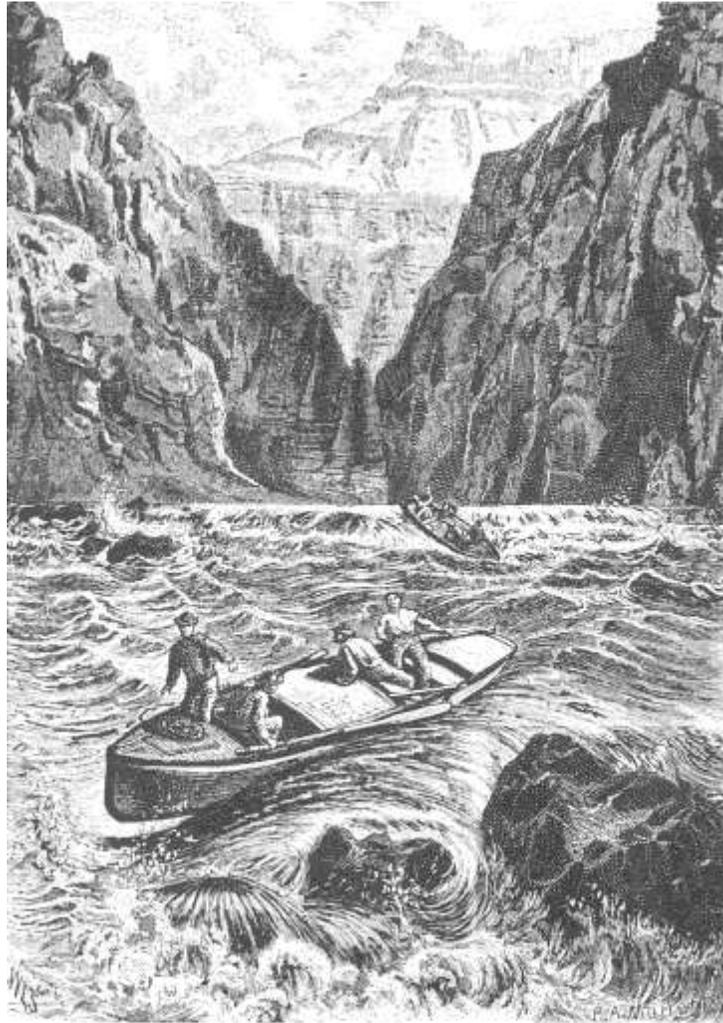


“Conqueror of the Grand Canyon” returns to Bloomington in 1896



RUNNING A RAPID.

This woodcut was one of several illustrations from a two-part article on Powell's 1869 expedition. The articles ran in the January and February 1875 issues of Scribner's Monthly magazine. Powell ended up losing one of the expedition's four boats to the violence of the rapids.

In January 1896, the celebrated explorer John Wesley Powell returned to Bloomington to visit old friends and reminisce about old adventures. Almost three decades earlier, Powell used Bloomington-Normal as a base to launch his epic three-month expedition through the last great unknown and unmapped swath of the contiguous United States.

In 1869 Powell led nine men (six of whom survived) through a 500-mile-long stretch of the Green and Colorado rivers, a landscape of desolate canyons and unspeakable beauty stretching across parts of present-day Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and Arizona. The expedition culminated with the first recorded passage through the Grand Canyon.

Powell, an obscure one-armed science professor associated with both Illinois Wesleyan and Illinois State Normal universities, was proclaimed nationwide as the “Conqueror of the Grand Canyon.” He would then leave Bloomington-Normal to explore and map the arid lands of the West before becoming the architect of the federal science bureaucracy, establishing and then heading both the U.S. Geological Survey and the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of Ethnology.

His accomplishments as a bureaucrat—though less exhilarating as running violent rapids in boats made of oak and pine—are his lasting legacy. From his seat of power in Washington, D.C., Powell advocated the wise use of resources of the West, and by doing so laid much of the groundwork for the conservation movement that blossomed during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt.

Born in 1834 in western New York, Powell spent his formative years in Ohio, Wisconsin and Illinois. In the 1850s, he taught in small rural schoolhouses, such as one outside Decatur and another near Clinton. During the summers he would paddle up and down the rivers of Middle America, including the Mississippi, Ohio, Illinois and Des Moines. During these trips, Powell collected natural history specimens, especially mollusks; studied geologic formations, and inspected Native American moundworks.

During the Civil War he lost his right arm just below the elbow. A few months later he returned to action (through the exposed nerve endings of the stump gave him trouble throughout his life), rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel and commanding sixteen batteries at the Battle of Nashville.

After the war Powell, though he had no college degree, accepted an offer to teach natural history at IWU. Once in Bloomington, he also maneuvered his way into the position of curator of the expansive natural history museum at Illinois State Normal University.

It was as paid curator of this state-supported museum that Powell organized two summer-long field trips, or collecting expeditions, to the Colorado Rockies. Tagging along with Powell during these 1867 and 1868 westward journeys was ragtag collection of college students, area residents and family members.

After the first trip, Powell and his wife Emma Dean remained in the Rockies while the rest of the party returned to Bloomington-Normal for the start of the school year. That fall Powell, then 34 years old, began thinking about an expedition through the canyons of the Green and Colorado rivers.

After his 1869 triumph, Powell spent much of the following year exploring the plateau region north of the Grand Canyon. He then organized a second, more-thorough expedition down the Green and Colorado. In June 1872, he resigned as curator of the museum at Normal and moved to Washington, D.C., splitting his remaining years between the wilds of the West and the corridors of power in the nation’s capital.

During his brief 1896 visit to Bloomington (which was likely his last—he died in 1902), Powell stayed at the home of James B. Taylor, a former IWU natural history professor who left the school to practice medicine. As an IWU student, Taylor participated in Powell's second collecting expedition of 1868.

Powell also visited with two other veterans of his western adventures: Harvey C. DeMotte, a former IWU professor and vice president, and local resident Leonidas H. Kerrick, an IWU graduate

On Thursday, January 16, Powell presented his “Canons of the Colorado” (canyons was spelled without the “y”) lecture at the Grand Opera House on the 100 block of E. Market Street.

Powell was no “professional lecturer” striving for a “fine rhetorical or oratorical display,” observed the student newspaper *The Wesleyan Argues*. “Nevertheless, his description of the wonderful natural scenery along the Green and Colorado rivers was listened to with the closest of attention, and his memorable journey through unknown waters, hemmed in by cliffs a mile high, was again told, though it has now become a part of history.”

The following day, Powell delivered a lecture on Native Americans at the IWU chapel. Under his direction, the Bureau of Ethnology dispatched anthropologists, linguists and other men of science to Native American tribes across the American West. In a time of rapid cultural extinction, the Bureau recorded for posterity Indian languages and lifeways, ranging from economic and political organization to creation myths.