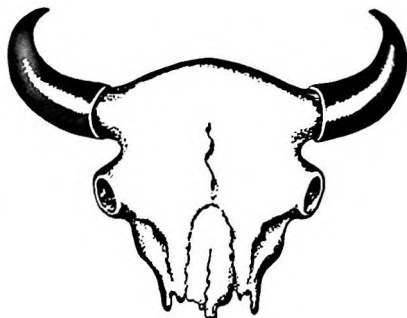


The DENVER WESTERNERS

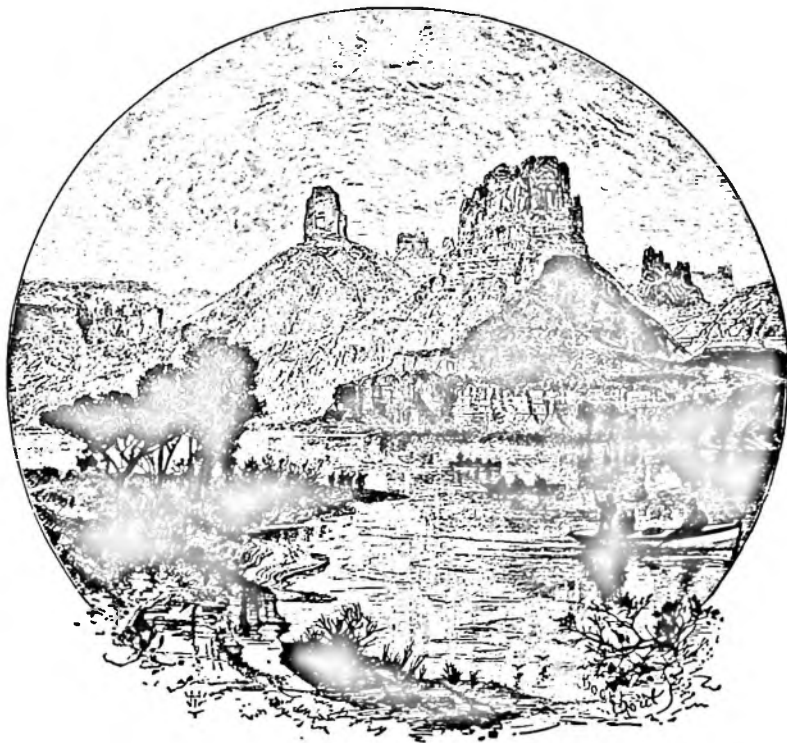
ROUNDUP

MARCH-APRIL 1986



CANYONS OF THE COLORADO REVISITED

Henry W. Toll Jr., P.M.



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by

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Presented 27 November 1985

Residents of our territory and State have played a variety of roles in the history of the exploration, study, and running of the Colorado River which shares our name. Some became famous through their involvement and a few, infamous. History has dealt kindly with some and harshly with others. This paper proposes to revisit the Canyons of the Colorado noting the lesser known involvement of Coloradans in its history.

All Western historians and river buffs recognize the *Canyons of the Colorado* portion of the title.¹ Of the myriad books published about the river, this stands with its predecessor, *Explorations of the Colorado River of the West* as the landmark for the historian, geologist, river runner, or writer. Powell's original report, which has been characterized as the "Smithsonian Report," was published after the completion of Powell's 1871 - 1872 trip through the Canyons.²

Regardless of how one calculates the numbers (and there is room for argument) at least half of the original Powell crew came from Colorado. That first trip in 1869 had been planned to last ten months, but was truncated to 98 exhausting days of a trial by water occasioned by the loss of one of four boats laden with crucial supplies. The site of the mishap, christened Disaster Falls, is in Colorado's Lodore Canyon.

The oarsmen of the ill-fated, imaginatively titled, "No Name," were Coloradan Oramel G. and, his brother, Seneca Howland. O.G. Howland, the elder of the two brothers, was a printer and editor by trade. He came to Denver in 1860 and worked with William Byers at the *Rocky Mountain News*. Of him, William Culp Darrah writes:

"No member of the Powell expedition of 1869 is more misunderstood than the elder Howland. He has many interests including: business agent for a Methodist Episcopal Sunday School magazine called "The Sunday School Casket," The Denver Typographical Union No. 49, and the "Nonpareil Prospecting & Mining Company." Howland was Vice-President of the Typographical Union in 1867 and was also the Secretary and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Nonpareil Prospecting & Mining Company. In other words, Mr. Howland was an active member in the business and social affairs of the city of Denver. He was apparently active also as an outdoorsman. He served as a guide for Major Powell in Colorado in 1868. He came to the Powell party with Mr. Byers, who had determined to attempt the ascent of Long's Peak with the Major after several previous unsuccessful attempts. Howland was never a mountaineer in the usual sense of the word."³

