

GRAND CANYON GUIDE no. 5

... excerpted from Grand Canyon Explorer ... Bob Ribokas

AN AMATEUR'S REVIEW OF BACKPACKING TOPICS

FOR THE

T254 - EXPEDITION TO THE GRAND CANYON - MARCH 2007

Down the Great Unknown

Major John Wesley Powell was 35 years old when he led the first expedition through the Canyon. He was a geologist, a teacher, and a one-armed veteran of the Civil War (he lost his right arm in the Battle of Shiloh).

Though he attended school irregularly, he was determined to pursue his studies in science over the objections of his father who wished him to become a minister. When he was 18, Powell began teaching in a one-room country school to earn money for college. The next 7 years were spent teaching school, attending college, and exploring the Midwest. At various times he attended Illinois College, Illinois Institute, and Oberlin College.

In 1858, he joined the newly formed Illinois State Natural History Society, and as curator of conchology (branch of natural history that studies mollusk shells), made a fairly complete collection of the mollusks (clams, mussels, etc.) of Illinois. He began teaching at Hennepin, Illinois in 1858 and in 1860, became superintendent of its schools.

While on a lecture tour in the summer of 1860, Powell realized that a civil war was inevitable. That winter, he studied military science and engineering. A strong abolitionist, John Wesley Powell was one of the first to volunteer when President Lincoln issued a call for troops.

Civil War Hero

On May 8, 1861, Powell enlisted at Hennepin, Illinois, as a private in the 20th Illinois Infantry. He was described as "age 27, height 5' 6 1/2" tall, light complected, gray eyes, auburn hair, occupation- teacher." He was elected sergeant major of the regiment, and when the 20th Illinois was mustered into the Federal service a month later, Powell was commissioned a second lieutenant. The regiment was sent to Camp Girardeau near St. Louis, Missouri.

Because of his knowledge of engineering, Powell was directed to prepare and carry out a plan for the fortification of the camp and town. In November, General Grant authorized him to recruit and train a company to manage the siege guns. That same month Grant allowed Powell a short leave for a hurried trip to Detroit to marry his cousin, Emma Dean, who accompanied him back to camp after the ceremony.

Powell was made captain of Battery F, 2nd Illinois Artillery Volunteers at the end of the year. A few weeks later, he and his battery were ordered to Pittsburgh Landing on the Tennessee River. During the Battle of Shiloh, on April 6, as Powell gave the signal to fire, a Minie ball struck his wrist and plowed into his arm. The wound was so severe that his arm had to be amputated below the elbow.

