



Down the Great Unknown

By Edward Dolnick
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Introduction

The story of Lewis and Clark is one of the most well known adventure tales in American history. The story of the first successful expedition down the Grand Canyon is far less known yet equally important to the opening of the American West. Few Americans know the full story of the canyon's exploration, but finally Edward Dolnick offers readers a thorough and thrilling account of John Wesley Powell's 1869 expedition "down the Great Unknown." Writing so the reader has a sense of being there, Dolnick uses first-hand diary and journal entries from the men who made the historic journey. Drawing on his own impressions from four trips down the Colorado, Dolnick skillfully weaves together historical fact and personal accounts with a great understanding of the geology of the canyon itself. On May 24, 1869, a one-armed Civil War veteran named John Wesley Powell and a ragtag band of nine mountain men embarked on the last great quest in the American West. No one had ever explored the fabled Grand Canyon-to adventurers of that era it was a region full of mystery and peril. The ten men set out from Green River Station, Wyoming Territory, down the mighty Colorado River, in four wooden rowboats hoping to map the region, study its geology and make history. Little did they know they would be lucky

just to survive. They were woefully unprepared, unequipped, and inexperienced, yet what they lacked in practical know-how, they made up for in sheer bravery and determination. The men of the Colorado River Exploring Expedition were avid explorers, but by no means were they experienced river runners. Six of the men, in addition to Powell, were Civil War veterans, five were self-proclaimed mountain men and all were ready to risk life and limb for the sake of a grand adventure. The expedition included Powell's younger brother Walter; Jack Sumner, a mountain guide and outfitter; Oramel Howland, a hunter and sometime printer and editor; his younger brother Seneca, an ex-soldier; Billy Hawkins, also a war veteran; Bill Dunn, another mountain man and acquaintance of Sumner's; and finally, George Bradley, one last Civil War veteran. For Powell, the journey was as much about intellectual exploration as pure adventure. As they made their way down the river they learned through trial and error how (and when) to run rapids and alternately, how to line or portage them when the rapids were beyond their ability. Along the way, they stopped to take barometric readings, mark their maps, and collect rock and fossil samples. All the while, they faced the possibilities of drowning, losing their supplies or one or all of their boats, running into unfriendly Indians or starving to death if their food rations ran out before they reached their destination. Every day the men faced grueling work in the hot sun and often survived on little more than bacon, bread, dried apples and coffee. Hair-raising rapids appeared around nearly every bend and whether running, lining or portaging them, the danger was equally palpable. Aside from the physical dangers of the river, the men also had to deal with the mental toll that such challenges could take, and keeping morale up was a continuous struggle. The men often grew impatient with Powell who wanted to proceed slowly in order to record his scientific observations, while they were anxious to move downstream through the final rapids of the Grand Canyon. At last, ninety-nine days, a thousand miles and nearly 500 rapids after leaving Green River Station, Powell and five of his men came ashore near Calville, Arizona. They arrived in three boats with five days' worth of rations left, completing a journey few thought they would survive, and in the process, resolving the last great mystery of the West.

Questions for Discussion

- Given the extent of exploration of the West in the early to mid 19th century, were you surprised to learn that the Grand Canyon had not really been explored until Powell's expedition in 1869? Why do you think it took so long for someone to have the courage to explore it?
- Do you think Powell realized how terribly unprepared and unskilled they were for this journey? Do you think he was reckless with his own life and the lives of his men? Do you think the other men were truly aware of the danger they faced?
- What do you make of the fact that Powell kept two diaries of the journey? Do you think his published account, which was dictated several years after the actual expedition, was credible? Why or why not? Does that question diminish the feat he actually accomplished?
- What type of a leader do you think John Wesley Powell was? Do you get the impression that the men respected him or just put up with him as their leader? What qualities of a good leader did he exhibit? What qualities was he lacking that could have made for a better trip?
- The author spends two full chapters graphically detailing Powell's service in the Civil War. Discuss the ways that Powell's war experiences may have affected his ambition, his fearlessness, and his leadership on the journey through the Grand Canyon.
- Dolnick notes that one of the biggest challenges Powell and his men faced, was the uncertainty of what lay before them. What kind of men can face not only terrible physical danger, but also keep their nerve day in and day out to deal with the emotional toll of facing unknown challenges?
- Discuss the challenge the men faced in deciding whether to run, line, or portage each rapid. Given the tight supply of their food rations, do you think Powell was right to insist on being more conservative even if it would take them longer to reach their destination?
- In the notes section, Dolnick explains that he stuck to the facts as known in telling the story saying, "I have chosen to leave the gaps rather than guess at how they might be filled. We lose the glossy finish of fiction but gain the tang and texture of reality" (p.293). Do you agree with his philosophy of telling the story this way? Did you feel that anything was missing from the story that you would like to have known?
- Compare Powell's exploration of the Grand Canyon with modern day adventures you've read about such as climbing Mount Everest. Are there similarities in the kinds of people who undertake these challenges? Although technology is far more sophisticated today, are there similarities in the challenges themselves? What do you think motivates these people?