

Historical Threads

Frederic Dellenbaugh, Artist and Explorer

by Jay M. Jones

In 1871, a 17 year-old Frederick Dellenbaugh from Buffalo, New York joined the second expedition of John Wesley Powell down the Green and Colorado Rivers. This was more than an adventure trip – its purpose was to gather scientific and topographic information for the United States government concerning the Colorado Plateau region.

Dellenbaugh's job was artist and assistant topographer. He also proved to be a very capable oarsman.

As in Powell's first expedition in 1869, the 1871 trip started from the railroad bridge at Green River, Wyoming, where three specially designed boats were launched into the river.

Eleven men started the journey. One man was soon dismissed and the expedition continued with 10.

The first resupply point at the Uinta River was reached, and Powell left the party to go with Jacob Hamblin, a Utah scout that Powell had hired to help with the resupply, in search of an overland route to the confluence of the Colorado and Dirty Devil Rivers, which had been planned to be the next resupply point.

Powell's nine remaining men continued down river to the crossing of the Old Spanish Trail at what is now Green River, Utah. Powell met them there with news that a viable overland route to the mouth of the Dirty Devil River had not been found. Powell did bring barely enough food to last until the Crossing of the Fathers further downstream.

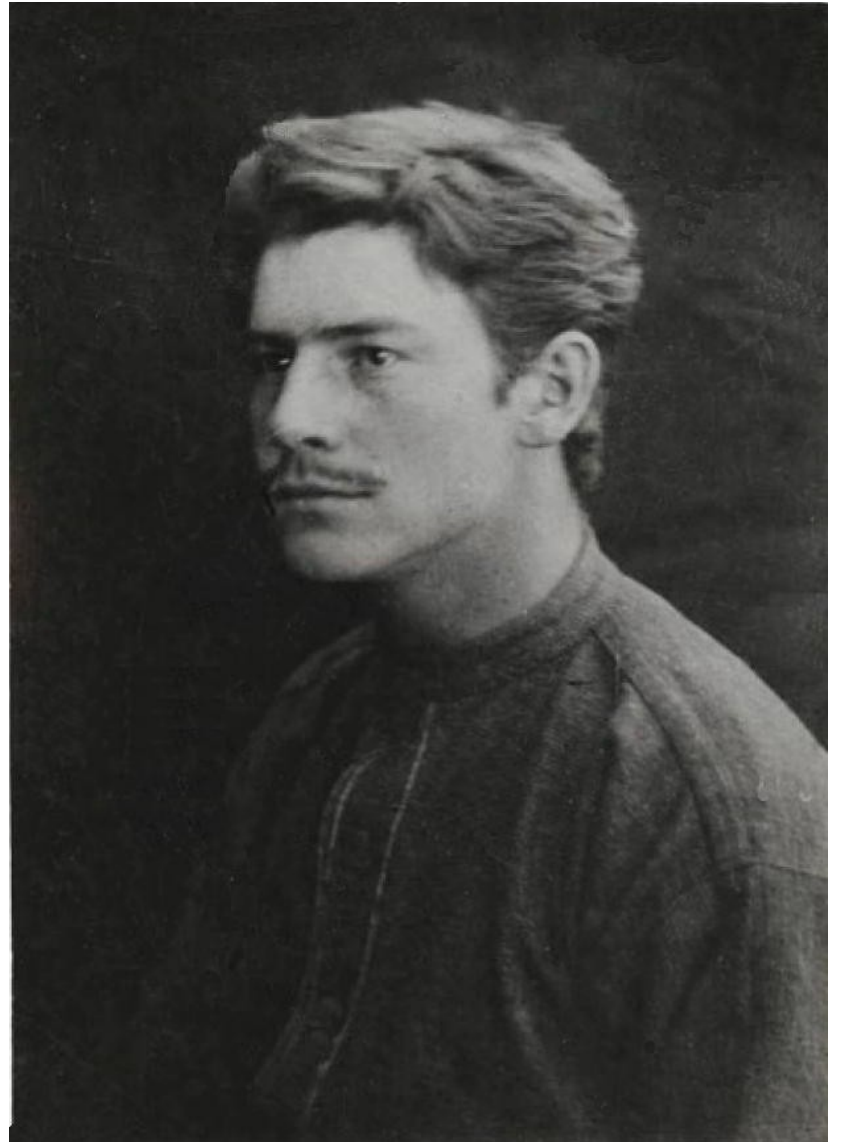
As Powell and his men continued, they passed an impressive rock tower which Dellenbaugh sketched. This formation is now known as Dellenbaugh Butte.