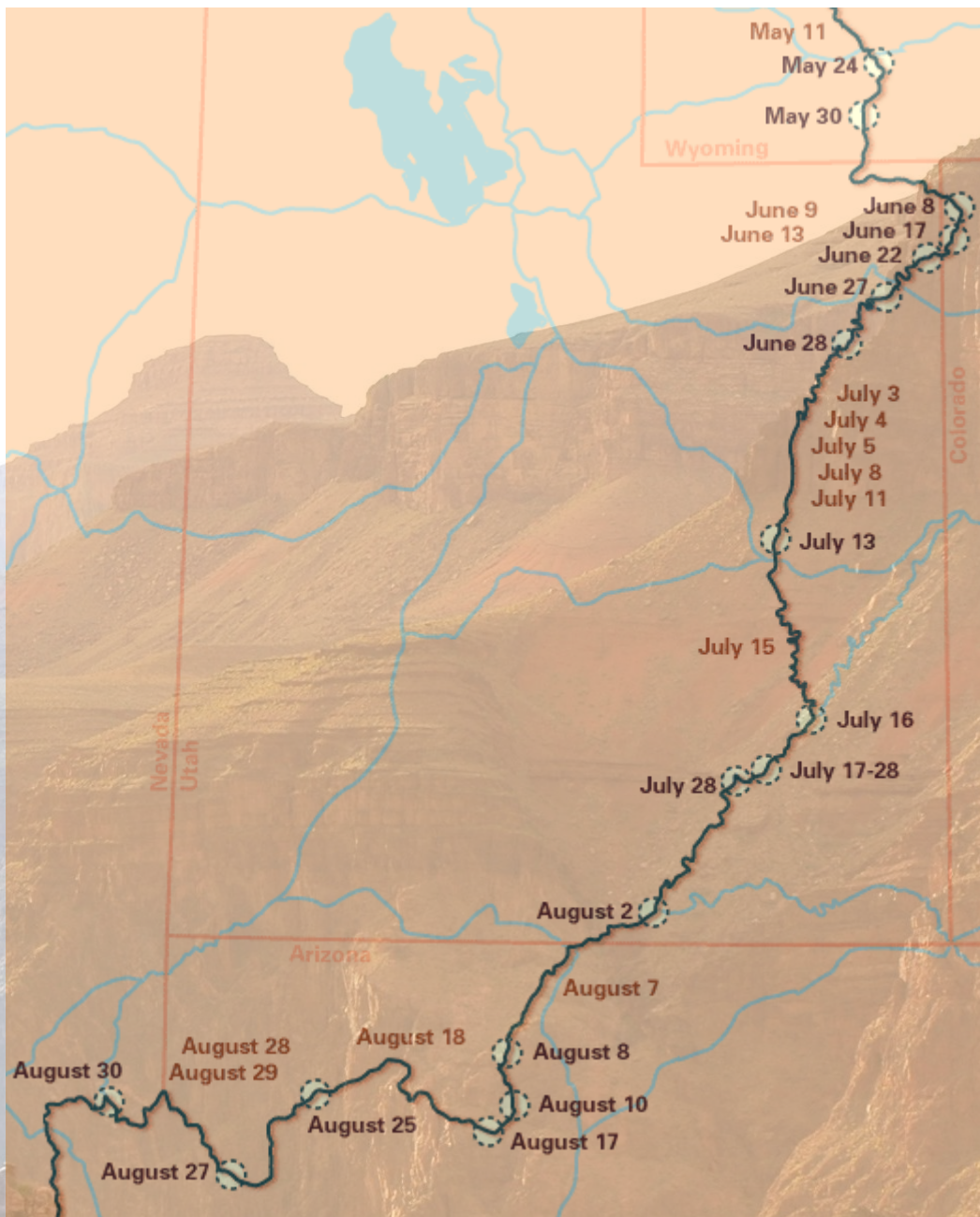
First Expedition into the Grand Canyon ... Down the Colorado River

"August 13 [1869] -- We are now ready to start on our way down the Great Unknown. Our boats, tied to a common stake, chafe each other as they are tossed by the fretful river. They ride high and buoyant, for their loads are lighter than we could desire. We have but a month's rations remaining. The flour has been resifted through the mosquito-net sieve; the spoiled bacon has been dried and the worst of it boiled. The few pounds of dried apples have been spread in the sun and re-shrunken to their normal bulk. The sugar has all melted and gone on its way down the river. But we have a large sack of coffee. The lightening of the boats has this advantage: they will ride the waves better and we shall have but little to carry when we make a portage.

"We are three quarters of a mile in the depths of the earth, and the great river shrinks into insignificance as it dashes its angry waves against the walls and cliffs that rise to the world above; the waves are but puny ripples, and we but pigmies, running up and down the sands or lost among the boulders.

"We have an unknown distance yet to run, an unknown river to explore. What falls there are, we know not; what rocks beset the channel, we know not; what walls ride over the river, we know not. Ah, well! we may conjecture many things. The men talk as cheerfully as ever; but to me the cheer is somber and the jests are ghastly."

