



The Best Expedition of 1891

by John Weisheit

Many of you have read David Lavender's book River Runners of the Grand Canyon. In the pictorial section there is a wonderful photo of Harry McDonald taken in 1891 by the photographer of the Best Expedition, James McCormick. That image was taken on the right side of Rapid #15 in Cataract Canyon. It is an interesting story to tell and one I would like to share, courtesy of the Marston Collection at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Beginnings

The Best Expedition of 1891 was a dream conceived by a placer gold miner, Harry McDonald. McDonald, as many such miners of the 1880's did, learned to handle a river boat through necessity. His first recorded trip on the Colorado River occurred in 1887 when he floated a skiff from Grand Junction, Colorado, to Westwater Creek in eastern Utah. McDonald would build a small cabin on the right side of the Colorado River near the mouth of a side canyon 2 1/2 miles above the Utah/Colorado border. Today, that side canyon is called McDonald Creek. McDonald's placer trade eventually took him to the gravel bars of the Colorado River in upper Glen Canyon. There, in 1889, McDonald met Frank M. Brown and Robert B. Stanton, overseeing a boating expedition to survey the Colorado River canyons for a railroad route. McDonald joined that ill-fated river trip, which eventually included the drowning deaths of Brown and two crew members in Marble Canyon, and where Stanton abandoned the expedition by hiking out. Stanton would reorganize that expedition in the same year and made McDonald his lead boatman. While on that expedition, just below the confluence with the Little Colorado River, McDonald noticed a potential mining enterprise in the Cardenas Lava, a geological formation of the Unkar Group that is over one billion years old. For reasons that still remain vague, McDonald left the expedition by foot at Crystal Creek and in the dead-of-

winter, completed the amazing feat of traversing the Kaibab Plateau to the then nearest town, Kanab, Utah.

Enter James D. Best

McDonald soon found himself in the financial center of the Intermountain West, Denver, with a plan that needed a willing capitalist. With some persuasion James D. Best, a principal of a real estate brokerage firm called **McKnight, Best, and Company**, became the lead financier of a river expedition to investigate the mining potential of Colorado River canyons. A company was formally organized by four directors, by-laws submitted, and stocks issued. The name of the company was: **Denver, Colorado Cañon Mining and Improvement Company**.

The expedition members, other than Best and McDonald were: John Hislop, boatman and engineer; Elmer Kane, boatman; William Hiram Edwards, boatman; Luther Jewell, boatman; John Jacobs, boatman; and J. A. McCormick, photographer.

Boat Craft

Two boats were ordered from the Douglas Boat Factory in Waukegan, Illinois. They were identical to the boats used by Stanton during his second expedition. To successfully operate the two boats, six boatmen were required (three per boat). Sitting with their backs to the downstream current, were the bow and stroke positions, where each man worked two 10 foot oars. Standing in the aft position was the steersman with a single 12 foot oar. The concept was to have the bow and stroke positions pulling hard with their oars to give the boat "speed". The steersman would then use his oar as a rudder giving the craft direction.

The boats had a carrying capacity of 2100 lbs., were 22 feet in length, 4 1/2 feet in width (beam), and 32 inches deep; constructed of oak planks, 3/4 inch thick for ribs, 1/2 inch thick for gunwales; were round-bottomed with a steel-plated keel; 10 watertight compartments were lined in galvanized steel with a total storage capacity of 144 cubic feet. When empty, each boat weighed 800 lbs. and cost \$1000.

Underway to Disaster

The trip launched from the railroad town of Blake (Green River), Utah, and was to exit at the railroad town of Needles, California. They launched on the 10th of July, 1891, and reached The Confluence on July 20th, where they made camp at the head of the first rapid in Cataract Canyon. Trip photography indicates a water flow of about 15,000 cfs. On the 21st, at about 3:00 in the afternoon, the party arrived at what is now known as Mile Long Rapid, or Rapids #13 to #18. The men pulled ashore to assess the danger of this boulder-choked course. The decision was made to run the boats through with crew gear.



