



Historic cabins near the Sand Wash ferry on the Green River in Desolation Canyon
Photo credit: Dan Miller

Hank Stewart and Sand Wash

by James M. Aton



Hank and Arden Stewart
Arden Stewart Collection

a ferry, probably at the same place, when the 1917 Utah Power and Light (UP & L) survey came through. The growing sheep industry in the early part of the twentieth century had necessitated ferries in the region. All those ferries are part of a larger story, which I will not recount here, of the various crossings between Split Mountain and Sand Wash. They predated the bridges that now span the river.

Hank Stewart's story is special for river runners partly because he made Sand Wash the most important ferry during that era. But he also spent a good part of his life up and down the river, before and after Sand Wash. Besides running two different ferries, he befriended Butch Cassidy and his gang, he rowed for two river surveys, he spoke Ute fluently and generally got on well with them, he ran a postal route, and he worked some copper claims. Stewart was typical of many men and women between 1880 and 1940 who were trying scratch out a living along the Green River: he did whatever he could to get by.

John Henry "Hank" Stewart was born in Mona, Utah in 1868 where his father, Simeon, worked as a mine company dentist. The peripatetic family moved to San Bernardino for a while, then returned to Mona. For a time, Hank and his brother, George E., lived with an aunt and uncle in Puget Sound, Washington. They both later attended All Hallows College in Salt Lake City. Even though he came from educated parents, all that Hank ever wanted to be, according to his son Arden, was a cowboy. As a youth he had devoured dime-store westerns and apparently yearned to be a part of that legendary life.²



Tia Juana Ferry
c. 1916-1919
Arden Stewart Collection

Every river runner who fights his/her way through the mosquitoes at Sand Wash for a run down Desolation Canyon will notice two old cabins there. Many of those boaters know that for years, Sand Wash was a major sheep ferry crossing. Some even know that the man who built one of those cabins and made the ferry a going concern was Hank Stewart. Few, however, know his story. So let me tell it to you—the outlines of it anyway.

But first you should know that Hank Stewart did not pioneer sheep ferrying in the Sand Wash area. Although it is not certain exactly when he started it, around 1912 one Charlie Brown was running a ferry and cable crossing just above Sand Wash at a place called Boat Bottom.¹ Also, a man named Miles (I have not yet found his first name) ran

In 1897 the Stewart brothers came into the Castle Valley country. They first worked for the Joseph B. Meeks and Pete Murning ranches in Castlegate. Hank quickly became friends with Butch Cassidy (aka Tom Gillis) and Elzy Lay (aka Bert Fowler), who were then punching cows on the nearby Jens Nielson ranch. He nearly got mixed up in the infamous Castle Gate Robbery that Cassidy, Lay, and Joe Walker perpetrated in April of that year. Hank had a big grey horse that Cassidy tried to buy from him. Stewart wouldn't sell it, but he agreed to let Butch borrow it for the winter. Cassidy proceeded to use the horse for the robbery, even though it bolted out from under him. Lay had to

retrieve the horse so Butch could escape to Robber's Roost in the San Rafael Swell. Eventually the horse was returned by a young boy who manned the relay station for Cassidy's gang.³

A year after his near run-in with the law, Hank married Minerva Van Wagoner, started a ranch in Argyle in upper Nine Mile Canyon, worked for various cattlemen like Preston Nutter, collected wild mustangs and wild cattle (mavericks), and eventually fathered three children. He also did a little mining on the side. Some time in the first decade of the century Hank divorced Minerva, and she later



Red Moon
University of Utah

m a r r i e d Stewart's good friend, Neal Hanks (of Hanksville). She got the ranch in Nine-Mile and custody of the children; Hank got the freedom to pursue mining and ferry ventures with his b r o t h e r George.⁴

Stewart next appears in the historical

record in 1911 and 1913 when he rowed Desolation Canyon for two improbable surveys. The first, the Carstarphen party, wrecked its boats above Rock Creek and had to abandon the river. Frederick Carstarphen was a Denver engineer who managed a gilsonite mine on Pariette Bench. He was looking to the river for a faster route to haul gilsonite to the railhead at Thompson.⁵ The second party was led by Roosevelt founder and engineer Ed. F. Harmston. He was surveying for a possible railroad line between Roosevelt and Green River, Utah for the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad. Although he could obviously handle a boat, the 1911 wreck notwithstanding, and knew the river, Stewart could not swim.⁶

