Hell Or High Water

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Chapter 23 Summary and Conclusions: Part C

Those parts of White’s story which described the land over which he traveled in 1867 and the Grand Canyon landscape, as well as that suspect fourteen-day timetable of events on the river, were major stumbling blocks to later acceptance of his journey. Rather than outright dismissal of White’s journey based on these apparent inaccuracies, however, some alternative factors should be considered.

White’s descriptions of the Grand Canyon and the river were inaccurate.

In their 1959 review of Lingenfelter’s book, Euler and Dobyns observed,

the psychological state [White] was in, after one of his companions was killed by Indians and the other drowned, would have inhibited scientific study by even the most habitual intellectual. A pilot forced down near the river in July 1959, who built a log raft and started floating down to Page, was suffering from shock and emotional upset more than from exposure when rescued only three days later; and he had watched no one die and had only aid to expect from any Indian he might have met.
Although stress is now considered a major factor in many areas of our lives, this was the first mention of its likely role in the journey of James White. In general stress varies widely and must be measured against a baseline—in White’s case, the arduous physical conditions of the trail, his relationship to this environment, and, especially, his particular character and personality.

In the nineteenth century, the people who left established homes and went west to seek their fortunes were hardy and courageous, not only willing to accept but determined to overcome hardships and setbacks. White was no different. Over a period of six years, he traveled the West on horseback, foot, and stagecoach. After his army stint, he went back to Colorado and Kansas, then over the Continental Divide to Silverton and the San Juan Valley. He lived in minimal army barracks and stagecoach stops, in tents, or, even more primitively, in bedrolls on the ground. There were no maps or signposts to guide him. After so many years, this environment would have seemed commonplace to him.

White was active, tough, down-to-earth, and courageous, but he was a man of limited imagination. Probably the only events between 1861 and 1867 that could be called stressful were the court martial, the Mulberry Creek horse raid, and the Goodfellow shooting episode, and these had little lasting impact on his life.

He had no battlefield experience while in the army, and whatever forays he may have had against hostiles were either at a distance or without violent conclusion. It seems safe to assume that watching Captain Baker die in a hail of bullets during a Ute ambush in the middle of unknown territory was the most traumatic event in his life up to that point. Despite this, White (and Strole) reacted with considerable coolness and courage and managed to escape. The death of George Strole obviously represented a quantum jump in his stress level, for it was then that the odds turned against him and the river became no longer simply a means of escape but an active menace.

Dr. Eddy, my helpful psychiatrist, had made a study of stress during his U.S. Air Force stint in Arizona and emphasized that, in addition to the element of fear, the purely physical stress of submersion, concussion from the rock-strewn river, increasing starvation, and pain would have affected White’s cognitive processes to a high degree. Add to that the unfamiliar and spectacular nature of the land surrounding him:
mile-high cliffs with their constantly changing colors and tortured shapes, the menacing roar of the rapids echoing against the confining walls, the chaotic, turbulent waters and deep holes of a rampaging river. Eddy thought it would have been medically exceptional for White not to have suffered from both physical and psychological trauma.

This type of stress produces, along with other unpleasant things, hallucinations. Did White hallucinate? It is a virtual certainty; too many others have experienced these phenomena under similar conditions to dismiss the probability. Did he talk about them? Of course not. He would not even have known what they were. All the evidence points to his having suppressed his perceptions or replaced them with a commonplace explanation. Anything so far out of the realm of normal experience carried the taint of insanity, a terrible fear—even in our enlightened world.

White’s descriptions distressed the river runners who came after him. In 1906, the Passenger Department of the Santa Fe Railway published an anthology titled *The Grand Canyon of Arizona*. It is filled with the most glorious prose, describing this most spectacular of Nature’s wonders. In C.A. Higgins’s essay, “The Titan of Chasms,” phrases like “an inferno, swathed in soft celestial fires” and “a whole chaotic underworld” abound. Even Major Powell waxed poetic with “from black buttress below to alabaster tower above . . . these elements weather in different forms and painted in different colors; . . . a facade of seven systems of rock has its sublimity multiplied sevenfold.” And the engineer, Robert Stanton, rhapsodized, “Those terrifying, frowning walls are moving, are changing! A new light is . . . creeping over them . . . coming out from their very shadows; . . . they are being colored in gorgeous stripes of . . . yellow, brown, white, green and purple.” And further, “The Grand Canyon . . . is a living moving pulsating being, ever changing in form and color.”