Seneca Howland came West from the family home in Pomfret, Vermont, in 1868 and joined the Powell expedition of that year with his brother. Although Howland may have been recruited here, history credits him to Vermont.³

Powell led field trips in Colorado in the summers of 1867 and 1868. In the course of his travels around the state in 1868, he made the first recorded ascent of

Long's Peak via an arduous route from the Grand Lake area. It was a difficult route and one seldom followed today. The most complete account of that summer is given in a book, *The Professor Goes West*, which is of special interest to Westerners because the volume was compiled by our founder, Elmo Scott Watson. Watson gathered the material from the records of his Alma Mater, Illinois Wesleyan University, where Powell was Professor of Geology previous to his explorations of the Colorado River.⁴ Powell later became Professor of Geology at Illinois State Normal University and Curator of the Natural History Museum at Normal. He resigned in 1872 to go to Washington, taking with him some of the expeditions' collections now lodged at the Smithsonian which some believe should have stayed with the college in Illinois.⁵ Both universities and the Illinois Natural History Society helped finance the first trip. The Smithsonian did contribute many of the scientific instruments used and receives primary credit in the report.

It was Powell's association with William Byers that led to the association of the most important Coloradan who made that first canyon expedition. Byers' brother-in-law was Jack Sumner who ran a trading post near Hot Sulphur Springs. Powell and Byers visited the trading post in the summer of 1868 and the Long's Peak climb was launched from that site. Sumner was a guide for that trip. He was also valuable to the first Powell expedition and has the significant distinction of being the only member of that first expedition invited to go on the second!⁶ Although invited, he did not go. It was Sumner who recruited William Dunn for the expedition. Dunn was a mountaineer then living in Colorado, but little is known of his antecedents and his future at that point is well-known, but short.⁷

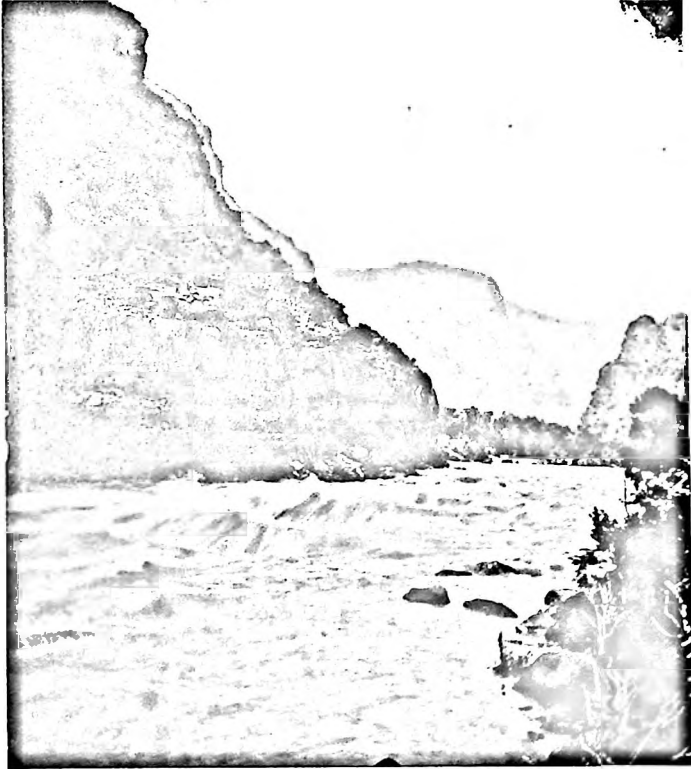
On August 28, 1869, three days before the expedition emerged from the Grand Canyon, the Howlands and Dunn left the first Powell expedition at what has since that day been known as Separation Canyon to go overland to the Mormon settlements. In that attempt, they encountered hostile Shivwit Indians who killed them in the alleged and mistaken belief that they were prospectors who had violated an Indian squaw. Fate and history have treated this threesome harshly. In later years, the Howlands and Dunn were characterized as deserters, although the diaries of that time and Powell's Preface to *Canyons of the Colorado*, indicate otherwise. Not only was Oramel Howland misunderstood by his companions, peers, and history, but by the Indians as well.

The personnel for Powell's second expedition were recruited primarily from the mid-West and no Coloradans were among the crew. I note two things in passing which are of interest, although they do not bear on the main topic. Both the "Smithsonian Report" and *The Canyons of the Colorado*, published 20 years later (after Powell's retirement as Chief of the U. S. Geological Survey) meld events of both trips into one apparent adventure. Powell never really acknowledged the contributions of the second trip which ultimately led Frederick Dellenbaugh to publish his book, *A Canyon Voyage*, documenting the traverse of 1871 and 1872.⁹

The next major attempt on the canyon was not to come for approximately 18 years and Coloradans played a major part in that effort. Frank Brown, of Denver, secured Eastern investors and in 1889 commenced a survey of the canyons west from

Grand Junction hoping to establish a water-level railroad route to California.

