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Glen Canyon and the Persistence of Wilderness

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FIELD NOTES:  
GLEN CANYON AND THE PERSISTENCE  
OF WILDERNESS

JARED FARMER

WHEN THE COLORADO RIVER WAS A RIVER, Glen Canyon was a place: 170 miles of flatwater rimmed by slickrock in southeastern Utah and far northern Arizona. The agreeably redundant place name—*Glen Canyon*—signified the Colorado's myriad tributaries. Glen Canyon was most remarkable for its side canyons. Some of these ravines, these enticing incisions in the sandstone wall, met quick and exquisite deadends, a waterfall, perhaps, trickling into a fern-decked pool. Others, by no indication of their mouths, strayed for dozens of dazzling miles. You never knew what to expect, except wonder. Every stop on a Glen Canyon river trip had potential for adventure. "Awe was never Glen Canyon's province," Wallace Stegner aptly wrote. "That is for the Grand Canyon. Glen Canyon was for delight."<sup>1</sup>

In 1963, Glen Canyon and its extended family of canyons began to die. Twin diversion tunnels, the Colorado River's intravenous life support, were closed, plugged, then sealed. The water, frustrated from its course, pooled submissively blue against the concrete face of the West's last great dam. Lake Powell was born.

That same year saw the publication of a monumental book on Glen Canyon. *The Place No One Knew*, a title in the Sierra Club's celebrated Exhibit Format Series—coffee table propaganda—featured luminous photographs by Eliot Porter alongside quotes from travelers and poets. The book was an obituary, and for many, the definitive record by which the place would be remembered.

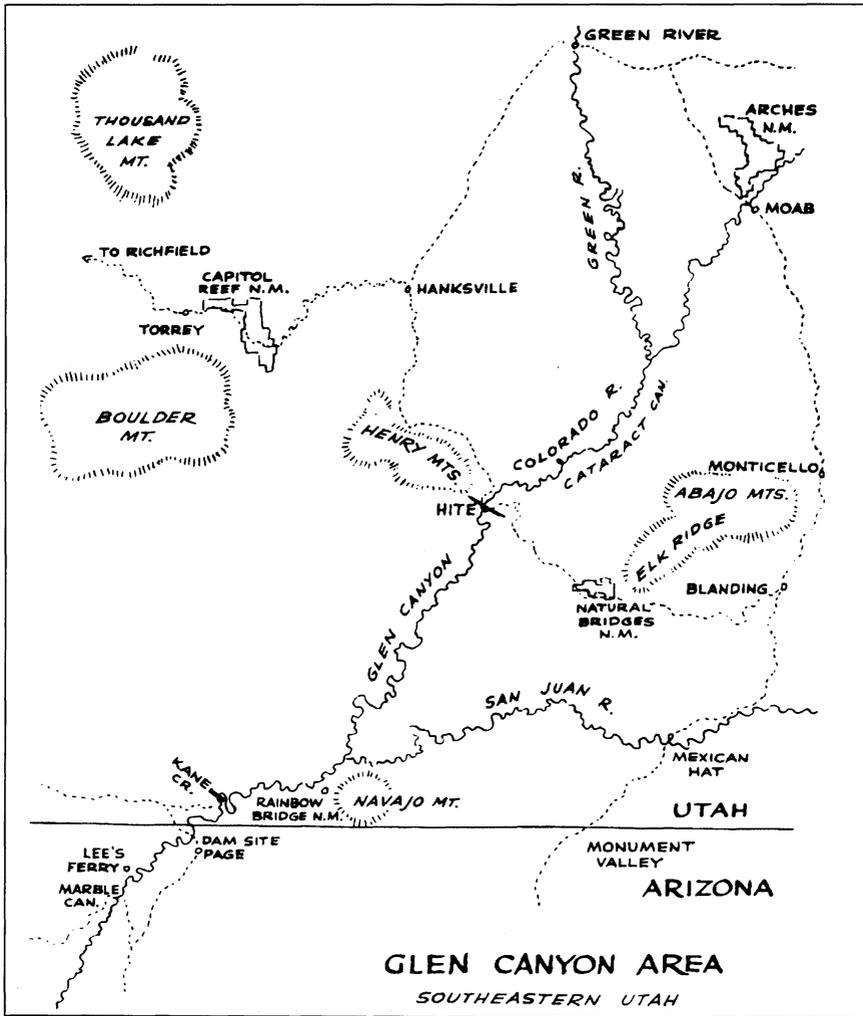
*The Place No One Knew* conveyed two basic messages: Glen Canyon used to be a pristine and astonishingly beautiful wilderness, and without public reckoning, that birthright was laid waste. "The best of the canyon is going or gone," lamented David Brower, executive secretary of the Sierra Club. "Some second-best beauty remains . . . but much of its meaning vanished when Glen Canyon died." Innumerable people have echoed the archdruid's weary outrage over the loss of one of earth's most glorious

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace Stegner, "Glen Canyon Submersus," in *The Sound of Mountain Water* (Garden City, NY, 1969), 121-22.

