran out of lake, we left the boat and climbed up and over a small hill; within four hundred yards, it seemed that we had stepped clear out of the twentieth
century and into the 1867 world of James White. The remoteness and silence were complete; Bullfrog Marina, its motorboats, even Lake Powell seemed like alien intrusions.

At Lee’s Ferry, we rented a small boat with an outboard motor and putted almost up to Glen Canyon Dam. Having read over and over the river runners’ insistence that White’s raft would have inevitably gotten hung up on the many sandbars in the river that make smooth sailing impossible, we cut the motor and let our boat drift back downstream without human interference. For miles, floating along in the silence, we found sandbars aplenty, but we did not touch a single one. Of course, we were aware that river contours change, more today than in White’s time, so the only conclusion we drew from our unimpeded travel was that one shouldn’t draw conclusions. We were gratified nonetheless, for it meant that getting hung up on sandbars was not a constant factor.

On our way home along U. S. 93, we came within fifty miles of Grand Wash Cliffs, that tantalizing point of entry favored by Stanton. We knew there were many things we had not had sufficient time to cover, but this trip had certainly brought James White to life.

Years later, living in Arizona added another dimension: the implacable heat, the arid landscape, the unearthly silence, the deep night with nearly impenetrable blackness at one’s feet and a scintillant sky overhead, a moon to read by, flash floods through the arroyos. No book or map or film could match that experience.

In a hesitant footnote to the conclusions proposed by Robert Stanton, we visited—at last—the Grand Wash Cliffs. Once off U. S. 93, we saw not a single car. Through unending scrub and an unexpected Joshua tree forest, keeping station with the forbidding cliffs to the east, we were physically unaware of the river to the north, although we knew it was there. A bare two hundred yards from where the Colorado, still a river, meets the Lake Mead reservoir, we saw the water.

This presented us with a puzzle of sorts. Had we been prospectors heading west or southwest across Arizona Territory at the approximate latitude of present day Interstate 40, we would not have seen any clear sign or physical landmark to lead us unerringly to the Colorado River by this northerly route. We searched for such signs, but could not find even one.
At Lee’s Ferry, where some White critics claimed he and Strole could easily have escaped the river through Paria Canyon, we had paused and considered that possibility. The riffles at this point seemed insignificant compared to Badger Creek and Soap Creek Rapids several miles downriver. The water seemed as benign as it must have been in Glen Canyon in 1867, but the bleak and dusty hills did not present an obvious escape route. Even in 1869, according to George Bradley, Powell had missed the Paria, and he was looking for it. In 1867, two things must have appeared almost painfully certain to White and Strole: this was an arid and forbidding land, and it still belonged to the Indians. It struck us that these two men had made a reasonable choice: weighing unknown land against unknown river, they decided to stay with the means by which they could reach downstream white settlements.

James White knew something about these settlements. He could not have helped but observe the Colorado as a north/south river at Fort Yuma in 1862. As the prospecting party moved west along the San Juan River, Captain Baker and his compass had told them that the Colorado ran north to the Grand and the Green. White and Strole had clearly traveled south on their raft. That ninety-degree turn to the west within the depths of the Grand Canyon was unknown to Captain Baker, and had the men gone south/southwest across the Arizona desert, they would have expected to intercept a north-south river, not search for an east-west one.

From the maps and the history and geography books to the evidence of Lee’s Ferry and this foray into the Grand Wash, we became convinced that James White’s footsteps were not here at Pierces Ferry. Always the souvenir hunter, I picked up a little clam shell and put it in my pocket. We took one last, long look at the place where Lake Mead intrudes its placid waters upon the mighty Colorado River and turned away.

That trip and the three years spent living in the desert Southwest were more than just pleasant experiences; they expanded our knowledge. Our only regret is that we were never able to follow James White onto the Colorado River and through Big Cañon.