After a very rough time in Cataract Canyon, Brown, his chief engineer, Robert Brewster Stanton, and their crew left Lee's Ferry for the run through Marble Gorge and Grand Canyon on July 9, 1889. Brown drowned at the foot of Soap Creek on July 10, 1889, and five days later, a second boat carrying Hansborough and Richards capsized at what is today Mile 25 Rapid, resulting in their deaths as well. Command



Disaster Rapids in Canyon Of Lodore.

Courtesy U.S. Geol. Surv. E. O. Beaman photo 1871. Second Powell Expedition.

of the expedition had passed to Robert Brewster Stanton upon Brown's death and with the loss of Hansborough and Richards, the expedition's supplies were cached at what is today known as Stanton's Cave and the party then left the river.¹⁰

In December of 1889, Stanton returned determined to finish the survey and to accelerate it with serial point-to-point photographs of the canyon. The photographer for that trip and the preceding trip was Franklin A. Nims of Colorado Springs.



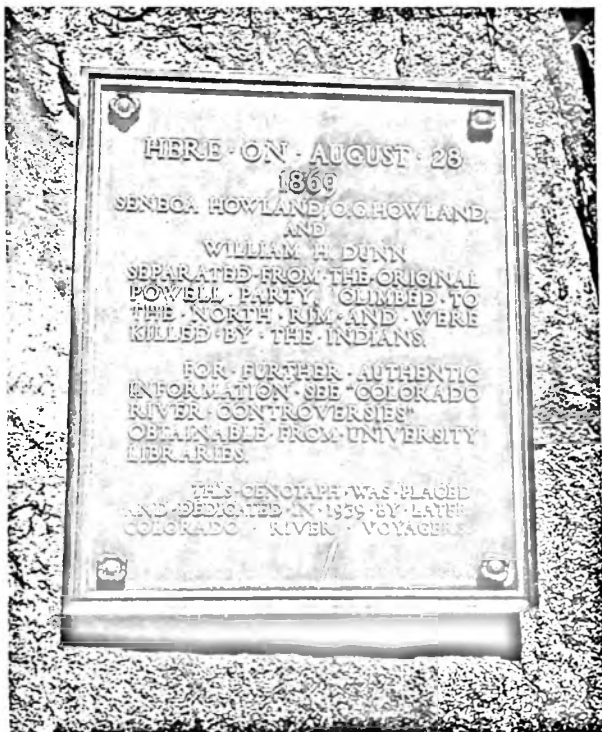
Major Powell's Party at Ashley Falls.

Red Canyon, Green River, Daggett County, Utah after portage of the boats, 1871. Beaman photo.

Disaster again struck when, three days into the canyon, Nims sustained severe injuries including a leg fracture in a fall of some 22 feet from a rock which he was using as a photographic station. The date is easy to remember as fate picked New Year's Day of 1890 for Nims' calamity. Unconscious and bleeding from his ears and his mouth, having sustained a basilar skull fracture, Nims was carried up a side canyon by his colleagues who hoisted his improvised stretcher up 1,700 vertical feet to the canyon rim. Ropes were required for the steeper portion of the trip. Transported by buckboard wagon from the rim to Lee's Ferry, he regained consciousness days later lying on the floor of Warren Johnson's ranch cookhouse. He returned to Colorado Springs after a period of convalescence in Winslow permitted him to do so. A workman's compensation note contrasting those days to this says that he was stricken from the company payroll on the day of the fall and received neither wages nor

medical expenses for his near fatal experience.¹¹

The railroad was never built, although the work of Surveyor Frank C. Kendrick, another Denverite, carried the line west of Grand Junction 160.78 miles to the junction of the Grand and the Green, at the head of Cataract Canyon. Stanton's arduous work of carrying a survey line through Cataract Canyon (which came to be known as the "Graveyard of the Colorado"), Glen Canyon, and the Grand Canyon, was all for naught so far as railroad construction was concerned.



Plaque at Separation Canyon.

Dr. David Claasen photo.

At least two other Denverites accompanied the expedition. They were lawyers J. N. Hughes and E. A. Reynolds. Stanton's field book lists them as President Brown's guests who were "expected to do their share of the work." In some accounts, they appear under the generic listing of "the two lawyers." Apparently they came mostly for the trip and were not held in high regard by working members of the crew. Hughes and two others left the expedition at Hite, Utah. Reynolds departed at Lee's Ferry.

