

OVERLOOKING
1, 1873

THE EXPLORATION OF THE COLORADO RIVER

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With an Introduction by Wallace Stegner

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and go into camp about mid-afternoon. And now I climb the wall and go out into the back country for a walk.

The sandstone, through which the canyon is cut, is red and homogeneous, being the same as that through which Labyrinth Canyon runs. The smooth, naked rock stretches out on either side of the river for many miles, but curiously carved mounds and cones are scattered everywhere, and deep holes are worn out. Many of these pockets are filled with water. In one of these holes, or wells, twenty feet deep, I find a tree growing. The excavation is so narrow that I can step from its brink to a limb on the tree, and descend to the bottom of the well down a growing ladder. Many of these pockets are potholes, being found in the courses of little rills, or brooks, that run during the rains which occasionally fall in this region; and often a few harder rocks which evidently assisted in their excavation can be found in their bottoms. Others, which are shallower, are not so easily explained. Perhaps they are found where softer spots existed in the sandstone, places that yielded more readily to atmospheric degradation, and where the loose sands were carried away by the winds.

Just before sundown, I attempt to climb a rounded eminence, from which I hope to obtain a good outlook on the surrounding country. It is formed of smooth mounds, piled one above another. Up these I climb, winding here and there, to find a practicable way, until near the summit they become too steep for me to proceed. I search about, a few minutes, for a more easy way, when I am surprised at finding a stairway, evidently cut in the rock by hands. At one place, where there is a vertical wall of ten or twelve feet, I find an old, rickety ladder. It may be that this was a watchtower of that ancient people, whose homes we have found in ruins. On many of the tributaries of the Colorado I have heretofore examined their deserted dwellings. Those that show evidences of being built during the latter part of their occupation of the country are, usually, placed on the most inaccessible cliffs. Sometimes, the mouths of caves have been walled across, and there are many other evidences to show their anxiety

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to secure defensible positions. Probably the nomadic tribes were sweeping down upon them, and they resorted to these cliffs and canyons for safety. It is not unreasonable to suppose that this orange mound was used as a watchtower. Here I stand, where these now lost people stood centuries ago, and look over this strange country. I gaze off to great mountains, in the northwest, which are slowly covered by the night until they are lost, and then I return to camp. It is no easy task to find my way down the wall in the darkness, and I clamber about until it is nearly midnight, before I arrive.

July 30.—We make good progress today, as the water, though smooth, is swift. Sometimes, the canyon walls are vertical to the top; sometimes, they are vertical below, and have a mound-covered slope above; in other places, the slope, with its mounds, comes down to the water's edge.

Still proceeding on our way, we find the orange sandstone is cut in two by a group of firm, calcareous strata, and the lower bed is underlaid by soft gypsiferous shales. Sometimes, the upper homogeneous bed is a smooth, vertical wall, but usually it is carved with mounds, with gently meandering valley lines. The lower bed, yielding to gravity, as the softer shales below work out into the river, breaks into angular surfaces, often having a columnar appearance. One could almost imagine that the walls had been carved with a purpose, to represent giant architectual forms.

In the deep recesses of the walls, we find springs, with mosses and ferns on the moistened sandstone.

July 31.—We have a cool, pleasant ride today, through this part of the canyon. The walls are steadily increasing in altitude, the curves are gentle, and often the river sweeps by an arc of vertical wall, smooth and unbroken, and then by a curve that is variegated by royal arches, mossy alcoves, deep, beautiful glens, and painted grottos.

Soon after dinner, we discover the mouth of the San Juan, where we camp. The remainder of the afternoon is given to hunting some way by which we can climb out of the canyon; but it ends in failure.

Music Temple

August 1.—We drop down two miles this morning, and go into camp again. There is a low, willow-covered strip of land along the walls on the east. Across this we walk, to explore an alcove which we see from the river. On entering, we find a little grove of box-elder and cottonwood trees; and, turning to the right, we find ourselves in a vast chamber, carved out of the rock. At the upper end there is a clear, deep pool of water, bordered with verdure. Standing by the side of this, we can see the grove at the entrance. The chamber is more than two hundred feet high, five hundred feet long, and two hundred feet wide. Through the ceiling, and on through the rocks for a thousand feet above, there is a narrow, winding skylight; and this is all carved out by a little stream, which only runs during the few showers that fall now and then in this arid country. The waters from the bare rocks back of the canyon, gathering rapidly into a small channel, have eroded a deep side canyon, through which they run, until they fall into the farther end of this chamber. The rock at the ceiling is hard, the rock below, very soft and friable; and, having cut through the upper harder portion down into the lower and softer, the stream has washed out these friable sandstones; and thus the chamber has been excavated.

how name chosen

Here we bring our camp. When "Old Shady" sings us a song at night, we are pleased to find that this hollow in the rock is filled with sweet sounds. It was doubtless made for an academy of music by its storm-born architect; so we name it Music Temple.