The Stewart brothers had some small copper claims on Leland Bench, between Roosevelt and Ouray, around the same time as Hank was rowing for the survey parties. The two brothers also started a ferry at Tia Juana Bottom. The sheep that crossed on it wintered on Wild Horse Bench, east of Upper Desolation Canyon, and summered above Nine Mile Canyon. Eventually Hank sold out his mining interests to George who had become the manager of the Uteland Mining Company,

while George sold his interest in the ferry to Hank.⁷

Hank operated the ferry at Tia Juana Bottom from at least 1913 to 1919. He was involved in a short-lived school for other ranchers' children at the confluence of Willow and Hill creeks to this extent: his oldest daughter, Eva, a recent BYU graduate, was the teacher. In 1919 Stewart met and married Jedediah Wardle's daughter, Elsie. She was fifteen and he was fifty one. Both had been baptized Mormons but neither practiced any religion throughout their lives.

During this time Hank (the Utes called him "Ma Oov Erats," or "Buckskin Shirt," his usual attire) had a run-in with Red Moon, an assertive White River Ute who lived along the east river bottoms. The story comes down to us from Stewart's son, Arden.

When Stewart was operating the ferry at Tia Juana Bottom, he always let Utes cross for free. This included Red Moon. But Red Moon did not like sheepmen and their sheep crossing onto what he considered his land. He tried to extract a fee from them, and eventually a sheepman named Peterson paid the Ute to silence him. After that, when the Ute tried to collect money from other sheepmen, they would lie to him, saying, "Peterson will pay."

Finally Red Moon realized he had been had. He got a pistol, and Hank Stewart happened to be the first white he saw. Red Moon fired at the ground around Stewart's feet. The ferryman then grabbed the Indian, threw him to the ground, held the pistol to his head, and threatened to kill him. Red Moon begged for his life, and Hank let him go.

Red Moon then jumped on his horse and rode for Ouray where a Ute Bear Dance was underway. He hoped to stir up the young braves for a reprisal against Stewart. The ferryman saddled up as well and took a short cut to Ouray, arriving ahead of Red Moon. In fluent Ute, Stewart explained to the tribal council what had happened. After Red Moon arrived and pleaded his case, the council ruled for Stewart. They made the White River Ute apologize to Stewart and promise to treat him as a friend. After that, Red Moon left Tia Juana Bottom and may have moved north, perhaps to Montana. He was dead by 1925 at the age of 61.⁸

Generally, however, Hank got along well with the Utes, partly because of his friendly, accepting nature



Sheep Crossing ice on Green River
Uintah County Regional History Center

and partly because he spoke their language well. But conflicts with Utes like Red Moon eventually prompted the area's sheepmen to encourage Stewart to move the ferry downriver to Sand Wash, a more convenient and less contentious crossing spot for sheep. Thus, in 1919 newlyweds Hank and Elsie floated the ferry down to Sand Wash and lived in a tent. That winter they tore apart their four room cabin, marked the logs, and dragged them down on a

bobsled on the frozen river. It took three or four trips.⁹

The ice they skidded the cabin on that winter was no fluke. Ice is an annual occurrence on the Green. The river usually solidifies in late November or early December and thaws in late February to mid March. The thick ice allows for the easy transportation that Hank and Elsie Stewart experienced. But sometimes during the spring thaw, ice jams pile up and prevent river crossing by any means—ferry, boat, or horse. Yet the ice had its uses in the pre-refrigerator days. Residents would cut ice blocks out of the river, pack them with snow in a shed, and cover them with a layer of gilsonite. The ice would last all summer. But it could be deadly as well. When Vern Muse was working at Sand Wash in 1933, he let his team of horses loose to get a drink in the river. They broke through the ice and disappeared.¹⁰

The ferries themselves worked through the use of a windlass which allowed the ferry to change attitude and let the current push it across. There was an air space between the boat bottom and the floor. The front of the wooden boats had an apron to allow animals easy access on and off. Later a man named Peterson, probably the same man in the Red Moon incident, brought in a metal ferry which is now buried in the sand downstream of the boat launch. The ferry cable wrapped around large cottonwood trees on either side. At various times ferries operated at Swallow Canyon, Jensen, Ouray, Tia Juana Bottom, Boat Bottom, and Sand Wash.¹¹

