

Coal Creek Dam Site

by Roy Webb

In the Belknap *Desolation River Guide*, on the same page [p. 37] as the photo of the “Thunderous Hole in Coal Creek Rapid” is another one of a man standing in the doorway of an old house, with the caption “Ruin housed Coal Creek damsite workers in 1911.” If you look fast, in the tailwaves of Coal Creek—once you’re safely past the “Thunderous Hole,” of course—you can still see major excavations into the slope on the right side of the river, and the house and associated buildings and corrals are still standing on river left. On the last CPRG interpretative training trip, we stopped and bushwhacked over there to get a look at the excavations, and later camped by the old house across the river. Quite a bit of work went into the keyway, or foundation, of the dam, and the house and corrals have likewise stood the tests of time.

Despite the obvious effort put into the dam site, however, historical sources on the dam are as scarce as shade in Gray Canyon, found mostly in aging newspapers and the voluminous files of the Otis R. Marston collection at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. It was known as the Buell Dam, after the promoter of the project. Little is known about Buell, not even a first name or an exact date when he started on the project. The most detailed description of the dam comes from the diary of Ed Harmston, a railroad engineer, who surveyed Desolation and Gray canyons by land and boat for the Denver and Rio Grande Railway in September 1913. Harmston’s party went by boat from mouth of the Duchesne River to the Seamount Ranch, today known as the Rock Creek Ranch; there they met members of the Buell Dam crew who were surveying the high water line of the proposed dam. From them Harmston learned that the dam “is to be 200 ft high...it is planned to use it for both irrigation and power purposes, the land to be irrigated amounting to 165,000 acres has been segregated under the Carey Act, and lies on both sides of Green River; the estimated cost of the project we are told is \$9,000,000. [...] The high water line of this dam will reach within a couple of miles of Seamount’s ranch.”

Apparently a man named Hyrum Johnson of Provo, Utah, was also involved in the dam in some way. In a 1966 interview between Otis Marston and Bill Seamount, Seamount says that Johnson “had 8 or 10 men drilling 2 or 3

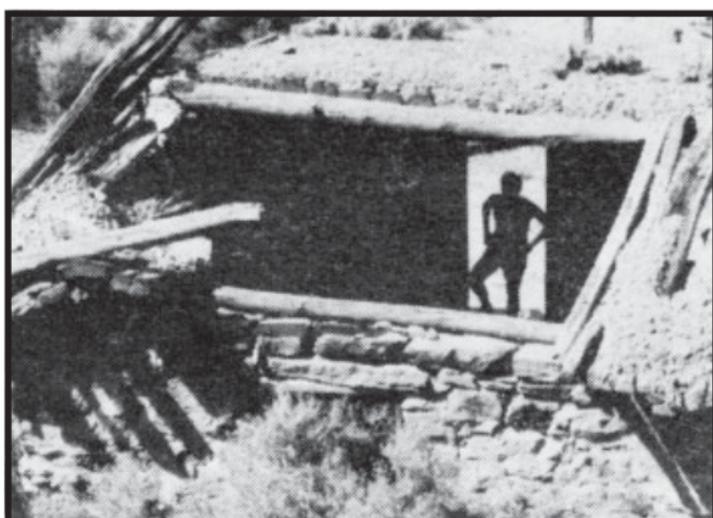


Photo from Belknap’s *Desolation River Guide*

years near Coal Creek for UP&L”; later he wrote to Marston that Johnson was the “foreman.” I found a Hyrum E. Johnson in the *Jonas Johnson Family, 1600 - 1970*, who seemed to fit the bill; he studied drafting and construction at Utah State Agricultural College (now Utah State University), and later owned his own contracting firm. But unfortunately his brief biography makes no mention of working on the Buell Dam, and his involvement must for now remain a mystery.

About the only river runners to mention the dam are the Kolb brothers, Ellsworth and Emery, who passed by on their river voyage in 1911. In *Through the Grand Canyon from Wyoming to Mexico*, Ellsworth mentions how they ran into five men in a boat rowing upstream “in a long, still stretch” above Coal Creek rapid [p 104-105]. The men told the Kolbs that they were working on dam a few miles below, and followed them back down river to watch them run Coal Creek Rapid. After their successful run, the brothers tied up at the camp across the river to visit. Most of the dam site workers were gone to Green River, Utah, since it was a Sunday, but there was a small crowd there. In *The Brave Ones*, the edited diaries of Ellsworth and Emery, Emery notes “They kindly invited us to stop for dinner at their head quarters which was a mile or so below. We accepted as usual. The dinner was prepared by Mrs. Steel and the pie not being passed the 2nd time gave no chance to reflect on our manners.” [p. 71]

The late 1800s and early 1900s were a time of great boosterism in the West. Anything was possible to “men of energy, enterprise, and capital”; no project was too grandiose, no mine too inaccessible, no river too wild to be tamed. The Buell Dam fits nicely into this pattern. A 1911 article in the *Grand Valley Times* of Moab about the Buell Dam noted that the dam was supposed to irrigate 240,000 acres of land, would cost \$10million, and would include “337 miles of canals and provide good agricultural land for from 20 to 50 thousand families.” Despite the claims of newspaper editors, however, plans for the Buell Dam ultimately fell through. Ed Harmston noted in 1913 that Buell had been trying for eight years to raise enough money to complete his project, but was unsuccessful. In 1922, when the USGS/UP&L survey went through Desolation and Gray Canyons, engineer Ralf Woolley didn’t even note the Buell Dam site. By the 1930s, the damsite and Buell’s schemes were abandoned and largely forgotten. In the heady years of the Colorado River Storage Project, after World War II, the Bureau of Reclamation again turned its gaze toward the remote canyons of the Green River, with plans for a series of dams up and down the river. Included in these plans was one to be called the Rattlesnake Dam, near the rapid of the same name in Gray Canyon. Again, however, the site was deemed too remote and the benefits not enough to justify the costs, so the Rattlesnake Dam was likewise cancelled. Today’s river runners in Desolation Canyon, whether stopping at Rock Creek, or enjoying the stunning vistas as Desolation Canyon ends, or running the “thunderous hole” in Coal Creek, can be glad that the grand schemes of all the dam promoters came to naught.

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