*Western Historical Quarterly* 27 (Summer 1996):211-22. Copyright © 1996 Western History Association.



Glen Canyon area, ca. 1960. Map by Elizabeth Sprang (King), from her book *Good-bye River*. Courtesy of L. D. Percival King and Kiva Press, Las Cruces, NM. *Good-bye River* was published in 1st ed. by Mojave Books, Reseda, CA, 1979.



The confluence of the San Juan (left) and Colorado in Glen Canyon, March 1963, days before rising Lake Powell stilled the flowing rivers. Note the serpentine side canyons. Photo courtesy U. S. Bureau of Reclamation, Regional Office, Salt Lake City, UT.

canyons. To many environmental activists, Glen Canyon Dam—a dam on a desert river that symbolizes overuse, in a rugged region that symbolizes wildness—remains *the* masterwork of human arrogance. Edward Abbey, that personable misanthrope and most widely-read writer of the American desert, helped remake the edifice into an object of hate. In many of his works, Abbey both rhapsodized about the Glen and fantasized about the destruction of the dam.<sup>2</sup>

Reading carefully the angry and wistful writing about Glen Canyon—and there's plenty of it—one realizes that people are lamenting lost opportunity as much as lost beauty. They mourn the canyon less as a place than as a wilderness in which they did or *might have* experienced something wonderful. Among the most desired experiences is discovery—that exciting feeling, as you move into a slot canyon, that you just might be the first to go here; that you have found a wild sanctuary and forsaken the

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<sup>2</sup> David Brower, "Foreword," in *The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado*, by Eliot Porter (San Francisco, 1963), 7. The full literature on Glen Canyon is too extensive to cite in this essay. For an engaging introduction, turn to Russell Martin's journalistic history, *A Story That Stands Like A Dam: Glen Canyon and the Struggle for the Soul of the West* (New York, 1989). Also see C. Gregory Crampton, *Ghosts of Glen Canyon: History Beneath Lake Powell* (1986; rev. ed., St. George, UT, 1994) and Eleanor Inskip, ed., *The Colorado River through Glen Canyon before Lake Powell: Historic Photo Journal, 1872 to 1964* (Moab, UT, 1995). For Edward Abbey's dam-fantasies, read *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (Philadelphia, 1975).

world. The curious thing about discovery is its persistence. From river-running in the Place No One Knew to houseboating at the Place Everyone Knows—Glen Canyon and Lake Powell, two supposedly antithetical places—visitors and outfitters have often described and sold experiences using the same language of discovery, exploration, and adventure.

Consider this 1941 river-trip promotional:

Each year more people are taking advantage of this opportunity to penetrate the heretofore unreachable “Land of Mystery”; to thrill to the remote fastnesses of these spectacular great canyons. The unlimited number of really unexplored side canyons ever presents the challenge for investigation and exploration.—It is like going into another World.<sup>3</sup>

The author of this verbal enthusiasm was Norman Nevills. Out of his family-run lodge in tiny Mexican Hat, Utah, Nevills cranked out “Canyon Wonderland,” a charmingly crude mimeographed leaflet. Nevills brought unflagging spirit to his struggle to make a living. His business was, for his time, peculiar. He floated high-paying passengers down remote fast-water river canyons. Nevills’s bread-and-butter run started at Mexican Hat, on the San Juan River. He followed the San Juan on its relentlessly crooked course until it married the Colorado midway through the Glen. Nevills’s week-long trips finished at Lee’s Ferry, Arizona, where Glen Canyon ended and the Grand Canyon abruptly began.

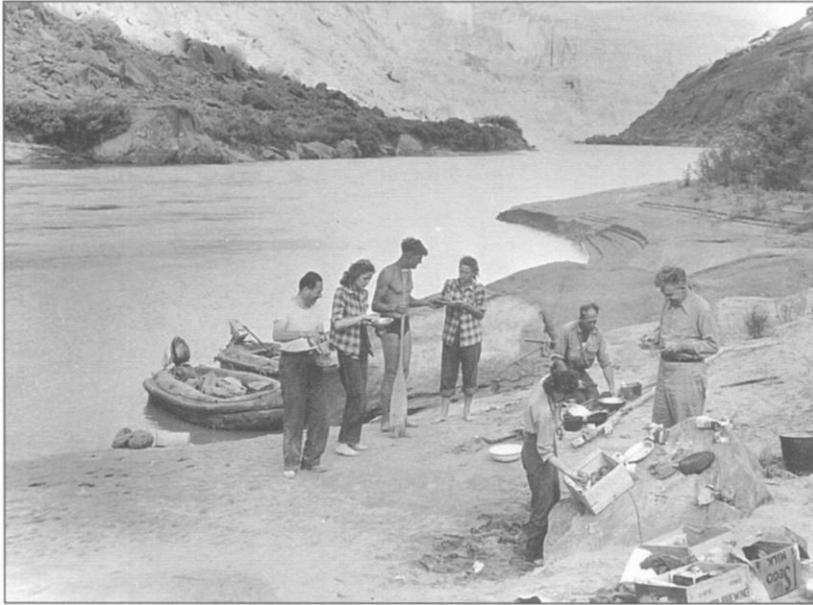
Before he died in a plane crash in 1949, Nevills had established a remarkable river career. He fished for and caught notoriety. In the 1940s, national magazines, including *Life*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *National Geographic*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, ran river-trip features. As much as any individual (one must also credit Bus Hatch of Vernal, Utah), Norman Nevills helped change the image of western river running from a daredevil sport to a legitimate vacation. With an excellent safety and satisfaction record, he could, by the late forties, attract diverse guests—women and men, old and young. The river trip was novel but not exceptional, exciting without the stigma of hazard.<sup>4</sup>

