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## 8. The Memorial

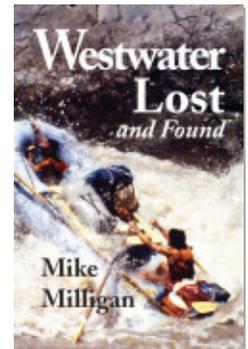
### Published by

Milligan, Mike.

Westwater Lost and Found.

1 ed. Utah State University Press, 2004.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9269>.



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## The Memorial

And how do you spell relief? It's when you get past that damn rapid. Although Skull is the most feared rapid in Westwater Canyon, it is not the last. Following quickly in succession are Bowling Alley, Sock-It-To-Me, and Last Chance Rapids, all of which can be formidable during various levels of water. Still, they seem insignificant after overcoming Skull Rapid.

Immediately after Skull is Bowling Alley. A popular rapid for kayakers during extremely low water levels, it gradually flattens out as the river's volume increases. Still, the fiercest I ever saw Bowling Alley was on June 28, 1983, when the Colorado River through Westwater was running 59,700 cfs. At that level Bowling Alley would not be considered a rapid; however, half the channel there was a huge whirlpool that rose above the water level, spinning itself upward like an inverted tornado.

Besides being a good ride in low water, the right hand shore above Bowling Alley Rapid is one of the few places in the inner gorge where boaters can hike out of the canyon. Three members of Les Jones's 1956 party escaped the canyon's remaining rapids by hiking out there. Who knows how many others have used this route to the top to either escape or to rescue boaters trapped in the Room of Doom at Skull Rapid.

Although 59,700 cfs was the highest flow at which I experienced Westwater, every water level below it presents a different canyon to run. Many river maps and commercial river running pamphlets, even as late as 1982, claimed that the canyon was

unrunnable at levels above 30,000 cfs. Then, during several seasons of high water in the 1980s and 1990s, many rafting parties braved the canyon and discovered otherwise. When the Colorado River flows above 40,000 cfs, the rapids, except for Funnel Falls and sometimes Skull Rapid, are washed out and replaced with whirlpools, and in some cases the canyon proves to be uneventful. It is difficult to visualize Skull Rapid at 59,700 cfs, where the boulder-strewn left shore is completely buried underwater and there is no rapid. At that same level, Funnel Falls has huge rollers that run nearly to Skull Rapid. There seems to be little chance of tipping or falling out of the raft, but if one did, the whirlpools could be worse than any other experience in the canyon.

At Sock-It-To-Me Rapid the best water is when it's running medium to low. During those stages you encounter numerous kayakers spending time enjoying the powerful hydraulics, performing endos, or surfing it. Boaters wanting to get the most out of the rapid must prepare to make a fast exit as the current leads them directly into the edge of a cliff referred to as the magnetic wall, where boats can get trapped in a strong eddy pinning them to the wall.

Last Chance is the last chance to mess up. The huge boulder at river right seems larger than the one at Skull and will create problems for the unwary who think the hump created by the rock is smaller than it actually is. The fairly short rapid forces boats left into a sharp edge of Precambrian rock. There, the rock divides the current into two eddies. The smaller, yet stronger eddy ferries boats upstream against the northeast cliff and regurgitates them back into the tail of the rapid. To the west the eddy is much larger but not nearly as strong and leads to freedom from the confining canyon walls. Or is it freedom?

Beyond Last Chance Rapid the river mellows, and except for a few small riffles and eddies, the excitement is over. After successfully negotiating the inner gorge, solace takes over. The canyon becomes serene, the only sounds coming from the boaters themselves as they anxiously reflect on their running of Skull that day. Beverages are now passed out because it's unlikely anybody has had any since they entered the gorge. Relaxed, boaters find their attention forced to their canyon surroundings. Many boaters haven't paid much attention to scenery through the

inner gorge as they focused on rapids, holes, whirlpools, and rocks. Yet, the shaping of sandstone by wind, rain, ice, and water has created some unique forms along the river.

