

# Westwater

## LOST AND FOUND

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EXPANDED EDITION

*Mike Milligan*

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*Logan*

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## INTRODUCTION

It's been a wild ride digging up historical stories to share with my Westwater friends. I hope that my readers appreciate the experience of discovery as much as I have. This said, although *Westwater Lost and Found* (2004) provides a comprehensive history of the region, there were a few unanswered questions about Outlaw Cave; James Miller's missing letter to Frederick S. Dellenbaugh regarding an 1897 excursion down the Grand River, an earlier name given for the Colorado River above the confluence with the Green River; and the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail (OST)—all of which I felt compelled to research further. Fortunately, with advanced digital technology and easier access to locating and communicating with individuals, historical societies, and libraries, I was able to track down additional information that expands on my first book. *Westwater Lost and Found: Expanded Edition* expounds on two stories about Outlaw Cave, the dentists Miller and Babcock's 1897 excursion down the Grand River, and a historic trail and road addressed briefly in the first book, and it provides important

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little-known historical documents related to Westwater and its relationship with the Upper Colorado River history. I'm especially grateful to be able to share Ellsworth Kolb's manuscript of his attempt to transit the Grand and Gunnison River tributaries in 1916 and 1917. As well, I have appreciated the opportunity to share the contents of James E. Miller's letter addressed to Frederick S. Dellenbaugh regarding his and O. D. Babcock's recreational boat excursion on the Grand River in 1897, and portions of Frederick Kreutzfeldt's (Creutzfeldt's) 1853 journal entries for Captain John Gunnison's central route survey of the thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth parallel for a Pacific Railroad. On my first river trip working as a swamper (river guide apprentice), I recall stopping at Rock Creek in Desolation Canyon to obtain water. We docked our rafts on a short beach upstream of the creek and while our passengers hiked to the ranch, and several of the guides went to refill the water coolers, I was left alone on shore with the boats. While there, I recall a feeling of being not far removed from stepping in the literal footsteps of early explorers such as Major John Wesley Powell's party, or members of the Wild Bunch. Although it was over 100 years earlier, because of the remoteness of the country, and far fewer rafting parties than there are currently, there was a slight chance that one of the historical figure's footprints might not have been trampled on, and I experienced some type of connection to them.

This experience initiated a passion to research the historical events of the Colorado and Green Rivers. I began purchasing and reading the classics by John Wesley Powell, Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, the Kolb brothers, George Flavell, Julius F. Stone, Clyde Eddy, and others to learn and compare their experiences with my own. Needless to say, although I had a number of dramatic experiences, none of them compared to the hard-fought voyages, portages, linings, uncertainties, hunger, and depravations of these historically hardened river men. Eventually, my studies led to Westwater Canyon, of which there were no books written. Initially, the only information I found came from Westwater Books' *Canyonlands River Guide*, where he inserted a couple of short blurbs below the photos of Ellsworth Kolb and Harold H. Leich that included the years that they boated through Westwater Canyon. Shortly afterward, whenever I ended a river trip, I spent much of my free time at



FIGURE 0.1. Three Spanish crosses located in the vicinity of Big Hole. Photo by Bob Brennan (2019).

the Moab library using their microfiche readers to search for articles from the *Grand Valley Times* (1896–1919) and the *Times Independent* (1919–current) on Kolb, Leich, and other subjects related to Westwater and the Grand River.

This was the beginning of over forty years of Westwater and Upper Colorado River research that resulted in *Westwater Lost and Found* (2004) and *Westwater Lost and Found: Expanded Edition*. There remains more history of Westwater and the Upper Colorado River to discover; however, finding it may be more difficult. Similar to the trappers who infiltrated the regions of the Green and Colorado Rivers at the turn of the nineteenth century, many of the earliest individuals who may have inadvertently boated or rafted through Westwater Canyon and the upper reaches of the Colorado River were likely illiterate trappers and miners who left no documentation of their activities. Preceding them is evidence of possibly the Spanish being in the Westwater region, where three inscribed Spanish crosses were recently discovered on a wall in one of the side

drainages. Despite a lack of biographical historical documents, there is a continuing effort to digitize the remaining Colorado newspapers, which will likely reveal more early boaters on the Upper Colorado River.

