

Those Darn Woman's Shoes in Westwater's cave

Mike Milligan

A question that crosses many boaters' minds when visiting Outlaw Cave in Westwater Canyon involves a pair of a woman's shoes. Found in the manmade cave midway through the Canyon are two curious wooden beds, a stove and a small table cluttered with old cans, bottles and other artifacts dated eighty years and older. Of the artifacts a woman's pair of shoes stands out. Because of their age and the remoteness of the cave one has to wonder what a woman was doing there, who she was, and when she was there.

Westwater Canyon is a popular seventeen mile stretch of whitewater on the Colorado River above Moab, Utah. Until the mid-1960s the Canyon was fairly remote and rarely visited except by cattle ranchers, bootleggers, horse thieves, outlaws, surveyors, trappers and miners. A few individuals unknowingly entered the canyon by boat. Others were turned away because of Westwater Canyon's sinister reputation. An early name given to the canyon was "Hades Canyon".¹

On August 16, 1933, Harold H. Leich pulled his boat, the "Dirty Devil", ashore from the Colorado River at the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad pump station near Cisco. Leich had just navigated the rapids in Westwater Canyon which at the time was only known to have been successfully run once before in 1916 by Ellsworth Kolb and Bert Loper. A recent graduate of Dartmouth College, Leich chose a temporary adventurous life instead of joining a workforce struggling through the Great Depression. His newest adventure was a solo boating attempt down the length of the Colorado River.

At the landing, Leich met the pump station engineer Roscoe Hallett. A longtime resident of the region, Hallett arrived as a small child with his parents in 1892 where they homesteaded land near the former railroad town of Westwater. Later his family moved downriver to Cisco. Hallett was well versed in the region's history and spent most of the following morning talking with Leich about Westwater Canyon. Leich inquired about the Cave and was told that it was a manmade cave that was dug out in the 1860's or 70's. This was before Moab or Grand Junction was settled and the region was populated mostly by Utes. Hallett and other local residents called it "Counterfeit Cave", because there were Spanish counterfeiters living in it during the 1880's. Of the river, other than the boating exploits of Kolb and Loper, Hallett mentioned only one other party attempting to traverse the canyon by boat. He said, "another party of 2 men & a woman tried the canyon some time ago in a big boat & came to grief. The woman was

¹ Helen J. Stiles, "Down the Colorado in 1889," Colorado Magazine 41 (summer of 1964), pg 235

drowned in the whirlpool.”² The story of a woman drowning was known by other local ranchers.

The story of the boating incident does not appear to have been reported in Moab’s newspapers and we aren’t told when it happened. An assumption was that the drowning occurred sometime early in the twentieth century. Attempts to locate the boating incident in Grand Junction newspapers also failed. Fortunately looking at earlier dates an accident reported in several newspapers in 1887 likely reveals the source of the story.

A Woman Drowned Near Cisco,

The first of this week information was received of the drowning of Mrs. Mary Osborne of Delta in the Grand river near Cisco. Mrs. Osborne was travelling by boat down the Grand river with her, husband Jos, Osborne and two other men. Their destination was opposite the Cisco pumphouse, and when within three miles this point, Mr. Osborne tied the boat to the bank and went down the river to investigate the rapids which they were approaching. Mrs. Osborne remained in the boat and the two other men of the party remained near her in another boat. While Mr. Osborne’s boat broke adrift and was carried down the river, finally striking a large rock with great violence and upsetting. Mrs. Osborne rose to the surface, clung fast to the keel of the boat and cried for assistance but before it could reach her she was swept off and disappeared. This occurred on March 17th and up to this time the body has not been discovered. Mrs. Osborne is well known at Delta where for some time she had charge of a hotel. Her husband is a trapper and is well known throughout the reservation. Mesa Co. Dem.³

Two years after the incident while conducting a railroad survey for the DCC&P Railroad of the Westwater valley at the head of the canyon Frank Clarence Kendrick wrote in his notes: “Ran line down through Box X ranch to Sta 2207 at mouth of “Hades canon” where the woman was drowned...”⁴ The “Box X” Ranch is where the Westwater Ranch is today. It appears that the

² Harold H. Leich diary, 17 August 1933, University of Utah Special Collections. John L. Malin, mail correspondence with author, 09 August 1987. “Yes I have heard about the two men and one woman having an accident at the Whirlpool the woman drowned, if the body of the woman was recovered I don’t know, or the date or who they were. If I did know I have forgotten the name or names.”