These walls were described by others as “constantly changing” in the varied sunlight and shade with “colors bleached to alabaster in the blinding sun” and “walls blanched of their color.” All these observations were made by perfectly normal river runners. It seems fair to suggest that fact and stress could have combined to produce the “white sand stone rock” White’s detractors found so outrageously inaccurate.

As for White’s rigid schedule on the river, we have presented physical evidence that it was several days longer than the fourteen days he claimed. White’s arrangement of his experiences on the river
produced a two-week schedule of utterly mundane events, one for each day, until he ran out of them, and he then forged this pattern into an unshakable memory. His stubborn recitation of events like a mantra, even fifty years later, suggests that he was exhibiting a typical symptom of time compression, combined with a haphazard recollection of events—a natural result, according to Eddy, of stress and isolation.

One cannot entirely fault White’s attackers for not recognizing the effects of stress during their era. What should be clear today, however, is that James White was alone on a flimsy raft on a river moving relentlessly over a course unknown to him; he saw primarily water and rock and more water. He was not a sightseer; that extravagant riot of color, light, form, movement, and sound which so enchant the present-day visitor would have been overwhelming for a man struggling to hold onto reality. Under those conditions, would it not be reasonable to find that White’s memory was little more than a fragmented chronicle of the events that followed Strole’s death?

Whatever knowledge White had of the land and river were obtained from other sources.

Today almost no part of our planet remains unexplored. Data on nearly every square mile have been recorded and stored and are readily available for instant recall to anyone with a computer. One of the few remaining mysteries is how to turn back the clock and imagine what it must have been like before science and technology gave us all this knowledge. Still, any attempt to assess nineteenth-century circumstantial physical evidence requires us to do exactly that. We need to examine White’s route in the light of nineteenth-century realities and recognize that he had knowledge about that part of the country which no one has satisfactorily explained how he came to possess (see figure 13).

Dellenbaugh argued that White got his information about the canyon and the surrounding territory from Kit Carson but made no attempt to explain how Carson, serving at Fort Sumner in New Mexico Territory in the fall of 1867, conveyed these details to White, let alone how Carson obtained them himself. The idea that White learned about the Colorado River and the Grand Canyon from a source other than from firsthand experience gained credence despite the fact that in 1867 that region was untraveled and unknown.
Later on, when the earlier accounts about White were discarded in favor of the opinions of those who had run the Colorado River, it was suggested that he obtained his impressions of the canyon as late as 1917 from sources which were by that time readily available. The only evidence to support these suggestions was that such sources existed, a hopelessly circular argument.

One possible source was the photograph. The art of photography was in its infancy in the 1860s; the first photographs of the Grand Canyon and environs were not taken until 1871, when Timothy O’Sullivan, part of Wheeler’s upriver trip, covered the area from Fort Mohave to Diamond Creek. Powell’s second expedition of 1871–72 produced many wonderful photographs by E. O. Beaman, J. Fennemore, and J. K. Hillers; more than excellent, they were incredible, given that the wet collodion process required that camera, glass plates, darkroom tent, and all the necessary processing chemicals—altogether about a ton of equipment—be carried to the point from which the pictures were taken. But these photographs were not published until 1902, long after White’s descriptions had been well documented.

As for any written words about the Grand Canyon, all articles published prior to the writings of Powell, Dellenbaugh, or Stanton were accounts of White’s own trip, and even if he had read them, they could not possibly have given him any information he didn’t already know.

The most important thing is to discover whether or not White’s recollections square with facts known today but unknown to anyone else at that time.

