

Seeking Hard Desert Truth

IN 1869, THREE MEN FROM THE HISTORIC POWELL EXPEDITION VANISHED. WERE THEY KILLED BY MORMONS, INDIANS, OR THE UNFORGIVING ENVIRONMENT OF THE REMOTE ARIZONA STRIP?

BY JONATHAN WATERMAN





JONATHAN WATERMAN | PREVIOUS: PETE MCBRIDE

A century and a half ago, Major John Wesley Powell and eight men were 99 days deep in the Grand Canyon and still scared sleepless by the roar of Colorado River rapids. They had launched in May from Green River, Utah, rowing blindly, facing backward in leaky, overloaded rowboats, into violent giant eddies they called whirlpools, pulled ever downward into the tumult of unknown falls and ancient rock canyons, back into shapeless antiquity. Obsessed by this geology, and having passed ruins built long before Christ, Powell felt peculiarly transported—just as boaters feel today in this place. Then as now, traversing the Grand Canyon is like traveling through time.

At the beginning of their expedition, Oranuel and Seneca Howland had earned Powell's wrath by capsizing and destroying a boat carrying 2,000 pounds of food, maps, and equipment, a mishap that left them faint with hunger and unable to fulfill their scientific research. Later, William Dunn fell into the river and destroyed Powell's pocket watch. The major—right shirt sleeve pinned beneath the stump of an arm lost to a Civil War bullet—barked at Dunn to pay \$30 for the watch or leave the expedition. The dominating Powell might have been a visionary in brokering Native American peace and foreseeing the water challenges of a parched American West, but on the river he couldn't get along with his own men.

By the morning of August 28, 1869, capsizees and near drownings had pushed his crew toward mutiny. Starving and facing yet another dangerous rapid, Dunn and the Howlands refused to continue downstream.

They parted amiably, and as the six remaining boaters saluted the departing trio with gunshots, each group believed the other wouldn't make it out alive. Powell would turn out to exit the canyon just two days later, but Dunn and the Howlands were bound for the remote Arizona Strip, up through a hot, complex gorge (later named Separation Canyon in honor of the parting) and past a gauntlet of Paiute Indians known as the Shivwits, to St. George, pioneer outpost of militant Mormons, 100 miles distant. They carried traps, ammunition, a double-barreled shotgun, and two breech-loading Winchester rifles. Their canyons had been lost to the river. They had no maps, but their pocket watch and an expansive chronometer would allow them to take sun sightings and navigate by longitude.

The men never made it to St. George, and what happened to them is one of the great enigmas of the Southwest. Some say Native Americans killed them as revenge for the rape of a squaw by three white men, while others claim Mormons mistook them for prying federal agents and shot them. One hundred and forty-seven years later, long intrigued by their disappearance, I decided to retrace their footsteps—to try view this land not as a modern adventurer, but through the

eyes of men who were struggling, weak, hungry, and venturing into the unknown. And by plunging back in history and diving deep into their route, I hoped to resolve the mystery.

This time-stalled corner of the Southwest—aridly referred to by guides as the "alien abduction zone"—is known for its lost souls. In 1928, honeymooners Glen and Bessie Hyde disappeared from their intact dory a few miles from where Powell's men departed the Colorado, in 1934, the young artist Everett Ruess never emerged from a trip with his burros into Utah's Davis Gulch. More recently, in 2012, Bill Ott vanished while photographing rock art across the river from Separation Canyon; then in June 2016, despite an extensive search where Powell's men would have topped out on the Arizona Strip, backpacker Floyd Richards joined the list of more than a dozen disappearances.

Traversing the Arizona Strip that Dunn and the Howlands hoped to cross is still quite difficult even a century and a half later. At almost 8,000 square miles, it's larger than Massachusetts, with only 21 square miles of water, and cut off from the rest of the state by the 277-mile-long, 18-mile-wide Grand Canyon and the evaporative Lake Mead. Culturally, the strip is more influenced by polygamous Utahns than Arizona sportsmen. As one of the most remote tracts in the Lower 48, far removed from cell service, its sharp volcanic rocks eat tires and deter all but the hardest four-wheelers. If you're foolish enough to visit in anything but dry weather, you'll find the rain transforms dirt roads into quagmires, while steep rocky washes become mud traps capable of stranding even tanks for days.

