Hell Or High Water

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Discrediting James White’s journey by attacking his character or denigrating his mental capacity seems particularly egregious. These allegations will be considered first.

*White was a liar who told his story to make himself important.*

The nineteenth-century American West was a fertile field for storytellers. They included novelists, journalists, painters, Wild West show entrepreneurs, explorers, prospectors, engineers, and just plain adventurers. The symptoms included high levels of exaggeration and pure hyperbole. They thought fast, possessed glib tongues, and shared a threadbare partnership with the truth.

Evidence is lacking to cast James White in this role. He was, in fact, self-effacing, taciturn, secretive, practical, and prosaic, basically incapable of convoluted invention or fantasy, unable even to talk his way out of the army’s stolen coffee charge or make himself a hero in the shooting of Joe Goodfellow. He lacked the imagination to create a tall tale or the chutzpah for a bravura display of his experiences.
By 1871, White had turned his back on the years of rough-and-tumble existence on the trail and reverted to a reflection of his formative years in Wisconsin. He took modest pride in supporting his family, being a good citizen, and providing a good education for his children. He insisted on good linen and china on his table, proper behavior from the family, good manners, and piano lessons for his daughters, all symptoms of a nineteenth-century middle-class lifestyle.

White’s western adventure stories never exhibited the imagination required to invent such physical characteristics as rivers going into canyons, mountain ridges, side canyons, or continuous rapids, nor was he capable of embellishment of any sort. If anything, his stories—including the Grand Canyon journey—became increasingly milder over the years. He made no attempt at self-aggrandizement and, except for that twenty-five-dollar check from Stanton, never made a dime off his raft trip. He was profoundly unaware of whatever fame he had been accorded. It was just as well, for it came from Colorado River runners and was entirely negative.

The accusations of lying were largely due to the exaggerated account written by Major Calhoun. He claimed to have the story straight from White’s “own lips,” but the evidence points much more strongly to the colorful Calhoun himself as the true candidate for Grand Canyon yarn spinner.

*White was a thief, and/or he murdered his companions, then lied to cover his crime.*

White was attacked in the early days following Powell’s expedition as some kind of thief who rafted down a stretch of river to save his hide. Just a hint of this by Frederick Dellenbaugh was considered a viable argument against his voyage. But the most bizarre accusation was that he murdered his partners and used an imaginary Colorado River–Grand Canyon raft trip as an alibi.

Of course, the nineteenth-century West was a violent land, peopled by a great many lawless white men. Indians were fighting throughout the territory: Ute and southern Paiute around the San Juan territory; Yavapai, Walapai, and Havasupai along the southern rim of the Grand Canyon, to name but a few. Along the Arkansas River and the Santa Fe Trail, the Arapaho, Comanche, and other powerful tribes made
whites nervous and kept a “shotgun” riding on their stagecoaches. There was indeed a lot of killing going on, but in those years murder seemed to rank a poor second to cattle or horse stealing (unless, of course, the target was an Indian horse—always considered fair game).

In this setting, might murder be a reasonable possibility? Consider this hypothetical case: White, Strole, and Baker leave Baker’s Park and head for the San Juan River. Somewhere along the way, White kills Baker and Strole. What are his options? Unfamiliar with the area where he commits this crime, he can head either north or south into unknown and forbidding territory, where neither horses and supplies nor Baker’s notes and compass can offer, let alone guarantee, a chance for survival. Or, wise to the facts of western life he has acquired in his six years of experience, he can turn around and retrace his steps to Baker’s Park.

There is only one smart choice: Baker’s Park and points east. If Baker’s party were the sole residents of Eureka Gulch and Baker’s Park at the time of their departure, our murderer has nothing to explain to anyone. Or, if there were other gold seekers in that area who still happen to be around, he can hide the horses and supplies and stagger bravely into camp, in which case his Indian ambush story makes him the local hero. Or, in a more practical scenario, he can walk in boldly with his ill-gotten possessions. “What happened to your buddies?” asks a curious Eureka Gulch prospector. “Indians,” replies White. If the prospector believes his story, he is properly sympathetic; if not, he mutters, “Right!” and goes back to his diggings.

Either way, there is no sheriff to go out into that unfamiliar and dangerous land to retrieve the victims, no posse to track the hostiles, and no deputies to make an arrest. Like roads and signposts, law enforcement at this time was conspicuous by its absence. It is far more likely that any prospector still in residence would merely shrug his shoulders and make damned sure his pistol was loaded.