Nearing the bend at Big Hole and looking upstream, one can see an arch located above Star Canyon, which enters the river from the south just below Last Chance Rapid. The arch doesn't seem to have an official name. A former Westwater resident said it was simply called Star Arch, after the canyon it stands above. In the early 1960s, John L. J. Hart, an attorney and explorer from Denver, Colorado, hiked up to the arch from the river. He described it as looking like a large open door, thus he named it Door Ajar Arch. On one of the walls was an inscription of "Paialius 1929."<sup>1</sup> This was probably a Basque sheepherder, not a fellow river runner. Later one of the early researchers of Westwater history, Kim Crumbo, coined the name Wingate Arch in a short article he wrote.<sup>2</sup>

Big Hole is one of few known escape routes out of the canyon, through the bottom of Trail Canyon. As previously mentioned, bootleggers reportedly ran a still in Big Hole. Also, Westwater resident Elwood C. Malin grazed his cattle at both Big Hole and Little Hole at various times in the early 1900s. By 1928, John A. Johnston and Annas Dolph of Cisco had their angora goats grazing at Big Hole.<sup>3</sup>

There is an inscription at Big Hole that simply says "CAMP." The inscription could be attributable to cowboys or sheepherders who regularly grazed there, or it may have been carved in 1916 by the Kolb and Loper Westwater party, who set up a camp somewhere in the canyon.<sup>4</sup>

About a mile below Big Hole is a fairly secluded campsite at Big Horn. The last good campsite within Westwater Canyon, it looks deceptively small until you draw closer to inspect it. Possibly the only complaint the site generates is about ants. If the ants are not a problem, there are plenty of good bedding spots and a great kitchen facility overlooking the river. Here the river is quiet and the night peaceful. I recall a night at this campsite listening to an elderly passenger, who claimed to have a repertoire of over three hundred songs, sing Hank Williams tunes through the night. That night under a full moon the old man sat alone on a point overlooking the Colorado and without an instrument beautifully sang sad, lonely songs to the river.

Not far beyond Big Hole the Precambrian slowly disappears beneath much younger sandstones. The first bald eagles known to nest along the Colorado River were sighted in this area in the early 1980s. More recently a total of three pairs have been reported nesting along the Colorado in the vicinity of Westwater. There are only six known nesting sites in the entire state of Utah. Although I have seen bald eagles in northern Utah, the experience of seeing them in Westwater Canyon for the first time etched the deepest impression; several boaters and passengers also considered that eagle sighting one of the highlights of the entire trip. The eagles seem to dominate their environment as they soar so high that they become barely discernible; and to think that up there they can clearly observe the boaters they hold spellbound hundreds of feet below. It doesn't take much imagination to know why our country chose the bald eagle as a national symbol. As it effortlessly soars overhead, and we inch closer to the takeout, we can thank God we have a few places like Westwater to set us free.

By the time boaters reach Agate Wash there are few remaining signs of Westwater Canyon's existence. The land levels considerably, and only a few outcrops of sandstone emerge periodically along the river. Near Cisco landing, in the vicinity of Rose Ranch, one outcrop of sandstone stands out, and at its base near the river stands a small memorial. Unless boaters are floating near the outcrop, the memorial can easily be overlooked. Similar to the numerous flowers and crosses that are scattered along our nation's highways to designate where lives have been lost, the memorial represents a life lost in the rapids of Westwater Canyon.

The memorial was placed there on November 15, 1971, one year to the day after the "lost deer hunter," C. R. Sherill, disappeared and was presumed dead as the result of capsizing his boat in Westwater Canyon. It marks the spot where for some time after he was reported lost, nets were stretched across the Colorado River to try to snare Sherill's body and those of two of his deer hunting friends, Robert Hubbs and Franklin LaMar Greenbalgh. One year after they drowned, only Sherill's body remained missing, and it was presumed it never would be recovered. After a memorial service that was presided over by a Catholic priest, followed by a military salute, the quartz headstone was placed strategically at the location where many man hours were

spent watching the river for three lost friends and loved ones. The inscription on the stone reads,

CHARLIE RAY  
 "C. R."  
 SHERRILL  
 BORN JAN. 11, 1943  
 LOST IN WEST WATER  
 CANYON  
 NOV. 15, 1970.<sup>5</sup>

It was late afternoon on November 15, 1970, when middle-aged Rex Christensen stumbled onto the Rose Ranch near Cisco landing. He had just traveled, hiking and swimming, approximately eight torturous miles along the Colorado River beginning from deep inside Westwater Canyon's gorge. Alone and frightened, Rex sought help finding the three hunting buddies he had last seen in the canyon above. He told Mary Rose about their boating accident in Westwater, and she called for emergency assistance in finding the three missing men.

