



The Needles area with the Abajos in the distance. These interesting erosion forms are in extremely primitive country. Photos courtesy W. C. Lee.

The confluence of the Green and Colorado rivers, looking northeast toward the La Sal Mountains.

DEAD HORSE POINT IN RAINBOW LAND

*By Josephine Fabian**



Utah has inherited some priceless possessions whose age defies the imagination. Like many family heirlooms, ignored as "old stuff" by some, cast off for the new by others, they keep cropping up here and there until an appreciation of their antiquity brings them into proper focus. A sentimental relative or a studious historian may polish them up and preserve them for the next generation. A few withstand the ravages of time. One such treasure gives Utah a unique position in the world today. Tucked away in the eastern expanse from the northern to the southern border of the state, a virtual "Biography of the Earth" has been written. The story begins almost at the moment the earth fell away from the sun, and the vicissitudes of the young earth in a universe of planets and stars, satellites, and revolving bits and pieces is forcefully and vividly told.

As with most historians, Earth accumulated a great deal of material but was a long time getting around to writing down the record. The colossal job of digging down to her core to find out what made her tick, however, was not left to latter-day archeologists. Accommodatingly, a few million years ago Earth found a way to tell her story. She used a wonderful device. Out of all the elements she had employed in growing

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up—the heat she had with her from the sun, the atmosphere, upheavals, erosion, earthquakes, volcanoes, oceans, tides, lakes — she saved the job of “making the record” for a couple of upstarts.

Two western rivers, to be known in the remote nineteenth century A.D. as the Green and the Grand (Colorado), were set to work. Their task was to roll back history by cutting away the outside surface of the earth, on down, into and through all the formations, until some of the first layers of the earth's skin were reached. Relentlessly, the rivers carved and threaded their way, working on a gigantic scale to lay open the canyons of the Green and the Colorado and to reveal for posterity the secrets of the earth's formation, her turbulent youth and her development to a robust maturity at which she would boast of a diameter of 7,926 miles, a circumference of 24,902 miles, and a weight of 6.6 sextillion tons! The repositories of this fabulous record are the natural bookshelves stretching upward from the shorelines of the two rivers along their steep, high, canyon walls. The full length covers 1,030 miles. Of these, 760 miles are in Utah from the upper reaches where the rivers began their carving down to the state line. Two hundred and seventy miles, which include the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, are in Arizona. Utah inherited most of the book!

The two great rivers did most of the “writing,” but Nature provided many collaborators — the wind, the rain, the elements — to draw scenes, descriptions of which range from angelic likenesses to Dante's Inferno. Then, as though inspired to imitate Nature in her recording work, the earliest inhabitants of Utah found a way to help with the record. The Indian people chipped away on the rocks and stones, and in simple but graphic ways told parts of their own living story. Many such records, now thousands of years old, are filed away along remote canyon walls. Some can be reached and read only if one is willing to scramble down steep ledges; others are accessible only by boat on the rivers themselves. Many of these priceless stories may still be undiscovered; others have been studied, photographed, and in some cases destroyed by carelessness and wanton lack of appreciation; and still others are soon to be lost forever in the progress of man as he inundates much of this precious heritage with dams along the Green and Colorado waterways.

The rivers and the Indians were the only scribes until the year 1776, an important year in the human history of our whole nation. The little fringe of eastern colonists hanging tenaciously to the Atlantic Coast, who were trying to establish a new homeland and a new and lasting government, had hacked their way only to the forests of Pennsylvania.

The vast limitless country to the west was unknown to them. Yet many years before this time there were well-established missions thriving in New Mexico. Spanish padres were living among and converting the Indians to Christianity. And at the very time the Declaration of Independence was being born, the Franciscan fathers, Francisco Antanasio Domínguez and Silvester Vélez de Escalante, with their small band were padding and trodding their way into the Great Basin, exploring, mapping, and naming the terrain from Santa Fé, New Mexico, through much of Utah and back to their point of beginning. Certainly the Fourth of July fireworks celebrating 1776 should have one great flare for Father Escalante, who with pen and ink set down in his now-famous Journal the detailed findings of his group as they trod the paths of the great rivers. It was he who wrote another chapter and opened a whole new vista as the white man discovered and laid claim to the boundless and fascinating land of the Green and the Colorado rivers.