An interesting observation throughout my research is that there are considerable overlapping or interacting historical figures involved in the Colorado, Grand, Green, and Gunnison River regions. The connection begins with the North Branch of the OST and continues with Captain John Williams Gunnison, whose impact on Colorado left a county, city, and river named after him. As documented in this book, he camped at Westwater Creek and members of his party led their famished mules and stock to feed and water at Westwater before leaving the Grand River in pursuit of the OST near the Green River crossing. The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad (D&RG RR) and Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad (D&RGW RR) were present since the early 1880s, connecting several river towns along the Colorado, Green, and Gunnison Rivers at Glenwood Springs, Rifle, Montrose, Delta, Grand Junction, Westwater, Cisco, and Green River. Newspapers were present in most of these towns and at Moab.

Although it appears that no individual completed a transit of the entire free-flowing Grand and Colorado Rivers, we have biographical information from Ellsworth Kolb, who came closest because he transited the Grand Canyon prior to the Hoover Dam being constructed and completed his journey to the Gulf of California. All that he lacked for the credit was sixty-five miles of flat water on the Colorado (Grand) River between Moab and the Confluence. Including Kolb and Bert Loper, another historical river name found at Westwater is John Colton “Jack” Sumner, who reportedly sustained a “knife wound in the groin” there in 1902.<sup>1</sup> Sumner resided in Grand Junction since 1886 raising the question, did he do any trapping or mining by boat on the Grand River as far as the Confluence? Outlaw brothers Bob and Jack Smith reportedly traveled down the Grand River to Arizona a year prior to the D&RG RR train robbery in 1887. They must have felt comfortable on the river because during their escape from the law they hired a German immigrant at Green River to build them a boat on that river so that they could continue their escape downstream. In 1887, Harry McDonald ran a boat with Jess Fuller from Grand Junction to the Utah



border. McDonald was a boatman for part of the Brown & Stanton's Denver, Colorado Canyon and Pacific Railroad (DCC&P RR) Survey in 1890, and again with the Best Expedition in 1891, which ended their mining expedition at Lee's Ferry after they lost a boat in Cataract Canyon. Elmer Kane was a boatman for both of the above expeditions and had testified during the Colorado Riverbed case, held between 1929 and 1931, that he had taken a raft down the Grand River from Grand Junction to Moab in 1888. Charles Brock, of Grand Junction, was also a boatman for the DCC&P RR, assisting surveyor Frank Clarence Kendrick down the Grand River to Green River, Utah, in 1889. Brock later settled on land near Westwater, where he was killed by Captain Wilson E. Davis on August 25, 1892. Nathaniel Galloway's son Parley, also a trapper, boated through Westwater Canyon in 1926 or 1927, and he guided Clyde Eddy through the Grand Canyon to Needles, California, in 1927. How much of the Grand River did he and his brother John trap for beaver? And how far did the mysterious Beppo Saeckler make it down the Colorado River in 1930?

Due to smaller populations, it appears that many individuals lived and worked within short proximity of each other throughout their lives in the vicinity of Green River, Utah, and Grand Junction, Colorado. Florence Creek, at the end of Desolation Canyon on the Green River, may have been named after Florence Harris Fuller (1866–1930), owner of the Pace-Fuller Ranch at Westwater.<sup>2</sup> Florence was a cattle woman who was well known in Green River, throughout Grand County, and in Grand Junction. On the east side of the Colorado River, upstream of the BLM Westwater Ranger headquarters, Florence's cattle ranch was one of the largest in Grand County. Longtime Westwater Ranch owner and sheep man Emmett Elizondo (1897–1992) resided in Grand Junction and Fruita, Colorado. And many other former residents came from, or had family, in Cisco, Grand Junction, Fruita, and Cedaredge. There is a little-known connection with Westwater involving the killing of Wild Bunch outlaw George "Flat Nose" Curry in Desolation Canyon on the Green River on April 17, 1900, and the murder of Moab sheriff Jesse Tyler in the Book Cliffs.<sup>3</sup>

