

The “Boatman Stories” of Arthur Wheeler

by
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Boatmen, and especially river guides, have long been known to “stretch the truth a mite,” if not downright come up with out-and-out “whoopers,” about the streams they have navigated or their own exploits there upon. It almost seems to be a prerequisite of guiding, for, after all, they have clients and customers to entertain, and the “No shit, there I was...” stories seem to be a staple of most river trips. This is certainly true on the rivers of the Colorado Plateau. Whether it was Major Powell in his 1875 account of his river expedition(s) or Norm Nevills around a nighttime campfire on the San Juan or in Glen Canyon, the facts have, on occasion, been stretched almost to the breaking point.

Though usually not thought of as a “boatman,” Arthur Wheeler, a rancher on the east bank of the Green River across from the mouth of the San Rafael, did pilot a steamboat at least once (and perhaps twice) downstream into Labyrinth and Stillwater Canyons. This voyage must have affected, or perhaps a better term is infected, him almost immediately with what some have called “canyonitis,” and he soon came forth with at least an “embellishment” of an actual event plus one “tall tale” about his boating experiences on the Green and Colorado.

Arthur Wheeler and his two brothers had come from New York state (see Winter, 1996 issue of *The Confluence*), and in 1884 they settled on the Green River some twenty miles south of the town of the same name. They planted alfalfa and fruit trees, but primarily ran cattle. In 1891 they were visited, both going and coming, by the members of a river expedition which descended the Green to just below the confluence with the Grand (today’s Colorado River), before returning back upstream to the town of Green River.

The eight men were members of a company planning to launch a “fleet” of steamboats that would carry tourists from the Denver & Rio Grande railroad downstream to a hotel, which was to be built a few miles below the Confluence near the “head of the cataracts” on the Colorado. A prototype steam launch had been built and shipped to Green River station by rail, and in August, 1891, its maiden voyage (see Winter, 1997 issue of *The Confluence*) was begun to test the practicability of the proposed plan. Christened the *Major Powell*, low water and too deep of a draft caused blades from its propellers to be knocked off by rocks in the channel. However, the trip was continued on in rowboats, stopping at the Wheeler brothers’ ranch each way.

The following year, 1892, the steamboat was refitted for a second trial run. This time there was a crew of only four: Arthur Wheeler, who had been asked to act as pilot; H. J. Hogan, engineer; W. A. Heath, artist; and David Kenty, “excursionist.” An account of the voyage was obtained from Wheeler and appeared in the July 3 issue of Denver’s *Colorado Sun*. Among other things it said:

“All the way down the Green river cañons these [prehistoric cliff] dwellings are to be found. At the junction of the Grand, where the Colorado river begins, is another interesting feature. It is what the maps have designated as a

Mormon fort. This is entirely erroneous. It antedates the Mormons, but by how much no one knows. It is on the west bank of the river on a high elevation. It is an earth-work fortification, but now shows little more than outlines. Inside of it have been found many fine arrow heads, but no modern warlike remains, which goes to show what people used it as a stronghold.”

Of course, there is no such “Mormon fort” at today’s Confluence, nor is there even any prehistoric Anasazi or Fremont culture archeological sites. The description does, however, match in some respects the two-room dry-laid masonry tower located forty miles up the Green on a high point overlooking what has been named Fort Bottom. Even here, though, the ruin is on the east side of the river, not on the west as stated in the *Colorado Sun* article. So, did Wheeler and his three-man crew even reach the Confluence, or did they



The Mouth of Spring Canyon on the Green
Photo: Mike Ford

only make it as far as Fort Bottom, many miles short of the junction of the rivers?

The newspaper story goes on to say: "The Colorado river is not at all an inviting stream to navigate. The voyagers on the *Major Powell* had a grand sight once they got into the Grand cañon. The walls are higher and the stream seems smaller than above, though it is increased materially in volume by the waters of Grand river. For only sixteen miles is there any safety for a boat. At the end of that distance the Cataract cañon begins. This is really a terror...It is one succession of cascades, rapids, whirlpools, rocks, curves and other difficulties, which make it impossible for a boat to live any time at all."