Taking advantage of the last weekend of deer hunting, Sherill, Hubbs, Greenbalgh, and Christensen had headed for Westwater to hunt the northwest border of the Dolores Triangle. The Dolores Triangle has been known to produce large deer, and what better way to get to them than by raft? Loading their pickup truck at Green River, Utah, with a seven-man raft Sherill recently helped purchase, life jackets, and beer, the four men set out for the canyon.

Temperatures were mild for mid-November, ranging between 50 and 65 degrees during the day. The Colorado River through Westwater was running at 5,580 cfs, a level where most of the rapids in the inner gorge are significant. The men had some experience on whitewater, having hunted the lower part of Gray Canyon on the Green River a week earlier. But Gray Canyon's rapids were nothing compared to what they would experience in Westwater. Whether they expected much of the same one can only guess, but their actions leading up to their accident would indicate that they didn't take the canyon seriously enough.

The primary question that left everyone scratching their heads was why the men left their life jackets behind in the pickup



Memorial to C. R. Sherrill, the lost deerhunter, located upstream of Cisco landing.

truck. A letter by Mary Rose to Dee Holladay, January 5, 1971, reported what she had heard from Christensen: “They had a small rubber raft, 2 large deer and four big men besides their guns—and the foolish part of it all they left their life jackets in their pickup at Westwater. All had been drinking for two days before and was drinking the day they drowned.” The drinking of course may have affected their judgment; it is certainly unwise for anybody having any knowledge of Westwater Canyon to make such a grave error as to leave behind life jackets. The hunt was good and the men bagged two large bucks at Marble Canyon, just above the Westwater gorge.

That same Sunday morning, November 15, 1970, after cleaning the deer and tying their carcasses to the small raft, the four men pushed their boat away from shore and jumped aboard. The raft undoubtedly would have been strained from the weight of the men and two deer. The canyon above had not presented any problems for them and, like many others before, they likely misjudged what was ahead. Overloaded, the small raft probably was difficult to manage going into Marble Canyon Rapid, and once they entered the gorge there was no turning back. They continued downstream, led by the current of the river for a short

time before their raft was upset at the rapid known as Big Hummer.<sup>6</sup> There, all of the men were thrown into the cold Colorado River and the hydraulics in the deep canyon pulled the men underwater, holding them as long as possible. Bobbing to the top and grasping air, Rex Christensen managed to swim to the shore and grab hold of a rock. Exhausted and cold, he pulled himself out of the river and looked for his friends. He saw, briefly, only Robert Hubbs, who clung to the overturned raft floating downstream toward Funnel Falls.<sup>7</sup>

How depressed and frightened Rex Christensen must have felt as he stood alone on a narrow shoreline in the deep Westwater gorge. Though it was shortly after noon, the mild temperatures likely were not enough to warm the drenched survivor. Rex's repeated calls to his friends went unanswered. Only his voice and the sound of rapids could be heard; he was on his own. Reluctant to leave his friends, Rex eventually recognized that they needed help and he had to find it. Working downstream he was able to find a place to hike out of the canyon and then continue downstream for several hours to the Rose Ranch.

By Monday, the Grand County Jeep Posse and "many citizens of Green River, as well as the Emery County Jeep Posse were on hand to aid in the search" for the missing men.<sup>8</sup> Don Harris, a famous Colorado river man and distant relative to Robert Hubbs, hiked in from the lower end of the canyon, while planes, boats, nets, and shore searches enveloped the area.<sup>9</sup> No sign of the men was found except for C. R. Sherill's jacket twisted wrong side out, indicating he may have slipped out of it while attempting to swim, and the raft with both deer still tied to it.

Throughout the winter everyone was on the lookout. The nets remained up near the Rose Ranch, and another net was set up near Moab, but it was not until the following May that any of the bodies showed up. On May 19, 1971, Robert Hubbs's body was found about two and a half miles above Dewey in the river.<sup>10</sup> Later that same month, on May 29, the body of Frank LaMar Greenbalgh was located nineteen miles below Moab by members of the annual Friendship Cruise.<sup>11</sup> The body of C. R. Sherill remained lost, and any hope of ever finding it dimmed with each passing month. It seemed to fit what Clyde Eddy said of the Colorado River in his 1927 classic, *Down the Most Dangerous River*: "Its water is so heavy with suspended sand that it rolls

along like a river of quicksilver, sweeping everything irresistibly before it. When men are thrown into the stream their clothing fills with sand and the very weight of it drags them down to death. Then the cruel and cunning river hides their bodies in backwaters in its lonely canyons and covers them with sand, burying them there forever.”<sup>12</sup> But Sherill’s body was finally located in a pile of driftwood on high ground approximately seven miles above Dewey on February 29, 1972.<sup>13</sup>

