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7. Skull Rapid

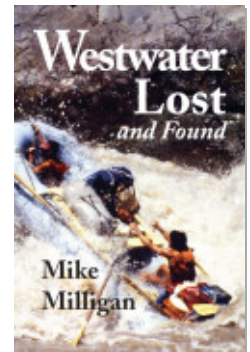
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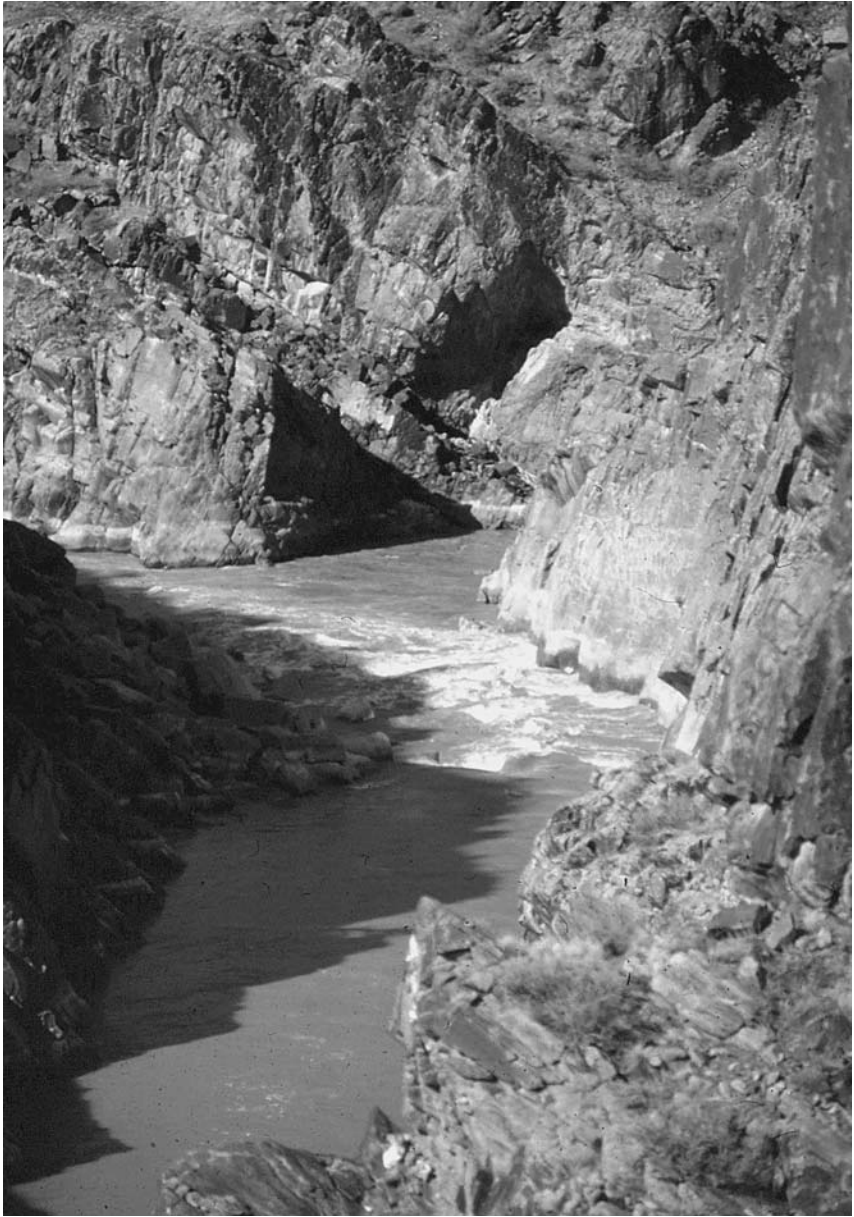
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Skull Rapid

When you look downstream from midway through the canyon, the river seems to come to a dead end. It is restricted by large fallen boulders, causing a long, tremendous rapid that crashes directly into a steep granite cliff. This is Skull Rapid. Although Skull is nearly the last rapid in Westwater Canyon, its location can be recognized almost from the beginning of the three-mile gorge. Continually in view, Skull becomes progressively more intimidating until it has the same effect as hearing the “da-dump, da-dump” warning in the movie *Jaws*. You know something bad is going to happen.