Following the padres came other explorers, scientists, and students, who worked over the old "biography," and its value began to be recognized. Explorations in recent decades have brought to light new facts of history, and the reports and findings are available in libraries throughout the country. Caves and deep recesses along the canyon walls and river banks have revealed the habitations of mankind, some said to be over 15,000 years old. Investigation has uncovered petroglyphs and pictographs depicting much that was unknown, and excavations have disclosed evidences of life from its very beginning — fossils and skeletons classified as those of the giant mastodon and dinosaur down to the tiny cohippus, forefather of the western pony.

Dead Horse Point, one of the most spectacular places in southeastern Utah, is like an index finger to the vast country which holds these and many other wonders in its embrace. Geographically, the Point comes as a surprise, for it is reached by a fairly good automobile road along the high mesa country, about thirty-three miles from Moab, Utah. But suddenly the road ends, and a few short steps from the road the earth seems to end — at a precipice — where 3,000 feet straight down the sheer rugged wall of the canyon the Colorado River is winding and twisting its way to meet the Green. The view is breathtaking, not only the scene below — the sprawling river and the weathered canyon walls which it has been chiseling through for millions of years — but the scene above, if the eyes can be pulled away from the dark depths of the "Grand Canyon" and focused on the horizon. For there, stretched out in all directions, is limitless expanse, with a panoramic view of the high



Rainbow Bridge, now almost inaccessible, will be easily reached via the lake which will be formed upon completion of Glen Canyon Dam.

Goosenecks of the San Juan. This twisting canyon was carved into the desert plateau by the San Juan River on its way to meet the Colorado.



La Sal Mountains to the east, the Abajo Mountains to the south, the Henry Mountains to the southwest, the Boulder and Thousand Lake mountains to the west, and the high Uintas to the north. Hidden in that expanse are many of the wonders of the world, some of Utah's greatest treasures, whose alluring names only increase the spell of the moment at Dead Horse Point — the Valley of the Goblins, Circle Cliffs, Cathedrals in Stone, Capitol Reef, the San Rafael Swell, the wondrous and weird Upheaval Dome (the only thing like it in the world), rainbow bridges, arches, colorful monoliths and monuments, and always the canyons made by the rivers while writing the story of the earth.

A short distance below Dead Horse Point the well-named greenish water of the Green River curls around Junction Butte and heads straight into the path of the Colorado. Once joined, each river seems to try to maintain its long and hard-won individuality; they edge along, the red of the Colorado at the left and the green of the Green at the right, reluctant to mesh. Torrential as they are at some places along their courses, they seem strangely less agitated at this point where the Green River loses its identity and blends into the Colorado for the rest of the work ahead.

Witnessing the indescribable grandeur and the magnitude of the scene from Dead Horse Point is a soul-stirring experience. Yet the Point bears no noble sobriquet to describe it. Rather, it takes its name from an episode in the human side of the story which was enacted in the "hell-for-leather" days of the pioneer West when Butch Cassidy and his gang were busy with their profession of "outlawing." They respected the beautiful old canyons and ravines of southeastern Utah only when they could serve as robbers' roosts, as hide-outs, or as a lure and trap to capture the wily mustangs.

The horse did play a big part in the history of the country. Hardy, hot-blooded mustangs, descendants of the animals brought to the territory by the Spaniards, ran wild from the Pacific Coast to the Rio Grande, and at one period in western history it is said there were more than a million of these horses roaming the land. Herded, corralled, roped, and broken, thousands were mustered into service to help tame the West. Many, however, could never be caught. They, like the great Indian tribes, claimed all of the West as their unfenced home, and accounts of roundups organized to plunder and kill hundreds of these stalwart wild horses still stir the blood and ire of horse fanciers and true westerners.