After passing the confluence of the Green and Colorado Rivers and negotiating the rapids of Cataract Canyon, Powell's group reached the Dirty Devil River. Not having the food rations to allow them to spend time exploring the area, Powell left one boat there for later use. The men all crowded into the remaining two boats and hurried on to the Crossing of the Fathers, where the Dominguez-Escalante expedition had crossed the Colorado River 95 years before.

The 1871 Powell expedition pulled off the river at Lee's Ferry and wintered in Kanab. The following Spring, Dellenbaugh was with the first federal party to record an exploration of the Escalante River drainage and the Henry Mountains. They found their way to the mouth of the Dirty Devil River and the boat which had been stashed the previous year.

Dellenbaugh and three others took the boat from the Dirty Devil River to float down to Lee's Ferry, where they joined the rest of Powell's team. On the way they took photographs, made sketches, and recorded notes of the geology and botany of the region that they had not had time to document the previous year.

The Powell expedition did not continue on from Lee's Ferry until 17 August 1872. The river was higher and more dangerous than in the 1869 trip. For that and other reasons the voyage was terminated on 9 September 1872 at Kanab Wash in the Grand Canyon and the explorers returned to Kanab.



*Frederick Samuel Dellenbaugh, 1872.
Wikimedia Commons Photo, public domain.*

Dellenbaugh drew the first map of the Grand Canyon area while staying in Kanab during the winter of 1872-73.

After two years of exploring the west, Dellenbaugh went to Europe to study art under some of the masters. Following years took him on expeditions to South America, Alaska, and Siberia.



One of the paintings by Frederick Dellenbaugh of Zion Canyon in 1903, which was exhibited in the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Source: Zion Museum Collection ZION 38105, Wikimedia commons, public domain.

In 1903 Dellenbaugh returned to Southern Utah to paint several views of “Little Zion” which were then exhibited at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, a celebration of the 100 year anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase. Those paintings, along with an article Dellenbaugh wrote for the January 1904 issue of Scribner’s Magazine would serve as the first introduction of the scenic wonders of Southern Utah to a large segment of the American public.

Zion was designated as Mukuntuweap National Monument on 25 June 1909 by President William Howard Taft. It later became Zion National Park in a bill signed into law by Woodrow Wilson on 19 November 1919.

Dellenbaugh went on to write several books. He was a founding member of the Explorer’s Club, and he was awarded the prestigious John Burroughs medal.

In 1929 Dellenbaugh made a return visit to Southern Utah. Newspaper accounts document a visit to the Cedar City Library as well as a visit to St. George in company with Randall Jones, S. J. Foster, and Dr. and Mrs. M. J. Macfarlane of Cedar City. He also visited old friends in Springdale and Kanab.

Following his visits in Southern Utah, Dellenbaugh went on to California to testify in a court case brought against the state of Utah by the federal government concerning ownership of the streambeds of the Green and Colorado Rivers. The case hinged on whether or not the rivers could be termed “navigable” at the time of Utah’s statehood in 1896. Earlier precedent had awarded states the ownership of the streambeds of navigable rivers. Dellenbaugh testified that Powell’s teams had “navigated” the rivers in 1869 and 1871. The case ultimately wound up at the Supreme Court in 1931, where it was decided that the term “navigable” was flexible and did not only mean supporting regular commercial traffic as the federal government contended. The state of Utah was supported in its claim to retain ownership of the streambeds.

Dellenbaugh died in 1935, but his legacy continued. In a 1966 river trip by two Cedar City men, Jimmy F Jones and Tony Stocks, their only guidebook was “A Canyon Voyage” written

by Dellenbaugh. Jones went on, like Dellenbaugh, to paint many portraits of the Grand Canyon and Zion.

In his 1929 visit to Utah, Dellenbaugh visited Oliver D. Gifford in Springdale, with whom he had stayed during his 1903 stop to paint the scenery of Zion. During the earlier stay Dellenbaugh remarked that the time would come when a modern hotel would be built in Zion Canyon. His host had seemed to doubt such a statement, so Mr. Dellenbaugh added, "Yes, a modern hotel will be built there, and thousands will come as tourists to see the wonderful canyon." 26 years later they both agreed that this prediction had been realized. With the passing of time, it can now be called a remarkable understatement.