

Through the Canyon

By Mark T. Warner

About July 1, 1934, Robert O. Davis, topographer of the United States Geological Survey, arrived in Montrose, Colorado, to make an official survey of that portion of the Black Canyon lying within the bounds of the newly-created Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument.

In organizing a party, he invited Reverend Mark Warner and D. B. Walker, photographer of the Walker Art Studio, to accompany him on a five-day trip through the canyon. They readily accepted. Glen Fleming was chosen as a general service man, and the two Kane brothers, Henry and Charles, were employed as "top men" to help transport equipment and provisions into and out of the canyon. Two rodmen, Palmer Bowen and Robert Eykyn, completed the party.

Later, in writing of this thrilling experience, Reverend Warner said in an article published in *The Montrose Daily Press*, October 1, 1934:

The Black Canyon of the Gunnison has always held a strange fascination for those who had the privilege of peering into its awful depths and with the eye following the course of the roaring Gunnison River as it tumbles and foams and dashes its way over and among great boulders to be found all along the narrow river bed at the base of the precipitous canyon walls. But this fascination and the thrill of the Black Canyon is greatly intensified for those who are privileged to traverse the rough river bed, and view the rugged canyon walls from below. There are hundreds of pinnacles, towers and other peculiar rock formations which may be seen projecting into the sky as one follows along the bottom of the canyon but which cannot be distinguished at all from either canyon rim as they blend into the colored granite walls. One will never have seen the Black Canyon in its more majestic and thrilling aspects until he sees it from the bottom. . . .

It was necessary for Mr. Davis and party of the Geological Survey to make this trip through the Black Canyon in order to obtain the necessary data for making an accurate topographic map. Up to the time of making this official survey, very little accurate information was available concerning the canyon as regards depth, width and other pertinent facts necessary for the proper appreciation of this stupendous gorge. The survey authorized by the Denver and Rio Grande railroad and made by Byron H. Bryant and party during the winter of 1882-83 furnished much interesting information relative to the Black Canyon as did the exploring parties of Prof. A. L. Fellows and Mr. W. W. Torrence in the summer of 1901¹ who traversed the river bed of the canyon in the interest of the Gunnison tunnel that was being proposed at that time. This information, while very interesting and valuable because it represents the difficult, pioneering work along this line, will now be supplemented by a large volume of accurate data obtained by Mr. Davis in his recent survey.

. . . Soon after the arrival of Mr. Davis in Montrose, about July

¹ See: Richard G. Beidleman, "The Gunnison River Diversion Project," *The Colorado Magazine*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 3 (July, 1959), 187-201; *ibid.*, No. 4 (October, 1959), 266-285.



Walker Art Studio
Looking Down The Canyon
Toward Pulpit Rock



U.S.G.S. Party
L. to R.: Glen Fleming, Robert Eykyn, R. O. Davis,
Palmer Bowen, Rev. Mark T. Warner

1, 1934, he came to visit me telling of his mission and work he had come to do in connection with mapping the Black canyon of the Gunnison National monument. He with Mrs. Davis had come here from the Carlsbad Caverns National park, where he had been engaged in similar work. Of course I am always glad to furnish information to anyone interested in our national monument, especially if interested in the development of the park, and so after a reconnaissance trip to the monument looking over roads, triangulation points and other matters of interest, Mr. Davis began his work.

In a few days we met again to make plans for the proposed exploration and survey of the canyon. Mr. D. B. Walker, photographer of Walker Art Studio, and I had talked at various times of making a trip thru the canyon but no definite plans had been made, so when invited by Mr. Davis to accompany the Geological survey party on its expedition this seemed a very satisfactory arrangement as the larger group would in many ways prove an advantage. . . .

In making our plans for the trip we consulted all available information in an effort to ascertain just what we might be expected to encounter by way of danger and hardship, and what equipment and provisions would best serve our needs. Many fascinating stories have been told and written concerning the experiences of men, who in other years had ventured to match their courage and endurance with the treacherous waters of the Gunnison, but we were not alarmed at those stories. We knew that when their explorations were carried on, all the water of the river was flowing entirely thru the narrow Black canyon as there was no Gunnison tunnel at that time, while in our case we did not expect to contend with a great deal of water as most of the water was at the time of our trip being diverted thru the tunnel for irrigation purposes in the valley. Still it was a problem to decide just what to take to be sure that we had all that we actually needed and yet not be encumbered with unnecessary luggage. So we made our selection largely thru the process of elimination.

