

THE STORY OF JAMES W. BLACK

By Jim Knipmeyer

Many old, historic inscriptions in Glen Canyon of the Colorado River were, unfortunately, drowned by the waters of Lake Powell reservoir. Such has been the fate of two signatures carved by early prospector and stockman James W. Black. Happily, however, a third was written high enough on the canyon wall that it has escaped inundation - barely!

About a half-mile upcanyon from the mouth of the Escalante River, at what would have been about Mile-89, right bank, on the old Colorado, is one of the large, shallow alcoves characteristic of the contact between the Kayenta bench and the Navajo cliffs. On the back wall, painted in what may have been a combination of charcoal and cooking grease, is "J. W. BLACK FEB 2 1896," still plainly visible today. It was first noted by Utah historian and writer Charles Kelly on September 30, 1938, while on a river trip with the so-called Stone-Frazier expedition.

James W. Black remains a little known and somewhat mysterious character of the Glen Canyon area. Where he was born or where he came from is not known. Early Escalante, Utah, resident Jess Barker told Colorado River historian Otis R. "Dock" Marston in 1955 that Black "came from Colorado." A statement by William H. Switzer in the collections of the Pioneers' Historical Society in Flagstaff, Arizona, says that he "came from Durango, Colorado." However, the La Plata County Historical Society in Durango has only one record of a James W. Black in that area, and his date of death would seem to preclude his being the James W. Black in question. What is known about Black comes from two prepared statements that he gave in Flagstaff on July 10 and 11, 1930, and a few scattered pieces of information collected by Dock Marston in the 1950s. The 1930 statements would seem to be the most valuable sources of information, but even they must be tempered by the realization that not only were they written some thirty years after the fact, but that they were prepared at the request of author Gladwell "Toney" Richardson as background material for his various books and magazine articles. Richardson, member of a long-time trading family in the western Navajo country, wrote a tremendous amount of both fiction and non-fiction, sometimes blurring the line between the two. He was a perfect example of the old axiom, "Never let the facts stand in the way of a good story."

Be that as it may, the first we hear of James W. Black is as a drover, hired by John W. Young to assist in driving a herd of horses from southern Utah, by way of Lee's Ferry, to the slopes of the San Francisco Peaks in northern Arizona. Black, in one of his 1930 statements, says that this was in August of 1880. By 1883 he was working as a cowhand with Young's Mormon Church-owned A-1 cattle outfit in Fort Valley, several miles northwest of Flagstaff. When attempting to track down information about Black, Dock Marston was informed that he was not related to the prominent Black family of Flagstaff in the 1880s and afterwards.

In a letter to Dock in 1957, Muriel Pope said that her father and uncle, George and Arthur Spencer, remembered a man named Black being around the San Juan River in 1883-84. Also, that her dad recalled a Jim Black, an "A-1 cowpuncher," who did a lot of prospecting at times and who made the observation that the scenery where the San Juan and Colorado met would make a "good tourist attraction"! James Black himself stated that he went up to the San Juan River to prospect for gold in 1889, after he "had just come out of the Navajo Mountain country to Flagstaff."

Writing many years later, Black probably meant 1892, as he mentions the gold discoveries of trader Jonathan P. Williams and the resulting "San Juan excitement," which took place in late 1892 and early 1893. He goes on to describe prospecting along the San Juan River that year but then moving on downstream and up the Colorado to Hite, just as many another disappointed San Juan prospector did.

This adjusting of dates would also reconcile the brief item about Black that appeared in The Coconino Sun, a Flagstaff newspaper on June 30, 1892. If he had, in fact, "just come out of the Navajo Mountain country to Flagstaff" before heading up to the "San Juan excitement," it would had to have been sometime during the summer, and that agrees exactly with the news item. "...James W. Black returned this week from a trip to the country northeast of here [Navajo Mountain]..in search of the 'Lost Spanish Mine' [the Merrick-Mitchell, or Pish-la-ki silver mine]. But after searching for the lost mine two weeks through the rocky canyons..[he was] forced to abandon [his] search.."