A) White’s 1917 statement of what he saw as he traveled down Mancos Canyon:

a large lookout house about 100 feet high, which was built out of cobblestones. Farther down the canyon we saw houses built of cobblestones, and also noticed small houses about 2 feet square that were built up about 50 feet on the side of the canyon and seemed to be houses of some kind of bird that was worshiped.

This is a spare, but unmistakable, description of the Anasazi ruins in the Mancos Valley, as easily visible to White in 1867 as they were to the Hayden Survey in 1874 (see figure 14).
Figure 14
Ruins of Anasazi tower, Mancos Canyon
B) White’s assertion that the party could no longer continue along the San Juan River because it entered a canyon with no bottomland:

This landmark does exist; it lies between Bluff and Mexican Hat in Utah (see figure 15).

C) White’s combined mention of a northerly direction from the San Juan, a mountain ridge, and their horses’ sore feet:

This combination of details prompted Euler, Dobyns, and Bulger to point unerringly to Comb Ridge, then Lime Ridge or Elk Ridge respectively, adding somewhat parenthetically that either route could cause “sore fite” (see figures 16 and 17).

D) White’s description of the side canyon where Baker was killed:

This description covered several physical features which had to be assessed as a whole before it could be considered truly representative of any real side canyon. These were 1) fifty miles from the San Juan; 2) accessible on the south side; 3) no egress from the north side; 4) water
Figure 16
Comb Ridge and the mouth of Comb Wash.
(Photo by R. C. Euler)

Figure 17
Lower Lime Creek forks
(Photo by R. C. Euler)
for horses and men but no running stream down to the river; and 5) the twelve- to fifteen-mile distance from the point of Baker’s death to the river.

Euler made an exhaustive search to determine whether such a combination of factors pointed to any real location in that area. There were several sites which matched one or another point, but the unique combination did indeed occur in a single place—Moqui Canyon (see figure 18).

E) White’s assertion that he and Strole floated downstream on smooth water for (at least) three days, followed by severe rapids in which Strole was drowned.

Is there any place on the Colorado where this combination of features exists? Yes. Even Stanton allowed this possibility when he told White in 1907, “You would have had . . . 185 miles of comparatively smooth water in Glen Canyon; . . . over this stretch you might have traveled on your raft with some safety as far as Lee’s Ferry.” There is no other
description of features along the Colorado that so closely matches Glen Canyon from Moqui Canyon to the formidable rapids known as Badger Creek at Mile 8 and Soap Creek at Mile 11.5. The sixty-mile stretch from Grand Wash Cliffs through Boulder Canyon to Callville does not offer such a match.

After Strole’s death, most of what White was able to recall was so deeply affected by physical and psychological stress that it was close to meaningless; however, there is one exception which can be considered. White, in his 1917 statement, described an unusual sight:

I stopped and looked at a stream of water about as large as my body that was running through the solid rocks of the canyon about 75 feet above my head, and the clinging moss to the rocks made a beautiful sight. The beauty of it cannot be described.

Does such a waterfall—not cascading over the top of a cliff, as most conventional falls do, but running through a hole in solid rock—exist in the Grand Canyon? It does; it is at mile 136 and is called Deer Creek Falls (see figure 19). Powell described it, too, but with a more poetic twist: “we pass a stream on the right, which leaps into the Colorado by a direct fall of more than 100 feet, forming a beautiful cascade. On the rocks in the cavelike chamber are ferns, with delicate fronds and enameled stalks.”

There are other waterfalls in the Grand Canyon, such as Vasey’s Paradise, but the juxtaposition of bad rapid and waterfall, as well as distance into the canyon, suggests Deer Creek. More to the point is whether a waterfall like the one described by White exists, not which one of several he saw.

The descriptions offered by White detailed definitive features and landmarks which were unknown to anyone else in 1867. The fact that these descriptions were linked in somewhat intricate relationships with his time and distance estimates belies the possibility that they could have come from an outside source. It is therefore difficult to escape the conclusion that James White did see and experience what he described and that he could not have done so had he not actually traversed the Grand Canyon.
Figure 19
Deer Creek Falls, Grand Canyon
(Photo by R. C. Euler)