

The Suck

The Green River was once a place of mystery and danger, at least according to the wags who hung out at Jake Fields Store in Green River, Wyoming. One of the most dangerous places was the mythical but nonetheless dreaded “Green River Suck.”

“The Suck” was supposed to be a deadly cataract somewhere on the Green River that was impossible to pass safely; to even attempt it was to court a certain death in its roiling, dangerous waters. During high water periods, the water pooled and swirled as it entered Flaming Gorge, and the resulting whirlpools gave rise to the legend of “Suck.” The story began during the “Ashley Days” of the fur trappers, and it’s impossible to say just who first told the



Entering the canyons of the Green 1909

tale around a campfire. The first time it appeared in print, though, was in 1856, in the memoirs of James P. Beckwourth, the “Chief of the Crow Nation.” Beckwourth, an African-American trapper who was a former slave, was in

Ashley’s party that came across the plains in 1825. In his memoirs, narrated to an admiring and credulous writer in a California gold camp in the 1850s, Beckwourth claimed to have rescued Ashley from the “Green River Suck” when the latter fell out of their boat: “The current...became

exceedingly rapid, and drew towards the centre from each shore. This place we named the Suck. This fall continued for six or eight miles, making a sheer descent, in the entire distance, of upwards of two hundred and fifty feet.” Beckwourth goes on to relate in breathless prose how he swam to Ashley, had him hold onto his shoulders, and started to swim for shore, but the current was too strong and soon they were in danger of being dragged to “inevitable death.” Just when his strength was giving out, Thomas Fitzpatrick reached out a pole and Beckwourth was able to pull himself to safety, Ashley still clinging to his shoulders.



Hideout Flat near entrance to Kingfisher Canyon

It all makes a great story, except that it was sheer fabrication. Neither Beckwourth nor Fitzpatrick were with Ashley on the river; Beckwourth was in the Wind River Mountains, far to the north, with James Clyman, while Fitzpatrick was exploring the northern slopes of the Uintas. But the legend took hold and grew, even while the location moved around. The “Suck” was variously placed at Ashley Falls, Disaster Falls in the Canyon of Lodore, Split Mountain Canyon (where Ashley did actually fall out of the boat, although he was quickly rescued by two unnamed men) and a number of other places. As the location shifted, so too did the results; in some versions, all save Ashley himself or him and one other companion were drowned, in others they lost all their boats and equipment and were forced to wander across

the sagebrush plains until rescued by someone; some stories even had them resorting to cannibalism! None of that actually happened. It mattered little to the mountain men, to whom the ability to tell a good lie was as valued as setting traps or skinning a beaver. None of it is true, although Barbara Williams Amburn, who grew up on a ranch at the mouth of Henry's Fork, just above Flaming Gorge, said that when they wanted to swim their cattle across the river, they went several miles above the head of Flaming Gorge because the water was too turbulent. But Beckwourth's story still conveys a good idea of the imagined dangers that lurked in the remote canyons of the Green.

This story is reprinted with the permission of the author, Roy Webb and is from the forthcoming book, "I had arrived at perfection": The Lost Canyons of the Green River, to be published by the University of Utah Press in 2012. All photos are from the Special Collections Department, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.