From the railroad survey came two classics of river history: *Colorado River Controversies* and *Down the Colorado*, both written by Stanton.^{8,10} The former includes one of many detailed studies of the claim of James O'White who for some years was thought to have traversed the Grand Canyon on raft, having been dragged half starved, and incoherent from his crude raft at Callville, Utah, on September 8, 1887. White was later to become a resident of Trinidad. His account of his trip was a source of great interest to General Palmer of Colorado Springs who was then in the process of investigating transcontinental railroad routes. Dr. Parry, who worked on these surveys, and Bell, who documented White's claims in the two volume edition of *New Tracks in North America*, were participants in the Palmer Surveys. Senator Shafroth of Colorado introduced a Memorial to Congress which recognized White as "First Through the Grand Canyon."¹² The preponderance of the evidence which has been rehashed many times through the years indicates this is not the first time and probably not the last that Congress may have been in error.

With Stanton's second trip, the exploration of the canyon was essentially complete. A succession of runs were made for trapping, mining, adventure and recreation in the ensuing years. David Lavender (a Telluride native) has given excellent accounts of these trips and I refer you to his recent publication: *River Runners of the Grand Canyon*.¹³

After Stanton, there were changes in boat design and in running technique which decreased the mortality rate, although sporadic deaths continued to occur.¹⁴

At the end of World War II, fewer than 100 persons had made the Grand Canyon portion of the traverse.

A third epoch in Western river running began after World War II with the appearance on the market of war-surplus rubber rafts and bridge building pontoons of various types. By 1967, commercial river runners using primarily various modifications of these craft had escalated the commercial usage in the Grand Canyon alone to literally thousands per year and by 1972, the figures had reached 16,432!

During these post-war years, the entire perspective changed. Whereas previously minor errors in navigation often resulted in calamity, today, the river forgives the operator of a rubber raft for all but the most blatant of errors. Present day outboard motors, more powerful and reliable than their pre-war counterparts render various pontoon assemblages of more than 30 feet sufficiently maneuverable for running rapids. While the benefits of gasoline engine technology are controversial as applied to the canyons, it should be noted that prior to the Glen Canyon Dam, a number of highwater runs were made by inboard engine craft. Not the least of these was the running of the canyon in cabin cruisers by the Rigg brothers of Grand Junction in 1952. The year previous, Bob and Jim Riggs had also made a record transit of the canyon under oars in Cataract boats with a time of 38 hours from Lee's Ferry to Diamond Creek and two and one-half days to Pierce Ferry. That record was ultimately whittled to just over 36 hours from Lee's Ferry to the Grand Wash in 1983 by Grua, Petschek and Reynolds, using dories equipped with car batteries to power searchlights and by running the lower less violent reaches of the river at night.¹³ Contrast their transit of a matter of hours with Powell's 28 days of extreme

hardship and anxiety!

A brief note on up-river runs. In 1858, Lt. Ives came up-river under steam as far as the Black Canyon and by skiff to Vegas Wash below the Grand Canyon. Over land, he had entered the lower Grand Canyon at Diamond Creek and made his famous pronouncement that nature intended the canyon to be "forever unvisited and undisturbed."¹⁵ What would be his amazement to know that jet driven boats breached the upstream Grand Canyon barrier in 1960? Subsequently, Bill Somerville of Lakewood took a jet driven craft up Cataract Canyon in June of 1965 thereby completing the last leg of upstream navigation from the river's mouth to the junction with the Green.¹⁷

The phenomenal changes of the past four decades have greatly changed historic perspectives. The back-breaking and time-consuming practices of lining and portage are seldom seen today. A knowledge of escape routes is a thing of the past. Rapids which were still considered unrunnable 60 years ago are run today on an almost daily basis. Hydrologists have emasculated the river's awesome power. The gasoline engine has violated the magnificent solitude of the canyons. In spite of this, the romance of the earlier history remains. Though relatively unrecognized, a considerable number of the participants in the significant nineteenth century expeditions came from the state which gives the river its headwaters and shares its name.

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¹⁵Telephone interview with Robert Rigg, 10/21/85.
¹⁶Dellenbaugh, Frederick, *Romance of the Colorado*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York & London, 1904, Second Edition.
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BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE:

In 1953, Francis Farquhar published his *Bibliography of the Colorado River and Grand Canyon*. (Dawson, Los Angeles), which remains an excellent check list for early history and contains 125 references. For a totally comprehensive work, the reader is referred to *Bibliography of the Grand Canyon, 1540-1980*, compiled by Spamer and others (Grand Canyon Natural History Assn., Grand Canyon, 1981), which by my casual count contains about 3,700 references.