Fortunately, there is an opportunity, unlike at many of the other rapids in the narrow gorge, to scout Skull Rapid from the shore. Unfortunately, the southern shoreline is strewn with large Precambrian boulders that are slippery and hazardous when making the short hike to overlook the rapid. Additionally, docking the boats can be precarious, depending on the water level. During mid- to high-water levels a strong current brushes against a shortened, rocky shoreline above the rapid, making it difficult to land and, of greater concern, to position one’s boat after scouting the rapid. The popular Skull run begins on the opposite side of the river, and when the currents are strong, it is difficult to get across the river without getting sucked into the whitewater prematurely.

As a novice boatman running Westwater for the first time in 1978, I was asked to watch over three boats while the more



Skull Rapid and the Room of Doom.



During low water, some boaters choose to avoid encountering an exposed rock in Skull Rapid by running along the left shore. Photo courtesy of Kyler Carpenter, BLM.



Boat getting pummeled by the hole at Skull Rapid.



Catching air rising out of the hole at Skull Rapid.

experienced guides scouted Skull Rapid. At that time, the Colorado River through Westwater was running approximately 20,000 to 28,000 cfs. Although seasoned, the guides were unfamiliar with Skull Rapid during these higher water levels; their experience came from the previous year when a severe drought caused the Colorado River to run low all summer. Because the current was extremely strong and continuously tugged at the boats, particularly the supply boat, the guides cautiously used two lines—one to tie the boats to the shore and another to tie each of the rowing boats to the larger supply vessel.

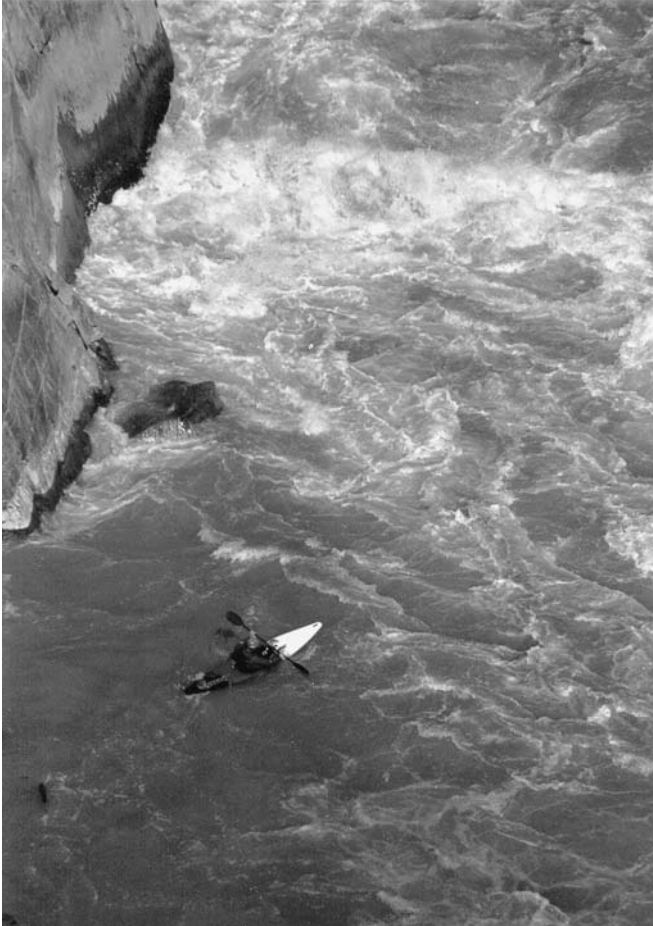
As an additional precaution, I was asked to remain with the supply boat and power it into the shore using a motor. The guides and most of the passengers then hiked to the rapid overlook while I remained behind. Not long after they left me, one of the main lines snapped in the tugging current. Frightened and inexperienced, I waited for what seemed an eternity hoping that the remaining line wouldn't snap and force me to run the boats through the unseen rapid below. Fortunately, the remaining line held long enough for the guides to return, and because they didn't like the looks of Skull, they decided not to take the passengers through the rapid. Gratefully, I accepted the assignment to lead them in a hike around.



Scenic shot of Skull Rapid.

