“Gone to the NEEDLES”  
by Jim Knipmeyer

In June of 1989 my good friend Mike Ford and I had jeeped down the old Horsethief Trail to the Green River and then proceeded south along the White Rim road to the short spur leading westward to Fort Bottom. Down on the flat below the ancient Moqui watchtower sat the slowly dilapidating remains of what showed on the USGS map as Wild Bench Cabin. According to local folklore a hideout of Butch Cassidy’s “Wild Bunch,” it was actually built by Moab cattlemen shortly after the turn of the century (the 20th!). On its rough-hewn log walls are carved and written many names and dates, most of relatively recent river runners and overland visitors. One in particular, however, caught my eye.

Painted, or perhaps printed with a lead pencil, to the right of the doorway was the following inscription:

A. J. Tadje  
Moving Pictures  
Oct. 11 – 1914  
Gone to the NEEDLES.

Somehow this simple, now-fading signature gave me pause. Just who would have been down in the Green River’s Labyrinth Canyon three-quarters of a century earlier taking movies? And his last statement, “Gone to the NEEDLES,” evoked a kind of wonder. The Needles district of Canyonlands were, indeed, visible from the narrow neck of rock leading from the end of the jeep road out to the prehistoric Anasazi ruin. But in 1914, The Needles were an unknown, little-visited region, except to a few cowboys from the nearby Indian Creek Cattle Company. Did Tadje reach that mysterious land of graben valleys, hidden arches, and rock spires?

After returning home to Missouri a search through my library of southern Utah materials answered my questions for me. Though the notion of an early trip to the rock-pinnacled Needles was summarily dispelled, a question for me. Though the notion of an early trip to the rock-pinnacled Needles was summarily dispelled, a no less interesting chapter in Green-Colorado River boating was brought to my attention.

August J. Tadje, of Salt Lake City, Utah, was the cameraman on a voyage through the canyons of the Green and Colorado rivers for the purpose of making a commercial motion picture film. The brain-child of Charles S. Russell, who in 1907 had descended the same canyon streams from the town of Green Rive, Utah, to below the last canyon on the Colorado, he now wanted to make a motion picture record of a similar voyage to show to paying audiences. After a futile attempt earlier in the year, in the early fall of 1914 Russell contacted Tadje, who at that time was working at the Utah Photo Studio in Salt Lake City. Arrangements were soon made for Tadje to serve as cameraman, and on October 8 the pair, plus William Reeder as a second boatman, departed the Utah railroad town of Green River.

Years later, in 1947, Colorado River historian Otis R. “Dock” Marston contacted Mr. Tadje, still residing in Salt Lake City, and urged him to write up a narrative of his 1914-1915 venture. The resulting account, now on deposit with the Marston Papers at The Huntington Library in San Marino, California, provided the facts for this article.

“We had a boat called the Ross Wheeler….Towards evening [of the first day] we reached a sort of island in the river and some friends of Mr. Reeder hailed us and wanted to know where we were going. “Going downstream, of course. We are going down through the Grand Canyon.” The trio’s ultimate destination, however, was the town of Needles, California, on the west bank of the Colorado. Thus Tadje’s statement in his inscription on the old log cabin at Fort Bottom. They were going to Needles, California, not The Needles of southeastern Utah!

In his 1947 narrative Tadje does not mention stopping at the cabin at Fort Bottom, but he did describe Stillwater Canyon of the Green just a few miles below. “….the water was rather quiet and we had to work rather hard on the oars, even going downstream. The interesting part here was that the sides of the canyon were rather perpendicular and many feet in height, of a crimson color, of which we found more of the same structure as we went downstream.”

Reaching the confluence of the then Grand and Green rivers, the Ross Wheeler and its three passengers started down Cataract Canyon on October 14. In what Dock Marston identified as Rapid No. 5, the boat struck a rock, throwing the men into the water. However, they managed to pull the craft to shore. Tadje later stated that he put his name near this point on the left (east) side of the river. [Author’s note: To my knowledge this inscription, if still visible, has not been noted in modern times.]

Here the three adventurers reclaimed the boat that had been abandoned during Russell’s aborted voyage earlier in the year. Now proceeding in two vessels, Russell promptly sunk the newly acquired craft after “he had encountered an object in the stream that….ripped his boat in two…..” Now near Dark Canyon, the trio went on in the original Ross Wheeler, arriving at Hite in Glen Canyon on October 23. In his 1947 account Tadje states that, “We didn’t line any rapids in the Cataracts but shot them all.” This notwithstanding their two “encounters” with “objects” along the way! Tadje also later stated to Dock Marston that he had painted his name in black at least five times in Cataract Canyon at different places along the canyon’s walls. But again, none of these have been reported in recent times.

After reaching Hite there was a respite of several weeks from the river voyage. Reeder quit at this point, and while Russell remained at the river Tadje went back to Salt Lake City to arrange for a new boat to be built and to get another boatman. He expresses his great disappointment when the new craft was ready. “It was altogether the wrong construction….It was built perfectly flat instead of stern or bow being raised somewhat from the water level. It made it extremely difficult to manipulate this boat in the water.” Perhaps prophetically, the new vessel was christened Titanic II.