Although the memorial was erected for C. R. Sherill, it serves as a remembrance for others, named or unnamed, who have lost their lives in the canyon above. Prior to 1955, all of the boaters who lost their lives remained anonymous, but on July 20, 1955, Kenneth Shipp died while fishing for catfish in Westwater Canyon.

Shipp was from Salt Lake City, Utah, and had been working in Colorado with the Grand Mesa Roofing Company when he was invited to go fishing on the Colorado River with fellow employees E. R. “Jack” Miller and Glenn Yearout, both from Grand Junction. They apparently intended to boat down to the Cisco pump station, where they were supposed to be met the following Sunday. They seem to have had just a faint idea of the distance to Cisco or the difficulty in reaching it.

According to Miller and Yearout’s testimony, they had traveled one and one-half to two miles below Westwater Ranch when their boat struck a rock wall at a sheer curve. The boat was about half full of water after the incident, but it remained upright and Miller and Yearout did not feel there was any danger at that point. Kenneth Shipp panicked though. Thinking the boat was sinking, he jumped out, causing it to overturn. Shipp held both of the oars in his hands and tried to tread water, but after a short time Miller and Yearout saw him go under water, and then only the oars surfaced. They believed Shipp had succumbed to a heart attack while in the water because he was known to have a bad heart. Miller clung to the boat and was swept an estimated eight to ten miles further downstream where he righted the boat after it stopped in an eddy.<sup>14</sup> He then hand paddled to the north shore. He spent the night on a large rock fifty feet above the river. Then the following morning he climbed up a slide approximately three hundred feet and headed downstream toward Cisco.

Glen Yearout was considered a good swimmer but was exhausted when he reached the south shore not long after the accident. He later said, "I know that river. I expect my fear of that river is what saved me." He did not move for some time after reaching the shore. Once rested, he clung to the rocks and worked his way upstream until he could find a place to climb out. Then he continued upstream toward Westwater, where he saw a paint crew for the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad working on the opposite side of the river. They were able to hear his shouts for help and rescued him. He said, "My greatest battle was after I got out. You just can't describe something like that."<sup>15</sup> From his description of the accident it was assumed he was the only survivor until the following day when Miller was located about twelve miles below Westwater Ranch. No reports have been found as to whether Kenneth Shipp's body was ever recovered. As mentioned earlier, some suspected the skeleton that Les Jones's party discovered a year later was Kenneth Shipp.<sup>16</sup> In any event, another Westwater memorial was erected.

For the spring 1969 edition of *Utah Historical Quarterly*, historian P. T. Reilly wrote an article entitled "How Deadly Is Big Red." He had researched the Colorado River from Cataract through the Grand Canyon and listed all of the reported deaths that came as a result of that stretch of river. Cataract has been labeled the "Killer of the Colorado" for many years, yet the dubious honor may well belong to Westwater.<sup>17</sup> Even the first recorded mention of Westwater Canyon, from Frank C. Kendrick in 1889, referred to it as "Hades Canyon where the woman drowned."<sup>18</sup> Later, in 1916, residents tried to get the sheriff to prevent an elderly Swede, Paul Adams, from traveling the canyon in a boat because of its demonic reputation.<sup>19</sup> Then when Kolb and Loper accomplished their transit of the canyon, they made headlines in regional newspapers, one of which stated "some twenty venturesome travelers" had gone to their death in Westwater Canyon. Although the newspapers didn't provide any supporting facts or names, the statement emphasizes the reputation of the canyon.<sup>20</sup> Not long after Kolb and Loper, several area residents claimed a young woman drowned while boating with two men when their boat capsized at the Big Whirlpool.<sup>21</sup> It is quite likely that more boaters entered Westwater Canyon than

either Cataract or Grand Canyons because of its proximity to settled areas. Like Elmer Kane in 1888 and Frank Barnes in 1921, there may have been many unsuspecting miners and trappers who entered the canyon, with only a few exiting it.