While in transit we stopped to watch each of the guides run Skull. One guide positioned his boat at the head of the rapid and, as he neared the whitewater, dove to the floor. I'm certain he prayed for the successful outcome that he no longer had any control over. I felt fortunate not to run Skull the first time I went through Westwater, and I'm surprised I continued boating after my initiation to it.

The sound of Skull Rapid is deafening, and observing it is frightening, especially in the mid-teen water levels, when the hole is large and the current crashes into the cliff. All of the water



Kayaker in the Room of Doom viewing the thunderous Skull Rapid.

funnels to the right side along a cliff worn sheer by water eroding rock for millions of years. The current surges forward into a huge hole midway through the rapid; approaching it can best be described as looking into the jaws of a hungry lion. Deep, explosive, and practically unavoidable, the rapid doesn't allow boaters much room for error. Next, directly in front of the current, past all of the ugly stuff in the middle, the river crashes into a cliff that splits the channel. To the right, the river enters a fierce whirlpool that has cut nearly a circle out of the granite formation; this is called the Room of Doom.

Invincible against other types of erosion, the Precambrian rock at this rapid has not given way to the river entirely. One remaining cliff firmly makes its last stand against the force of water. A former Westwater resident whose father ran cattle at Big and Little Holes described his memory of Skull Rapid years later: “There is one place about half way down the canyon where the river goes completely under a cliff, this is a portage place as well as the whirlpool.”¹ Although the river may have looked like it disappeared to cowboys observing from above, it actually crashed off the cliff, then continued its trek to the Gulf of California.

Skull is not just any rapid; it is one of the notable ones. No matter how much experience boaters have had running rivers, they all seem to have some fear of Skull Rapid. A little diarrhea, a sudden need to take a leak (even if they just took one), or maybe just stomach queasiness are all discernible signs of a boater’s respect for Skull. It would be ludicrous for them not to fear the rapid, with the legend it’s maintained for over one hundred years. Dock Marston once said of the Grand Canyon, “Now if you are going to run a trip down that canyon and you are the leader, I give you this advice, and you must follow it. You must be afraid, to begin with; if you’re not afraid, you’re dangerous. But you must not let any person in the party know that you are afraid. Because if you do, then those members of that party, or anybody that you convey that information to, will lose confidence.”² Marston’s words ring true for Westwater as well.

Other rapid names in Westwater Canyon sound like amusement park rides: Sock-It-To-Me, Bowling Alley, Big Hummer, Wild Horse. Skull is an exception that has earned its name. It was first christened in the spring of 1956 when five young boaters from Salt Lake City spent the night in the canyon. A reconstruction of their experiences as related to me in an interview with Roger Green in 1986 follows.

When it was nearly dark on the cool Friday evening of March 23, 1956, Leslie A. Jones parked his car in front of the gas station at Cisco, Utah.³ With him were his brother-in-law, Klaus Axman, and four friends from his job at Western Steel Company: Roger H. Green, Rulon C. Briggs, and Paul H. Hurd. All were from Salt Lake City. Although boating the Colorado River enticed Les’s friends to accompany him on the long trip, his primary objective was to map Westwater and diagram its rapids.

From the late 1940s through the 1950s, whitewater boating increasingly became a popular recreational sport. Commercial river companies began to flourish, taking paying customers down popular stretches of river such as through Glen, San Juan, and Grand Canyons. It was during this growth that Les Jones began producing “scroll maps” to sell to a new generation of river runners. The scroll maps were designed to be easy to use and were the equivalent of the current Belknap River Guides, which are used by many boaters for the Colorado and Green Rivers. This would be Les’s first descent of Westwater to research the rapids for his Granite (Westwater) Canyon scroll map.⁴

While the group was at the gas station, Les asked a Cisco resident for directions to Westwater and told him that he intended to take boats through the canyon the following morning. Les and his friends were not prepared for what happened next. The Cisco residents became concerned for the group and tried to discourage them from attempting to boat the canyon, relating the familiar theme that only one or two people had survived the canyon before.