. . . Ordinarily I do a great deal of culinary work in camp, but on this trip I was charged with the responsibility of providing trout each day for the camp menu. However, I would have accomplished more as a cook, for as a trout fisherman I proved a total failure, catching just one trout thruout the canyon trip. The others who fished met with the same results. We had nothing by way of bait or lure in which they were interested. After the evening meal we sat around our campfire until the embers died out, then retired to our downy beds on our sand mattresses to await sleep which was never long in coming after a day of hard work climbing over granite boulders of all sizes. Really a sandbar mattress can be made most comfortable. It can be adjusted to conform perfectly to the particular size and shape of any individual. If you want a pillow of any certain proportions, all that is necessary is to heap the sand under the head of your blanket to the desired dimensions. If you awaken in the night with a cramp in any part of the body, one only needs to reach under the blanket and either pile up the sand or take it away until the affected spot on the body is comfortable. . . .

. . . I have slept out in the open beneath the stars upon many occasions and in many places, but never in a more elaborately ornamented bedroom than with the spires, pinnacles and towers of the canyon rim almost completely surrounding us and it was a rare privilege we enjoyed of lying on our sandbar bed and watching the morning sun illuminate these various points as it slowly flooded the canyon with its descending rays. And this was an experience that we enjoyed every morning—an experience that

one cannot have except in the depth of a rugged canyon like the Black Canyon. . . .

. . . We were up early Wednesday morning [the third day] and soon making preparations for a hard day. After morning camp duties were all finished one of the rodmen swam thru "the Narrows" for a level reading. We had previously decided to measure the canyon at this point so Davis and Fleming, each holding the end of a string swam to the narrow portion of the gorge, Davis taking the north way with the current. When each reached their respective sides of the canyon, they tightened their string and holding their marks swam back to shore. Upon measuring the marked string we found the canyon at "The Narrows" to be just 40 feet wide. It is the narrowest place in the entire Black Canyon and thru this narrow gorge the mighty Gunnison pours its turbulent waters. The canyon at this point is 1725 feet deep. Every member of our party decided that this portion of the Black Canyon for about one and one-half miles each way from "the Narrows" is by far the most fascinating and thrilling of any part, and from the bottom is much more magnificent and impressive than from the top.

. . . We were rather slow in getting started on Thursday, the fourth morning as we were tired and worn from the hard day before altho we traveled only 1.3 miles. Leaving on the right or north side of the river we only went 200 yards until we had to cross to the south side. This crossing was effected by means of using ropes over large boulders forming a natural bridge. The water runs under and among the large rocks at this point practically disappearing from view. Some very interesting potholes were discovered in some of the rocks of this natural bridge and these, together with the natural bridge can be seen from the Bridge site on both canyon rims looking down the river. This crossing was rather dangerous and difficult as in one instance there was a sheer drop of some ten feet to a small round boulder below with a deep and swiftly moving current of water running by. A few yards below we had to cross the river to the north side, this crossing being accomplished with the aid of our ropes. This was our last difficult crossing as the river widens at this point, and the boulders are not so large, or at least the large ones are not nearly so numerous. Near the last rock crossing we came upon a small waterfall of several feet drop and under a large rock was a cave-like hole filled with mist from the falls and stepping into this was like stepping into a real refrigerator. Beginning at the East Portal of the tunnel, for the first two miles the river drops 40 feet per mile. In the third mile the drop is 75 feet; fourth, 55; fifth, 110; sixth, 200; seventh, 260; eighth, 140; with a 70 foot drop in 700 feet; ninth, 50; tenth, 40; eleventh, 40; twelfth, 50.

The following depths are given covering some of the better known points of interest. Depth of canyon at East Portal, 1880 feet. East Portal triangulation station, 1,850 feet. About 1.7 miles below this station the depth is 1920 feet. Rock point as seen upstream from Pulpit rock, 1820. Pulpit rock 1770 feet. The Narrows, 1725 on south rim and 1718 on north rim. At the Bridge site the canyon is 1830 feet deep from the south rim. At High point about one mile below the Bridge site the canyon is 2300 feet in depth, and at the hill on the rim overlooking Main street, Montrose, the canyon is 2730 feet deep. As a result of the splendid and careful work of Mr. Davis along with that of other parties and members of the U. S. Geological survey, we are now in a position to give authentic information regarding depth, width and other interesting features of the Black Canyon within the boundaries of the national monument.