

“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. Tadge
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 Tadge 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 no less interesting chapter in Green-Colorado River boating was brought to my attention.

August J. Tadge, 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 Tadge, who at that time was working at the Utah Photo Studio in Salt Lake City. Arrangements were soon made for Tadge 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. Tadge, 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 Tadge’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 Tadge 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. Tadge 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 Tadge 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! Tadge 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 Tadge 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, Tadge’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 Tadge 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." Tadge describes stopping at Vasey's Paradise, Redwall Cavern, and the mouth of the Little Colorado. Though he does not mention it in his narrative, Tadge 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. Tadge 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 Tadge 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." Tadge 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. Tadge, "Moving Pictures" cameraman, never did reach "the Needles."