August 2.—We still keep our camp in Music Temple today.

I wish to obtain a view of the adjacent country, if possible; so, early in the morning, the men take me across the river, and I pass along by the foot of the cliff half a mile upstream, and then climb first up broken ledges, then two or three hundred yards up a smooth, sloping rock, and then pass out on a narrow ridge. Still, I find I have not attained an altitude from which I can overlook the region outside of the canyon; and so I descend into a little gulch, and climb again to a higher ridge, all the way along naked sandstone, and at last I reach a point of commanding view. I can look several miles up the San

Juan, and a long distance up the Colorado; and away to the northwest I can see the Henry Mountains; to the northeast, the Sierra La Sal; to the southeast, unknown mountains; and to the southwest, the meandering of the canyon. Then I return to the bank of the river.

We sleep again in Music Temple.

August 3.—Start early this morning. The features of this canyon are greatly diversified. Still vertical walls at times. These are usually found to stand above great curves. The river, sweeping around these bends, undermines the cliffs in places. Sometimes, the rocks are overhanging; in other curves, curious, narrow glens are found. Through these we climb, by a rough stairway, perhaps several hundred feet, to where a spring bursts out from under an overhanging cliff, and where cottonwoods and willows stand, while, along the curves of the brooklet, oaks grow, and other rich vegetation is seen, in marked contrast to the general appearance of naked rock. We call these Oak Glens.

Other wonderful features are the many side canyons or gorges that we pass. Sometimes, we stop to explore these for a short distance. In some places, their walls are much nearer each other above than below, so that they look somewhat like caves or chambers in the rocks. Usually, in going up such a gorge, we find beautiful vegetation; but our way is often cut off by deep basins, or potholes, as they are called.

On the walls, and back many miles into the country, numbers of monument-shaped buttes are observed. So we have a curious ensemble of wonderful features—carved walls, royal arches, glens, alcove gulches, mounds, and monuments. From which of these features shall we select a name? We decide to call it Glen Canyon.

Past these towering monuments, past these mounded billows of orange sandstone, past these oak-set glens, past these fern-decked alcoves, past these mural curves, we glide hour after hour, stopping now and then, as our attention is arrested by some new wonder, until we reach a point which is historic.

In the year 1776, Father Escalante, a Spanish priest, made

an expedition from Santa Fe to the northwest, crossing the Grand and Green, and then passing down along the Wasatch Mountains and the southern plateaus, until he reached the Rio Virgen. His intention was to cross to the Mission of Monterey; but, from information received from the Indians, he decided that the route was impracticable. Not wishing to return to Santa Fe over the circuitous route by which he had just traveled, he attempted to go by one more direct, and which led across the Colorado, at a point known as *El vado de los Padres*. From the description which we have read, we are enabled to determine the place. A little stream comes down through a very narrow side canyon from the west. It was down this that he came, and our boats are lying at the point where the ford crosses. A well-beaten Indian trail is seen here yet. Between the cliff and the river there is a little meadow. The ashes of many campfires are seen, and the bones of numbers of cattle are bleaching on the grass. For several years the Navajos have raided on the Mormons that dwell in the valleys to the west, and they doubtless cross frequently at this ford with their stolen cattle.

August 4.—Today the walls grow higher, and the canyon much narrower. Monuments are still seen on either side; beautiful glens, and alcoves, and gorges, and side canyons are yet found. After dinner, we find the river making a sudden turn to the northwest, and the whole character of the canyon changed. The walls are many hundreds of feet higher, and the rocks are chiefly variegated shales of beautiful colors—creamy orange above, then bright vermilion, and below, purple and chocolate beds, with green and yellow sands. We run four miles through this, in a direction a little to the west of north; wheel again to the west, and pass into a portion of the canyon where the characteristics are more like those above the bend. At night we stop at the mouth of a creek coming in from the right, and suppose it to be the Paria, which was described to me last year by a Mormon missionary.

Here the canyon terminates abruptly in a line of cliffs, which stretches from either side across the river.