As business improved, Nevills replaced his leaflet with a slick-paper brochure, complete with photographs and testimonials. What could you, the prospective guest, look forward to? SCENIC BEAUTY • EXPLORATION • SAFE ADVENTURE. “Here one may trod where no human has ever before set foot—or follow up the narrow chasm of a side canyon not knowing what the next turn will reveal. It is a thrilling world.” True

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<sup>3</sup> Norman Nevills, “Canyon Wonderland,” brochure, 1941, Box 2, Norman Nevills Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT (hereafter Nevills Papers).

<sup>4</sup> On Nevills, see P. T. Reilly, “Norman Nevills: Whitewater Man of the West,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 55 (Spring 1987): 181-200. A good contemporary feature article is Neil M. Clark, “Fast-water Man,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 18 May 1946, 30-31, 148-52. On Hatch, see Roy Webb, *Riverman: The Story of Bus Hatch* (Rock Springs, WY, 1989). On river running in general, see Roy Webb, *Call of the Colorado* (Moscow, ID, 1994); David Lavender, *River Runners of the Grand Canyon* (Tucson, 1985).



Boating party in Glen Canyon, ca. 1950. Photo courtesy Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.

enough. Big sections of Utah's canyon country had yet to be mapped in detail. It was easy to feel like *voyageurs* charting the Unknown, and Nevills did his best to encourage the fantasy. A passenger in 1948 described waking to the rushing Colorado with a resonant sensation—"explorer's fever." His fever found relief: later in the trip, the Nevills expedition explored and then named a cavernous draw.<sup>5</sup>

In his day, Nevills had Glen Canyon to himself. Only near the end of his career did the first competition form. Then, in the 1950s, recreational activity mushroomed; by the end of that decade, no less than eight outfits plied the river. The new entrepreneurs used WWII surplus neoprene pontoons, affordable, unsinkable rubber tubs that held more people in more comfort than Nevills's trim plywood boats. Business was good.

Private parties, too, began floating the Glen. All it took was a little cash and some leisure time—two post-war increases. No permits required. As well, starting in 1947, hundreds of boy scouts (Explorers, appropriately) from the Wasatch Front and Southern California rained on the Colorado. Though not the docile stream some have depicted—swift water, powerful eddies, and relentless wind could all cause

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<sup>5</sup> "Canyon Voyage with Norman Nevills," brochure, ca. 1948, Box 2, Nevills Papers; Weldon Heald, "The Canyon Wilderness," in *The Inverted Mountains: Canyons of the West*, ed. Roderick Peattie (New York, 1948), 245. Also see Heald's "Loud Roars the San Juan," *Travel* 92 (May 1949): 29-31.

trouble—the run in Glen Canyon was appropriate for anyone with average outdoor skills.

Most of the canyoneers put in at Hite, Utah, at the head of Glen Canyon. Here was the only place to cross the Colorado—on an old-fashioned cable ferry—for 282 river miles. Considering its isolation, Hite (a town so small it eluded the census) began to see an impressive number of visitors. During the 1962 boating season, Woody Edgell, who ran the ferry for the state of Utah, carried some five hundred vehicles per month.<sup>6</sup> Most of these dented, dust-covered cars carried river runners. “The Colorado and its tributary, the San Juan, are seeing traffic of a sort never dreamed of before,” reported the *New York Times*.<sup>7</sup> The prospectors in this “boating rush” sought one-of-a-kind beauty and adventure. In the late fifties and early sixties, Glen Canyon’s busiest era, discovery didn’t abate. In fact, it only increased.