Shivwits Plateau sticks a crooked middle finger into the Grand Canyon, forcing the great west-flowing river into its southernmost loop. On a perfect October day, in 2016, we bumped and rocked our way south, aiming for the rim of Separation Canyon in a Land Cruiser, seatbelts bristling our shoulders, with emergency-exit mountain bikes dancing on the rear rack. It would have been easier to row a boat down the Colorado River to get to the mouth of Separation—as I learned from past trips.

According to local canyoners, there are only two exits from Separation. Guidebooks for these remote defiles are notoriously sparse. Using compass and GPS in place of Powell's chronometer, we parked and walked the last miles to a wash draining toward the Grand Bushwhacking and then scrambling down execrable Kaibab limestone and across a highborn trail, we emerged onto the highest valley in Separation Canyon's east fork. My arms and legs were quickly bloodied from whacking through juniper, piñon, and thorny mesquite, my companions, David Schipper and Chris Pietrak, were unscathed at first, but by afternoon a cactus spine had embedded itself deep into Chris's calf.



It's hard to imagine 19th century mountain men exiting the Big Ditch without paying a steep mental and physical toll.

Although we had expected a pleasant trek down, the route became complicated. At several crucial points, we followed tiny cairns marking loose traverses and steep down-climbing. Without the aid of a trail or its markers, without food or water, it's hard to imagine 19th century mountain men, let alone modern canyoneers, exiting the Big Ditch without paying a steep mental and physical toll.

Down in Separation, by the end of a 75-degree day, we were parched. I'd started out carrying two gallons of water, but drank half as much again from old rainwater puddles. That evening, as David and Chris hunted for scorpions in our campsite, I headed down-canyon. Running water was nonexistent. While Dunn and the Howlands slaked their thirst from puddles as I did (tree rings and Powell's river journals show that 1869 had been a wet year), their deerskin and wool were entirely unsuited for the August heat. They would have tied clothes around their waists and still sweated profusely. Without protective sun clothing or lotion, their skin would have burned like the redwall limestone imprisoning them.

As darkness fell, I turned on my headlamp. But Powell's men lacked torches, and if they chose to travel in the cooler night air they would have stumbled painfully through an arboretum of cacti—16 species worth—as in the last days of August 1869 the waning moon was only half full.

At 36, as the oldest member of the expedition, Oramel Howland would have led his charges up the canyon like "a mad King Lear" (as Powell described him). Seneca, 26, quiet and pensive, got along with Powell, but didn't want his half brother to depart without him. Little is known about Dunn, 24, but he had greasy hair hanging down his back and, as the major put it, "a sublime contempt for razors."

Rowing and portaging the snowmelt waters of the Colorado River—after their earlier hunting trips in the cool Rockies—would not have inured them to this antithetical desert biosphere. Edible plants are scarce. There are lizards and elusive packrats, but game abandons the summer canyons for the plateau grasslands, and bighorn sheep, as they'd learned in frustration over the past months while transiting the river, often lay beyond rifle range.

During open bivouacs encamped with stinging, venomous critters, their long beards blew sideways in the eerie hot blast

of rising air, pushed by cooler air below and audibly howling up this canyon until the dawn—as it has blown for millennia. For Dunn and the Howlands, Separation Canyon was an objective to be vanquished rather than nature to be admired. In the minds of 19th century pioneers unburdened by romantic thought, wilderness reigned with malevolence. As I stumbled alone back up the canyon, I appreciated how desperate they would have felt, with little water, no food, intense heat, and nothing but the unknown above them.

Separation Canyon is no simple gorge. Although only 30 miles from river to rim by our route, it splits into labyrinthine west, main, and east forks—each twisting up into a half-dozen narrow sub-canyons. Finding one of the two exits in the furthest east canyon would have demanded repeatedly climbing confusing look-alike canyons only to be stymied by dead ends of vertical rock.

