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THE PIONEER EXPLORATION OF
THE COLORADO RIVER IN 1869-70**

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Outing Adventure Library. First Through the Grand Canyon. Being the Record of the Pioneer Exploration of the Colorado River in 1869-70 by John Wesley Powell & Horace Kephart

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JOHN WESLEY POWELL & HORACE KEPHART

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BY MAJOR JOHN WESLEY POWELL

Being the Record of the Pioneer Exploration
of the Colorado River in 1869-70

EDITED BY
HORACE KEPHART



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INTRODUCTION

The Colorado River of the West is formed in southeastern Utah by the junction of the Grand and Green rivers. For hundreds of miles it flows through a series of profound chasms, in many places from 4,000 to 6,000 feet deep, and rising nearly vertically for a considerable distance above the water. These cañons are from one to fifteen miles wide at the top. The most famous of them is the Marble-Grand cañon (really continuous, although it goes under two names, the Marble and the Grand). Through this vast gorge the Colorado drops 2,330 feet in 283 miles, the current sometimes attaining a velocity of twenty-five miles an hour. The river itself varies in width from seventy-five feet to a quarter of a mile. In the narrowest places it has at times a depth of over 100 feet.

Up to 1869 practically nothing was known of the Colorado River from its source to where it emerges into the valley of the Grand Wash, except what could be observed from look-out points at the tops of the cañons, or from the few places where descents had been made to the bottom. It was a river of mystery and of fear. For long distances it was supposed to flow underground. There was no evidence that any human being had ever passed through the cañons and come out alive. The Indians who lived in the neighborhood considered such a feat preposterous.

Then came a scientist and a man of nerve, Major John Wesley Powell, who studied the river carefully at several points along its bank, and calmly decided to risk his life in clearing up the mystery by navigating the stream clear through to the Wash.

The undertaking was all the more remarkable from the fact that Powell had only one arm. He had lost his right arm

in the battle of Shiloh. His plucky young wife, to whom he had been married but a month, was present at headquarters when he was wounded, and promptly offered herself as a substitute for the missing limb so that her husband could continue in service. She then and there enlisted, and General Grant gave her a "perpetual pass" to follow the army in the capacity she had chosen. With this help Major Powell continued in active service to the close of the war.

In his student days Powell had made a specialty of what was then called "natural history." When the war was over he accepted a professorship of geology in the Illinois Wesleyan University, and later held a similar chair in the Illinois Normal University. In the summer of 1867 he initiated the practice of student field work by taking his class to the mountains of Colorado for geological exploration. It was on this trip that he formed the idea of exploring the cañons of the Colorado River of the West.

Having obtained funds from public institutions of Illinois to outfit his little expedition, he started from Green River City, above the head of the Colorado proper, May 24, 1869, on one of the most hazardous adventures in the history of exploration. He emerged from the Grand Cañon on August 29, with five of the nine men he had started with. Four had deserted on the way, and three of these were killed by Indians.

Major Powell's report on this first exploration of the Colorado River was published by the Smithsonian Institution in 1875. Together with the scientific data appended, it forms a large quarto volume, which is now out of print. The narrative part is here republished without abridgement.

In 1870, Congress established a Topographical and Geological Survey of the Colorado River of the West, and Powell was placed in charge of it. In 1871-1872 he made a second descent of the river, this time for the government. Again he came through

unharmcd, proving his mastery of a species of navigation so difficult that many who have tried it in later years have perished in those brawling waters.

Much of Powell's attention was given to American ethnology, and when a Bureau of Ethnology was formed by the government, he was appointed its director. In 1881 he succeeded Clarence King as director of the U. S. Geological Survey. Major Powell died September 23, 1902.

HORACE KEPHART.