As I conclude *Westwater Lost and Found: Expanded Edition* and search for biographical information and stories, it has become simpler to

locate and reach out to the descendants of historical persons, through the use of genealogy programs. Using Ancestry.com I located descendants of both Drs. James E. Miller and O. D. Babcock with the hope that they might have more biographical information on their ancestors and that perhaps they might know the whereabouts of the photos that the dentists made of their 1897 trip down the Grand River. Fortunately, I did learn more about their lives; nevertheless, their descendants knew very little about the boating excursion and nothing about the photos. In retrospect, it was rewarding for me to share information with them about their ancestors' historical boating experience. Also, I have not been able to document when Dr. Miller met Major John Wesley Powell in Glenwood Springs. The two men haven't appeared together in any of the available Colorado digitized newspapers, and there isn't a complete registry for Hotel Colorado in order to document when Powell stayed there. From additional genealogy sources, I was able to learn more about Richard (Rich) Adolphus McGruder, who lost his left arm when he worked on the Gunnison Tunnel in the Black Canyon and it collapsed on him and trapped over thirty-five fellow workers in 1905. He is associated with Outlaw Cave history in Westwater Canyon, and possibly his new bride in 1919 is a candidate for the woman's shoes found in the cave.

Generally speaking, libraries, museums, and so on work independently of each other, and there are likely important historical documents that will eventually be digitized and thus made more widely available. This was the case that I experienced when I located James E. Miller's letter written to Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, housed in the Robert Brewster Stanton papers at the New York Public Library. It was an unexpected discovery. Another discovery is the Frederick Kreutzfeldt (Creutzfeldt) journal held at the Smithsonian Institution Archives. Kreutzfeldt was a German botanist who accompanied Captain John W. Gunnison's central route survey for a Pacific Railroad in 1853. The unpublished journal was written in German and translated into English.<sup>4</sup> I first learned of its existence on May 28, 2020, and immediately requested a copy from the Smithsonian Institute but because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, it couldn't be accessed. As I was nearly ready in January 2022 to submit *Westwater Lost and Found*:

*Expanded Edition* to be reviewed for publication, I received an email from archivist Deborah Shapiro at the Smithsonian on December 22, 2021, with an attached typewritten transcript copy of Kreutzfeldt's journal. The new information caused me to revisit chapter 1, because Kreutzfeldt's journal notes did not support the premise that Captain Gunnison camped at Westwater. Bill Chenoweth's extensive research following Gunnison's path into Grand County relied solely on Lieutenant Edward G. Beckwith's narrative, which could lead to the conclusion that Gunnison's camp was subsequently moved to Westwater and the Grand River to nourish and rest their mules. Kreutzfeldt's journal did not appear in any of the primary sources that I researched on the OST and the North Branch.

Kreutzfeldt's journal is a much-lesser-known third biographical source of information that, along with Beckwith's report and Dr. James Schiel's account, helps to document Gunnison's central route survey of the thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth parallel for the Pacific Railroad Exploration and Surveys in 1853. As more original historical resources become available to the public, they can help support, or correct, what has been written and avoid a possible misinterpretation of historical events. This is an example of the usefulness of the internet and being able to locate sources that were not previously available to historians.

The unfortunate Kreutzfeldt was the botanist for Colonel John C. Frémont's ill-fated winter expedition along the thirty-eighth parallel, where ten men died from exposure and hypothermia in 1848, and Captain John W. Gunnison's central route survey for a Pacific Railroad in 1853, where Kreutzfeldt was killed along with Captain Gunnison and six other members of the party by Pahvant Utes on October 26, 1853.

Additional questions continue to build, and as more sources from libraries, museums, historical societies, and newspapers are digitized and made available on the internet to the public, our ability to further research Westwater and the Upper Colorado River and other topics is likely to increase.

In order to have the Westwater and regional histories that I researched readily available on investigative trips, I typed up major parts of stories and articles and kept them in a large binder that fit snugly into a 40MM Ammo can. As a resource during my travels, the

binder was something I brought with me on river trips and when I drove on the back roads of Westwater, Cisco, and the Book Cliffs. The binder was shared liberally with anyone in my company, and it was those who thumbed through its pages who convinced me to write my first book. Separately, I collected poetry, song lyrics, and quotes about rivers and the wilderness that helped me to internalize my feelings for these natural places. The quotes are also kept in the large binder with the Westwater material. Words portraying images are important to me. Personally, I feel inadequate at formulating my own written images through words and sometimes resort to borrowing the words from those who are more gifted. From the stories about Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain writes, “We said there warn’t no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smotherly, but a raft don’t. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft.”<sup>5</sup> Just like that, Huck Finn describes how I feel about boating.