The year before, in 1955, Roger Green had come to Utah from New York, where he recently had been discharged from the air force. He intended to go to college in Oregon but stopped temporarily in Salt Lake City to reevaluate his decision. Under the G.I. Bill, Roger went to work for Western Steel Company as an apprentice draftsman. It was at Western Steel that he met Les Jones. Roger was unfamiliar with whitewater boating and was immediately impressed by Les’s reputation and from the numerous river stories and adventures he recounted.

Les Jones had begun his river travels in 1953 working for his cousin Don Hatch, of Hatch River Expeditions. As it established itself as a commercial outfitter, Hatch River Expeditions ran primarily the Yampa and Upper Green River, with some trips through the Grand Canyon, including possibly the first commercial baloney boat run there. According to historian Roy Webb, Les was disenchanted by the large commercial crowds and inflatable crafts and did not last long as a commercial guide. He then designed his own whitewater boat, using an aluminum canoe rigged for oars and putting bulkheads and canvas over the openings, and traveled in smaller groups or solo. Some of his more notable trips he made solo. Once he traveled from Moab to Hite

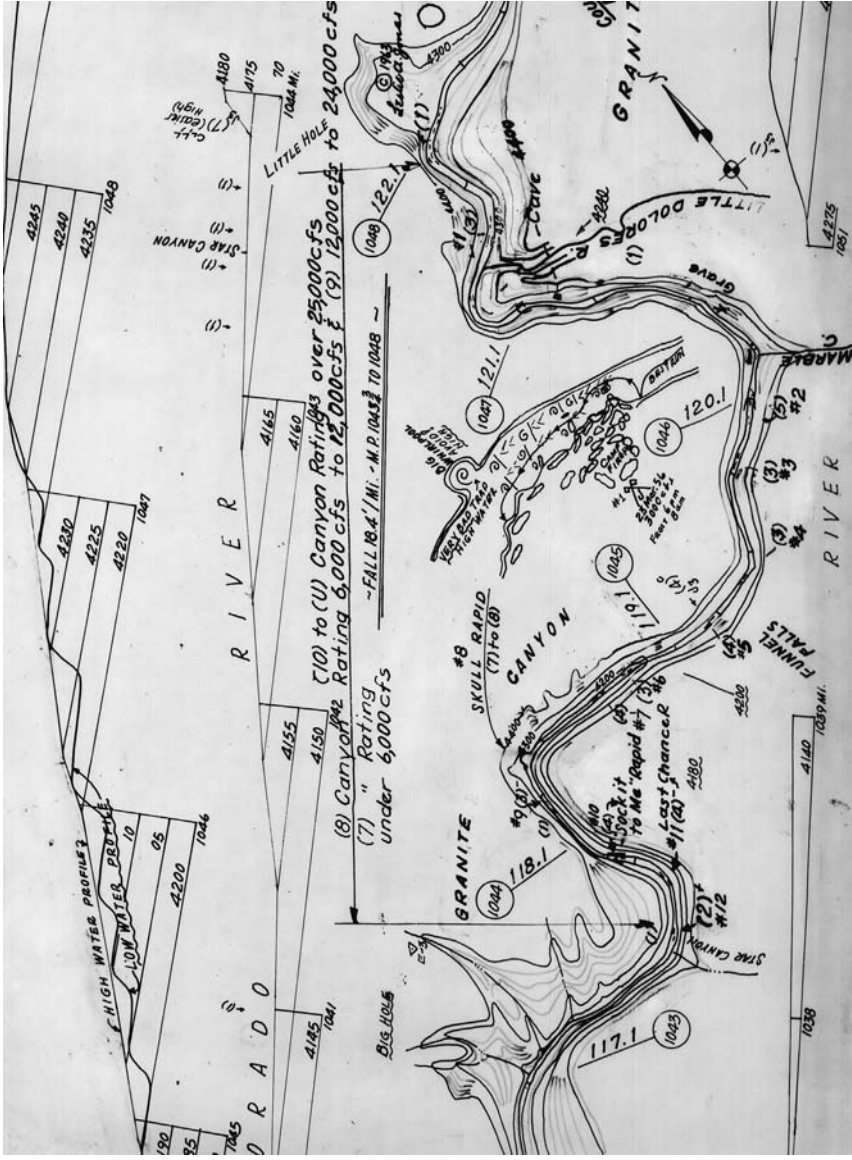
in thirty-six hours, and once he made another speedy trip from the Gates of Ladore to Split Mountain in ten hours.⁵

