



Elmer Kane, James McCormick, John Jacobs, John Hislop  
Harry McDonald, William Edwards, James Best, Albert Gregory, Luther Jewell

Note: Gregory was not on the river trip.

# The Best Expedition of 1891

*The following is an excerpt from an account of the Best Expedition by J.A. McCormick, the photographer of the river trip. I chose those events pertaining to "Hell to Pay" (the rapid formerly known as Capsize) as well as some Glen Canyon stuff and an "adventurous day hike" at Lee's Ferry. This is a typewritten manuscript with penciled in editorial additions by McCormick. The "Expedition" was organized by "The Colorado Grand Canon Mining and Improvement Company". The Company was formed to "acquire by purchase or otherwise, mines and mining properties, and to work, tunnel and develop the same, and to provide and erect necessary buildings, machinery and appliances therefor; also to construct, own and operate a toll road or toll roads in the Territories of Arizona and Utah, running into and out of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River; and to establish, acquire, own and operate a ferry across the Colorado River in said Territories, or either of them, and the necessary docks, landing places, boats and appliances therefor, and to charge and collect tolls from the public using said toll roads or ferry...erect and operate hotels...and when desirable sell same...acquire, maintain and operate irrigating canals...acquire and sell real estate...lay out, plat, and acquire town sites...carry a general mercantile business... and to engage in any business or enterprise that may seem best or desirable to its Board of Directors". Four of these men, Hislop, McDonald, Kane and Edwards, were with Robert Stanton in 1890. They launched July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1891 from Green River Station, Utah.*

We landed on the east shore at the head of rapid No. 12 for the usual inspection and found that rapids 12-13-14 were so nearly continuous that there was no possible landing place indicated in the entire length. It was advised by both Hislop and McDonald that we camp here and study the channels carefully, watch the driftwood, and formulate a plan of running the entire distance in one run without the extra men. There was an ideal camping place across the river on a bar with a fine group of cottonwoods. There was nothing to prevent the extra men, the Chief and myself, from walking along the shore to the safe water below and I would have had an opportunity to get some sensational pictures of the boats in a really bad water condition. With the argument that we had made such fine progress that it was advisable to go as far as was possible and that it was still early in the day, the Chief insisted on our making the run. With such superficial inspection here was the making of a major tragedy, and it was, as far as equipment was concerned.

Peculiar as it may seem the water has all the appearance of piling up at the head of a rapid and it has this feel on the oars as one tries to get up speed for steering. While it is not difficult, from high on the shore to pick the exact place to enter a rapid with the assurance of escaping the obstructions, it is quite another thing to be able to find that spot from the basin above where one

cannot see over the brink, particularly if the inspection has been curtailed.

Lunch, observation and the arguments pro and con consumed much time so it was 3:15 when we took to the boats for the fateful run.

No. 1 with the Chief as passenger took the lead and it looked to us as though they were getting to far to the right which proved true. Their speed was so great that as they broke over the brink they were unable to swing over to the channel, and cut into the eddy which caught their bow and turned them toward shore and they were thrown well up on the rocks so that it was necessary to utilize the incoming waves and some effort to get back into the water, fortunately with no damage. We know nothing of this as we had not yet turned the brink of the rapid.

Boat No. 2 with me as passenger and Hislop steering, were well into the channel as we turned the crest but this brought us in sight of the other boat in apparent distress: Hislop swung his boat to the right to reach the other, which put him across the main current, and he immediately saw that he could not reach the eddy but would be carried onto a reef extending out from the west shore. He ordered the men to back water to escape this reef but the bow caught on the outer point and fortunately held until the current swung our boat through the opening between this reef point and a rock just below that looked as big as a cottage. This put us below and in the protection of the reef so we had no difficulty in making shore where we tied up intending to go back and help the other group. In one thousand attempts I doubt whether a boat could have reached this place safely, so it was mere good fortune.

Provision had been made for the two steersmen to have a consultation, in case of trouble, which was subscribed to by the Chief, but, in this case, when he saw that we were safe he ordered McDonald to get back into the main channel. Just as they seemed to be safely in the clear, a cross current caught them and before one could hardly bat an eye their boat was plastered across the face of the big rock that we had missed, the water poured into their boat, picked the four men up, dropped Best and McDonald on the top of the rock and carried Kane and Jewell down the river.

We boys on shore tried to follow the boys down the river but soon lost sight of them, and as the Colorado never had been known to give up it's dead we were convinced that they were lost, without hope of even finding their bodies.