"The wonders of the Grand Canyon cannot be adequately represented in symbols of speech, nor by speech itself. The resources of the graphic art are taxed beyond their powers in attempting to portray its features. Language and illustration combined must fail. The elements that unite to make the Grand Canyon the most sublime spectacle in nature are multifarious and exceedingly diverse. The Cyclopean forms which result from the sculpture of tempests through ages too long for man to compute, are wrought into endless details, to describe which would be a task equal in magnitude to that of describing the stars of the heavens or the multitudinous beauties of the forest with its traceries of foliage presented by oak and pine and poplar, by beech and linden and hawthorn, by tulip and lily and rose, by fern and moss and lichen. Besides the elements of form, there are elements of color, for here the colors of the heavens are rivaled by the colors of the rocks. The rainbow is not more replete with hues. But form and color do not exhaust all the divine qualities of the Grand Canyon. *It is the land of music.* The river thunders in perpetual roar, swelling in floods of music when the storm gods play upon the rocks and fading away in soft and low murmurs when the infinite blue of heaven is unveiled. With the melody of the great tide rising and falling, swelling and vanishing forever, other melodies are heard in the gorges of the lateral canyons, while the waters plunge in the rapids among the rocks or leap in great cataracts. Thus the Grand Canyon is a land of song. Mountains of music swell in the rivers, hills of music billow in the creeks, and meadows of music murmur in the rills that ripple over the rocks. Altogether it is a symphony of multitudinous melodies. All this is the music of waters. The adamant foundations of the earth have been wrought into a sublime harp, upon which the clouds of the heavens play with mighty tempests or with gentle showers. "



John Wesley Powell's first expedition down the Colorado River

May 11 -- Powell supervises the unloading of his boats and supplies from a Union Pacific Rail car.

May 24 -- Green River City, The ten-man crew pushes off on the Green River from Castle Rock in Wyoming Territory.

May 30 -- The party passes safely through its first three canyons: Flaming Gorge, Canyon of the Rapid and Kingfisher Canyon.

June 8 -- Cañon Lodore/Disaster Falls, One of the three boats is dashed to pieces at Disaster Falls. The expedition loses a third of its food supply and much else, including three of their barometers and many personal belongings. George Bradley writes in his journal, "It is a serious loss to us and we are rather low spirited [sic] tonight."

June 9 -- George Bradley: "We have plenty of rations left, much more than we care to carry around the rapids [sic], especially when they are more than a mile long. The scenery at this point is sublime. The red

sand-stone rises on either side more than 2000 ft., shutting out the sun for much of the day while at our feet the river, lashed to foam, rushes on with indescribable fury."

June 13 -- George Bradley: "We remain in camp today for we are tired out from the effects of constant hard labor.... Our rations are getting very sour from constant wetting and exposure to a hot sun. I imagine we shall be sorry before the trip is up that we took no better care of them. It is none of my business, yet if we fail it will be want of judgment that will defeat it and if we succeed it will be *dumb luck*, not good judgment that will do it"

June 17 -- Echo Park, While waiting to eat dinner, a gust of wind spreads the campfire to a few pine trees and the fire soon whips rapidly down the canyon. The men rush for their boats. They manage to get ahead of the sheet of flames only by running a dangerous rapid in twilight.

June 22 -- Mouth of Yampa River, The party camps out here for several days. The fishing is good, which is encouraging because some of their food is moldy. George Bradley: "Have spread the rations to dry and find one sack of rice spoiled. We are glad to get rid of it for our boat is too much loaded to ride the waves nicely but is all the time growing lighter as we eat the provisions."

June 27 -- Antelope Valley, The last few days of June the going is easy. They travel 63 miles today.

June 28 -- Mouth of the Uinta River, The group camps for several days near the mouth of the Uinta River. This is the last point on their journey where they are within striking distance of human settlement. Powell and three other men hike 40 miles to an Indian reservation to send letters home.

July 3 -- Mouth of the Uinta River, Unknown to the men on the expedition, "The Chicago Tribune" publishes a fabricated account of a tragic end to the Powell party. The newspaper bases its story on an account from a man called John Risdon who, claiming to be the sole survivor of expedition, says the party had all drowned, sucked into a whirlpool on the Green River.

July 4 -- Mouth of the Uinta River, Bradley spends July 4th in personal reflection while waiting for Powell to return from the Indian reservation. "Took a long walk tonight alone beside the lake and thought of home, contrasted its comforts and privileges with the privations we suffer here and asked myself why am I here?"

July 5 -- Mouth of the Uinta River, Powell and two of his crew return from the Indian reservation with additional supplies of flour. The English adventurer Frank Goodman, discouraged by losing all his belonging in the wreck a month earlier, decides to stay at the reservation.

July 8 -- On a side-trip to measure the west wall of the canyon, Powell almost loses his life by falling off a rock face. George Bradley takes off his pants and uses them as a rope to pull Powell to safety.