Probably the most notable solo trip he made was through the Grand Canyon. It had been done before, but this time Les Jones was going to make motion pictures of the event. He “got a football helmet and bolted a lard can on top of that. He had a window in the front of that lard can and then he had a mount in there for a motion picture camera. Then he had a tube coming down out of that with a bulb and he put that bulb in his mouth and he could start the motion picture camera with this by squeezing the bulb and then he would stop it by squeezing the bulb.”⁶ The weight of the helmet was too much though, and at 24 1/2 Mile Rapid Les almost “lost it” when he capsized and the heavy helmet held him down. Recovering from the near tragedy, he continued as far as Bright Angel Creek, where he stored his boat. A year later he returned without the helmet and completed the trip. Historian Dock Marston refused to credit this as a solo run since Jones stayed close to a Hatch commercial trip that second year. Afterward, Marston unkindly referred to him as “Buckethead.”

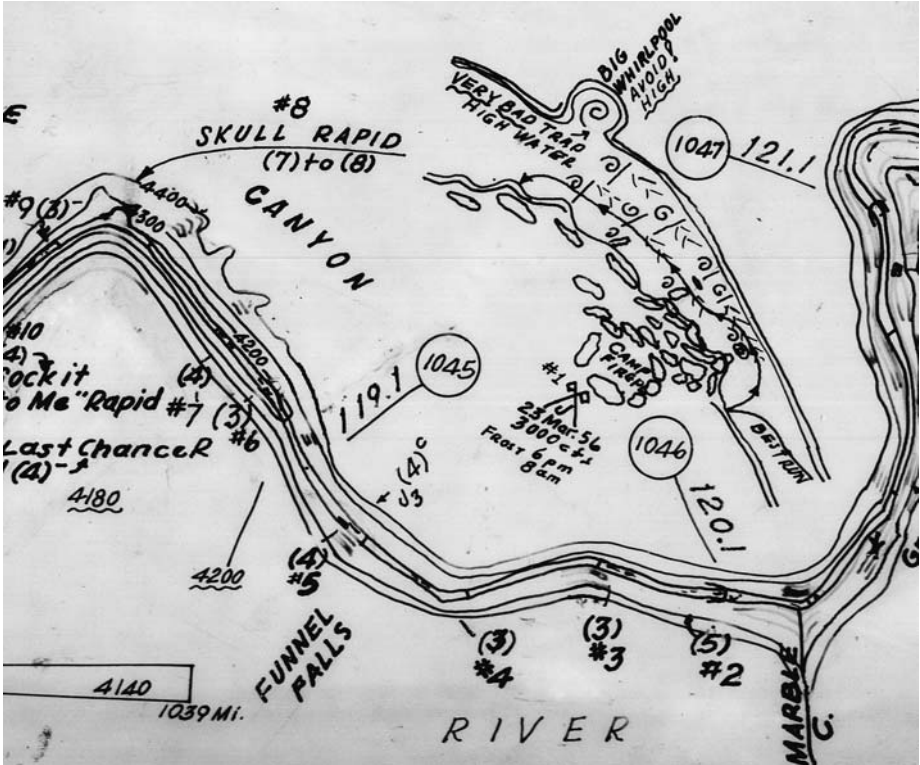
It was after dark on that Friday night when Jones’s group arrived at Westwater after approximately an hour of driving from Cisco. The night air was cool and the only sound was that of swift water moving past the hard beach-like area they had selected as their point of departure. Anxious and tired, Roger spread out his sleeping bag and got in. Staring up into a star-swollen sky, he listened to the river rush by and pondered the warnings given by the Cisco residents earlier that evening. The continuous sound of the river soon diverted his angst, as his mind focused on its melody until he was asleep.

The following morning Roger’s sleep was interrupted by obnoxious bleating all around him and the other boaters. Each man poked his sleepy-eyed head out of his sleeping bag to discover what seemed like four hundred sheep grazing amongst them. The humor of the moment dispelled any fears left by the comments of the night before. Soon they were preparing the boats for the river trip.

Roger was assigned to run a Gruman aluminum canoe with Klaus Axman, while Les Jones, Rulon Briggs, and Paul Hurd manned a raft. Jones was the only member of the group who had



Les Jones's scroll map of Westwater. Courtesy of Les Jones.