We returned to our boat, got out a grappling hook, bent it to a light line and over taxed with excitement as we were, it took us an hour to get the line out to the boys on the rock. They fished up the bow line of the wrecked boat, we sent out our heavy emergency line which they spliced and with our two-one block and tackle we stretched the rope and the boys came ashore with an arm over the rope and their bodies dragging in the water.

After the boys were safe ashore we all lost our ambition and just sat there looking at the wreck and nobody had a word to say. The noise of the rapids

between these 3000 foot walls makes it necessary for us to get close and shout to be heard so we could not hear any unusual movement. Before we realized it the two lost men were back with us. Adventure certainly effects men in different ways for Kane got us together and without apparent excitement, told of his sensations while in the water and what happened. They were carried down river about a mile, bumping along the bottom with an occasional trip to the surface for air when the current released them for the moment. The current threw them into an eddy, fortunately on our side of the river, and as they were carried up stream they each succeeded in getting onto a rock fairly near shore. After coughing the water from their lungs Kane tried the water inshore, found it shallow and with no force so he waded ashore. Jewell did likewise and they came into camp. Jewell was so stunned that he had not a word to say. This put new life in the entire party and we got busy at once and established camp while Edwards got us a hearty meal. We retired early with high hopes of saving our boat in the morning.

The rock on which the boat was wrecked lay diagonally facing up stream and the opposite shore, with the bow of the boat away from us and pointing down stream. During breakfast after discussing the matter it was decided to send two men to the rock, pass them timbers from the drift, they to rig a 'jinnie', pass the heavy line over this so that we on shore could put a strain on this line while they pried the boat upstream, thus lifting the bow of the boat a little at a time until it was released from the force of the current. Theoretically, fine, but in practice we, with our combined effort could not overcome the power of the water but all that we accomplished was to pull the rivets loose and wreck the bow. It was evident that blasting the rock was our only hope, but how? Our powder was in the bow of the wreck. After trying other suggested methods without success, it was decided to send one man out to the nearest civilization for powder and as we had extra powder at Dandy Crossing that was the logical place. Hislop insisted that he was best suited for the trip so he started on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> [July] and returned on the 31<sup>st</sup>. Hislop also arranged to have some provisions brought up to the first trail into the Canyon from below.

As Hislop came into camp he noticed that the rope attached to the wreck was nearly worn through and on more careful examination it was deemed unsafe to attempt to get out to the rock. Higher water was another factor which made it unsafe, so we broke the rope and packed, prepared to leave in the morning.

As a matter of convenience we had, from the start of the Expedition, been living off of the rations in Boat No. 2 as Edwards was oarsman and carried the cook outfit with him, for the reason that he might reach a camp ahead of the other boat. This was an added misfortune, for we lost, in the wreck, more than half of our provisions. While Hislop was out after Powder we carefully rationed ourselves, but seven healthy men will consume much food and being almost entirely out, it was imperative that we make as fast time as possible to the provi-

sions that the Dandy Crossing boys were bringing in. It was decided that Hislop, Jacobs and Edwards should take the very much lighter boat through the rapids while the five of us walked along the shore.

Everything went fine until we reached Rapid No. 21 which was full of obstructions from shore to shore, with a huge rock in the main channel in the lower portion, making it impossible to pass the smaller obstructions and then swing free from this great barrier. The obstructions near shore made it inadvisable to try to line the boat down along shore so we unpacked and carried forward. We then took the boat out over skids to the safe water below. As it was now late in the day we soon camped for the night.

Near this camp one of the boys found a case of Cranberry preserves in the drift wood, which had been exposed to the weather for so long, that the glass was brittle and we had great difficulty in getting the bottles open. We were now down to just oatmeal with no sugar so we substituted these preserves for sugar and it made the entire party sick. A great spire of rock down stream inspired the name for this camp—Chimney Rock Bend.

Soon after leaving this camp the boys in the boat saw an inscription cut in a sheer wall (D. Julien 1836). We had found an inscription with a sailboat and a rising sun cut in a canyon wall about a hundred miles north of this point which was signed by this same D. Julien. We learned that members of a former Expedition had found another inscription by the same man in Marble Canyon, just below Lees Ferry, Arizona. We could not verify this as we left the river at that point. We concluded that he must have been a French-Canadian trapper who in some mysterious way had survived the Canyon dangers.

We reached our provisions soon after noon on this day and it was certainly a great treat after two days on plain oatmeal.

Having passed the worst of the rapids by now we made great progress. We five that were walking would stay on one shore until we would come to a straight wall, cross on the boat and continue until we were forced to return and in this way we reached Dark Canyon where we could all ride through.