But hypothetical scenarios aside, this idea that concocting a complicated Ute ambush, embarking on an uncharted river, and weaving a fantasy about rafts and rapids could constitute an alibi for a crime is ludicrous in the extreme. More to the point, such an accusation becomes a smokescreen since it must be patently obvious that liars, thieves, and murderers have as much ability to ride a raft down a river
as upstanding and God-fearing mortals. White’s moral character has no bearing on his journey.

White was so mentally deficient that he had no concept of time or distance.

It has been well established that James White spent the years between 1861 and 1867 covering hundreds of miles throughout the West and Southwest, sometimes alone, often in company. If he had not by then learned the basics of estimating time and distance, he would hardly have made it as far as he did since these skills were absolute requirements for survival in that territory.

Stanton’s premise that White went overland from Four Corners to embark on the Colorado at Grand Wash Cliffs, floated sixty miles to Callville, but was so abysmally ignorant that he mistook this journey for a raft voyage on the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon seems hard to swallow. Still, it must be examined because so many believe it.

The questions, “Why leave the San Juan River?” and “Why cross totally unknown territory?” are relevant since it is obvious that Baker’s party did leave the San Juan at some point and cross unknown territory either to the north or south. But which way was it?

White’s 1867–68 statement indicated that the party’s goal after Baker’s Park was the San Juan River, that they spent some time prospecting along that river, and that they then traveled north. In 1907, according to Stanton’s interview transcript, White said they left the river immediately after coming to the mouth of the Mancos and traveled southwest, a gross contradiction. We can accept this as a benign product of White’s advanced age or blame it—as Stanton did—on White’s ignorance. However, we cannot forget that Stanton’s premise required that White (alone or with companions) make this overland journey to the southwest.

Any point where the prospectors might have left the San Juan River would have presented essentially the same choices: along the flank of the southerly continuation of Comb Ridge, down to Monument Valley, thence to the area of present-day Tuba City, south to Gray Mountain to miss the impassable gorge of the Little Colorado, west across the waterless Coconino Plateau, skirting the Aubrey Cliffs,
then northwest along the Grand Wash Cliffs to Pierces Ferry. This route could have been physically possible had they had help from friendly Navajos, but most of these tortured people were absent from their lands at that time, under detention by Kit Carson at Bosque Redondo in eastern New Mexico Territory; those who had escaped the Long Walk were in hiding, did not trust white men, and were unlikely to emerge to offer their services as guides.

This Comb Ridge route adds up to approximately three hundred miles, with no food except an occasional jackrabbit, an uncertain water supply, and a rate of travel gradually reduced because of the men’s decreasing strength. No matter how far east along the river they started, the difficulties would have been just as great; the routes would have converged in any case, and the distances overland would have increased. It would have been an incredibly tough journey, one whose physical features were entirely opposite to those White described. The canyon system that characterizes this area is mind boggling, and finding a way around it equally so. In 1867, constant experimental probing was far more likely than any straight-line travel, adding miles and time to the route.

It is important to note that it was Stanton’s interview which spawned the contention that White had gone overland and entered the Colorado at Grand Wash Cliffs. According to the transcript, White said the party crossed the San Juan River at the mouth of the Mancos and traveled southwest from there. An examination of this point clearly shows that there is no bottomland for several miles on the north side along which men or horses can travel; crossing the San Juan here was a necessity, not a choice (see figure 9). During the remainder of the interview, White spoke only of the Grand River—in a northerly rather than a southwesterly direction—certainly a matter of some confusion.

The accusations of mental deficiency in White were not supported by anything more than the diagnosis put forth by Stanton in his *Trail* article; however, that and the interview were remarkably effective in promoting the theory of an overland journey and a Grand Wash Cliffs point of entry.

If Stanton’s premise is correct, the most glaring question of all remains: Such a long and arduous land journey bears absolutely no resemblance to a sixty-mile river voyage through Boulder Canyon; no
mental deficiency can explain the substitution. And if not because of mental deficiency, why should White deny a land journey and make up such a complicated river story instead? It seems more and more likely that Stanton’s insistence that White went overland was wishful thinking, based solely on a desire to place him outside the Grand Canyon.

Figure 9.
The Mancos River at its confluence with the San Juan
(Photo by R. E. Adams)