Close up of Skull Rapid notes from Les Jones's scroll map.

any previous whitewater experience. He walked over to where Roger was preparing to take his position in the canoe, told him how to run it, then, without saying anything, pulled out a knife and strapped it in front of Roger. After Roger and Klaus seated themselves, Les tied some canvas around them to keep water out of the cockpit of the canoe. Then, like an old river gentleman, he told them that if they tipped over and couldn't get out, the knife was to cut their way out. As he walked away, they could hear him chuckle. Roger was uncertain how to interpret the knife comment, and for a moment he was concerned about it being there. Still, with Les leading the way, Roger and the others pulled away from shore and started enjoying a leisurely ride down the Colorado River.

They traveled along a two-mile bend, becoming familiar with their boats. The time during this slow stretch was comfortable

and fun. The raft and canoe stayed close together so the boaters could talk, tell a few jokes, and loosen up. The Colorado River was running low, 3,330 cfs at Westwater, and the narrowness and height of the canyon were intensified. The raft crew took motion pictures of the canoe as Roger and Klaus successfully ran a few small rapids at the head of the canyon. At times the canoe seemed to disappear from sight and then crashed through a small wave, dramatizing the actual drop.

Everyone was having fun until at one point they looked up, and on top of the Wingate sandstone cliffs, about 800 feet above, stood several spectators looking down at them. The boaters felt like ancient Roman gladiators looking up at Colosseum spectators who had already, the evening before, given them a thumbs down. Again a touch of fear briefly entered Roger's thoughts, and then he ran another rapid and everything was forgotten. The boaters began to think that maybe it would not get any more difficult. Still, Roger thought it odd that the Cisco residents would assemble on top of the cliff to watch them.

Making no stops along the way, they continued deeper into the canyon. Halfway through, the river briefly widened and the current slowed considerably. The men were disappointed, thinking the canyon would soon end, but then, as they slowly drifted westward, the canyon narrowed again into yet a deeper slit in the earth. The black cliffs rose ominously straight out of the river to a height of 200 feet. Ahead in the gorge was a fierce-looking rapid with granite boulders sitting in the middle and dividing the current. Leading the way, Les chose the primary channel to the right, and both boats followed the tongue of the rapid into large waves that made for a more exhilarating ride than they had experienced upstream. But the first major rapid still awaited them downstream.

At higher water levels the Colorado River flushes through the canyon, and there aren't many places between the steep cliffs to land a boat. At low water some shoreline existed above the next, clogged rapid for the boaters to land their boats and inspect the scene. They walked up a steep talus slope until they overlooked the rapid. Although rough looking, the rapid was not as abrupt a drop as they originally thought. Still, its large lateral hole was menacing and would require a more precise entry than the rapids above had demanded. Les, noticing the excellent view

from their scouting point, decided to have Roger and Klaus remain on shore to film the raft running Funnel Falls.⁷

Les, Rulon, and Paul returned to the raft and prepared themselves for the run. Anxiously they adjusted their life jackets, picked out their route, and pushed the raft into the current.

On shore, Roger focused the movie camera on the raft as it entered Funnel Falls Rapid. The canyon was so narrow that the men on shore were looking almost directly down into the raft when it floated by. As the men in the raft approached the head of the rapid, they were to the right of their planned entry, and as they attempted to reposition the boat, they found themselves dropping into the rapid at an angle to a large lateral wave coming from their left. Suddenly the boat capsized, and Roger stopped filming and began counting heads to make sure everyone was accounted for. Two men were floating with the boat, but one person was missing. Shortly afterwards, the boat and two swimmers also disappeared from sight.

Desperate to help, Roger and Klaus ran to the shore where their canoe was docked. After seeing what happened to the raft, they decided to line the canoe along the shore past the rapid. Although the Precambrian rocks were difficult to climb around, the canoe met little resistance as they lined it into an eddy. They got into the canoe, paddled it through the tail of the rapid, and continued downstream about an eighth of a mile, where they found Rulon and Paul stranded on a small rock outcrop.⁸ A little further down they also picked up Les.