The dominant explanation is Glen Canyon Dam. For many, the giant federal project—began in 1956—intensified the canyon experience. A “fevered mix of discovery and farewell,” essayist Bruce Berger has described it. Like a victim of horrifying disease, the canyon attracted loved ones and curiosity-seekers. Outfitters pocketed the bittersweet reward. In 1962 and early ‘63, riverman Harry Aleson issued the FINAL INVITATION to see “Glen Canyon and the superb beauty in the mouths of hundreds of side canyons and glens, never to be seen by man again.” Call it terminal exploration. In a matter of months or even days, the Bureau of Reclamation would shut the river off. Aleson and his guests never in fact saw the dam from the Colorado; since 1957, all parties were forbidden past Kane Creek, a lonely spot 37 miles upriver, where the government had cut a road. However, the specter of the dam, like thunder from unseen clouds, could jostle the mind-set of canyoneers.<sup>8</sup>

Were machine technology and exploration necessarily incompatible? One outfitter suggested not. Art Greene bucked the neoprene current. Forget about week-long float trips—starting in 1948, he used motorboats to go *up* the river. From Lee’s Ferry, Greene powered passengers to Forbidding Canyon (from there, a six-mile hike to Rainbow Bridge) and back in just three days. Eventually Kane Creek became the base for the trip. Art Greene’s first watercraft, a do-it-yourself beauty, featured a 450-horsepower airplane prop. The noise was deafening, but the contraption did the job. Passengers wore earplugs. This handicap, however, didn’t prevent travel writer Joyce Rockwood Muench from hearing her pulse. She used heart-pounding language to describe Greene’s inaugural up-river trip—another “first” for “Twentieth Century adventurers.” There in Glen Canyon, “no hint of the outside world is had and with

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<sup>6</sup> John V. Young, “Utah’s Land of Standing Rocks,” *Sage* 1 (Fall-Winter 1966): 9-14, quote on 14.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Goodman, “Big Boating Rush Along the Colorado River,” *New York Times*, 29 July 1962, sec. 10, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Berger, *There Was A River* (Tucson, 1994), 2; see, for example, Aleson’s ad in *Desert* 26 (April 1963): 34. Also see “Last Year to See Unspoiled Glen Canyon,” *Sunset* 128 (April 1962): 58-65.

the grand feeling of isolation, the stupendous scale of the chasm, the world seems well lost."<sup>9</sup>

Near the mouth of Glen Canyon, at the future dam site, Muench spotted survey flags and metal earth-moving machines. The equipment seemed "very much out of place among the wildness of the scenery." Still, if you could be an adventurer on a motorboat on a flowing river, so what about a dam? Would the impounded Colorado be that different? Ruefully anticipating the arrival of Lake Powell, one writer gave a sensible answer: A lot more would be able to see the area, "but these thousands will miss the thrills of that wilderness adventure in the slickrock solitude. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

It's one of the great ironies of the reservoir, however, that many found just such a thrill. In 1963, weeks after Lake Powell started rising, a correspondent with the *Salt Lake Tribune* made an inspection tour. He reported, without a hint of regret, the demise of "one of the last great wilderness frontiers." Yet in the same article, he used words that could have described the former, "wild" Glen Canyon—a place of "breathing room" and "solitude" that offers "adventurous skippers and crews plenty of chances to let their exploring imaginations run wild."<sup>11</sup>

Many embraced this exciting incongruity—a wilderness where you could pilot a boat, a reservoir where you could feel like Columbus. Travel articles covering nascent Lake Powell are laden with metaphors of exploration and pioneering. "Historians have called the Indian Wars the last great American adventure," wrote one Salt Laker, "but I can testify there's some left, and I've just had a taste of it."<sup>12</sup> His party of six spent a long weekend at Lake Powell. Half of them had never camped before. They returned to their city homes after three delightful days as frontier adventurers.

The chance to discover was intoxicating. David Brower once labeled 1962 the "Year of the Last Look."<sup>13</sup> Page, Arizona, construction town converting to tourist site, liked to call 1963 the "Year of Exploration." A characteristic traveler's report went like this: "[A]s the water reaches into mysterious canyons, creeping into areas never before seen by whitemen, it will disclose to exploring boaters exciting country seen for the first time."<sup>14</sup> Before the dam, Glen Canyon's tributaries often contained

<sup>9</sup> Joyce Rockwood Muench, "The Trip to the Rock That Goes Over: A Trip to Rainbow by Boat," *Arizona Highways* 25 (August 1949): 30-35, quote on 33. Also see Muench's "The Rainbow Land of Glen Canyon," *Natural History* 59 (June 1950): 264-71.

<sup>10</sup> Muench, "The Trip to the Rock That Goes Over," 35; Natt N. Dodge, "The End of the Rainbow Trail," *National Parks* 35 (March 1961): 8-10, quote on 10.

<sup>11</sup> Mike Korologos, "Canyon Wilds Sink Beneath Big Lake," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 21 May 1963, sec. B, 5.