Sheep made the ferries necessary, and up to 45,000 head passed through Sand Wash a year; 50 head at a time fit onto the boat. Sheep were sheared on the “Wrinkles” side, across from Sand Wash. The wool was sacked and freighted out by wagon. Hank Stewart charged three cents a head, and in his best year made \$2,700. The scariest cargo was Jim McPherson’s bulls. Not surprisingly, they were hard to herd onto the boat and rambunctious during the crossing.¹²

At Sand Wash the Stewarts had a large garden, pigs, chickens, and a few work horses. They probably had a milk cow. Elsie canned extensively in the winter. She was known as an excellent and very creative cook, and sometimes their cabin served as a boarding house for stockmen passing through. Visitors remarked on her tasty pastries and “big white gravy.” Elsie herself sometimes helped with the ferry. Many men noted that “she worked like a man,” lifting the logs that formed the cabins and later herding and branding cattle at the Willow Creek ranch. She also kept a detailed diary of all business transactions at the ferry and at the ranch. Unfortunately that diary burned in a house fire in Vernal many years later.¹³

Hank eventually grew tired of the ferry business. He sold out to Chuck Sands sometime between 1929 and 1930 and moved upriver to Willow Creek. He bought a ranch from his father-in-law, Jediah Wardle. The 160-acre homestead sat over a mile up creek from the Green. Sands, meanwhile, added a second cabin at the ferry (Sand Wash is named for the sand that comes out of the side canyon, not after Chuck Sands, as some have thought). He and his wife, Lola, had two children. He sold out to Peterson, and Peterson in turn sold to Ray Thompson in the mid-

1930s. Thompson was there in 1937 and 1938 when Haldane “Buzz” Holmstrom stopped by two years in a row, the second time with Amos Burg. He told Holmstrom that a 1935 flood had brought the rock and mud down Sand Wash, burying the lower part of one cabin. It is still visible today. An eater of horse flesh, Thompson in his best year saw twenty thousand sheep pass through at five cents a head (\$1,000). The ferry business declined, though, because bridges were being built upstream. Moreover, the 1934 Taylor Grazing Act, a prolonged drought, overgrazing, and the Depression all worked to reduce the size of sheep and cattle herds on public ranges. When a big spring flood in 1952 ripped out Thompson’s ferry boat and cable, he abandoned it because business had narrowed to a trickle.¹⁴

Hank Stewart, meanwhile, hacked out a living at his Willow Creek ranch in the early and mid 1930s, as well as anyone could during the Depression. The family did not really suffer during the world-wide economic downturn because they were largely self-sufficient. But besides ranching, Stewart contracted as a private postal delivery man. He picked up the mail at Ouray and delivered it to ranchers up and down Willow Creek. Although he lived near the river for over two decades, Hank’s inability to swim caught up with him in the spring of 1937.¹⁵

On May 18 that year during the spring rise, Stewart and his young ranch hand, Thomas McKenna, were rowing a heavy disk harrow and a corn planter tongue across river in a small boat. The boat filled with water and swamped. Both men’s wives watched in horror as the tragedy unfolded. Stewart was knocked unconscious by the machinery, and when he surfaced, McKenna tried to hold on to him and the capsized boat at the same time. Harry Aumiller swam his horse out, threw a rope to McKenna, but the young man missed it. Both men then disappeared under water. Stewart’s frantic wife, Elsie, attempted to ride and swim to rescue him but fortunately was restrained by Chuck Sands. For the next week a team of fifty men in eight boats searched for the bodies. They finally discovered them a few miles below the accident. Hank’s best friend, Matt Curry, found him.¹⁶

Stewart, age sixty nine, left a twenty-nine-year old wife, a twelve-year old son, and a mountain of debt. Elsie Stewart had to sell two hundred Herefords to pay off ranch debts. She eventually remarried Jack Brewer, which improved the family’s finances.¹⁷ McKenna, who was twenty five, widowed a wife and left two small children fatherless.

Stewart was especially mourned. An impulsive, hot-tempered man, he was also known as a friendly, gregarious, can-do cowboy. In large headlines, a front page article in the local paper described him as “one of Utah’s colorful pioneer stockman....Hale and hearty, able to ride and work hard, he did things a younger man would shirk...respected for his hardihood and straight-forward dealing with his fellow man.”¹⁸

Hank Stewart’s legacy includes a reputation for working hard, starting various enterprises, guiding, and making many friends up and down the river. He etched his name and character on Sand Wash. Tip your hat to him next time you push off shore.