According to Black's 1930 statements, he and two companions returned to Navajo Mountain in January 1892 [again, his year date may be wrong]. It was on this trip that they first saw Rainbow Natural Bridge from near the top of the



mountain. In a 1956 letter to Dock Marston, a Preston M. Mercer told of visiting with an old-timer in Flagstaff by the name of Emmett Kellam. In the 1930s, Kellam had worked in a supervisory capacity for the U.S. Indian Service and had spent a lot of time in the Navajo Mountain country. In fact, he had camped all one winter along the north side of the mountain, building trails into the canyon country [probably the government-sponsored CCC construction work of the early and mid-'30s]. Kellam said that he had found a "chunk of old log" along an old trail north of Navajo Mountain with Black's name carved on it and also a date that was in the "1800s." He went on to say that he also saw Black's name carved on trees in more than one other place on Navajo Mountain. These statements by Kellam are intriguing because they can be substantiated, at least in part, by others. When geologist Herbert E. Gregory visited the top of Navajo Mountain in the summer of 1913, his field note entry for June 18 states, "Navajo Mt. Highest point..mark on tip top stake..Jas Black Jan (?) 1903." In a story very similar sounding in some respects to both the Kellam and Gregory accounts, author Elmer E. Davis, in an article for the July 1926 issue of *Progressive Arizona* says, "...[at] the summit [of Navajo Mountain]..a piece of wood, a portion of the limb of a tree, had..carved on it, ..'Jas Black,

1903.'" Black himself tells of returning to Navajo Mountain again after 1897, but again he may have been a few years off in his 1930 recollections.

Black stated that his view from Navajo Mountain of what is today known as Bridge Canyon "intrigued me," so the next year, 1893, he got another man to go back in with him. He indicated that they went by way of what he called the "East trail" past "Glass Mountain." This would be the trail on the north side of Navajo Mountain which crosses today's Bald Rock Canyon-Nasja Creek region. [Shades of Emmett Kellam's story!] This is also the area of slickrock domes that Western author Zane Grey referred to as the "Glass Mountains" after his pack trip of 1913. In 1930, of course, Black could easily have been aware of this name. Black continues on saying that they went down Oak Canyon and camped in a "kind of basin" where the Colorado River made a bend. Crossing over into what is now Forbidding Canyon, they prospected for two months. Black added that the two of them found "Indian ruins in cliffs, but no gold." Therefore, they called the gorge "Aztec Canyon," a name that today is applied only to the creek.

One problem that modern historians and researchers have had with Black's 1930 statements is the following: Black said that he

and his companion swam their horses over the Colorado and went up the Escalante River to the small Mormon town of the same name. Because of the meandering course of the Colorado, the often times sheer cliffs, and the blocking gorges of deep tributary canyons, it would have been next to impossible for a person to travel by horseback the some twenty river-miles separating the mouth of Forbidding Canyon from that of the Escalante upstream. However, Black and his fellow prospector may have crossed from the delta at the mouth of Oak Canyon and angled downstream, not more than a quarter-mile, to the almost opposite delta of what is shown on the modern USGS map of the area as Navajo Valley, the old Glen Canyon river runners' Twilight Canyon. This drainage did provide a difficult, but passable route up onto the Escalante Desert at the end of the Kaiparowits Plateau and an open way on northwest to the town of Escalante.

The two prospectors may have stayed around Escalante, for Black says that during the winter of 1894-95, in order to get another grubstake for prospecting, he and his same companion from 1893 agreed to winter two hundred head of horses for some people at Escalante. They swam the stock across the Colorado and put them into the basin in the river bend between Oak and Forbidding canyons that Black modestly related was afterwards called "Jim Black's Basin."

Writing more than thirty-five years after the fact, Black was probably not completely clear in his remembering. More than likely, Jim Black Basin was not on the Colorado itself, but a short distance up Oak Canyon. In pre-dam/lake days, the Colorado here did, in fact, make a large bend from south to west, but this caused the river to flow right next to the almost vertical canyon wall, leaving no room even for a trail, much less a "basin." Oak Canyon, too, made a large sweeping turn from its mouth back toward the west, nearly encircling a tall rock mass that remains as an island today in Lake Powell. Before looping back south once again, this bend of Oak Canyon nearly cut its way back to the Colorado, a thin blade of sandstone wall just a score of yards wide separating the two streams. The comparatively low area fanning out to the southeast from this meander of Oak Canyon most likely was the basin described and is still indicated today by the semi-circular part of Lake Powell known as Oak Canyon Bay. What was Oak Canyon is now known to lake boaters as Secret Canyon. From this area the two men prospected out from the basin and even made a trail over the canyon wall into "Aztec Canyon"

near the mouth, where there were "some cliff ruins." Black said that they cleaned out one room where they then camped and did their cooking. While in Aztec that winter they both went to the "natural bridge" [Rainbow Bridge?] several times. Somewhat surprisingly, there is some corroborating evidence for this winter excursion. There was, in fact, an old trail, identified as "prehistoric," by members of the Lake Powell Research Project in the mid-1970s. Before the filling of Lake Powell reservoir, it ascended by way of some pecked steps from the floor of Oak Canyon, across the sandstone slickrock for not more than a third of a mile, and then down to the mouth of Forbidding Canyon. This very well could have been the trail that Black said they "made" in 1894-95. They probably simply improved upon the old Anasazi route.

