

GRAND CANYON

... on the record

A Timely Selection from a Century and a Half of
Contrasting Thoughts on the Grand Canyon

One man after looking down into the void and trying vainly to penetrate its vapors said: "I and my two daughters come here yesterday to see the cañon, and the trip has cost me a lot of money. I must go away by the next train and I haint seen a dern thing but snow and fog. I'd no business to have come at this time of year. March is a mean month. It ought not to be allowed."

Clifton Johnson, 1908

"The Grand Cañon in Storm."
Outing Magazine, Vol. 52, no. 1 (April 1908), p. 94



(Author's photo)

More-fortunate visitors view a splendid winter canyon scene, December 1988

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compiled by Earle E. Spamer



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The region last explored is, of course, altogether valueless. It can be approached only from the south, and after entering it there is nothing to do but to leave. Ours has been the first, and will doubtless be the last, party of whites to visit this profitless locality. It seems intended by nature that the Colorado river, along the greater portion of its lonely and majestic way, shall be forever unvisited and undisturbed.

Joseph C. Ives, 1861

Report Upon the Colorado River of the West, Explored in 1857 and 1858
(Government Printing Office, Washington), Part I, p. 110
(36th Congress, 1st Session, House Executive Document 90 and
Senate Executive Document [unnumbered])

Tourists to the Grand Canyon soon will have a new look at the rainbow-hued chasm. The new outlook will be from Mather Point, a jutting two-pronged cape about three miles east of Grand Canyon village. Two trails from the 120-car parking lot will lead to a pair of fingers protruding from the canyon rim. These will be cleared and protected by guard rails affording a view area from which the sheer canyon will drop on three sides.

unsigned, 1954

"New Canyon Vistas."
Desert Magazine, Vol. 17, no. 1 (January 1954), p. 29

II

These vestiges [ruins] of a former race of inhabitants, which are found so widely scattered over the table-lands of New Mexico [Territory], may be taken as evidence either that the country where they exist can or that it cannot now sustain a population; depending upon the theory adopted to account for the disappearance of the previous residents.

Joseph C. Ives, 1861

Report Upon the Colorado River of the West, Explored in 1857 and 1858
(Government Printing Office, Washington), Part I, p. 117
(36th Congress, 1st Session, House Executive Document 90 and
Senate Executive Document [unnumbered])

“We’re still here.”

Sarana Riggs, 2018

Chishi Diné (Chiricahua Apache)

“We’re Still Here. Native Voices on the Grand Canyon National Park Centennial.”
Colorado Plateau Advocate, (Fall/Winter 2018), pp. 4-9
(Statements from Havasupai, Hopi, Hualapai, and Navajo people)

“Remember, we used to own the whole place.”

Augustine Hanna, 1973

(Havasupai)

[Statement of Augustine Hanna.] In: *Grand Canyon National Park. Hearing before the Subcommittee on Parks and Recreation of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, United States Senate, Ninety-third Congress, First Session, on S. 1296, a Bill to further protect the outstanding scenic, natural, and scientific values of the Grand Canyon by enlarging the Grand Canyon National Park in the State of Arizona, and for other purposes : June 20, 1973* (Government Printing Office, Washington, 1973), p. 72

III

Ever before us has been an unknown danger, heavier than immediate peril. Every waking hour passed in the Grand Cañon has been one of toil. [. . .] Now the danger is over; now the toil has ceased; now the gloom has disappeared; now the firmament is bounded only by the horizon; and what a vast expanse of constellations can be seen!

The river rolls by us in silent majesty; the quiet of the camp is sweet; our joy is almost ecstasy. We sit till long after midnight, talking of the Grand Cañon, talking of home

John Wesley Powell, 1875

Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and Its Tributaries.
Explored in 1869, 1870, 1871, and 1872.
(Government Printing Office, Washington), p. 103
(43rd Congress, 1st Session, House Miscellaneous Document 300)

. . . if we could [but] compass the passage of the Grand Cañon of the Colorado, in Arizona, a feat attempted often by intrepid adventurers, but never yet, I believe, accomplished.

Herbert W. L. Way, 1912

Round the World for Gold : a Search for Minerals from Kansas to Cathay.
(Sampson Low, Marston and Co., Ltd., London), p. 204

IV

I have also heard in the Grand Cañon of the Colorado River, in Arizona, some most extraordinary echoes, comparable, I think, with any that are to be heard elsewhere.

J. A. Zahm, 1892

Sound and Music
(A. C. McClurg and Co., Chicago), p. 120

A loud company of Americans who had just arrived in their wagon chased me away from the wonderful point; they of course immediately had to shout for an echo and thereby destroy the main attraction of the breathtaking picture, the tremendous silence.

Hugo Fromholz, 1897 [in translation*]

An den Küsten des Pacific : Reisebriefe von Hugo Fromholz
(Druck von August Hoffmann, Berlin), p. 95

*A reminiscence from a visit to Grand Canyon at the Hance Trail (year not indicated).

Original text in German: "Eine laute Gesellschaft soeben mit dem Wagen anlangender Amerikaner scheuchte mich fort von dem wunderbaren Punkte, die natürlich gleich Echo schießen mußten und damit den Hauptreiz des wundervollen Bildes, die ungeheure Stille, zerstörten."

V

No man will ever *really* “see” the Grand Cañon

Charles F. Lummis, 1893

“The Grand Cañon of the Colorado.”

The Californian Illustrated Magazine, Vol. 4, no. 1 (June 1893), p. 17

You notice that when a person has once seen the Grand Cañon, there’s nothing left on earth to astonish him with.

Helen Dawes Brown, 1899

A Civilian Attaché : a Story of a Frontier Army Post

(Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York), p. 70

(A novel.)

VI

Far ran the moon along the infinite sky,
Hastening to her eclipse; while nature slept
In tranced stillness strange and ominous.

James Ernest Nesmith, 1894

"The Grand Cañon of the Colorado River"
in *Philoctetes and Other Poems and Sonnets*
(Riverside Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts), p. 70

I asked the famous Julius Frederick Stone, who has been everywhere, if the Grand Canyon were not the most sublime of all spectacles. "Yes," said he, "with only one exception: a total eclipse of the sun."

William Lyon Phelps, 1940

"Billy Phelps Speaking" [column].
The Rotarian, Vol. 57, no. 3 (September 1940), p. 45

VII

You cannot see the Grand Canyon in one view, as if it were a changeless spectacle from which a curtain might be lifted

John Wesley Powell, 1895

Canyons of the Colorado

(Flood and Vincent, The Chatauqua-Century Press, Meadville, Pennsylvania), p. 397

Nature does not draw a curtain around the Grand Canyon when for a few minutes there is no one to see it.

Frank Badollet, 1921

"Thoughts on Flute-Playing."

The Flutist (Asheville, North Carolina), Vol. 2 (July 1921), p. 440

VIII

When you wish to pray go down into the Grand Cañon, you will find you can succeed without needing a book to help you.

Augusta Evans Wilson, 1902

A Speckled Bird
(G. W. Dillingham, New York), p. 274
(A novel.)

Men do not read descriptions of the Grand Canyon as they stand on its brink

unsigned, 1908

"The Bible, or About the Bible?"
The Epworth Herald, Vol. 19, no. 16 (September 12, 1908), p. 400

IX

The book on the counter of the Bright Angel Hotel at the Grand Canyon in Arizona calling for expressions of feeling inspired by the view, presents every phase of hysteria known to medical science and every form of extravagance known to language.

Arthur Farwell, 1904

“Introduction.” In: *Sonata Heroic by Campbell-Tipton*
(Wa-Wan Press, Newton Center, