Hell Or High Water

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Appendix B: James White’s 1917 Statement

The following statement was dictated by James White to his daughters in 1916, at the request of Thomas Dawson. It was published in Senate Document No. 42 in 1917.

I was born in Rome, N.Y., November 19, 1837, but was reared in Kenosha, Wis. At the age of 23 I left for Denver, Colo., later drifting to California, and there enlisted in the Army at Camp Union, Sacramento, in Company H, California Infantry, Gen. Carleton (some doubt as to the correct spelling of his name) being general of the regiment, and the company being under Capt. Stratton. I served in the Army three and one-half years, being honorably discharged at Franklin, Tex., on May 31, 1865. From there I went to Santa Fe, N. Mex., and then to Denver. In the fall of that year I went from Denver to Atchison, Kans., with Capt. Turnley (some doubt as to the correct spelling of this name) and his family, and from Atchison I went to Fort Dodge, Kans., where I drove stage for Barlow & Sanderson, and there I got acquainted with Capt. Baker, also George Stroll [sic] and Goodfellow. This was in the spring of 1867, and the circumstances under which I met them were as follows: Capt. Baker was a trapper at the time I met him there, and the Indians had stolen his horses, and he asked me to go with him to get his horses, and I went with him, George Stroll, and Goodfellow. We could
not get his horses, so we took 14 head of horses from the Indians. The Indians followed us all night and all day, and we crossed the river at a place called Cimarron in Kansas, and we traveled across the prairies to Colorado City, Colo.

Before going further with my story I would like to relate here what I know of Capt. Baker’s history. He had been in the San Juan country in 1860 and was driven out by the Indians. He showed me lumber that he had sawed by hand to make sluice boxes. I was only with him about three months, and he spoke very little of his personal affairs. When we were together in Colorado City he met several of his former friends that he had been prospecting with in the early sixties. I can not remember their names. The only thing I know is that he mentioned coming from St. Louis, but never spoke of himself as being a soldier, and I thought “Captain” was just a nickname for him. He was a man that spoke little of his past or personal affairs, but I remember of him keeping a memorandum book of his travels from the time we left Colorado City.

After reaching Colorado City, Colo., Baker proposed a prospecting trip to the San Juan. There we got our outfit, and that spring the four of us started on the trip and went over to the Rio Grande. At the Rio Grande, Goodfellow was shot in the foot, and we left him at a farmhouse, and the three of us proceeded on our trip. From the Rio Grande we went over to the head of it, down on the Animas, up the Eureka Gulch. There we prospected one month. We dug a ditch 150 feet long and 15 feet deep. We did not find anything, so we went down the Animas about 5 miles, crossed over into the Mancos. At the head of the Mancos we saw 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 a bird that was worshiped. We followed the Mancos down until we struck the San Juan. Then we followed the San Juan as far as we could and then swam our horses across and started over to the Grand River, but before we got to the Grand River we struck a canyon; so we went down that canyon and camped there three days. We could not get out of the canyon on the opposite side; so we had to go out of the canyon the same way we went down. There we were attacked by Indians and Baker was killed. We did not know there were any Indians about until Baker was shot. Baker, falling to the ground, said, “I am killed.” The Indians were hiding
behind the rocks overlooking the canyon. Baker expired shortly after the fatal shot, and, much to our grief, we had to leave his remains, as the Indians were close upon us; and George Stroll and I had to make our escape as soon as possible, going back down in the canyon. We left our horses in the brush and we took our overcoats, lariats, guns, ammunition, and 1 quart of flour, and I also had a knife scabbard made out of rawhide, and I also had a knife, and we started afoot down the canyon.

We traveled all day until about 5 o’clock, when we struck the head of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River. There we picked up some logs and built us a raft. We had 200 feet of rope when we first built the raft, which was about 6 feet wide and 8 feet long, just big enough to hold us up. The logs were securely tied together with the ropes. We got on our raft at night, working it with a pole. We traveled all night, and the next day, at 10 o’clock, we passed the mouth of the San Juan River. We had smooth floating for three days. The third day, about 5 o’clock, we went over a rapid and George was washed off, but I caught hold of him and got him on the raft again.

From the time we started the walls of the Canyon were from two to three thousand feet high, as far as I could estimate at the time, and some days we could not see the sun for an hour, possibly two hours. Each day we would mix a little of the flour in a cup and drink it. The third day the flour got wet, so we scraped it off of the sack and ate it. That was the last of the flour and all we had to eat.

On the fourth day we rebuilt our raft, finding cedar logs along the bank from 12 to 14 feet long and about 8 or 10 inches through. We made it larger than the first one. The second raft was about 8 feet wide and 12 feet long. We started down the river again, and about 8 o’clock in the morning (as to our time, we were going by the sun) we got into a whirlpool and George was washed off. I hollered to him to swim ashore, but he went down and I never saw him again.

After George was drowned I removed my trousers, tying them to the raft, so I would be able to swim in case I was washed off. I then tied a long rope to my waist, which was fastened to the raft, and I kept the rope around my waist until the twelfth day.

About noon I passed the mouth of the Little Colorado River, where the water came into the canyon as red as could be, and just below that I struck a large whirlpool, and I was in the whirlpool about two hours or more before I got out.
I floated on all that day, going over several rapids, and when night came I tied my raft to the rocks and climbed upon the rocks of the walls of the canyon to rest. I had nothing to eat on the fourth day.

