

Trip Thru Westwater Cañon Was Like Tickling Dynamite With a Lighted Match—Wow!

Kolb and Loper Mastered Wild Waters After Going Thru Experience That No Man Accomplished Before

**From the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel
September 29, 1916**

Special thanks to Michael Milligan for sharing this newspaper article with CPRG.

Snapping their fingers under the very nose of Death itself, taunting gaily with the grim reaper, with their marvelous river skill as their only defense, Ellsworth L. Kolb of Grand Canyon, Ariz., and Bert Loper of Torrey, Utah, succeeded Monday and Tuesday in conquering the ferocious and roaring cataracts of the Grand River in Westwater Cañon, 40 miles west of the city.

They ran thru millraces with death as their nearest companion many times and just when it seemed they had joined the ranks of the men who had tried to run the rapids and died in the attempt, they would bob up and crawl back into the careening canoe and dash into the teeth of the next death trap, and finally conquered the mighty stream.

The boat, a 17-foot cedar freight canoe with hatch covers over each end, was only capable of holding one passenger, while the other member of the expedition ran the picture machine. The plan was to change off and each have a chance at shooting the bad places.

The cañon is 12 miles long, with five miles of mad waters a sheer bottleneck gorge with granite walls 400 feet high. At the top of the granite wall on each side is a wide bench, above this bench towers the sandstone 500 feet more. Along the bench a trail meanders and from various points along this trail it is possible to obtain glimpses of the rapids below and also possible at a few places to climb down to the edge of the river. Down such places the photographers planned to descend to picture the various stages of the trip, which was to take two days.

A few miles from the start of the cañon is one place where it is possible to reach the river edge with horses and here it was planned to make a small camp.

With Kolb besides Bert Loper were Frank E. Dean of Grand Junction, photographer, William Stubbs a cattleman and Ed Herbert a deputy sheriff from Westwater, Utah. They witnessed portions of the wild trip from such perches as they could obtain on the granite cliffs. They were armed with long ropes to hurl to the river rider in case of dire need. Mr. Dean operated

the movie camera.

Kolb and Loper started out to conquer the first series of rapids, six in number all of them snorting geysers of river anger. Kolb says Loper is the most ardent lover of river sport he has ever met. He started in the craft and mastered the first few rapids each one being worse than the last, while Kolb camera in charge, stayed on the bank. Dean had started ahead along the plateau to meet Stubbs and Herbert to strike camp for the night leaving Kolb and Loper to take pictures of that series of rapids. It was then that the death grapple with the river began.

Kolb shouted orders to Loper in the river below, from where he was situated on the rocky walls of the cañon. He saw Loper run the first two, then the third and fourth. Each one got worse and the boat leaned, tossed, rocked and bucked but Loper held on and let her lope. Kolb called to Loper after he had [crossed] the last rapids before the terrible Double Pitch [Funnel Falls], which he had planned to attempt the next day, recognizing it as the demon of all demons [?] [?] the start and the whirlpool. He had not told Loper of this especially as he had not thot [sic] of making a try at it the first day. He saw the danger and shouted to Loper to come out of the river. Loper could not see the terrible Double Pitch, a sheer drop of 10-feet with a succession of falls following which made a fearful cataract. Kolb could see it and yelled hoarsely to Loper, who mistook the frantic signals as a "go ahead" and go ahead he did, his steady eye and strong arms tuned for the next rapids. Little did he know its power.

Kolb Believes Loper Lost

Powerless to yell louder or to make himself understood in the din filled gorge of mighty waters Kolb [saw] [the] boat take a nip at the awful plunge which had cracked many a man's skull on the rocks below. The canoe leaped into the air and crashed down, down, down, out of sight in the gnashing, grinding, murderous water which boiled and tangled in a veritable maelstrom of fury, a fury so deadly that the foam stood out in clouds on the water surface.

Kolb, heart sick, watched for the reappearance of the small craft and his friend. He could see nothing of it. For an hour he clambered back and forth almost beside himself with apprehension; how he had failed to warn Loper of the awful place, how he had not wanted him to try it. He imagined the worst had happened to his comrade. He had never had a fatality on any of his expeditions and he grew faint as he thot of the possibility that at last one had happened.

