Green River: Mile 225, river right

Jack Sumner, of Powell's first expedition recorded in his journal that some of the party carved their names on Echo (Steamboat Rock opposite their camp at the confluence with the Yampa on June 20, 1869. I have never located this inscription, although there are many petroglyphs along the base of Steamboat Rock.

Green River: Mile 224.4

A two mile walk up Pool Creek ends at the Chew Ranch which is now owned by the National Park Service. On the stone walk leading to the main ranch house notice the diamond shaped stone. The “diamond” is the Chew Family brand, and in a variety of forms is still used by them today.

Green River: Mile 222-221

On a bench about 40 feet above river level on the right are survey marks and stakes from the survey of the Moffat Railroad. On the left at about the same level are ladders, cables, painted benchmarks and other debris related to the Echo Park Dam survey.

Unfortunately in 1989 I observed a seasonal river ranger at the Split Mountain boat ramp with much of these historic items. He was “cleaning up the canyon!”

Green River: Mile 212.6, river left

“The White Buffalo” a petroglyph-like figure on the wall to the left of a small island. The figure is above a talus slope and partially hidden by vegetation. The figure has characteristics of “cowboy art” although some say that it is Ute.

Green River: Mile 199.5, river left

Note a large talus slope that appears to contact the overhanging cliff just upstream from the boat ramp. There is a 50 feet gap between the talus and the “wall” which is actually a very large alcove or cave. On the boulders facing the cave are several painted inscriptions believed to be from men conducting the Bureau of Reclamation survey for the Split Mountain Dam.

Green River: Mile 199.2, river left

A several hundred yard walk up the bottom of the Split Mountain Escarpment to the second box canyon leads to inscriptions left by Chick and Frank McKnight. Chick and Frank were nephews of Josie Basset Morris whose cabin is at the end of the Cub Creek Road. The McKnight boys left the inscriptions in the late 1950’s when they were visiting Josie and their father had let them drive his new (used) Buick. The boys cut across the fields and hiked up the canyon to explore. After leaving the inscriptions they got the car stuck much to the dismay of their father! Frank worked for Hatch River Expeditions for many years.

But an observant naturalist will gaze at the rocks below Triplet Falls across from the inscriptions and imagine a 27 foot pontoon boat high above today’s river level. A savvy naturalist will make a connection between the inscriptions, today’s lower water levels and the changes we have wrought upon our rivers: involving their customers in a thought provoking activity that highlights what we should do about those changes.

To put these inscriptions into perspective you can read books like Echo Park by Jon Cosco; The Doing of the Thing, by Welch, Conley and Dimock; If We Had A Boat by Webb, and such classics as The Chew Bunch.

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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—one 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 Seaount 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, Seaount says that Johnson “had 8 or 10 men drilling 2 or 3...
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 Kolbs, 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.

Special thanks to Jim Aton for research assistance.

“Set My Spirit Free”
A History of SOCOTWA
by Roy Webb

In the past twenty years of researching, writing about, and speaking about river history, I’ve given many talks to many different groups. Whenever the topic is Glen Canyon, it seems like invariably someone would come up to me afterwards and says, “I went down Glen Canyon with SOCOTWA!” After a while I started getting curious; what was this group with the odd name? I knew about Nevills, and Harry Aleson, and Moki-Mac and the Quist family, all of whom took many people through Glen Canyon over the years before it was flooded by Lake Powell. But SOCOTWA? I ran across their logo, an inverted triangle with a mountain man in the middle, in the Music Temple register books. Obviously SOCOTWA had a lot of impact on Glen Canyon. One of these days, I vowed to myself, I’m going to do some more research and write an article about them.

But it never happened until the 2003 Desolation Canyon CPRG training trip. On that rainy, wonderful trip I was talking around the campfire with Dee Holladay and Annie Payne, president of CPRG; I said something about SOCOTWA and Dee mentioned that in the 1950s, there were only a couple of ways to get down Glen Canyon: either with Moki-Mac or with SOCOTWA. Annie immediately perked up; it turned out that her river mentor, Richard Jones—former owner of World Wide Expeditions—had told her many stories about SOCOTWA trips, and had incorporated many of the traditions and practices of SOCOTWA into his own company. Then and there Annie and I decided to work together on an article for The Confluence about SOCOTWA. Once we got back to Salt Lake City, we started setting up interviews with former guides and members of the group, starting with Richard Jones. Richard had started going on SOCOTWA trips when he was only 14 years old, just out of junior high. But at that first interview, also present were Oscar Olson, who had gone on his first trip with the group while he was in the army in 1962, and Dale Labrum, who, as it turned out, was one of the founders of SOCOTWA in the years just after World War II.

Even though Annie and I did a number of other oral histories with SOCOTWA trip participants, from whom we heard a lot of great stories, that first one with Richard, Oscar, and Dale was the most important. From them we learned a number of startling things: first, that SOCOTWA was still in existence, although it had become, as Oscar put it, a “knife and fork” club, a group that met occasionally for dinner, and to listen to a speaker. Next was the extent of their operation: we were both surprised to hear that in the 1950s, SOCOTWA had over a thousand members, owned as many as 30 surplus inflatable rafts and a couple of busses, and could have half a dozen trips on the water at the same time. Finally, from each of them we received an invaluable gift: Oscar had brought with him a book titled...