

A Dash Through the Canyons: Gen. John Wesley Powell's First Expedition on the Colorado

Steve Byrne

On May 10, 1869 workers drove in the final spike into the Union Pacific Railroad at Promontory, Utah, connecting both coasts of the United States. The historic moment not only paved the way for the country's future economic expansion, but it signaled the final days of the frontier. With increased westward migration, the frontier quickly disappeared into settled, charted land. Yet even though the coasts were now connected, one large swath of the American West still lay blank on maps and unexplored by white men. The region was known as the Plateau Province, and those crossing the West tried to avoid it at all costs.¹ Composed of high deserts, deep canyons and occasional mountain ranges the area remained off limits and unchallenged by westward settlers. While westward fortune seekers on the railroad avoided this uncharted part of the country, one man, Gen. John Wesley Powell, dared to explore and chart the Plateau Province. Because the land was too arid and expansive to walk, the only method of exploration was by boat on the Colorado River.

Maimed at the Battle of Shiloh during the Civil War and left with only his left hand, Powell ignored the difficulties that his injury might present and set out determined to explore the last American frontier. Born in the frontier Midwest, as a child, Powell's preacher father moved his family between small country towns in Ohio, Illinois and Wisconsin. Raised far from civilization, early on Powell developed an intense appreciation for nature. After his days at war and expeditions of eastern rivers, exploring the most remote corner of the U.S. proved an illusive attraction for Powell and during the spring of 1869, he set out for Green River Crossing, Wyoming.

The Green River is a high tributary of the Colorado crossed by the Union Pacific Railroad. Because of its easy access to the railway and river, Powell chose the small town of Green River Crossing as the starting point for his journey. Traveling westward, Powell recruited nine other men to join in his expedition. Some of the men, like his brother Walter, he knew. Others, frontiersmen looking for adventure, he recruited along way to Wyoming. While preparing his gear at Green River Crossing, Powell noticed a young man rowing on the Green River. The eighteen year old, Andy Hall, displayed skills that caught Powell's attention. Thinking that the boy would be useful on his voyage, Powell quickly recruited him for the trip. By May 24, 1869, the eclectic group of ten adventurers set out down the Green River, bound for the unknown in four wooden dories: the *Maid of the Canyon*, the *Kitty Clyde's Sister*, the *Emma Dean*, and the *No Name*.² "Onlookers of the departure must have thought they would never see the 10 men again."³

The first few miles down the Green River presented no great difficulties. Swift but unchallenging waters met the expedition affording time to hone their paddling and navigation skills. Despite the easy start, Powell and his crew knew that before them lay treacherous waters. As the crew entered Flaming Gorge, a river canyon carved out of red sandstone that glowed in the sun, they encountered their first major rapids. Upon scouting the boiling waters, the team decided to shoot the rapids rather than portage, risking themselves and months of provisions. The river smashed the boat on sharp, underwater rocks, sending its crew and supplies floating down river. No men were lost, but the decision cost the expedition the *No Name* and month's worth of supplies.

As the expedition wore on, the river's volume grew. The water, murkier with the characteristic red silt of the Colorado and angrier as the canyon walls reached higher and higher, trapped the expedition in what seemed like a never-ending hell. Between the confluence of the Green River and the Colorado four thousand feet of drop awaited Powell and his men. The rapids that had destroyed the *No Name* were just the beginning of the long voyage ahead. With the surrounding canyon terrain growing every more severe, the possibility of portage, and in many cases scouting, withered away. Day after day the expedition faced unrelenting waters and risks that threatened to end the expedition. The grueling monotony of deadly rapids took their toll on the crew. On August 27 the expedition arrived at a rapid impossible to portage and difficult to scout. George Bradley described the scene as "a hell of foam".⁴ The next morning O.G. Howland, his brother Seneca and Bill Dunn decided that they had had enough, and abandoned the group claiming "how surely we will all die if we continue this journey".⁵ As the rest of the expedition took their chances on the rapid before them, the three men climbed out of the canyon in search of civilization. Instead of finding a way out, a group of Shivwit Indians slaughtered the three not far from the canyon rim. Only three days later, the rest of the expedition reached their takeout at the mouth of the Virgin River, what is present day Lake Mead.⁶

Even though he too felt overwhelmed with the enormity of the landscape, and the inexorable monotony of the voyage, Powell never stopped focusing on the flora, fauna and geography surrounding the river. For Powell, the mission was not to simply pass through the Colorado River and Plateau Province, but to record and chart this enigma of the American wilderness.

The same spirit that propelled Powell into the unknown on his first Colorado River expedition, later led him down the Colorado and other rivers throughout the West. Powell's never ending desire to explore and chart the U.S. led him into politics and to be the father of the US Geological Survey, Bureau of American Ethnology and of the Reclamation Service of the country'. To this day, the agency carries on the spirit of Powell: the never-ending pursuit to understand our country and the natural environment in which we live so that there are no uncharted, unknown areas of our country's wilderness.

Works Cited

- Hobbes, Dr. William Herbert. "John Wesley Powell: 1834-1902." *The Scientific Monthly* vol. 39, no. 6 (1934): 519-529.
- Reisner, Marc. *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.
- Unknown. "John Wesley Powell." Available from <http://www.powellmuseum.org/MajorPowell.htm>; Internet; accessed 09 February 2006.

End Notes

- ¹ Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 24.
- ² Reisner, 26.
- ³ Unknown, "Major John Wesley Powell." Available from <http://www.powellmuseum.org/MajorPowell.html>; Internet; accessed 9 February 2006.
- ⁴ Reisner, 26.
- ⁵ Unknown, "Major John Wesley Powell." Available from <http://www.powellmuseum.org/MajorPowell.html>; Internet; accessed 9 February 2006.
- ⁶ Unknown, "Major John Wesley Powell." Available from <http://www.powellmuseum.org/MajorPowell.html>; Internet; accessed 9 February 2006.
- ⁷ Dr. William Herbert Hobbs, "John Wesley Powell: 1834-1902," *The Scientific Monthly* vol. 39, no. 6 (1934): 519-529.