While the above is an accurate description of Cataract Canyon, it is certainly no "sixteen miles" from the junction to the first rapid. The true distance, of course, is only four miles, which, even allowing for mere estimation instead of accurate measurement, still seems to be a rather significant error. This, then, again begs the question: Were Wheeler and his fellow voyagers even at the "head of the cataracts"?

Lute H. Johnson, writing for the *Denver Republican* the following year, stated simply: "In 1892, a second trial [of the *Major Powell*] was made, a few miles down the Green attained and again the expedition was abandoned." Writing several years after, William H. Edwards said: "The second attempt was made a year later, 1892, but the boat was abandoned at Wheeler's Landing [ranch], twenty-five miles down stream from the starting point at the Rio Grande Railway crossing [at Green River, Utah]."

Arthur Wheeler, therefore, seems to have "embellished" a little on his evidently aborted voyage down the Green on the second trial run of the *Major Powell*. In fact, it may very well have been from Edwards, who had been down the Green and Colorado Rivers with the James S. Best prospecting expedition in 1891, that Wheeler got the descriptions of the so-called Mormon fort and the area below the Confluence. Such second-hand information from Wheeler may, then, account for the discrepancies from the correct facts in the *Colorado Sun* newspaper account.

But if the 1892 story was simply an embellishment, then the one that followed in early 1893 was a true "whooper." Once again based on an account evidently provided by Arthur Wheeler, a relatively short item appeared in Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* entitled, "OVER THE RAPIDS," with the subheading, "The Major Powell Went Through Cataract Cañon." The entire article is as follows:

"Green River, Utah, Jan. 11.- Promptly at 7 o'clock yesterday morning the twin screw launch Major Powell left her dock at the mouth of the San Rafael river for her trip through the Cataract cañon of the Colorado

river. On board were Captain A. Wheeler and Engineer William Lyle. At a twelve-knot speed the junction of the Green and Grand rivers was passed. Cork jackets were donned and fenders thrown over the gunwales. At 1 p.m. the head of Cataract cañon was reached and the perilous voyage begun. Faster and faster went the launch with engines reversed, quickly veered to port or starboard, barely missing great jagged rocks. Now in a whirlpool, now down a cascade, nine miles of seething, boiling cauldrons was safely passed. A smooth stretch of a few miles and once more down, with ever increasing velocity, through the maddest torrent ever attempted by a pilot. The Major Powell had gone through the Cataract cañon safely. Twelve miles below, in a comparatively insignificant rapid, a snag caught the port propeller, breaking two blades. The launch swung quickly to the left, striking bows full on a big rock, staving her badly. She was safely beached and will be repaired at once and proceed to Dandy Crossing."

The above account was made notwithstanding the assertion made just a few months earlier in regard to Cataract Canyon, that in it "it is impossible for a boat to live any time at all." Nothing about this account seems to have any validity in fact at all.

The dates, to begin with, do not seem to make any sense. The *Rocky Mountain News* article appeared in the January 12 issue, and the dateline from the town of Green River was January 11. However, the item immediately begins by stating, "Promptly at 7 o'clock yesterday (my emphasis) morning the screw launch Major Powell left her dock..." The makes the entire subsequent series of events appear to have taken place in only ONE day. This is certainly an impossibility for the 151-mile distance from the mouth of the San Rafael to Dandy Crossing [Hite], which in 1893 would have included some 35 miles of Cataract Canyon rapids. Simply put; one day, no way!

The steamboat *Major Powell* was 35 feet in length, had an 8 to a 10-foot beam (accounts differ), with two 6-horsepower, wood-burning engines driving twin screws. Modern river runners in Cataract Canyon seem to be nearly unanimous in declaring that such a craft almost certainly could not have successfully navigated the 47 to 52 (again accounts differ) major and minor rapids of that canyon. Therefore, one must conclude that the *Rocky Mountain News* article has no basis in fact whatsoever, and is nothing more than pure fiction.

These two accounts of river voyages, however, do serve one purpose: to elevate Arthur Wheeler from the status of mere "rancher" to that of a true "river guide." It is clear and obvious that he could spin "boatmen stories" with the best of them.