¹ George Stewart interview by Bill Belknap and Loie Belknap Evans, 1974, Belknap Collection, Northern Arizona University; Arden Stewart, "Ferries: A Lecture to the Uintah County Historical Society, 10 July 1993," Uintah County Regional History Center (hereafter UCRHC), Vernal, Utah.

² "River Victims Located Near Scene of Death," *Vernal Express*, 27 May 1937, p. 1; Arden Stewart interviews with author, 8 January 2004, 25-26 March 2005.

³ Stella McElprang, comp., *Castle Valley: A History of Emery County* (Emery County Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1949), 50-51; Arden Stewart, "Dad Nearly Rode With Butch," *Outlaw Journal* 1.1 (Summer 1991): 46-47. Arden Stewart, "Arden Stewart at the Uintah County Historical Society on Outlaws," UCRHC.

⁴ Arden Stewart interviews; Mildred Miles Dillman, comp., *Early History of Duchesne County* (Springville, UT: Art City Publishing, 1948), 256; "River Victims."

⁵ Robert Sorgenfrei to author, 26 July 2004; "Much Interest in Castle Peak," *Eastern Utah Advocate* (29 June 1911), 11; Many articles in the *Eastern Utah Advocate* and *Carbon County News* for the fall of 1911 and winter of 1912 recount Carstarphen's battles with the state road commission and his efforts to purchase trucks to haul gilsonite to the railhead at Price. He failed and ended up back in Denver, where he did some survey work for the city.

⁶ "Diary and Report of Ed. F. Harmston, Engineer, on Feasibility of Line for Railroad from Green River on Denver and Rio Grande R.R. to Roosevelt, in Uintah Basin, State of Utah. September 6th, 1913," Marston Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, California; Bill and Mrs. Seamount interview by Otis R. "Dock" Marston, Salt Lake City, 1 January 1966, Marston Collection; Ray "Budge" Wilcox interview by Bill Belknap and Loie Belknap Evans, 1974, Belknap Collection.

⁷ George Stewart interview; Arden Stewart, "Ferries;" Kathleen Irving, "Interview with Arden Stewart, 19 April 2002," UCRHC.

⁸ Arden Stewart, "Lecture for Uintah County Historical Society." Stewart composed this story in the form of a poem called "Red Moon" which he has preformed on numerous occasions; Arden Stewart interviews; "Ute Indians Allotment Records, Uintah and White River Utes, circa 1900-1940," MSS B-833, Box 1, Fd 5, # 351, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.

⁹ Arden Stewart, "This Story Was Told To Me," UCRHC; Arden Stewart interviews; Kathleen Irving.

¹⁰ Arden Stewart, "Ferries;" "Ouray," *Vernal Express*, 23

March 1933, p. 4; Kathleen Irving; Pearl Baker, *Rim Flying the Canyonlands with Jim Hurst* (Riverside, Ca: A-to-Z Printing, 1973), 43-44; Rex F. Rowley, "Ferry on the Green and other happenings at Sand Wash, "1969, Ms in author's possession; Rex F. Rowley, "Sand Wash Ferry Played Role for Early Sheepmen," *Vernal Express*, 21 August 1969, p. B6.

¹¹ Irving; Stewart, "Ferries;" Arden Stewart interviews.

¹² Stewart, "Ferries."

¹³ Arden Stewart interviews.

¹⁴ Chuck Sands was a hot-tempered man who once slapped young Arden Stewart in the face. Stewart never liked him after that. Thompson was known to eat horse meat from the wild horses he rounded up when he lived at Ray's Bottom. Arden Stewart interviews; Brad Dimock, ed., *Every Rapid Speaks Plainly: The Salmon, Green & Colorado River Journals of Buzz Holmstrom* (Flagstaff: Fretwater Press, 2003), 50, 168; Stewart, "Ferries."

¹⁵ Doris Karren Burton, *Settlement of Uintah County: Digging Deeper* (Vernal, UT: Uintah County Library, 1998), 502, 508.

¹⁶ "Searches Fail to Recover Bodies," *Vernal Express*, 20 May 1939, p. 2; "River Victims;" Arden Stewart interviews. Curry owned the Ouray store and later Curry's Manor in Vernal. He was well-liked by both Anglos and Utes.

¹⁷ Irving.

¹⁸ "River Victims."

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