³ The Daily Enquirer Provo, A Woman Drowned Near Cisco, 4/12/1887 pg 3

⁴ Helen J. Stiles, “Down the Colorado in 1889,” Colorado Magazine 41 (summer of 1964), pg 235. Frank Clarence Kendrick surveyed the Grand River for the Denver, Colorado Canon and Pacific Railroad (DCC&P RR) from Grand Junction to the confluence with the Green River. From there his crew hauled their boat up the Green River to the town of Green River. The survey continued down the Green and Colorado Rivers under the DCC&P RR president Frank Mason Brown until his death near Soap Creek Rapid in Marble Canyon, then his chief surveyor Robert Brewster Stanton completed the survey. 5. Memorandum from archeologist Richard E. Fike to Montecello, Utah, district manager dated 27 June 1973. The memorandum includes site inventories and brief histories of the Wild Horse Cabin and Outlaw Cave in Westwater Canyon. The information is not for public use and resides with the Moab Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Donald Montoya, email correspondence, 25 March 2014. “The earliest

stories and the legend of a woman drowning refer to Mary Osborne. Could the shoe belong to her?

There are no known efforts by the BLM or other parties to date the woman's shoes in Outlaw/Counterfeit Cave. In 1973 Dee Holladay of Holiday River Expeditions invited BLM Archeologist, Richard Fike, to join him on a river trip down Westwater Canyon in an effort to record and preserve the relics found there, including Miner's Cabin and Outlaw Cave. Mr. Fike recorded some of the artifacts found at both locations; however, he did not mention the shoes. Based on his observations the earliest date given for the artifacts was 1887 and according to current BLM Archeologist Don Montoya of Moab, the only other date given in Fike's report was 1910.⁵

To assist in efforts to date the shoes John Magill, former curator of Historic New Orleans Collection, was contacted. Among other expertise John is recognized for being proficient with identifying and dating historical clothing. His first impression upon seeing photos of the woman's shoes were that they were anywhere from 1880 to 1910 matching the date range given by Richard Fike. He asked for better pictures of the shoes to be certain.

On one of his final river trips as a BLM Westwater Ranger, Alvin Halliday assisted in obtaining detailed photographs of various angles of the woman's shoes for Mr. Magill to research. Based on the photos Mr. Magill responded back with the following observation:

"I like the picture you sent me of the woman's boot, it is interesting to look at. The workmanship looks a lot sturdier than what you see in many shoes these days — including expensive women's ones.

I would guess — and feel comfortable in saying — that the boot was made somewhere between about 1905 and 1920. Perhaps the earlier end of that period, but that is hard to say for certain.

I have a reproduction of a 1908 Sears catalogue, and several of the lace-boot styles shown there are very like the one in your picture. Prices per pair ranged from 97c to a staggering \$1.58.

Actually, front lace-up women's Balmoral boots were made over a long period from the early 19th century — but especially from about the 1860s up to about 1940. Of course there were the "granny boots" in the 1970s or thereabouts. The look of the workmanship and stitching in your boot, I think, would make it decades ahead of the 1970s.

date is 1887 and the only other date is 1910 from some archival records. There was no additional dating of the artifacts."

⁵ Don Montoya email correspondence, 25 March 2014

Earlier women's boots from the 1880s tended to be button boots, rather than lace-up, made of very soft leather, very tight fitting and quite pointy in the toe. Indeed, very feminine, and not a bit masculine looking. Sort of like the boots one can buy today from "wild west" stores that sell modern reproductions —or interpretations — of old-time fashion.