The new boatman was Goddard Quist, Tadje’s wife’s brother-in-law. Leaving Hite about December 6, the pair of boats headed down through the calm waters of Glen Canyon. In his narrative Tadje describes Hall’s Crossing, the Hole-in-the-Rock, and the junction with the San Juan River. Though it is not mentioned, they must also have stopped at the mouth of the Escalante River, as
before being drowned by the rising waters of Lake Powell reservoir, immediately upstream was still to be clearly seen the painted inscription:

A. J. TADJE
M. Pictures
Dec. 10 1914.

Arriving at Lee’s Ferry, Arizona, two days later, after several days they started on down Marble Canyon. But at Soap Creek they quit the river on account of cold weather and much ice on the water. By the end of February or beginning of March, 1915, the trio began again, after they “had to cut [one of] the boats out of the ice as it was frozen in.” Tadje describes stopping at Vasey’s Paradise, Redwall Cavern, and the mouth of the Little Colorado. Though he does not mention it in his narrative, Tadje later told Marston that he had also painted his name in Marble Canyon. Once more, it has not been noted in modern times.

Upon reaching Bright Angel Creek the trio climbed up to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, where they remained three or four weeks. Here Quist had to leave the party, and here also the expedition began to disintegrate. Tadje persuaded an acquaintance of his, a Mr. Jake Jeffs, to come out from Los Angeles to take Quist’s place. No sooner had they shoved off than Jeffs was thrown out of his boat in rough water. An inexperienced boatman, he became so frightened and hysterical that he immediately quit.

The party was thus further detained while Tadje prevailed upon yet another friend, Mr. Clement Clemens, also from the Salt Lake City photo studio, to join them. But before they even started this time, the Titanic II was lost while attempting to move it to a more sheltered mooring. Another month’s delay was endured while yet another new boat ordered and shipped to the South Rim. However, upon reaching the river in the latter part of November, it was found that a falling rock had punctured a hole in the Ross Wheeler, necessitating yet another delay while repairs were arranged and made.

Finally starting once more, they “hadn’t gone but two or three rapids when [the] boat we had just added…..was lodged in the river.” Again they climbed back up to the rim to get help in freeing the pinned boat. But it was ultimately abandoned and the trio proceeded on in the old reliable Ross Wheeler. Upon arriving at the Bass cable crossing they rowed to shore in a “rather heavy rain.” While huddled in their small tent, in the cold of December, the decision was made to give up the expedition altogether.

The Ross Wheeler was pulled “some one to two hundred feet from the river, and it is there to this day to my knowledge.” Tadje was correct in this assumption, the metal boat still to be seen near river Mile-108 in the depths of the Grand Canyon. What had begun as a rather successful voyage as far as Bright Angel Creek had now rapidly fallen apart and been terminated. Practically all of their original 20,000 feet of movie film and 150 to 200 still-picture films had been lost in their various capsizings and sinkings. And August J. Tadje, “Moving Pictures” cameraman, never did reach “the Needles.”

Continued from Bert’s testimony as published in THE CONFLUENCE, Number 24, Fall 2001. Editorial comments are in brackets.

Q: On one occasion when you were on this trip was it necessary for you to bring some supplies a short distance by boat?
A: We had a pack train meet us at certain points along the river; the last place the pack train was due to meet us was at the mouth of Piute Canyon, twenty-one miles from the junction; the pack train always beat its time about a day, until this time it was four days late; we were running out of grub; and one night about sun down we heard a shot fired, and here came the packer on horseback, but no packs: he came down and he told us the big rains had made part of the trail up the big cliff up Piute canyon slip off, and he couldn’t get his packs out.

So Mr. Trimble came to me and asked me what we had better do.

I says, “Have him come into Spencer canyon; that was where the pack train had met us the last time, three weeks before.”

We had to take the boat back up the river and get those supplies.

Q: How did you get the boat up the river?
A: We drug the boat up the river the next morning; they gave me the bulk of the grub they had left, and I stripped down to my BVD’s and was preparing to go up and take the boat up the river; when I got up to where the boat was, Mr. Hugh Miser, the geologist in our company, was up there, also in his BVD’s, if it hadn’t been for Mr. Miser, I don’t know how many days it would have taken me to get up.

That is what you call a heart breaking trip.

Q: How many miles was it?
A: It was seventeen, and it took us two days of the hardest work I ever done, to get that boat up there.

Q: Through that seventeen miles were there any rapids?
A: No sir
Q: What stage was the water?
A: It was very low, there was reefs across there that wasn’t four inches deep, because Mr. Miser was a big man, and I wasn’t so little it took about all we had to go up there in two days, seventeen miles. ...The supply train arrived about an hour after they had gotten the boat up the river.

Q: And then did you and Mr. Miser start down stream?
A: Not until the next morning; it was late then, and we had had two very strenuous days.

Q: In going down stream, did you find enough water so you could row?
A: It took the two of us a whole day to make seventeen miles.