Their tongues swelled in their throats. Their heels blistered. Mosquitoes harangued. More than a half-dozen exit attempts would have cost them two dozen miles of route-finding—certainly causing debates leading to arguments and more anxiety-heightening exhaustion.

After a few days of running this maze, they would have been even more weakened and dehydrated—physically cooked by the Arizona Strip, perhaps cramping and nauseous, perhaps on the edge of heat exhaustion, followed by fever and the elevated pulse of heat stroke, which can kill the fittest athletes within an hour.

In two long days—once taking a wrong turn until corrected by our GPS—we backtracked to the rim, chastened. Cutting through this dense and featureless forest on a different route by compass after our GPS batteries died, we climbed a knoll in hopes of spotting the road. A long silence reigned as we imagined getting lost in these dense woods cut by jagged washes, downed trees, spiny gardens, and boulder fields. Then we spotted the Kelly Springs road a half-mile away. Our relief to be back on track was tangible.

If Dunn and the Howlands made it this far, they would have found the Indian trail leading off the plateau. Atop this basalt stratum, pale postholes lay at our feet, littered with burnt-orange, thumbnail-sized chert fragments, carried here over the millennia by Native Americans to be knapped into

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arrowheads. Within a day or two, the trio likely would have met the locals.

The Shivwit band of the Paiute moved into this area roughly a thousand years ago. They farmed corn, squash, and mutton in the valleys—the same kind of garden produce that Powell and his starving men stole a half-day's float down river from Separation Canyon. On the plateau, the Shivwits skillfully hunted deer, sheep, and rabbits with bow and arrows. Many mountain men experienced the lethality of the Paiute tool firsthand, and they learned to prefer this silent weapon to a rifle for stealthy hunting.

This corner of the Arizona Strip belonged to the Shivwits, but it was on the verge of radical change. Within a dozen years, sheep herders and cattlemen would begin settling the high plateau. Mormons had been in the lower elevations for two decades, fighting with and baptizing the Iondolothed Shivwits and other Paiutes. And while the Shivwits were perceived as largely peaceful and destitute—taken by Navajo and sold as slaves across the river, decimated by Euro-American diseases—the remote plateau served as a final stronghold where they could resist being civilized by Mormons. Indeed, only months before Powell's expedition made its pioneering descent of the Colorado, two dozen Shivwit warriors fought with the Hualapai in a war against the U.S. Army across the river until realizing that they were hopelessly outmanned and outgunned. Miners and ranchers monopolized both sides of the river, stealing water sources and despoiling fertile grasslands and wild game that belonged to Native Americans.

Three years earlier, just 30 miles northeast, Navajo raiders had crossed the river and killed two white ranchers. Mormon gunmen found Shivwits with the ranchers' clothing and coins, abandoned by the departed Navajo. The Mormons tortured the Indians, hanging them from their heels and breaking their thumbs. The Shivwits futilely begged for their lives. Some ran and were shot in the backs. Even in these dark, chaotic times, Mormons generally avoided this kind of violent punishment lest they invite the Paiute culture's revenge—the Shivwits would never forget these brutal killings of family and friends.

Dunn and the Howlands were oblivious to the cultural upheavals they were stumbling toward.

Two dozen miles north of our Separation Canyon exit, any doubts about the tro making it out were dispelled by our findings atop Mt. Delienbaugh, a 900-foot hike above the Shivwit trail. On top, it took us three hours to find the inscription, scratched onto a boulder with a knife. "W DUNN 1869."

The brown-varnished rock aligns with a view north across a sea of juniper. Although many in the Grand Canyon community believe that it's fake, the inscription felt

authentic to me, particularly compared to the modern and much cruder scribbled graffiti on surrounding boulders, especially since a hermit cowboy, Afton Snyder, who lived in a cave below this dormant volcano, remembered seeing Dunn's mark in the 1930s.