Some later boot models showed rounded toes and were more like a tailored man's shoe only with a high heel. I feel that is where your boot fits.

Generally, I think that your boot has to date after 1900 and maybe as late as 1930, but I feel more confident that it falls more in the middle — from late in the first decade of the 20th century and up to around World War I.

In the 1900 period a boot like this would probably have served as a regular street shoe (covered by long skirts), but as the century wore on the look would have been more proper for casual and sporty wear. Also as skirts got shorter shoes became more the norm with boots becoming less and less common.

Also, at the same time men were moving out of lace-boots (like the ones we see today) into shoes. Often men's and women's fashions influence and reflect each other at the same time."⁶

Another individual who offered to research photos of the shoes came up with a similar date of around 1920.⁷

Without further conclusive research it would appear from these evaluations that the shoes do not date back to when Mary Osborne was in Westwater Canyon.

There are many stories surrounding Outlaw/Counterfeit Cave but few document the names of individuals who resided in it. Except for Mary Osborne a woman's name has not been associated with anyone in Westwater Canyon until 1950 when two women and their spouses and another man were trapped in the canyon after damaging one of their boats.⁸ There is a

⁶ . John McGill email correspondence. 05 October 2015. Curator John Magill to retire after 3 decades with Historic New Orleans Collection, by Dominic Massa, 17 June 2015.

⁷ Tom Mattimore, email correspondence, 31 January 2017 & 02 February 2017. Tom is with Mattimore Harness, a custom boots and modern footwear business in Laramie, WY. See www.civilwarboots.com . Tom questioned whether the boots could belong to s child. Part of his reasoning is some photos I sent him were with artifact cans and the perspective that they were smaller than an adult foot. Otherwise, his response centered on or around a date of 1920. "The style is post 1920. The construction is post 1870's. The heel is too low for a woman's shoe The foot also appears to be too small for five foot tall person. It is barely as big as the tin cans in the picture. Lace hooks were common by the 1880s in military shoes. The ealiest example of a similar style is the 1889 Spaulding baseball company shoe. The rounded wide toe is a post 1915 example. The use of so many small parts in the pattern of a small shoe cry out cutting dies, clicker presses and assembly line sewing."

⁸ Mike Milligan, *Westwater Lost and Found*, Utah State University Press, Logan, Utah, 2004. Page 180-184

report from 1908 that five “tramps” stole a boat in Grand Junction and the next day it capsized in rapids sixty miles downstream killing three. Names and genders were not disclosed.⁹

The earliest named resident was John Warren of New York who moved into the cave around 1904. He was an elderly man who resided in in the cave and also owned a small dwelling on the bank of the Grand/Colorado River downstream of the current Westwater boat launch. Warren may have been hustled to come to Westwater by the cave’s previous occupants who promoted it for it’s gold potential. For income Warren delivered mail to the railroad. Each morning he hiked from the cave to the Post Office at Westwater Ranch, picked up themail by 9:00 AM and delivered it a mile away to the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad Depot, then he’d get into his boat, cross the river, and hike back to his mine work. He did this for five years until he lost his job at the Post Office and disappeared from the region.¹⁰

A former resident Elwood Malin of Westwater told a story of a one armed man named Rich McGrooder who with another man bought a boat at Westwater for a prospecting trip in Westwater Canyon. They “lived in Counterfeit Cave for some time” as they tried to interest parties in New York to invest in mining equipment for them. When their offer was rejected they left their equipment in the cave and never returned. Malin recalled the incident was approximately 1908 or 1910, however, there are Westwater news articles from 1917 and 1919 indicating a Mr. R.W. McGruder had a claim in the canyon that he was working. He is likely the same man who Malin recalled living in the cave. Each time Mr. McGruder entered the canyon by boat he was accompanied by two different partners.¹¹