Roger was especially relieved to see Rulon Briggs, who he assumed had drowned. Roger had not seen him after the accident because Rulon had been trapped under the overturned raft. Fortunately, nobody had been injured, but one of the capsized boaters was not himself.⁹ In a state of shock he frantically tried to scale a sheer wall to escape the river. The other boaters watched his futile efforts, and eventually persuaded him the river was safer. Someone suggested that they say a prayer to assuage their fears. The others were not certain of Roger's faith, though, and asked him if he wanted to pray with them. He answered, "What do you think I've been doing for the last hour?"

Wet and cold, the party continued until dusk, when they heard the familiar loud crashing of a rapid ahead of them.

Because of the darkening canyon the boaters could not see from the river how large or technical the rapid was, so again they landed their boats at a rocky outcrop to scout ahead. Together they stumbled over the rocks and, upon observing Skull Rapid, immediately agreed to camp for the night. They hadn't planned on spending the night so they didn't have any sleeping gear, and the food they brought had been lost when the raft capsized.

Only under extreme circumstances would anybody choose to camp at Skull Rapid. Camping at the large rock peninsula in the heart of the rapids was an indicator of their fears. There are no flat or sandy areas to sleep on, just large, irregular boulders strewn throughout the narrow peninsula. The fledgling boaters had lost faith in Les's ability to get them safely through the canyon, and unfortunately, Les didn't know anymore than they did about what to expect further downstream. Now they wanted off the river. The encroaching darkness chilled the air and kept them from drying out. Cold and exhausted, they brought the raft onto the rocks and positioned it like a lean-to for shelter.¹⁰

While the boaters huddled beneath the improvised lean-to, Roger decided to look for firewood. He searched the lower end of the outcrop where he expected wood would settle amongst the rocks whenever high water receded. The area he searched is identifiable to boaters who have been there by a large, house-sized boulder nearly directly across from the Room of Doom. When Roger was approximately twenty feet upstream of this large house rock, he spied an intact skeleton under another large boulder about ten feet from the river. His first thought was that the remains belonged to the last poor devil who had tried to boat the miserable canyon. In these strange conditions, finding a human skeleton did not seem significant to him; he thought it was not unusual in the Wild West. He casually returned to gathering wood and eventually returned to the other boaters still huddled beneath the raft. When Roger mentioned finding the skeleton, the others became excited and asked him to show them where the corpse was.

The completely intact, bleached skeleton had no observable clothing or identification near it. Because there was no skin or hair attached to it, the boaters estimated it had been there for twenty, thirty, maybe even forty years. A couple of the men began

toying with the skeleton. One of them picked up the skull and placed it on a rock overlooking the rapid, while another picked up an arm bone, threw it into the rapid, and christened the torrent "Skull Rapid."¹¹ At this point it occurred to them that perhaps they had done something wrong, and they ceased playing with the bones and returned to their small fire next to the raft.

Uncomfortable and cold, most of the boaters couldn't sleep, and the sound of the thundering rapid reminded them throughout the night of what they would have to contend with the following morning and that there were likely more rapids to follow. Only Les Jones slept; Roger described him as being like a rattler curled up on a rock. If their fearless leader seemed to be in his element, nobody else was, so their questions about his ability to help them escape the rapids unscathed grew. After all, he hadn't had any answers the previous day when they capsized, and he was as unfamiliar as they were with the canyon. Their respect for Les's boating skills hadn't diminished; their concern was the unknown river before them. If, as the Cisco residents told them, only two or three boaters had ever survived Westwater Canyon, what other demoniacal rapids might be downstream? Les had traversed legendary rapids in Cataract and Grand Canyons, but he didn't know what to expect. Their thoughts resembled John Wesley Powell's less than a century before as he entered the Grand Canyon: "We have an unknown distance yet to run, an unknown river to explore. What falls there are, we know not; what rocks beset the channel we know not; what walls rise over the river, we know not."¹²

The frosty morning camp on March 25, 1956, was quiet.¹³ Cold and frightened, Rulon and Paul had decided they wanted out as soon as an opportunity presented itself. They were not anxious to get back onto the river, but there was no other choice. Roger did not remember the boaters running Skull the next morning, but even portaging or lining the boats did not alleviate their fears of impending rapids below. Somewhere downstream of them they could hear another rapid. After bypassing the newly christened Skull Rapid, the party headed downstream but did not travel far before finding an escape route near Bowling Alley Rapid. At that point, Roger decided to leave the canyon with Rulon and Paul, while Les and Klaus remained on the river with the two boats.