On the fifth day I started down the river again, going over four or five rapids, and when night came I rested on the walls again and still nothing to eat.

On the sixth day I started down the river again, and I came to a little island in the middle of the river. There was a bush of mesquite beans on this island, and I got a handful of these beans and ate them. When night came I rested on the walls again.

The seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth days were uneventful, but still going continuously over rapids, and still nothing to eat. So I cut my knife scabbard into small pieces and swallowed them. During the entire trip I saw no fish or game of any kind.

On the eleventh day I went over the big rapid. I saw it before I came to it, and laid down on my stomach and hung to the raft and let the raft go over the rapid, and after getting about 200 yards below the rapid 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 can not be described.

On the twelfth day my raft got on some rocks and I could not get it off; so I waded onto a small island in the middle of the river. On this island there was an immense tree that had been lodged there. The sun was so hot I could not work, so I dug the earth out from under this tree and laid under it until the sun disappeared behind the cliffs. This was about noon. After resting there I got up and found five sticks about as big as my leg and took them down to the edge of the island below my raft. I then untied the rope from my raft and took the loose rope I had around my waist and tied these sticks together. I slept on this island all night.

On the thirteenth day I started out again on my newly made raft (leaving the old raft on the rocks), thinking it was daylight; but it was moonlight, and I continued down the river until daylight. While floating in the moonlight I saw a pole sticking up between two large rocks, which I afterwards learned the Government had placed there some years before as the end of its journey.

When daylight came I heard some one talking, and I hollered “hello,” and they hollered “hello” back. I discovered then that they were Indians. Some of them came out
to the raft and pulled me ashore. There were a lot on the bank, and I asked them if they were friendly, and they said they were, and I then asked them to give me something to eat, when they gave me a piece of mesquite bread. While I was talking to some of the Indians the others stole my half-ax and one of my revolvers, which were roped to the raft. They also tore my coat trying to take it from me.

After eating the bread I got on my raft and floated until about 3 o’clock in the afternoon, when I came upon another band of Indians, and I went ashore and went into their camp. They did not have anything for me to eat, so I traded my other revolver and vest for a dog. They skinned the dog and gave me the two hind quarters and I ate one for supper, roasting it on the coals. The Indians being afraid of me, drove me out of their camp, and I rested on the bank of the river that night, and the next morning, the fourteenth day after I got on my raft, I started to eat the other quarter, but I dropped it in the water. I floated that day until 3 o’clock and landed at Callville, and a man came out and pulled me ashore.

Jim Ferry or Perry (not sure as to the first letter of this name) was a mail agent at that place. He was also a correspondent for some newspaper in San Francisco. He took me in and fed me. When I landed all the clothing I had on my body was a coat and a shirt, and my flesh was all lacerated on my legs from my terrible experience and of getting on and off the raft and climbing on the rocks. My beard and hair were long and faded from the sun. I was so pale that even the Indians were afraid of me. I was nothing but skin and bones and so weak that I could hardly walk. Jim Ferry or Perry cared for me for three days, and the soldiers around there gave me clothing enough to cover my body.

I was at Callville about four weeks, and a boat was there getting a load of salt, and I got on that boat and went to Fort Mojave. There I met Gen. Palmer and told him my story.

From Fort Mojave I went to Callville again and there worked for Jim Ferry (or Perry), carrying the mail for three months between Callville and Fort Mojave. Then he sold out to Jim Hinton, and I carried mail for him for a month. He sold out, and we each bought a horse and pack animal and we started from Callville, going to Salt Lake in the spring of 1868. From Salt Lake City we went to Bear River. There we took a contract of getting out ties. Then I hired out as wagon boss. Then I quit and run a saloon. I sold out and then went to Omaha, Nebr. From
there I went to Chicago, and from there to Kenosha, Wis., to visit my old home. That was in 1869.

From Kenosha I went to Chicago, and from there to Leavenworth, Kans., and later to Kansas City, Kans. From there I went to Junction city, Kans., and then to Goose Creek. I drove stage in and out of Goose Creek for Barlow and Sanderson, for whom I had worked in Fort Dodge. I was transferred from Goose Creek to Fort Lyon or Five Mile Point. From there I went to Bent Canyon, Colo., and kept home station. From there I went to Las Animas, Colo., and minor places, later drifting to Trinidad, where I have lived since 1878.

These are the plain facts. There are many minor points that could be mentioned, but did not think it would be necessary to mention here. I have never been through that country since my experience, but have had a great desire to go over the same country again, but have never been financially able to take the trip.


“These are the plain facts,” said James White in 1916 as he was nearing the age of eighty. Even a cursory examination of this statement and a brief comparison with his 1867 letter, the early accounts (by Parry, Grandin, Kipp, and Beggs), and the meeting with General Palmer reveal that his “plain facts” for the time spent on the Colorado River were, in fact, a jumble of odd anecdotes, mistaken persons and places, wrong times, and, quite possibly, hallucinatory events. His fourteen-day schedule remained as rigid and incredible as it had been from the day he first articulated it.

But these are minor and peripheral faults, and it would be a mistake to discount the core of his recollections. Too much of what he said over the years remained constant and consistent with a voyage through the Grand Canyon, however impossible anyone might have thought it.