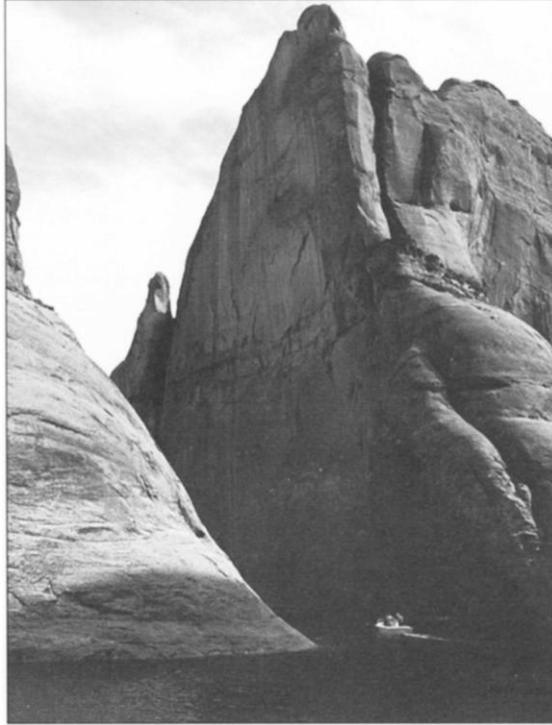
<sup>12</sup> Pat Capson, "Safari Afloat," *Desert* 29 (May 1966): 8-9, quote on 8.

<sup>13</sup> David Brower, "Glen Canyon: The Year of the Last Look," *Sierra Club Bulletin* 47 (June 1962): 7.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Pepper, "A Lake Is Born," *Desert* 26 (July 1963): 20-24, quote on 24. Popular travel articles constitute a legitimate primary source—but only in quantity. About one hundred Lake Powell features (from 1963 to the present) were read for this essay. In addition to titles cited elsewhere, magazine coverage from the 1960s includes the following: Ben Avery, "Lake Powell—

impassable drop-offs or choke-stones, tantalizing barriers to the unknown. As the listless lake invaded the glens, overwhelming ferns and cottonwoods, beaver and deer, the water surpassed the rock obstacles, permitting exploration beyond. Eyes aglow, boaters propelled up canyons where perhaps even the nimble Anasazi had never been, and itinerant ravens never cared to go.

And Lake Powell offered more. Not only could you discover a specific twisting canyon, you could find solitude in the main channel. Most observers of the infant lake mentioned both the geographic isolation and the personal solitude—a week gone by without seeing another soul. Here you could really escape the world. Like any “wilderness” should be, Lake Powell was a clean slate, the marks of



Motorboat explorers accept the invitation of a Lake Powell side canyon, June 1965. Photo courtesy U. S. Bureau of Reclamation, Regional Office, Salt Lake City.

riverine history having been erased. *Terra incognita*: This created landscape literally had never been seen before. The new shoreline was simple—rock meets water, water reflects rock. The reservoir looked, at least while it rose, shockingly pure. Several went so

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What Kind of a Lake Will It Be?" *Arizona Wildlife & Travelogue* 34 (September 1963): 18-25; Fred Clark, Jr., "Gunkholing the Glens," *Yachting* 122 (August 1967): 48-50, 78-79; Louis Corbeau, "Lake Powell Is Being Filled," *Motor Boating* 112 (August 1963): 44-46; Floyd Dominy, "Yours to Discover," *Western Gateways* 5 (Spring 1965): 12-15, 22, 42-43; Walter Meayers Edwards, "Lake Powell: Waterway to Desert Wonders," *National Geographic* 132 (July 1967): 44-75; no author, "Lake Powell," *Motorland* 89 (March 1968): 26-31; Buz Fawcett, "Lake Powell," *Sports Afield* (June 1966): 25-27, 78-82; A. Golay, "Lake Powell Idyl," *Western Gateways* 9 (March 1969): 48-53, 91-97; Randall Henderson, "Lake in the Redrock Canyons," *Westways* 56 (March 1964): 20-22; Joyce Rockwood Muench, "Fill'er Up: A New Lake Is Born," *Motor Boating* 133 (May 1964): 21-23, 110; Choral Pepper, "Lake Powell: Adventure Is Now!" *Desert* 30 (April 1967): 25-27; Pat Perrett, "A New 'Desert' for Cruising," *Outdoors* 6 (August 1964): 2-9; Elizabeth Ward, "America's Newest Water Playground: Lake Powell," *Ford Times* 57 (October 1964): 17-21; John V. Young, "Powerboat Camping on Lake Powell," *Better Camping* 7 (May 1966): 22-26. Also see the January 1964 special issue of *Arizona Highways* and *Lake Powell Vacationland*, the yearly supplement to *Western Gateways*.

far as to describe the man-made waterway as “unspoiled” and “unexploited.” SCENIC LAKE POWELL, proclaimed one newspaper subhead, HEART OF UTAH’S WILDERNESS.<sup>15</sup>