The weather was hot when the three men hiked up Trail Canyon at Big Hole. Lost, but happy to be off the river, they didn't know how far from Westwater they were, and they were hungry and thirsty. Without a map and unfamiliar with the region, they walked atop the high Wingate Cliffs, hoping to follow Westwater Canyon back to where they had begun the trip the previous day. Mile after mile they trudged. At a few spots along the way they found mud pots and, cupping their hands, skimmed as much moisture off of the top to drink as they could. One of the men wanted to stop and sleep for awhile in the shade but was persuaded to continue walking in hopes of finding clean water and some food. As they neared Westwater Gulch, they found an abandoned shack, likely belonging to sheep herders, and clean water in a rain barrel designed to capture and store it. They arrived at their vehicle and food after a ten-mile hike.¹⁴

On the return home to Salt Lake City, Les Jones reported the skeleton find to Mrs. Carolyn Seeley in Cisco, who dispatched the information to Sheriff John Stocks of Moab and the local newspaper. The *Times-Independent* reported: "The men said they had passed over eight of the rapids when one of them discovered the rib torso. The upper part of the skull was found a short distance farther downstream from the 'barrel' part of the skeleton. The jaw bone of the skull was missing," so perhaps the bones had not been completely intact.¹⁵ Several sources suspected the bones were those of a forty-eight-year-old Salt Lake man, Kenneth Shipp, who had drowned a year earlier in a fishing accident in Westwater Canyon. Roger Green didn't believe the bones belonged to a man who had only drowned a year earlier because of their bleached and fleshless condition. It would also seem improbable that Shipp's body could be ten feet above the river where Roger Green discovered the skeleton since Westwater was running 4,400 cfs when he died on July 30, 1955, and between his death and March 24, 1956, when Les Jones's party camped at Skull Rapid, there were only four days of a higher water volume, the maximum being 5,000 cfs.

For nearly two weeks Sheriff John Stocks attempted to hike into the canyon to search for the skeleton, but bad weather and poor access to the reported area kept him away. Jimmy Walker, who later became a Moab commissioner, had previously hiked

into the canyon through Little Hole around 1947 with a rock club, and now offered to help Sheriff Stocks with the search. Entering the canyon at Little Hole, they hiked down to the river carrying a small aluminum boat to search both sides of the river. The two of them spent the day examining both banks up to Marble Canyon and back with no success, but they did discover the cave now referred to as “Outlaw Cave.”¹⁶ The only bones they reported finding were those of sheep. Their search did not include the three-mile inner gorge where the skeleton had been discovered because, according to Jimmy Walker, the description given by the boaters did not indicate they would need to look there.

Former resident John Malin, who from 1955 to 1957 periodically visited Westwater while mining uranium nearby, claimed that the skeleton was later found and had a watch, wallet, and a .38 caliber revolver with it. He did not recall the identity of the skeleton or where it was located.¹⁷ However, Malin likely confused the skeleton reported at Skull with another skeleton that was located at Big Hole in 1975.¹⁸ Les Jones’s scroll map changed the name of “Big Whirlpool” Rapid to Skull. On his map he shows a campfire in the rocks at the head of Skull rapid and the date, “23 Mar 56, water running 3000 CFS and Frost 6PM to 8AM.”

Eighteen years after Roger Green experienced the terrifying Westwater Canyon, he ran across an article in the *Deseret News*, dated June 20, 1974, about the canyon. The article presented some history—mostly incorrect—and referred to the author witnessing a twenty-four-foot “J” rig capsizing in Skull Rapid. It was the first time Roger realized the name of the rapid had been changed from Whirlpool to Skull. Making a note to the side of where the article named Skull Rapid, Roger drew an arrow to the name as if wanting somebody, someday, to recognize his party for naming it. Roger wrote:

Named “Skull Rapid” because of human skeleton found below rapid by Roger Green while he was looking for fire wood in 1956. His party had also turned over in this rapid and was building a fire to dry off and get warm.¹⁹