Likely the last known occupant of Outlaw/Counterfeit Cave was L.D. Hummel. Several boating parties in the 1950s and early 1960s reported mail found in the cave. Some of the parties said that they could not read the names or did not remember them. Other’s brought some of the mail back to Moab or to Salt Lake City where they were deposited at the Utah Historical Society to be preserved.¹² Unfortunately, the mail and envelopes have not surfaced to be examined. Most of the reports of the mail had them dated in 1903 just prior to John Warren’s occupancy of the cave. In 1962, the first known group of kayaks traversed the canyon and reported finding letters. On a slide register for the photos that were taken of the trip Joe M. Lacy referred to the cave as L.D. Hummel Cave. When he was asked in an interview forty years later about the name

⁹ The Daily Journal, Telluride, 25 July 1908; page 3

¹⁰ “Malin Letter Clears Up Lot of Mystery of Cave History”, Moab Times-Independent, 24 May 1956.

¹¹ “Malin Letter Clears Up Lot of Mystery of Cave History”, Moab Times-Independent, 24 May 1956. bid and Westwater News

¹² Mike Milligan, Westwater Lost and Found, Utah State University Press, Logan, Utah, 2004. Pages 139-146.

Mr. Lacy did not recall where it came from. Because it is a name associated with the region it likely came from some of the mail that was found in the cave.¹³

Luke Hummel was a popular trapper throughout the region making headlines in local newspapers from 1908 to 1928. He held property in Glade Park and at Westwater near Bitter Creek.¹⁴

Because of the rough life they lived and the limited news items about them there is no evidence of women involved with Warren and Hummel. The news article naming R.W. McGruder in the canyon in 1919 has his middle initial wrong; his name is Richard Adolphus McGruder. Born in Colorado, Richard *Adolphus* McGruder lived a relatively short distance from the Utah border residing in Cederidge and Glade Park during the time when he was inspecting his claims in Westwater.

Rich McGruder married at the age of twenty-two in 1904 and divorced three years later. According to a descendant, McGruder, a miner, lost his left arm while he was working on the Gunnison Tunnel near Montrose, Colorado. On May 30, 1905, the Tunnel collapsed killing from four to ten persons and burying thirty-five others who were expected to be rescued. McGruder's left arm was amputated from the incident and prevented him from serving in World War 1.¹⁵ He remarried in 1918 and 1919, to the same woman, Ida Merkt. This was during the same years that he was working his claims in Westwater.¹⁴ Ida had children from a previous marriage that may have been preoccupied her from visiting the cave. She was not named in either of the articles about McGruder and his partners visiting the claims in Westwater Canyon, however, the time period is correct for the shoes. Perhaps it was their honeymoon location?

Unless there is someone who can place the woman's shoes on Mary Osborne or Ida Merkt's feet we do not have an answer to the mystery of who belongs to the shoes found in Outlaw/Counterfeit Cave. Although the shoes do not appear to fit the time period for Ms. Osborne; her, her husband, and two other men appear to be the first documented boaters in Westwater Canyon. Perhaps one day we will learn of another party of boaters in the early part of the twentieth century where a woman drowned ...without her shoes.

¹³ Mike Milligan, *Westwater Lost and Found*, Utah State University Press, Logan, Utah, 2004. Pages 191-197.

¹⁴ . Richard Adolphus McGruder, US World War 1 Draft Registration Cards 1917-1918. There is also a photo of McGruder evidencing the amputated arm in Ancestry.com

¹⁵ There are two separate marriage certificates for the marriage of R.A. McGruder and Ida M. Merkt.. The first occurred on July 29, 1918, in Grand Junction, Colorado, and the other on March 31, 1919, in Green River, Utah. Information and/or images found on Ancestry .com. Correspondence from a grandchild briefly described Ida as a great fisherman and chewed tobacco and of the type who would not be reluctant to float the river.