We reached Dandy Crossing the afternoon on August 4<sup>th</sup> and sat down to a hearty meal that the boys had prepared after we came in sight. We enjoyed one days stay here very much but were unable to get a boat that was suitable: We learned that there was a boat at Good Hope bar that we could get and with some caulking and paint would find it usable.

On the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup> [August] we loaded our boat with all the extra provisions and supplies which had been brought overland and as there was no bad water immediately below, the eight of us got aboard and although this made the boat unwieldy we were able to keep the safe channel with no difficulty but lessened speed. It was during the trip to Good Hope and below that we made a pan test of the seven bars which we located and filed on. These were mid-river bars and in each case we got free colors from the surface gravel after clearing it of the surface sand. While the gold was very fine we got a

sufficient showing to have justified real excitement. At least we should have done the necessary assessment work to hold these claims and got the locations recorded while we were at a point in the Canyon where we could get out to the nearest land office. With eight men working together we could have done the work required in ten or twelve days. Our Chief said he would send men in to do the work after we got home.

I find from my notes, that some of these locations were well below the mouth of the San Juan River and would have required recording from Lees Ferry. Supplies and machinery could be easily floated down from Dandy Crossing with little effort.

At Good Hope we were able to secure a large flat bottomed boat that required a full days work to make it usable but it permitted the dividing of the load of both men and equipment and solved our boat problem for the moment.

From Dandy Crossing to a considerable distance down river the walls receded leaving wide benches of gravel carrying flour gold. At intervals, a bench is being worked in a more or less indifferent manner and usually a grub stake is assured.

Near the mouth of the San Juan river the Canyon walls close in and from there on Glen Canyon is one continuous picture.

The mouth of the San Juan river is a spot of unusual charm with high terraced Canyon walls trimmed with a nicely distributed tree and shrub growth dotted with large gray sage and backed by a straight box canyon from which the river flows in a rushing stream. A good showing of flour gold at the grass roots made it hard to pass this point but our party had developed a sliver complex and although we would have been within the intent of the plans and it was the proper thing to do, our Chief ruled that we make haste.

This same day, August 11<sup>th</sup>, we stopped at Crevice Canyon; a narrow gash in the wall which was little more than the span of a mans arms; the pools of water reached from wall to wall and we had to wade to reach the head of this short stream which opens up in to the most remarkable amphitheater with its overhanging roof. Leaving just a spot of sky visible. It is safe to say that 30,000 people could find shelter on the ledges under this roof. The acoustics were the most remarkable I have ever experienced. We carried on a conversation across and to the upper ledges without raising our voices and there was none of the usual reverberation found in such vast openings. Could it be that the break in the roof or the narrow inlet of Canyon accounted for this freedom from echo? If this is so it would be well for the Architects to introduce these features in their plans for Auditoriums. It would be worth a special expedition of specialists on acoustics to give this intensive study.

....We reached Lees Ferry on August 14<sup>th</sup> and camped in the old John D. Lee fort and this proved to be the end of our river trip. With but one boat fit to navigate the waters of Marble and the Grand Canyon, it was declared more practical to make the head of Bright Angel Canyon by pack horse.

*Following is some exploration they did while at Lee's Ferry waiting for McDonald and Best to get back from Salina with pack stock, via a board meeting in Denver.*

**T**he Canyon wall just back of our camp was about 1700 feet high and this had to be scaled before we could explore the country to the west and north. We had found a place that we could climb, with care, a few hundred yards upriver.

One morning at early daylight, Jacobs and I climbed to the top and just as we reached the crest the sun peeped over the eastern horizon. This reflected on what appeared to be numerous water pockets well out in this apparent arid stretch of desert. Johnson, who had lived on a ranch at the mouth of Paria creek for sixteen years had cautioned us about going far from the Canyon rim, for he said that no game trails indicated no water.

We studied the land marks for a time to be sure of being able to retrace our steps and started to investigate these reflections. Presently we came to a small dry wash and with no idea of being able to cross it a few hundred yards to the right, we went to the left for a mile and headed it, coming back to keep our land marks in line.

As we got back to our starting point we found that we were just a little ways from where this stream, in flood, would pour into the main canyon, and it was easy of access. I went down stream and Jacobs went up the Canyon to see if water pockets were available, as we wanted to conserve our canteen supply. I found a large stand of fine clear water near the Canyon mouth and called to Jacobs. While waiting for his answer and after an astonishing length of time, my voice came back so clear and distinct that it was startling. Before I called again my call was repeated so often that I just stood too astonished to move. When Jacobs finally came down to me we spent a considerable time testing this echo.