The following is the testimony of a crew member, William Hiram Edwards: "The first boat pulled out into the current and the two oarsman pull hard as the boat must go faster than the water in order to get steerage way. All goes well until they get about half way down the rapid when they get too close to a big whirlpool near the right shore which catches the boat and whips it around into an eddy and they pull ashore. We follow with our boat and when we see them on shore suppose they have discovered something wrong with the lower part of the rapid and try to follow them but find the current so strong we cannot make it. In trying to turn we lose steerage way and the boat turns about but with the help of the steersman's oar we back water and slip between two big boulders, landing about 100 yards below the first boat at the head of the last fall in the rapid [a successful run of Rapid #15]. The first boat then makes another start, but the current being very swift from the opposite shore they cannot get their boat straight with the current and drift down striking broadside on one of the big boulders we had barely missed. The boat capsizes instantly and took the four men down with it. One of our crew looking up saw the head of the steersman, Mack [McDonald], ...the current carried him to the rock and he climbed up on it. Next we see two of the others [Kane and Jewell] come up 100 feet downstream [and drifted down river for about one mile]. Best [had] been caught in the boat but finally freed himself [and] came to the surface [where McDonald pulled him] up on the rock."

The crew tried to free the pinned boat with what tools they had and were unsuccessful. On the 25th, Hislop hiked out of the canyon and went cross-country to Dandy Crossing (Hite) where he acquired some explosives. He returned to the wreck site on the 29th, where they attempted to blast the rock apart, to thus free the boat. This method of white water rescue also proved unsuccessful. The final disappointment occurred when flood waters caused the river to rise 4 to 5 feet, submerging the rock and ending their hopes to free the boat.

Conclusion

They spent a week at Rapid #15 trying to salvage Boat #1. Probably while waiting for Hislop's return, most of the members left inscriptions on the talus boulders of the river right side. Today, this is a popular hike for photography, to scout the rapid, and watch modern boats pass through - sometimes with similar difficulties. The rapid is affectionately known today as, "Capsize". However, river historian Otis Marston preferred to call Rapid #15, "Best Rapid".

The expedition continued toward Dandy Crossing in boat #2 whenever quiet waters allowed for such an opportunity; otherwise, they walked the shoreline. No portaging or lining was done on the trip. Upon reaching Dandy Crossing, they acquired a skiff to relieve the load and floated to Lees Ferry, AZ. At that point, the idea of boating to

Needles was abandoned and the members then purchased stock animals and traveled up into the Kaibab Plateau and down into the Grand Canyon following Bright Angel Creek. No formal mining enterprise was ever accomplished.

When the Best Expedition was formed in 1891, only two expeditions had made complete runs through the Colorado River and the Colorado Plateau. In definitive language, the historic Colorado River (pre-1921), starting geographically at The Confluence of the Green and Grand rivers and through to the geographic end of the Colorado Plateau at the Grand Wash Cliffs. However, both expeditions, Powell's Expedition of 1869 and Stanton's trip of 1889 - 90, both met with boat loss and crew desertion.

It is my impression that the Best Expedition was to make the first trouble-free trip through to the Grand Wash Cliffs. Funding for the trip amounted to \$10,000 with every possible need taken into consideration. Three of the crew members (Hislop, Kane, and Edwards) were veterans and non-deserters of Stanton's completed expedition. According to physical descriptions in various clippings from the Denver and Salt Lake City newspapers, the boatmen were physically fit, and all were over six foot tall, which is not likely to be a 19th century coincidence.

Interestingly, the Best Expedition was to be the last trip for the round-bottom boat class. This was outside of Clyde Eddy's romantic idea to replicate the concept for his river trip in 1927. On that expedition, Eddy too lost a boat and had crew desertion. In 1896, Nathaniel Galloway and George Flavell completed trips with flat-bottomed boats using upstream ferries for steerage. A boating innovation that brought repeated success to the future traverses of the Colorado River.



"The scenery between Bridge Canyon and the Crossing of the Fathers is more wonderful than that of any section of the Colorado River above Lee Ferry. In fact, in some ways it is more interesting than the Grand Canyon proper."

Eugene LaRue, 1921. USGS hydrologist and proponent for construction of a high dam above Lees Ferry.