This wasn’t mere hyperbole. In the first months—even the first several years for some parts of the sprawling lake—the place did seem wild. The head-start boaters found no operating marina. For seven months after the dam gates closed, boating recreationists had to drive 23 miles of jarring dirt road to Kane Creek to put in. During the same time, at the very same spot, straggling river parties took out. In August 1963, the lake finally rose high enough to service the permanent boat ramp at Wahweap Marina, near Page. Years before, with great foresight, Art Greene had leased the state property for development. Did the Arizona business pioneer have misgivings about Lake Powell? No permanent ones. “Now a whole new breed of people can come out and be adventurers in safety,” Greene told *National Geographic*, sounding like Norman Nevills two decades earlier.<sup>16</sup>

Adventure it was. Before the summer of 1964, nothing save shoreline and sky existed for 150 miles beyond Wahweap. If you wanted to make it very far from the dock, you had to carry your own gas, and plenty of it. More than a few visitors got stranded or lost. There were no patrols at first, no buoys marking the maze of side channels. “Be carefree but not careless,” admonished the National Park Service, the agency given charge of the reservoir. “This is a place for recreation, but it is just emerging from its wild state.”<sup>17</sup> Ambitious recreational developments were in the works, but they were unfinished when, just days after Lake Powell started rising, people arrived with their boats in tow.

Visitation numbers tell a story. In 1963, the year of Lake Powell’s debut, an estimated 44,000 people came to look, to fish, to boat. Judging from entries in the Rainbow Bridge visitor register, the actual count on the lake was lower, but the fact that any number of people would haul a boat across hundreds of miles of desert to a reservoir with practically no developments is remarkable. Primitiveness was part of the lure. “From an exploring standpoint,” explained the *Salt Lake Tribune*, “boating the lake right now is the best time.”<sup>18</sup>

People understood that Lake Powell’s embryonic phase would be short. Now was the time to explore. In 1968, one travel writer was surprised but delighted that he couldn’t find a detailed map of the reservoir. “Ahead of all who go there is mystery and discovery. Go there now, before it is all ‘discovered,’ and make your own map. You’ll never have a chance again quite like it.” These words, and others like them, sound like preparations for nostalgia. Bruce Berger tells of a friend who discovered the canyon only after the dam. On his first day on Lake Powell in 1963, he saw nobody else. He returned yearly for a “series of

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<sup>15</sup> Rosalie Goldman, “Soaring Arches, Remote Gorges in Park Setting,” *Chicago Tribune*, 18 June 1967, sec. 6, 1, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph Gray, “From Sun-clad Sea to Shining Mountains,” *National Geographic* 125 (April 1964): 542-89, quote on 564.

<sup>17</sup> “Glen Canyon National Recreation Area,” brochure, National Park Service, July 1964, C. Gregory Crampton files (unsorted), Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

<sup>18</sup> Visitation figures, National Park Service, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Page, AZ. Approximately 2,800 people (some of them river runners) signed the register at Rainbow Bridge National Monument in 1963. Even with the reservoir, it was a considerable hike to the bridge. (Now it can be reached by boat.) The register is found at Park Service headquarters in Page. Mike Korologos, “High and Dry,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 19 May 1963, sec. D, 8.

fresh adventures in a new country.” But each subsequent year, more people appeared and more canyon disappeared. Finally, inevitably, faced with a barrage of fun-seekers, he threw in the towel: “That was the end of our Lake Powell, which was a place for exploration, and its conversion into pure recreation.”<sup>19</sup>

A trip through the travel literature shows that the lake has indeed become something of an aqua-park for the affluent. Contemporary travel articles tend to focus on the joys of houseboating and waterskiing. But the language of discovery survives. Even the reservoir’s name, Lake Powell, evokes exploration. It honors—or dishonors, depending whom you ask—John Wesley Powell, the great scientist and bureaucrat. Travel brochures recall his famous first voyage down the Colorado River in 1869. In the remote realms of the lake, they say, you’ll feel a bit like Major Powell. ARAMARK, the leisure corporation that now owns the marinas, points up the available comforts of home and luxuries of a resort, but adventure still comes with the package: “96 Canyons to Explore” at “America’s Natural Playground.”<sup>20</sup> The concessionaire advertises various combo tours—the Houseboat Explorer, the Senior RV Rainbow Explorer, the Canyon Explorer. With its subsidiary, Wilderness River Adventure, Inc., you can experience the remnant 15 miles of Glen Canyon. Motorized float trips embark daily from the foot of the dam.

The persistence of wilderness buzz-words around places that no longer resemble “wilderness” indicates the cultural—and commercial—importance of the imagined primitive West. Glen Canyon is but one example. The words are pervasive; one should be wary of associating public language with private experience, or basing generalizations on selected sources. Not everyone who wrote about what they did in Glen Canyon used the language of discovery. Not everyone, by a long shot, wrote anything at all. And though published travel accounts do display striking correspondence, the same words don’t necessarily embody identical personal meaning.