Toward the end of my five-year career as a professional river guide, I recall floating along Peter’s Point on the Green River in the early morning shade when I was struck with these very feelings. I remember my passengers were relaxed as they quietly observed the magnificent sculpted canyons in that region, and it was so quiet and serene that I could hear droplets of water fall from beneath my elevated oars as they returned to the river. It was an intimate moment for contemplation and inspiration enhanced by my knowledge that I might not be back. Although I grew up in a suburb of Salt Lake City, I was never comfortable living there or any large city. It wasn’t until I began boating that I could feel a distinct positive difference in my personality and confidence. From my youth I had plenty of experiences in the outdoors and from hunting; having said that, the river experience was different. It unknowingly released many inhibitions and allowed me to be freer with myself and others. Had I believed I could make a responsible career out of river rafting, I likely would have done it.

Because I didn’t believe I could make it a livelihood, I returned to the city, finished my degree, got a job, got married, and had children. I returned to the river periodically with friends, or as a guide for private groups, and over the past twenty years primarily as a Westwater historian. Yet, when I couldn’t be on the river and had free time, I researched

Westwater and read the latest historical river books. This activity did not preoccupy my time to the extent that it affected my work and raising a family, but when I needed a break I had somewhere to escape to: the river. In addition to sharing the historical discoveries found in *Westwater Lost and Found* (2004), the book is also intended to provide a personal experience of boating down the Colorado River through Westwater Canyon, whether on or off of the river.

On April 18, 2018, I was invited with Grand Canyon geologist Peter Huntoon as one of the specialists for a single-day Westwater Canyon interpretive river trip sponsored by Colorado Plateau River Guides (CPRG). The interpretive trips are organized to educate professional river guides representing companies located at Grand Junction, Green River, and Moab about the various canyons that they traverse.

The Colorado River through Westwater Canyon was running lower than I had ever rafted it, at 2,100 cfs (cubic feet per second). Both Skull and Razor Rocks were well out of the water. I'd seen the rapid at nearly this level in 2003 from the cliffs above, and from that height there appeared to be plenty of space to split the two major rocks in Skull Rapid. Looking at the rapid from river level is a different matter and requires precise timing to get through it cleanly. I think of a quote by historic Grand Canyon boatman and photographer Ellsworth Kolb, who described a plan getting through Skull "Whirlpool" Rapid in 1916 by "making a corkscrew curve with a back action kick and a swipe at the scenery."<sup>6</sup> Well, when Westwater ranger Bob Brennan swiped at the scenery, our boat landed between Razor Rock and the rocky shore, temporarily stuck. The other boats in our party were too far right and squeezed between Skull Rock and the cliff, where they were pooped out through the "birth canal" into the eddy behind the rock. None of the runs were particularly pretty; even so, they were pretty entertaining. Incidentally, Kolb also had his troubles in the rapid, when his boat turned over briefly. Fortunately, he was able to right the boat midway through the rapid and finish the run.

Ellsworth Kolb said of Westwater Canyon that "it is the Grand Canyon in miniature."<sup>7</sup> Dr. Peter Huntoon helped the guides appreciate the uniqueness of Westwater Canyon when he compared its geography to the Grand Canyon. The missing strata that make up an unconformity

that exists in both canyons represent a far greater length of time between sequences in Westwater Canyon than in the Grand Canyon. It is a beautiful canyon with breathtaking views where the Colorado River follows a narrow slit in the earth exposing 1.7-billion-year-old Precambrian rocks. There are petroglyphs, a small waterfall, old dug-outs, and the Outlaw Cave of mystery within the short canyon's walls. What else could a person want on a one, or two-day river trip?

It was a great experience to return to Westwater Canyon. I'm not sure whether it was my last time through the canyon, or whether I will return. One thing is certain: if I do, the river is never the same. I'm reminded of a quote from the 1996 movie *Same River Twice*, where an old river guide says, "Part of the reason we keep coming back here is we don't exactly know what's going to happen, that's part of the thrill, it's never the same river twice."<sup>8</sup> That's the uniqueness of Westwater Canyon; it's never the same river twice. And whether I am able to return to the river physically, or through continued research, it is never the same. Knowing the region's history, I look at the entire experience differently and can imagine Utes on horseback crossing the Colorado River upstream of the Westwater Ranger Station, or picture surveyors and military expeditions watering and fattening up their livestock for the dreaded trek across the Cisco Desert, an old railroad town, scattered sheep, and unsuspecting trappers and miners in heavy wooden boats attempting Westwater Canyon. Just as flora, fauna, and geology contribute to our appreciation of the river's waterways, so can the footprints of historic humankind leave an impression when these people's presence is known and they have hopefully taken care of the land.

