“An Adventure on the Colorado River, 1867.” By James White

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.

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 moved over into the Mancos.

We followed the Mancos [River] down until we struck the San Juan [River]. Then we followed the San Juan down as far as we could and then swam our horses across and started over to the Grand River [now the Colorado 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 the canyon on the opposite side; so we had to go out 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 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 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 or10 inches through. We made it larger than the first one. The second raft was bout 8 feet wide and 12 feet long. We started
down the river again, and that was 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 in to the canyon as red as it 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,
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 a 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 on to 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 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 someone 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 that 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 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.

Source: 65th congress, 1st Session. Senate Document No. 42: The Grande Canyon, An article giving the credit of first traveling the Grande Canyon of the Colorado to James White, a Colorado Gold Prospector, who it is claimed made