

The Dentists' Sabbatical on the Grand River in 1897

**James Edwin Miller (1857-1945) 40 and Oro DeGarmo (O.D.) Babcock
(1873-1945) 24**

By Mike Milligan

In the early years of boating on the Green and Colorado Rivers there tended to be a bit of jealous rivalry among a number of the boaters who made history. They wanted their boating excursions documented according to their perspective, while sometimes questioning the exploits of others. Examples include whether James White truly was the first through the Grand Canyon in 1867? Questions whether the three men who left Major Powell's expedition in 1869 were cowards or did divisiveness split them up at Separation Rapid in the Grand Canyon? During the 1889 DCC& P Railroad survey did surveyor Frank Clarence Kendrick portage Westwater (Hades/Granite) Canyon out of fear while surveying the Colorado (Grand) River from Grand Junction to the Confluence with the Green River? Their experiences in the Grand Canyon caused a few of the boaters to become Colorado and Green River historians as they diligently gathered as much information while it was fresh from living boaters and other sources for those that they could not locate or who had died. The preeminent historians were Frederick S. Dellenbaugh and Robert Brewster Stanton. Both men were part of two of the earliest boating expeditions down the Grand Canyon. They wrote biographies of documenting their historical voyages that were published.¹ There were some controversial opinions regarding each other's expedition that is noted above. Later, Otis R. "Dock" Marston would assume the role as historian when he took up the mantle and gathered volumes more of data that is commonly used by current authors who write books about the Grand Canyon today.

Dellenbaugh was a ripe young age of seventeen when he joined Major John Wesley Powell's second expedition to survey the Green and Colorado Rivers in

¹ Stanton's was published after he died. Dellenbaugh's was "Canyon Voyage"

1871 and 1872 that ended at Kanab Creek in the Grand Canyon. He admired Major Powell and defended his reputation regarding controversies that surfaced about the first expedition in 1869. We would write two historical publications about the Green and Colorado River; *The Romance of the Colorado River* was published in 1902 and *A Canyon Voyage* was published six years later in 1908.

Stanton's experience on the river began in 1889 as the chief engineer surveying the plausibility of building a railroad along the Colorado River to the Gulf of California for Frank Brown, President of the Denver, Colorado Canyon and Pacific Railroad Company. Stanton died before he could publish a large volume of the history and exploration of the Colorado River that was to be titled *The River and the Canyon*. Two books he wrote were edited and posthumously published; *Colorado River Controversies* (1932) and *Down the Colorado* (1965).

In the early 1900s both Dellenbaugh and Stanton were aware of a previously unknown voyage beginning at Glenwood Springs down the Grand and Colorado Rivers that didn't make it into their publications. Unknown to them the river trip by James E. Miller and O.D. Babcock was reported in newspapers as far east as Chicago, New York and Virginia.

After reading Dellenbaugh's, *The Romance of the Colorado River*, James E. Miller wrote a letter to the book's author dated November 2, 1906, describing a boat trip he made on the Grand (Colorado) River with fellow Dentist, O.D. Babcock in 1897. Dr. Miller was surprised that Dellenbaugh wasn't aware of the Doctors' excursion before his book was published. He surmised that Major John Wesley Powell would have informed Dellenbaugh. Sometime after Dr. Miller's Colorado River trip ended in September 1897, Major John Wesley Powell arrived in Glenwood Springs to give a lecture at the Colorado Hotel about the lower Colorado River. Major Powell led both the first and second historical expeditions down the Green and Colorado Rivers in 1869 and 1870 respectively. While in Glenwood Springs Powell became acquainted with Dr. Miller and they spent nearly an entire day together discussing and viewing negatives of the Dentists' boating excursion down the Grand and Colorado Rivers. Powell must have been impressed by the story and while he was delivering his lecture that evening he cut

it short and invited Dr. Miller to join him and present his story to the public.² Dr. Miller seemed perplexed that Major Powell did not inform Dellenbaugh about it before he died on September 23, 1902.