As I indicated in my first book, for personal reasons I avoided boating Westwater Canyon and instead pursued my research of the area by land from 1984 until 1998. I began to research Westwater Canyon in 1981, and, although at times it was difficult, I continued to do it after I lost my mother in Skull Rapid on August 31, 1983. Fortunately, I was encouraged to continue with the research by my friend's, former Westwater Ranger and cofounding director of Colorado Field Institute (CFI), Karla VanderZanden, and the late Dee Holladay of Holiday River Expeditions. Ultimately, researching Westwater became somewhat of a release for me and helped me to remain in contact with the river.

Shortly after my mother died, my stepfather approached me to ask if I would participate in a lawsuit against river companies that was brought on as a result of a number of boating accidents that occurred during the record high-water season of 1983. I don't remember the particulars of the lawsuit; however, I believe it involved companies not having sufficient means of handling emergency situations on river trips. Unlike today, in 1983 about the only way to communicate while on the river in the middle of a canyon was use of long-range walkie-talkies. I understand why my stepfather was approached about the lawsuit—he was devastated, distraught, angry, and confused, and although he didn't outright blame me for the accident he did want to find some kind of resolution. I too was devastated and guilt ridden, and I reflected in my mind numerous times about what had happened; nonetheless, I refused his invitation to cooperate in the lawsuit. Although I had lost my mother, I had over the previous five seasons of river running seen the rivers' many more positive influences than negative ones on people's lives, even my own.

Returning to the river, both literally, and through river books and research, helped me to recall the positive experiences I had and to heal. I perceived from the experiences that I had with fellow river guides, private boaters, and passengers that rivers had a similar influence on them too; that they had found an escape from the working world, politics, and busy cities and found a love and liberty within this adventurous outdoor wilderness experience. A recent documentary that appeared on Netflix titled *The River Runner* (2021) expressed to a far greater scale some of my feelings regarding rivers and their influence on us. The film follows world-renowned expedition kayaker, cinematographer, and producer Scott Lindgren and depicts how river running probably saved him and his brother from a life of crime, or worse. River running did become his livelihood! He also had a devastating loss of his best friend, Chuck Kern, who died while kayaking the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River on August 14, 1997, and he too returned to the river. Lindgren said,

The river sang to my heart. I'd been fighting my whole life—kids, teachers, cops, parents—and here was a force so powerful that my



only choice was surrender. I recognized the river as a teacher, offering me a gateway to the world. It channeled all the energy that was going to get me locked up or killed into something productive. I couldn't get enough.<sup>9</sup>

I observed a seventy-something-year-old stockbroker loosen up and take his first-ever vacation with a grandson down the Green River. A woman passenger trying to overcome alcoholism was warned she'd relapse by going on a river trip, and instead she was strengthened in her resolve to quit while on a five-day river trip through Desolation Canyon. I saw youth and adults enthusiastically catch their first (cat) fish, and it was easy for me to allow nature to discipline a couple of fighting young siblings on my boat by taking them through Westwater Canyon and scare the hell out of them. And many other families and friends bonded together from the whitewater, the solitude and beauty of the canyons, and the experience of camping in tents, or outside beneath a canopy of stars. Needless to say, nearly everyone enjoyed the various locations where we set up a room with a view (latrine). It's not easy to leave the river, and who would want to?

The following chapters are a continuation and expansion of Westwater history and the discovery of its centrality to the histories of other regions of the Upper Colorado River. Without Westwater Canyon obstructing early river travel, we would have far less knowledge of the historical boaters on the Grand River, and at the head of Westwater Canyon the discovery that the valley was historically important because of its abundance of wood, grass, and water for Native Americans, trappers, surveyors, and settlers traveling between the Green and Grand Rivers along the North Branch of the OST. In addition to new information about the North Branch of the OST, with this book I have added further insight into two stories related to Westwater's Outlaw Cave and added historical documents and insight into the character and boating experiences of the earliest-known parties who tackled Westwater Canyon's troublesome rapids.