July 11 -- Powell is thrown out of his boat while running a rapid. Unable to hold onto the vessel with just one hand, he has to swim to shore. He loses all his bedding, one barometer and two valuable rifles.

July 13 -- The crew leaves Gray Canyon at some point in the day.

July 15 -- George Bradley: "Made another hard run, for the sun was so hot we could scarcely endure it and much of the time the cañon was so closely walled in that the breeze could not reach us."

July 16 -- Junction with the Colorado, George Bradley: "Hurra! Hurra! Hurra! Grand River [Colorado River] came upon us or rather we came upon that very suddenly and to me unexpectedly 5 1/2 P.M...here we float in upon the scene never before beheld by white men." The crew stops for four days to recaulk the leaky boats, throw out the moldy portions of the food, and to establish the precise latitude and longitude of the junction.

July 17-28 -- Cataract Canyon, For twelve days the crew battles through Cataract Canyon. On the 25th

Bradley writes: "Two of the boats came in tonight leaking badly. Mine is now the only tight one we have left and fear she will not long remain so if we continue to meet such severe rapids. The river is still one foaming torrent, yet I believe there is a slight improvement today."

July 28 -- Dirty Devil Creek/Frémont River, The crew reaches what Powell names Dirty Devil Creek. In his journal, Jack Sumner explains why: "The water is about as filthy as the washing from the sewers of some large city, but stinks more than cologne ever did."

August 2 -- Mouth of San Juan River, Powell, seemingly not worried by the shortage of supplies, spends several days at this camp making observations. The crew grows anxious as George Bradley notes in his diary: "Doomed to be here another day, perhaps more than that for Major has been taking observations ever since we came here and seems no nearer done now than when he began.... He should not ask us to wait and he must go on soon or the consequences will be different from what he anticipates."

August 7 -- An eclipse gives the crew reason to rest for a day. The men spend the day repairing the worn boats. Bradley puts four new ribs on his. Powell and his brother Walter spend the night on the mountain top where they watch the eclipse. After all their efforts, clouds obscure their views.

August 8 -- Redwall Cavern, John Wesley Powell: "The water sweeps rapidly in this elbow of river, and has cut its way under the rock, excavating a vast half-circular chamber, which, if utilized for a theater, would give sitting to 50,000 people. Objection might be raised against it, however, for at high water the floor is covered with a raging flood."

August 10 -- Little Colorado River, Powell calls a halt for a few days while he determines the latitude and longitude of the junction with the Little Colorado. His men grow increasingly disgruntled. The following day Bradley notes, "If Major does not do something soon I fear the consequences, but he is contented and seems to think that biscuit made of sour and musty flour and a few dried apples is enough to sustain a laboring man."

August 17 -- The crew leaves Silver Creek/Bright Angel.

August 18 -- George Bradley: "Hard work and little distance seems to be the characteristic of this cañon. Have worked very hard today and have advanced but four miles...our rations are not sufficient to anything more than just to sustain life."

August 25 -- Lava Falls and Vulcan's Throne on Colorado River, The party opens its last sack of flour.

August 27 -- Separation Rapid, George Bradley describes the 96th day as "the darkest day of the trip." The crew has come across what seems to be impassable rapids. Bradley's journal description is vivid: "The water dashes against the left bank and then is thrown back against the right. The billows are huge and I fear our boats could not ride them if we could keep them off the rocks. The spectacle is appalling to us.... There is discontent in camp tonight and I fear some of the party will take to the mountains but hope not."

August 28 -- Separation Rapid, Unpersuaded by Powell, three men decide to hike out. Powell estimates they probably have a four-day walk to the nearest town. After a strenuous climb to the North Rim, the men are attacked and killed allegedly by Shivwits.

August 29 -- The rapids are less formidable and the country begins to open up. George Bradley: "The rapids grow less as we advance and we hope and expect that the worst of the trip is over. All we regret now is that the three boys who took to the mountains are not here to share our joy and triumph."

August 30 -- Mouth of the Virgin River, Exhausted and battered, the six remaining crew members float unexpectedly to the mouth of the Virgin River. They come across three men and a boy fishing and realize that their 98-day, thousand-mile trip is over.