In Print

Damming Grand Canyon: The 1923 USGS Colorado River Expedition

by Diane E. Boyer and Robert H. Webb, Utah State University Press, 2007, $35

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In 1922, the Colorado River Compact allocated the river's water among the seven basin states. However, no means to control that water existed. The U.S. Geological Survey and the much younger U.S. Reclamation Service were struggling to figure out their respective roles, and both wanted a say in control of the Colorado. The notes and maps of John Wesley Powell's earlier Grand Canyon explorations were not reliable enough for their engineering needs: a detailed map was needed.

For nearly three months in the summer and fall of 1923, 12 men in four aged, wooden boats traveled through and mapped 29 potential dam sites in Grand Canyon. *Damming Grand Canyon: The 1923 USGS Colorado River Expedition* sets the stage for this wild adventure and then provides a day-by-day account as recorded in the participants' journals.

Prelude to the Expedition

The book begins with the history of development of the Colorado River, including early attempts to control it. It delves into politics as well, discussing the formation and early leadership of USGS and Reclamation and their disagreements over where dams should be built and how the decision should be made. Finally, it describes how the 1923 expedition was organized and the dynamics of the group.

Journal Entries

The expedition included engineers, geologists, topographers, boatmen, and cooks. Eight of the men kept journals; their entries, supplemented with narrative, make up the middle part of the book.

The journal entries are daily; often several men's accounts of the same day are included. Personal notes, such as what they ate or heard on the radio in the evening, add interest. The entries also offer insight about the pre-dam Grand Canyon. They wrote of abundant flying insects and the scarcity of sandbars in Upper Granite Gorge, conditions typically—and incorrectly—attributed today to the presence of dams, according to the authors.

Virtually no mention was made of environmental or aesthetic impacts should a dam be built in the canyon, except in one brief entry where the trip leader noted that a proposed damsite might have engineering drawbacks, but "at least it wouldn't inundate Bright Angel Creek and Phantom Ranch."

Aftermath

The book ends with a description of the subsequent careers of the expedition members, the outcome of their work, and the paths the agencies followed.

For readers lacking familiarity with the agencies' histories and the individuals involved, it can take some time to keep it all straight. The book is heavily footnoted, which is variously distracting, helpful, and interesting. Some footnotes explain the significance of a particular entry, describe how the reports conflict, or elaborate on a relationship. Without the footnotes, the journal entries alone would not convey the same level of conflict among the group.

Damming Grand Canyon also contains abundant photos from the expedition that provide interesting insight on the men, their equipment, and how the canyon looked at that time.

This book has appeal for a diverse audience ranging from those interested in USGS/Reclamation history to those familiar with the canyon and its geology, river rafters, environmentalists interested in fate the canyon escaped, and those who dream of big dams.