In a large alcove just inside the mouth of Forbidden Canyon were, before flooding, four enigmatic, dry-laid stone "walls," probably prehistoric but possibly also modified by Glen Canyon prospectors in the 1880s and '90s. This very well could have been one of the "cliff ruins" described by Black and in which they camped. In fact, on the alcove wall just to the right of the last structure was carved an inscription, "Jas Black, Feb." Unfortunately, no year date was ever reported for the inscription, though in 1955 river runner Gus Scott did give a year date of 1909. However, immediately below the Black inscription was one reading "Don Beauregard, 1909." Both had been partially obscured by a large, white painted site number from the University of California's Rainbow Bridge-Monument Valley expedition of the 1930s. Perhaps Scott thus misinterpreted the defaced inscriptions and mistakenly read the 1909 from the Beauregard signature as a part of the Black.

Further supporting testimony comes from an account given by one Dan Leroy, an old Idaho shepherd, to Utah physician and river runner Dr. Russell G. Frazier in 1937 while on a voyage down the Salmon River. Many years earlier Leroy said that he was a prospector on the Colorado River in Glen Canyon and knew Jim Black. He further stated that Rainbow Bridge was first seen by Black in 1894, "while exploring the flat mesa above." A similar-sounding story came from an old Escalante cowhand named Harry Ogden. In the mid-1950s he told Utah historian and writer Charles Kelly that Black had ridden up Oak Creek, got out on top, and saw Rainbow Bridge "from above."

While these two stories do seem to compliment Black's 1930 statement, there is yet

even one more piece of supporting evidence. On two of his Colorado River trips in 1938 and 1942, Charles Kelly and his fellow river runners camped at the mouth of Oak Canyon. Though he does not mention it in either of his two diaries from those voyages, on at least one of them he must have explored up the canyon a ways. In a letter to Dock Marston in 1952, he states that there was a Black inscription "a mile or two up Oak Canyon." Intriguingly enough, this would have been very close to the point where the prehistoric Anasazi "trail" led up out of Oak Canyon and over to the mouth of Forbidding Canyon.

After the 1894-95 trip, little is known about the activities of James W. Black. Besides the "Feb 2 1896" inscription above the mouth of the Escalante, there is another that has been found high up in a room of a small cliff ruin in the Escalante River canyon about a mile below the mouth of Twenty-five Mile Wash. It was discovered by southern Utah guide and packer Ken Sleight in 1964 and reads, "J. W. BLACK, SEPT. 2, 97." It was written in charcoal and in 1964 was beginning to fade. Sleight indicated that the year date could have been "92." Black himself, in his 1930 statements, mentions only one other occurrence with which he supplies a date during this time period, a summer 1897 prospecting trip with two other men from Flagstaff to the Kaibito Plateau area of northern Arizona. Interestingly, the two Black inscriptions on the Escalante side of the Colorado River are both signed "J. W. BLACK" and are done in charcoal. All of the ones found on the Navajo Mountain side of the river, however, which are quoted exactly, read "Jas. Black" and have all been carved. This leads to the distinct possibility that the inscriptions may have been done by two different individuals. Those west of the Colorado seem to be associated with an old stock trail leading from the Escalante northwest to Halls Creek. Canyon hiker and author Steve Allen states in a 1997 book, with no source cited, that this so-called "Black Trail" was constructed in part by a John Black, an early-day Escalante cattleman.

The inscription at the summit of Navajo Mountain would indicate that James Black was still very much active even after the turn of the 20th century, and he obviously was still in the Flagstaff area of northern Arizona in July of 1930. But there are no records of his death or burial to be found in Flagstaff, and what ultimately happened to James W. Black,

prospector, stockman, and possible discoverer of Rainbow Natural Bridge, remains a mystery.

Mille Crag Bend 1952 George Simmons photo