Despite these problems, the point remains: At Glen Canyon, before and after the dam, something real, something participatory, is obtainable beyond the worn-out vocabulary. Each year, as the reservoir inched upwards—Lake Powell didn’t reach capacity until 1980—landforms were submerged and viewpoints revealed, creating unused exploring grounds. At full pool, Lake Powell boasts an incredible 1,960 miles of shoreline. In recent years of little rain, the reservoir dropped nearly one hundred feet, exposing cliffs and canyons, disclosing sites never seen by most visitors. And for each individual, of course, the first trip to any canyon of Lake Powell at any time offers personal opportunity for exploration. What’s more, these slickrock fjords, stained as they are by a bathtub ring and clogged with summertime tourists, *do* lead to “natural” areas, oases of solitude. Today Lake Powell receives nearly three million annual visitors (who consume some five million gallons of gas), but the surrounding territory remains as undeveloped as any in the contiguous United States. One recent guidebook described the lake as part of the last great American wilderness, a place that “offers adventure and discovery.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> George S. Wells, “Lake Powell,” *Travel* 129 (March 1968): 52-56, 66-67, quote on 67; Berger, *There Was A River*, 36-39.

<sup>20</sup> “Family Room,” advertisement, in *Utah Travel Guide*, Utah Travel Council (Salt Lake City, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Jim Harpster, “Foreword,” in *Lake Powell Boater’s Guide*, by Dennis Netoff et al. (Page, AZ, 1989), 5. Also see Dick Hodgson, *An Explorer’s Guide to Lake Powell Country* (Sioux Center, IA, 1993), and Rob Schultheis, “The Lake in the Desert,” *Outside* 9 (June 1984): 38-44, 69-71.



Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell, 1966. The dam, composed of 5 million cubic yards of concrete, rises 587 feet from the river bed. The reservoir, the second largest in the United States, can hold 27 million acre feet, about two year's flow of the Colorado. Photo courtesy U. S. Bureau of Reclamation, Regional Office, Salt Lake City, UT.

Many who mourn Glen Canyon have forsaken the place. They refer to its successor as Lake Foul or the Blue Death. "Put a road into wild country and the wild country is gone," elegized one conservationist in 1964. "Put a marina in wild country and again it is gone."<sup>22</sup> The message? Glen Canyon has changed from sacred to desecrated. Formerly a wilderness, the place is now a playground.

In truth, the reservoir can act as both. A representative travel writer cited the "feeling of adventure following the spirit of early explorers" as an important component of his idyllic Lake Powell vacation, "but the luxury of the houseboat had to top the list." Another houseboater, after enjoying a spaghetti dinner, "slipped from familiar domesticity into a night out of time, simply by stepping off the porch of the houseboat into the silent, black solitude of the canyon." Like Norman Nevills's passengers 30 years before, she entered another world, a world for exploration—only she did it with a single step.<sup>23</sup>

Accounts like these pose difficult questions. If you can have a "wilderness experience" on a houseboat (a mass of metal and plastic) on a reservoir (the result of concrete and tubing), what in the world is wilderness? Why do people cry over the lost wilderness of Glen Canyon?

<sup>22</sup> Richard C. Bradley, "Requiem for a Canyon," *Pacific Discovery* 17 (May-June 1964): 2-9, quote on 5.

<sup>23</sup> Ernie Cowan, "Happiness Is . . . A Houseboat on Lake Powell," *Desert* 37 (May 1974): 24-29, quote on 29; Margaret G. Nichols, "Bass, Buffalo, and Bluegills," *Field & Stream* 80 (April 1976): 84-88, quote on 85.

Considering what Lake Powell replaced—natural bridges, nameless canyons, cliff ruins and heron rookeries, the Colorado bending round tapestried walls—it's difficult not to feel bad. The room for sorrow is spacious. One suggestion of the Glen's former glory is the size (and remarkable high caliber) of its literature—the literature of the lost.<sup>24</sup>

Ironically, though, for those who have only books by which to remember, even well-placed sorrow can turn to self-pity: *I came too late*. Too late to see the unspoiled West, too late to discover Glen Canyon in its wilderness state. But imagined paradise is just imagination—not a place, but The Place No One Knew. This consecration of Glen Canyon implies inconsistent beliefs. Not enough people knew about the canyon to save it; and precisely because it was unknown, Glen Canyon was wonderful—a rock fantasy land, in other words, where you might have felt the ecstasy of exploration.