It appears that nothing came of Dr. Miller's letter to Dellenbaugh. A note found in Otis (Dock) Marston's research revealed the existence of a letter.

experiences of Dr. O.D. Babcock and myself in the summer of 1897
Dr. J.E. Miller of Yampa, Colo, to FSD
left Glenwood – 18' long 3 ½ beam
(probably fiction/pictures)³

In parenthesis at the bottom of Dellenbaugh's brief note regarding the event it appears to read "probably fiction". Not entirely legible, the characters could possibly read "probably pictures", because there were photos taken and Miller offered to show them to Dellenbaugh if they met. A few years later in 1909 Dellenbaugh shared Dr. Miller's letter with Robert Brewster Stanton who was accumulating material for a book that he intended to write. A note scanned at the bottom of the letters indicates that Dellenbaugh was suspicious about the distance the Doctors' travelled.⁴ Dr. Miller indicated that they had "nearly lost our boat about 150 miles below the mouth of the Green..." and a statement that he probably questioned most was what was written about Cataract Canyon. Dr. Miller wrote that they found it (Cataract Canyon), "not so disastrous. We never stopped to even look the thing over but went right through..." Cataract Canyon presents difficulties even today and it would seem unheard of for someone from their era using wooden boats to survive the canyon without stopping anywhere. There is a reason that the Canyon is referred to as the "Graveyard of the Colorado

² Stanton, Robert Brewster, James E. Miller letter to Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, 02 November 1906, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library

³ Marston, Otis (Dock), Note found with Frederick S. Dellenbaugh material, Huntington Library

⁴ Stanton, Robert Brewster, James E. Miller letter to Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, 02 November 1906, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library. Note reads that the letter was received 27 November 1906 and that Dellenbaugh wrote back for more details. We do not have a copy of the letter that he wrote. On the note he wrote, "The point 150 miles below the mouth of the Green where he had his only danger is smooth river – no rapids – at least compared with Cataract Canyon which he found so easy." FSD

River. Not many of the early expeditions through the Cataract Canyon were able to avoid portaging or lining their boats around at least some of the rapids. The trip started in mid-August when the river generally is running low and many of the rocks are out. It is difficult to observe a route through Big Drop 3 in low water from a boat. It is no wonder that both Dellenbaugh and Stanton appeared to question part of the letter's contents.

The plan to boat down the Grand (Colorado) River was a spontaneous decision made shortly before the excursion started. James Edwin Miller was forty years old in 1897. He was born in Canada on 23 February 1857 and moved to the states in 1864. He spent time in Minnesota, South Dakota, Utah and Chicago before arriving in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, around 1896 and appears to have resided there until his death in 1945. He was married with children when he arrived in the town.

Oro Degarmo Babcock went by O.D. Babcock, was fourteen years younger than Miller. He was born on 27 August 1872 in Wisconsin, and at the age of two his family moved to Minnesota. Dr. Babcock appears to have remained in Minnesota until at least 1894 when his name appears in a College of Dentistry yearbook at the University of Minnesota. It is unclear whether the doctors' were previously acquainted before beginning a dental business venture that appears to have lasted until March 1900 when O.D. Babcock moved with his physician wife Helen to the state of Washington.

Dr. Miller wrote that the dentists decided one day that they wanted to quit their work and let a coin flip determine what they would do with their time off. His description for temporally quitting their work may have been stress related or other health reasons. He wrote, "to cause two men of [stomach troubles] who one day decided to quit work, pitched up a half dollar in the office to decide whether we were going into the hills, or down the river. The River trip won and in

an hour we had rented a carpenter shop & tools and the boat was under construction before evening.”⁵

The boat took about one week to be built. One newspaper described it, “...They have a boat about 18 feet long, strongly put together with two large airtight compartments, one in the bow and one in the stern, in which they expect to store those things they desire to keep perfectly dry. The boat is built with two sets of oar locks and arranged to carry quite an amount of [sail]. They will have a canvas cover to protect them from the sun and rain. In the stern they have put a heavy piece of timber in which a rope is attached to be used in case it becomes necessary to shoot the rapids. By the means of the rope the boat will be guided over the rapids while the excursionists take to the shore.”⁶

The doctors were reportedly excellent oarsmen and were not dissuaded by reports of others failures and reported deaths in the rapids below. They planned to boat down the Grand (Colorado) River to Cataract Canyon, then return up the Green River to the railroad town of Blake (Green River). The excursion was unusual for the era and appeared to be mostly for the thrill of boating and the scenery; they also intended to search for cliff dwellings and collect artifacts along the way. A newspaper reported, “Picks and shovels constitute a part of the outfit and the pleasure seekers expect to do some excavating in the hopes of discovering some interesting and valuable relics. They have a camera and will bring back some of the choicest views.”⁷

Two days before the boat launched, Glenwood Spring’s newspaper The Avalanche reported, “Drs. Miller & Babcock’s offices will be closed until the first week of September.” Then at 10 A.M. on 13 August 1897, with a crowd reportedly as many as 500 or more onlookers watched, the boat christened “Little Gold Dust”

⁵ Stanton, Robert Brewster, James E. Miller letter to Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, 02 November 1906, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library. Dr. Miller’s handwriting is not entirely legible but seems to write “stomach troubles”.