Finds the Truth

Finally he gave up looking as the sun sank behind the cliffs to the west and climbed up to the trail to go to camp, which he knew was a few miles further on. He had made arrangements to have the other three men

meet himself and Loper, on this trail and return to camp together. He met Dean and asked quickly if any thing had been seen of the wreckage of a boat or of Loper. "Why he's in camp," was Mr. Dean's rejoinder. Kolb almost discredited his own ears and soon reached camp and grasped Loper's hand with a mighty handshake and the first thing Loper said was that he had had a frightful time and had had enough of rapids for a while. Then he asked if the pictures would be good. "Pictures," said Kolb, "why man you got way beyond camera range and would not come back, you were so wild to run more rapids." Loper was crestfallen to think he had mastered a king of rapids and no movie had been possible. How he went over the drop and kept the boat upright, water-filled as it was, and finally was able to get away from the maw of the river monster, only he knows.

Kolb Runs Death Traps

The next morning a new start was made with Kolb in the boat and Loper helping Dean and the other two men who were to throw life lines if needed. Loper was to run part of the rapids later on and did so.

Kolb got away under ideal picture conditions and started for the Little Niagara Whirlpool section [Skull Rapid], the most demonical on the entire river. He had not been gone long when his boat got into a place where the waves were running many feet high, tangoing back and forth between granite cliffs and making slaps at his boat that sent it hither and thither like a chip. Kolb clung on with his masterly skill and rode the bronco.

Suddenly, he struck a place that would have made a whirling dervish sea-sick and the boat shot over and he "got out and got under" good and plenty. He reached the lifeline and keel of the good ship and finally by might and main turned the craft right side up and crawled aloft. The watchful picture men, perched like magpies on the skyline above, did not see the upset. He had inhaled water and choked and gasped for some minutes.

Then came the whirlpool. The picture men who had gone down stream a ways saw his hat floating down the river and all of them had a terrible scare, fearing he was lost. Then came the worst place of all. Straight down the stream Kolb could see the water spouting many feet in the air as it shot with tremendous force against a boulder the size of a house in the whirlpool rapid. To the left was a "nigger head" rock which was covered with water about half the time. He saw that by making a corkscrew curve with a back action kick and a swipe at the scenery he might get thru, if he could dodge all the 100-ton pebbles and avoid the geysers of idiotic water that spit at the sky and found a target far below in the chugging foam under the rocks. He made it-not. A wave slapped him a half-ton lick on the face and picked him up, gunboat and all and rammed him over five feet, right up on top of the nigger head. The boat skidded off upside down, full of water, in the insane foam.

Here Kolb made the movie man above close his eyes

and crank, crank, crank with only a prayer and a peep to see if aim was still on the struggle below. Dean's eyes opened wide when he saw, not a dead man floating down stream with a smashed canoe trailing behind, but a very sore mariner whipping his boat back into line, safe beyond the rapid grinning at the cliff with an "I told you so" expression in his eyes, if anyone could have seen it.

The Rest of the Trip

But why repeat the heart rending, scare giving scenes? They came again and again, not so bad, but chilling to the marrow and Loper took all the rapids he could, that is whenever he could coax Kolb to let him have a whack at the river. Those two greedy river men, hungry for more wild scraps finally arrived at the finish looking like they had been playing with the tail of an angry comet, but with a seven-inch grin on each of their faces. They had conquered the river that had conquered [men] since men knew how to build the frail chips that float. They won and won a hard fight and the story will go down in history as one of the truly great river triumphs.

Kolb says that the cataracts excel anything in the Colorado River in fierceness altho [sic] of course vastly less extensive in length and number. Kolb was in Grand Junction all day yesterday and Loper arrived with the boat yesterday at noon when Mr. Dean got in. Black Cañon next week they say. •

One Red Oar

Resting an oar
in solid blue
from edge to edge
angels kneel beside the door

a coolness barely noticed
in Lapis shadows
leaning against boulders
imploping eager souls to scout
carefully

disaster flirting next to
the green tongue and the roar
and what love looks like
to a blinking fool

reading eddy lines
between the see you again
sometime
and the good bye kiss

the whole world stopping
at the abyss
for half a second
at one

red

oar.

Doug Oblak, October 1, 1996