Lost in the Grand Canyon

In the spring of 1869, a thirty-five-year-old, one-armed Civil War veteran and self-taught scientist led an expedition down the Colorado River into the last uncharted territory in the United States. Ninety-nine days later, John Wesley Powell emerged from the Grand Canyon after one of the most daring journeys in American history. Transformed by his experience, Powell would forever change America's attitude toward the West. "Lost in the Grand Canyon" is an account of the dramatic quest to explore one of the most unforgiving, and breathtakingly beautiful, places on earth. Produced by Mark Davis; Joe Morton narrates, and Peter Coyote provides the voice of John Wesley Powell.

"There were only a couple of great unknowns and the greatest of all the unknowns was the Colorado River system," says author and Colorado River guide, Michael Ghiglieri. "It was a mysterious entity, a lost world. And it was a gamble. If you failed, you might be dead, but if you succeeded, you would be the hero of the decade."

On May 24, Powell and his crew pushed off from Green River, Utah. Three hundred miles downstream, the Green merged with the Colorado. From that point on, the map was blank— a wilderness of towering, inaccessible canyons and treacherous whitewater rapids. Somewhere deep in that rugged desert was the Grand Canyon — a place more of rumor than fact, glimpsed from the rim two centuries before by Coronado's soldiers, but shunned ever since. Powell was an unlikely explorer — but he had always defied expectations.
His father had wanted him to join the ministry, but young Powell was moved by nature more than scripture. After losing his arm at the battle of Shiloh, Powell refused to accept his limitations; instead, he returned to his unit and fought for three more years. Despite a limited education, he landed a teaching post after the war at Wesleyan University in Illinois, where he began searching for a way to make his mark.

He found his answer out West. A mountain guide told Powell about a vast unknown area around the lower Colorado River. At a time when America was obsessed with the promise of the West, Powell set out to conquer its greatest perils. He outfitted four boats with guns for hunting, scientific instruments to map the terrain and measure his party's progress, and enough flour, coffee, and bacon to feed his crew of nine for ten months.

But just eighty miles into the journey one boat was smashed to pieces in the rapids, and a third of the food supply lost. Powell named the spot Disaster Falls.

The loss at Disaster Falls made a leisurely, ten-month trip impossible. Powell became more cautious. He ordered the crew to carry the heavy boats and supplies around the worst rapids, rather than try to navigate them. The backbreaking work slowed their progress to a crawl. "Have been working like galley slaves all day," boatman George Bradley wrote in his diary. "Have been wet all day, and I have nothing dry to put on."

On July 21, fifty-nine days into the journey, Powell and his men passed the point where the Green River merged with the Colorado. From here on, there was no way out but to follow the river. "We have an unknown distance yet
to run," Powell wrote in his journal. "What falls there are, we know not; what rocks beset the channel, we know not . . . With some eagerness and some misgivings, we enter the canyon below."

By the middle of August, Powell and his crew were more than a mile deep in the earth. It was brutally hot; and the crew was close to starvation. They were in the Grand Canyon. Powell was forced to abandon his scientific observations; the goal now was survival.

On the ninety-seventh day, three men left and began hiking out. Powell later called it Separation Rapid. The three were never seen again. Just two days later, on August 30, the Powell expedition reached the end of its journey. They had survived America's last Great Unknown, and filled in the last blank spot on the nation's map.

No longer an obscure professor, Powell became a hero. He gave public lectures and speeches, returned for a second Colorado trip to finish his scientific studies, and popularized the Grand Canyon with an illustrated account of his journey. By the early 1880s, he was the director of both the Bureau of Ethnology at the Smithsonian and the new US Geological Survey — the latter putting him in charge of the mapping and disposition of public lands.

Once more, Powell reached to make his mark. Fearing that an unplanned rush into western settlement would doom thousands of small farmers to failure, he used his influence to block further settlement until a comprehensive survey of arid lands and irrigation strategies was completed. Western politicians were apoplectic. Nevada senator "Big Bill" Stewart claimed Powell had become a law unto himself and vowed to destroy him. Powell tried to rally support on the basis of his heroic past, but he was in over his head. His budget slashed, Powell resigned from the Geological Survey.

A year after Powell's death in 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt visited the Grand Canyon and declared it to be "a natural wonder absolutely unparalleled in the world . . . one of the great sights every American should see." The Grand Canyon would come to be embraced like no other natural place in America, a national shrine for those following in the footsteps of John Wesley Powell.

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