⁶ Take a Trip Down the Grand, The Glenwood Post, Volume 7, 1898 August 14; pg 1

⁷ Take a Trip Down the Grand, The Glenwood Post, Volume 7, 1898 August 14; pg 1 During the nineteenth and early twentieth century there were no laws governing looting of Native American Indian sites. It wasn’t until 08 June 1906 that Congress passed “An Act for the Preservation of American Antiquities” in an attempt to protect the removal artifacts and preserve historic sites. The Act did sufficiently deter artifact collectors and more legislation was enacted until it is more strongly enforced today.

pushed off of the Grand River shore and the two Dentists were headed downstream.⁸

Dr. Miller wired his whereabouts and their experiences to his family whenever it was possible. Details of the excursion appeared in several newspapers located along the Grand River. The dentists arrived the following afternoon at Rifle and reported there were no serious mishaps. Up to this point their only difficulty with their boat was encountering shallow water in places where the river divided. The article read further that “They did not anticipate any more trouble from that source between Rifle and Green river.”⁹

Sometime between August 23rd and the 26th the Doctors landed at Moab and remained there for a few days to investigate cliff dwellings. They reported:

“We made a run at Pallisade that will remain one of the exciting incidents of our lives. If you should take a drive down past Mr. Knott’s a bit, just where the river runs close to the Midland track, take a look at the rapids – it is one of the mildest we had to run. The one at Pallisade was much more dangerous. It was a quarter of a mile long, filled with boulders, and the water ran like a millrace. First, there was a very rough stretch of water through which it took all our skill to steer the boat; then there was a short stretch without a ripple, only it ran faster as it approached the drop. It was full of rocks, concealed by just enough water to make them dangerous. Once in this current, there was no stemming the rush –we went like the wind. How we got through is a dreamy sort of remembrance. It was one wild rush for a quarter of a mile. With set teeth we made the plunge. After we were once fairly in I do not think we minded it much. I imagine it’s like a soldier going into a battle. The approach is terrible. I shall not attempt to tell you what a sensation comes over one when, after you have slipped by one rock by the skin of your teeth, you find another only a few feet ahead. To hit one of these rocks with

⁸ On a Dangerous Voyage, Colorado Weekly Chieftain, 19 August 1897. “...crowds of people were attracted to the state bridge and other points where the start could be watched. Also, in Dr. Miller’s letter to Dellenbaugh he wrote, “...made our own boat at Glenwood, the point of departure, where at least 500 people witnessed the start...”

⁹ Get info!!!!

the velocity we had attained could mean only one thing,”¹⁰ There appears to no longer be any major rapids near Palisade. Some river companies offer a tame Palisade Wine Country float trip. Perhaps the rapids that Drs. Miller and Babcock encountered were upstream of Palisade and are now inundated after the Grand Valley Diversion Dam was built in the De Beque Canyon between 1913 and 1916?

Moab’s, Grand Valley Times on 28 August 1897 wrote of the boaters: “They report having had some exciting rides over rapids; in some cases boat and passengers diving under the water. The worst places being through the Pallisades and the Granite Canon above Cisco. From Cisco down they found smooth sailing.”¹¹

There have been questions whether the doctors’ traversed Westwater Canyon because of information presented in Glenwood Springs’, The Avalanche on 27 August 1897, where they reported that the party did not attempt to go through the “Black Canyon” and described it as being “15 miles of length between perpendicular walls of a thousand feet in height.” The mileage corresponds to that of Westwater Canyon and it does not make sense that the newspaper brought up the Black Canyon which is on the Gunnison River that merges with the Colorado near Grand Junction? However, there is a description in Dr. Miller’s letter that appears to describe Skull Rapid in Westwater. In the letter he seems to be describing an experience that they encountered in Cataract Canyon, however, the description sounds eerily similar to other early boaters when describing Skull (Big Whirlpool) Rapid. He writes: “We came to one place in the Colorado that was (*strenuous*) for a moment, coming around a short bend. The river seemed to divide into two channels, one shooting under an overhanging rock and the other going over a fall of three or four feet. There not being room enough under the rock for boat and selves, we chose the falls. You know how quickly one has to decide somethings, well the water going over the falls had excavated a considerable hole, I was slung, my companion jumped back & sat down between my feet to lighten up the bow, but her stern went into the (bar) & for a moment it