What happened to the three after they left Mt. Delienbaugh has been debated in riverside campsites, university classrooms, and the dens of historians for generations. We do know that in early September 1869, less than two weeks after the separation, the men were reported dead at the hands of the Shivwits. When Powell returned to the area a year later with a Mormon translator, the Shivwits confessed, saying Dunn and the Howlands were mistaken for three men who'd raped an Indian woman and killed in retribution. But after the recent discovery of a cryptic 1883 letter found in a trunk in southern Utah by a retired biology professor, others argued the men were killed by Mormons who thought they were federal spies. This alternative hypothesis was reported by the *Salt Lake City Tribune*, then spread around boater campfires, across the web, in books about Powell or the Colorado River, and within a chapter of the best-selling book *Under the Banner of Heaven*. History was quickly revised, and now most who've studied this small, tragic chapter in western exploration take it as gospel that the Mormons, who slaughtered 120 emigrants nearby in 1857, were responsible.

The truth of the killings is buried in time. Bodies were never found, and scratches on a rock are some of the last hard evidence of their passing. But I have consulted historians, combed archives, read books and transcripts of oral histories, and studied the 1883 letter. I've found multiple sources that point to the truth, and as I stood atop Mt. Delienbaugh, confronting Dunn's final signature, I knew that the Mormons did not kill Powell's men.

Contemporary thought processes—disconnected from knowledge of the land or a Native American context of western expansionism—occlude our understanding of Dunn's and the Howlands' fate. Sympathy for the marginalized Shivwits may play a role in shifting blame to the Mormons, too; despite the confessions, Powell chose making peace with the locals over pursuing charges against them to avoid an endless cycle of revenge.

But that day in early September 1869, I believe that Oramel, the strongest brother, was taking care of the younger Seteca—all but disabled by heat exhaustion and hunger. Neither had climbed with Dunn to view the route or leave inscriptions as they had done as an inseparable threesome a month earlier in Glen Canyon. Now the men were barely able to walk or carry their gear.

After meeting three Indians who offered help, the

trusting Oramel mistakenly allowed the Shivwits to carry their rifles and the traps. The three, named Toab, Jim, and Tamamam, had fed the men the previous night at Parashant Springs, a few miles from where the butt of Dunn's rifle was found in 1993. Seeing an opportunity, and wanting revenge for the 1866 tortures and murders of Shivwits at the hands of Mormons, the Indians unshouldered their bows. Juniper arrows tipped with chert rained into Dunn and the Howlands. As each white man fell, defenseless, the Shivwits continued to draw, pull, and shoot.

The 1883 Mormon letter, which referred to "the killing of three" in a town called Toquerville north of St. George, is flimsy evidence at best. That the bedraggled, emaciated men would pass the area's largest settlement for a small village 10 days after leaving the river only to be killed there by suspicious Mormons is far less plausible than what the Indians themselves admitted. After digging deep into historical records—including letters from ranchers and testimony from Indians, all of which corroborate the original report—I now firmly believe that Shivwits killed Dunn and the Howland brothers.

The 1870 confession to Powell spoke of "killing Powell's men with arrows." Then, in 1902, Toab bragged of the killing to a ranch hand name Jimmy Guerrero, saying that "they just begged and they cried." (Toab was later caught vandalizing springs, cattle trails, and fences and eventually served time in prison for murdering another Paiute.) In 1923, a Shivwit named Simon, who was a boy when the killings occurred and heard about them firsthand, told a sheriff named George Brooks that Toab, Jim, and Tamamam then "ran and hid."

"Their bodies were not buried," said Simon, but rather were left for coyotes, Brooks reported in a letter. Three years later, in 1926, Frederick Delienbaugh, an artist and topographer on one of Powell's later expeditions, heard a corroborating story from another Indian source, who confirmed the three men were killed near Parashant Spring. "The men let the Indians carry their guns and other traps. They left the spring in the morning, got out a half-mile or more, when the Indians attacked them. It was a running fight—bows and arrows were used," Delienbaugh wrote in a letter.

Thermals continued to lift air out of the great, prehistoric chasm of the Grand Canyon below. We left Dunn's inscription and headed down. Below the cinder cone summit, we walked around crumbling ruins built of black basalt, the same that Dunn would have passed in 1869. Above us, gray storm clouds scudded. It was a landscape just as harsh and unforgiving as 150 years ago, or 1,500. It was also a place that kept its secrets, but not all of them, well. 