The elapsed time was so great that I was able to sing two lines of Annie Rooney, which was the first song I thought of, before it would start to repeat, then repeating so many times distinctly before it began to over lap soon to become a mixture of sound.

If this echo is ever made available to the travelling public, it will become famous.

We continued along the line of our landmarks, soon coming to a group of dozens of water pockets, from deep cisterns to wide shallow pockets that would have been dry only for recent rains.

While skirting a high wall near these water pockets we found the first indications of Cliff Dwellings in the caves along the wall. These were almost totally obliterated, while in fact they should have been well preserved in the protected location where found.

This whetted our appetite for exploration so we climbed to the top of these cliffs and surveyed the surroundings for other prospects. This gave us a very extensive view of the same general formation described along the Green River. To the west at some distance we saw similar cliffs to the one we were on and after carefully studying all landmarks and laying out a definite route, we struck for the nearest prospect.

This proved to be a large hard sandrock cliff which had resisted the action of the elements, except for some soft strata which had been eroded by the winds into caves, some quite deep. Each cave had well defined indications of having been lived in without other building except for defensive walls of rock layed in a square, facing to the outside. Numerous mealing stones and hand pieces, much cactus hull, game bones and corn cob indicated long occupancy.

As we approached this cliff we had picked up many arrow heads of a material very much like the petrified trees along Paria Creek and near our camp. This indicated that these people were besieged, and it may have been a last stand, justifying the lack of buildings. We made a trip on top of this cliff which gave us a most extensive view, and found that walls were placed along the edges, without doubt as a defensive measure, behind which the able bodied fought while the women and older men chipped arrowheads and made arrows. This was indicated by a large mound of chips in the protected center of the cliff top.

Returning to the caves below we found one much deeper than the others with the walls better placed. In one wing of this cave there was a wide spread of ashes. As I had read at some time that these people spread ashes from their fires over their dead, and as we were carrying a shovel for any eventuality, we began to dig to see if this were true. Presently we broke the corner off of a slab of rock, ran an arm in to explore and brought forth some bone tools, fiber fabric, a few human bones and some fiber rope with a square knot tied in it; the same knot that we tie today.

We found some scraps of pottery but none intact. The arrow heads were small, beautifully formed and we brought many back to give to our friends for tie pins.

As we dug into the grave, the ashes would cave in and almost suffocate us, and as our water was low we decided to start for camp, hoping to get back here for farther investigation. We never had this opportunity for we proceeded with the expedition after this trip.

On our way in we came to a dry stream bed, followed it for a ways and came to a deep tank at the foot of what would be a considerable water fall in flood time, which contained some hundreds of gallons of water. Drinking our fill and refilling our canteens we were in no particular hurry to get to camp. We failed to find anything of interest but returned by way of the blind trail which required much careful study before we could get started right at the top so as to be sure to reach the bottom safe, as night was on us.

We reached camp late, had a hearty meal and after describing our days activities to the boys, retired with a feeling that we had really accomplished something definite.

....Getting to Bright Angel canyon, after leaving Lees Ferry on October 15th....

A party was made up at once to go down and visit the reported silver vein. They left with high hopes, were gone three days and returned with full realization that our expedition was a total failure as far as the silver vein

was concerned, and in much doubt as to how to turn failure into success.

*Company goes into receivership, only thirty nine of several hundred photos developed at that time, photos go to receiver as asset, don't get developed for ten years and are ruined. Most of the rest of the considerable text are devoted to McCormick's geology theories.*

*There was a "silver vein" up Bright angel canyon seen by members of the Brown Stanton survey that started the whole expedition.*

**A**s much as I regret it, I must report that when we were well along on the Expedition our Chief became obsessed with the idea that if we failed to reach and secure the silver vein the Expedition would be a failure so he sacrificed everything to speed. This resulted in the loss of one of our boats in Cataract Canyon which caused much delay and resulted in slowing the field work so that it took nearly five months to reach the head of Bright Angel and the alleged silver vein which proved to be nothing more than Mica-schist. This left the Expedition at the end of the road with nothing of value but a few hundred photographic films of the scenery and this value made doubtful by the failure of the main adventure.

**Editors note:** *Even though the disclaimer on page 2 of the Confluence should cover me, I would like to emphasize that I in no way endorse carrying a shovel "for any eventuality" on dayhikes and using it to dig up Hisotsonam burial sites, nor do I endorse collecting arrowheads to make into tie clips for friends. However, carrying powder in the bow of one's boat has some possibilities! Dave*