¹⁰ They Have Felt the Thrill: That Comes from Dangers Narrowly Escaped – But Drs. Miller and Babcock Are Having a Good Time on the Whole – Sun Burns and Blisters, The Avalanche, 28 August 1897; pg 1, column 3

¹¹ Grand Valley Times; 27 August 1897; Volume 3 Number 14

was a toss-up whether we were going end over end or not but we came out all right.”¹²

Whether Dr. Miller’s description of the rapid is Skull in Westwater or one of those found in Cataract Canyon may not be important. The description of the event does appear to give credence that the doctors’ did have sufficient experience to run the rapids that they encountered and there is no indication in the letter that they made any portages. He said of his boating skills, “Dr. Babcock & self [use] to make the boat spin when we saw the white water ahead I had a good [aim] & could generally put the boat through alright but not always.”

Little else of the trip below Moab was mentioned in the newspapers that followed. Dr. Miller provided a brief description that left Robert Brewster Stanton questioning how far that they had floated. He wrote, “We do not know how far down we went. We ran across a cowman, who came down to the river for water, he told us that we were then in what was known as Buckskin Canyon...I do not see how Mr. Brown (Frank Mason Brown) in your account (Romance of the Colorado River) could of found the Cataract Canyon so disastrous. We never stopped to even look the thing over but went right through and I have a number of negatives in my possession to prove it.” He mentioned in the letter that Major Powell recognized a number of locations from the negatives he was shown. Major Powell would have only been familiar with photos taken below the Confluence with the Green River. Dr. Miller wrote further that “we nearly lost our boat about 150 miles below the mouth of the Green, barely saving our lives, over 50 negatives were ruined but we didn’t kick for reasons you would understand. Then he described the incident related before that could possibly be a description of Skull Rapid. One hundred fifty miles would have placed them well into Glen Canyon before they returned to Glenwood Springs.”¹³

Needing to return to work the dentists bypassed the Green River and returned through Moab. On 17 September 1897, the Grand Valley Times reported: “Drs.

¹² Stanton, Robert Brewster, James E. Miller letter to Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, 02 November 1906, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library

¹³ Stanton, Robert Brewster, James E. Miller letter to Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, 02 November 1906, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library

Miller and Babcock of Glenwood Springs, who passed through Moab some weeks ago on their way down the river, having come down Grand river in a boat, returned the first of the week (Sept 12 or 13 at Moab). They went as far as Cataract canon. They concluded not to return via Green river as was on their program, hence rowed back to Moab and went home on the stage. They report having had a very pleasant trip and well repaid for their labor. The scenery is simply grand." They arrived in Glenwood Springs by the 13th of September.

Few boaters on the Grand River were recognized by the early historians. Their emphasis followed Major Powell's boat wake down the Green and Colorado River below the Confluence and through the Grand Canyon. Historian Otis Marston kept a running count of the first 100 and then the second 100 individuals who boated through the Grand Canyon. No such inventory exists for the upper Colorado River. Even today there is sparse information about the Grand (Colorado) River boaters primarily because there were no major expeditions and it was luck of the draw whether they received recognition by appearing in local newspapers. Residents of the former railroad town at Westwater claimed to have discouraged boaters that unknowingly floated past them to quit their plans. This occurred when Ellsworth Kolb and cowboy John Shields were going from Grand Junction to Moab in August 1916. Upon the advice of the town residents Ellsworth instead hiked through the canyon to see what he was up against and returned a month later and ran it. We learned about Elmer Kane and Parley and John Galloway and others from their testimonies that were given during the River Bed case from 1929 to 1931 determining navigability of Utah rivers. Ellsworth Kolb and Bert Loper received national recognition in 1916 when they boated parts of the Gunnison River and the Grand/Colorado River where they started at Glenwood Springs then made an historic run through Westwater Canyon. The newspapers reported that it was the first successful transit of Westwater Canyon. It was reported that many others had tried and died in the Canyon. Fortunately local newspaper's captured glimpses of others attempting the river in a boat as we learn of Frank Barnes in 1922, Beppo Saeckler in 1930, and Harold H. Leich in 1933 and others.

Prior to the re-discovering Dr. James E. Miller's letter only the 1916 transit by Ellsworth Kolb and Bert Loper was thoroughly documented. Although we are missing Dr. Miller's photographs we have information from his letter that helps support their trip down the Colorado River in the summer of 1897. Notes from both Dellenbaugh and Stanton indicate that they mailed letters with clarifying questions about the Dentist's excursion. There is nothing in their files indicating that they received a response and their questions went unanswered.