The story of Dead Horse Point is no less appalling. As reported by a resident of Moab,¹ it is somewhat as follows:

"Before the turn of the century a very profitable business in the Big Flat area consisted of corralling wild horses and shipping them to Kansas City, Missouri. There they brought fair prices, and some of the Missouri farmers were able to tame them enough to serve as work animals. It is said that in the attempt to domesticate them many gave up in desperation because the plains-loving creatures could not adapt themselves to harness or saddle.

"Due to the peculiar terrain of the point area (400 yards at the widest and 60 yards at the neck), which offered no escape except through the narrow entrance way, the cowboys of the plains were able to use this natural corral as a retaining and grading spot for the mustangs.

"For a few years before 1900 each season saw trainloads of the broomtails head for the eastern market. The best season provided seven trainloads, and all of the horses had served time corralled on Dead Horse Point. From there they were driven to Thompson, Utah, and loaded.

"The cowboys were not usually a heartless bunch in their treatment of animals, but in this particular case they did give the mustangs more credit for horse sense than they rightfully deserved. In their haste to make the train in this last good season of horseflesh harvest, the herders left about fifty head of culls on the point. The participants of the round-up swore, or agreed to swear, on a stack of Bibles higher than the point itself that the corral gate was left open so the animals could return to their happy feeding grounds in Gray's pasture, a luscious grazing ground to the south."

Whatever the circumstances, the abandoned horses were left on this waterless point. They raced around aimlessly, stopping only to peer over the edges of the cliff, 3,000 feet to the river, until they died of exhaustion and thirst within sight of water they could never reach. This story has become almost a legend, and occasionally other names are suggested for this unusual place; but the name Dead Horse Point seems to stick as it gradually mellows into an over-all reminder of the part the horse played in the making of the West.

Automobiles, trucks, jeeps, even airplanes have taken the place of the faithful horse in the great country of the Green and the Colorado. Where the padded footfall of the padres, roving Indian tribes, and wild horses made trails in the red dust, there are now roadways, some highways, and an occasional air strip. Colonizing, prospecting, grazing, oil

¹ Mr. F. M. Pimpell, Secretary, Moab Chamber of Commerce.

wells and uranium mines have led many to make their homes in the vicinity; others, intrigued by the thrill of river-running, have explored the rivers in boats. Probably the most famous name among the latter is that of John Wesley Powell, who has left thrill-packed accounts and much scientific information about the rivers and their tributaries. Conservation has played its part; there are National Forests and small National Parks and Monuments to protect special features.

The lure of the wide open spaces, the magnificent scenery, the phenomena of archeological discoveries, the excitement of river trips, exploring, motoring, horseback riding, and hiking (for there are some remote areas which defy access by man's inventions and are accessible only by saddle horse or on foot), all have brought increasing numbers of visitors to the whole area. Since the end of World War II, this great influx has shown the importance and value of the fantastic antique which Utah inherited. On the other hand, greater demands for the waters of all western rivers have forced the damming and flooding of much of the land adjacent to her mighty rivers. Flaming Gorge Dam will bury forever many of the treasures along the upper course of the Green River; Glen Canyon Dam will put under water the old wagon trail which once led through the famous "Hole-in-the-Rock," and when completed it will have inundated those early paths of the padres into the lands of the Colorado and obliterated entirely the steps carved for the horses to reach the famous "Crossing of the Fathers." There will be created a lake whose shoreline will measure over a thousand miles, and the body of water will reach distances the venerable Father Escalante in his wildest fancy could not have envisioned, either by mirage or miracle.

"The Crossing of the Fathers" must go, and much of Earth's story is going or has gone in the path of reclamation. How fortunate, then, that in the infinite wisdom of the Maker of all things, the beginning of an imperishable record was made by Father Escalante in 1776, and the history of some of Utah's heirlooms will not be lost in the sea of commerce as the rivers of civilization flow more and more rapidly down their relentless course. Soon Dead Horse Point will look downstream to a new wonder—the man-made lake formed by the Glen Canyon Dam, a body of water for which the desert has thirsted for centuries; and at the same time, it now seems to be pointing to a new horizon—the preservation and protection of the vast expanse which Nature endowed with wonders beyond measure and bequeathed to Utah in trust for posterity.