Viewing the canyon like this—seeing the true West, in the sharp words of Elliott West, as “timeless, unlayered, storyless . . . the land of No Place”—leads to heartache and short-sightedness.<sup>25</sup> This viewpoint disguises the fact that exploration has and will go on at Lake Powell. It excludes the possibility that the man-made lake could possess some of the other experiential qualities—mystery, sacred beauty—so freely attributed to wilderness. Perhaps most troubling, it serves to define “wilderness experience” as essentially escaping the world and finding, however briefly, a more potent one. Discovery—with its legacies of conquest

<sup>24</sup> The best single piece of writing on Glen Canyon is Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York, 1968), 151-95; also see Abbey's *Beyond the Wall: Essays from the Outside* (New York, 1984), 95-103. Other titles include F. A. Barnes, *Canyon Country Arches and Bridges* (Moab, UT, 1987), 258-61, 404-405; Charles Bowden, *Blue Desert* (Tucson, 1986), 87-98; David Brower et al., “Remember These Things Lost,” in *Time and the River Flowing: Grand Canyon*, by Francois Leydet (San Francisco, 1964), 157-75; Dave Conley, “Lake Powell: Paradise or Paradise Lost?” *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City), 21 August 1983, sec. T, 1, 6; Charles Eggert, “Forbidden Passage,” *Sierra Club Bulletin* 43 (November 1958): 44-52; Frank L. Griffin, Jr., “Visit to a Drowning Canyon,” *Audubon* 68 (January-February 1966): 27-32; Philip Hyde, *A Glen Canyon Portfolio* (Flagstaff, 1979), and “A Lament for Glen Canyon,” *Living Wilderness* 44 (September 1980): 21-23; Bruce M. Kilgore, “Silent River,” *Sierra Club Bulletin* 48 (April-May 1963): 6-7; Gary Ladd, *Lake Powell: A Photographic Essay of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area* (Santa Barbara, CA, 1994); Katie Lee et al., “People on the River” and E. Tad Nichols, “Glen Canyon As It Was: A Photographic Record,” *Journal of Arizona History* 17 (Spring 1976): 39-56, 57-68; John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid* (New York, 1971), 153-245; Ellen Meloy, *Raven's Exile: A Season on the Green River* (New York, 1994), 85-97; Eliot Porter, “The Exploration of Glen Canyon,” in *The Place No One Knew*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City, 1988), 6-7, and “Lament for a Lost Eden: Lake Powell,” *American Heritage* 20 (October 1969): 60-61; P. T. Reilly, “The Lost World of Glen Canyon,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 63 (Spring 1995): 122-34; Terry Russell and Renny Russell, *On the Loose* (San Francisco, 1967), 91-105; Richard Shelton, “Glen Canyon on the Colorado,” in *The Forgotten Language: Contemporary Poets and Nature*, ed. Christopher Merrill (Salt Lake City, 1991), 132-35; Vaughn Short, *Raging River, Lonely Trail: Tales Told by the Campfire's Glow* (Tucson, ca. 1978), 39-43, 66-69, 103-106; Elizabeth Sprang, *Good-bye River* (1979; reprint, Las Cruces, NM, 1992); Gaylord Staveley, *Broken Waters Sing: Rediscovering Two Great Rivers of the West* (Boston, 1971), 135-40; Robert Swift, “Glen Canyon: A Negative Opinion,” *Point West* 3 (November 1961): 22, 52-53; John Telford and William Smart, *Lake Powell: A Different Light* (Salt Lake City, 1994); Stephen Trimble, “Glen Canyon: It's a Dam Shame,” *Arizona Daily Star* (Tucson), 7 August 1988, sec. G, 1, 3; Ann Weiler Walka, “Lake Powell: A Canyon Transformed,” *Plateau* 65, no. 2 (1994); Stanley L. Welsh, *Water, Stone, Sky: A Pictorial Essay on Lake Powell* (Provo, UT, 1974). Be sure to read Ann Ronald's wry commentary on nature writers who write about the Glen Canyon region, “Why Don't They Write About Nevada?” in *Wilderness Tapestry: An Eclectic Approach to Preservation*, ed. Samuel I. Zeveloff et al. (Reno, 1992), 97-109.

<sup>25</sup> Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque, 1995), 142.

and consumerism—becomes a desired means of encountering the wild. The irony is poignant, and very human.

“[O]n a geological scale of time, the building of Glen Canyon Dam hardly mattered,” Patricia Limerick has written. “If the dam was a crime, [people]—not nature itself—were the victims.”<sup>26</sup> One should add a clarification: Some people were victims, some beneficiaries, still others a bit of both. Nevertheless, the language, and at times even the experiences of those who mourn Glen Canyon and those who delight in Lake Powell are parallel.

And to follow that conclusion, a caveat.

Whatever meaning people give Glen Canyon, whatever reading one may give the texts on Glen Canyon, there is this humbling, inescapable fact: *Something* great is gone. Not some idea of nature, but the reality of a maidenhair fern unfurling in the quiet of a glen. Something independently real and irreplaceable—a place if not a wilderness—lies submerged beneath the wakes of passing boats.



Lake Powell near Kane Creek, July 1963. Photo courtesy U. S. Bureau of Reclamation, Regional Office, Salt Lake City, UT.

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<sup>26</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Desert* (Albuquerque, 1985), 156.