For many years, Westwater Canyon retained a notorious reputation that only one or two boating parties had ever survived it. Considering the small number of successful boaters through the 1950s, the mortality rate truly would be extremely high if all of the reported deaths were true. Westwater's sinister reputation continued through the mid-1950s, as locals regularly warned boaters of the numerous tragedies in the canyon, but no specific tragedy was recorded until Kenneth Shipp drowned there in 1955.

As boating the canyon gradually increased in popularity, the number of reported deaths also increased. The victims included Robert Baird Millard, age twenty-seven, who in July 1968 was pulled into the river while trying to line his boat past the "severe rapids,"<sup>22</sup> and the trio of deer hunters in 1970. On May 13, 1982, Mike Cromer was ejected from his boat at Surprise Rapid; his body found the following day.<sup>23</sup> That same year on June 27 we were reminded that river guides are not invincible as Matthew Zinkus of Partners River Program sustained injuries and died when his raft overturned at Funnel Falls Rapid.<sup>24</sup> Then on August 31, 1983, two more casualties occurred, as the tricky waters at Skull claimed Milan, Italy, vacationer Luigi Boyl and Pauline Lambert in separate boating accidents.<sup>25</sup>

Pauline Lambert is my mother. Reporting her accidental death is difficult. I would prefer not to, but it has eternally connected me with Westwater Canyon. "Pete" wasn't even supposed to be in Westwater. She was frightened of water so I wanted to take her on a Desolation Canyon, Green River, trip. Short of vacation days from her work at Cottonwood Hospital in Salt Lake City, she chose the shorter river trip through Westwater. I wanted to show her what I had been doing for five years.

On August 31, 1983, the Colorado River through Westwater was running at 7,280 cfs. It was a fun water level for being in the canyon. There were five boats in our party; one was sent ahead at Outlaw Cave to take photographs of the other boats going through Skull Rapid. My boat was designated the sweep boat and

followed the others through the canyon. The Rogue river boats we used were made of a heavy, durable material and seemed to be extremely stable. They had bigger tubes that reduced the amount of water we took on in rapids. We felt we had the safest boat on the river.

As expected, all of the boats made it safely through all of the rapids above Skull Rapid. Then we spaced ourselves out to run Skull. I don't recall watching the other boats; my focus was on how I should run the rapid. I would have loved to make an aggressive run but decided instead to run it conservatively, going right to the left to catch the far left side of the hole. My entry was going as planned, and as I was straightening my bow for the edge of the hole, a large, unexpected hydraulic exploded on our left. Nearly as soon as I saw the surge develop, we flipped. I didn't believe we had flipped until I found myself underwater. I felt like I was being pulled down. I didn't know which direction was up. Eventually, my life jacket brought me to the surface beneath my overturned boat. Making my way to the outside, I found two of my four passengers holding onto the side of the boat. Shortly afterwards I heard my stepfather Ben repeatedly hollering for Pauline.

Mom was nowhere to be seen. I looked for help from my fellow boatmen, but only one boat was near us. I was agitated because there was not more help. At the time I was unaware that one of our other boats had also flipped and was being assisted by a third boat. We were short handed. It was the first time I recall us flipping boats in Westwater. My two rescued passengers and I were pulled out of the river onto the one boat that waited for us. I held onto the overturned boat as we searched for my mother. Shortly we saw the back of a life jacket above Sock-It-To-Me Rapid. Believing the life jacket was a loose spare, the guide hesitated leaving the overturned raft to go to it. I volunteered to remain with the raft so they could investigate. They ferried to the jacket and discovered my mother floating face down. She was still alive; they said she was still breathing, they said she was talking. I then was separated from them when my overturned boat was swept into the rapid. She held on long enough to learn that her husband and I were safe.

The count has since continued, and although these tragedies represent a very small number compared to the multitude of

boaters who have descended Westwater in recent years, they do remind us of the respect we should show for the canyon.<sup>26</sup>

How many other lives the Sherill memorial represents is unknown. Perhaps we need a new memorial that is a tribute to the vitality of Westwater Canyon itself, which retains its character because of the few who persistently fight to keep it pristine, not allowing it to be marred, who have understood what a few days here can do for one's psyche. Not all our precious wealth comes in the form of oil and gold or silver; some of it is in our desire to taste freedom, if only for a couple of days enjoying Westwater Canyon.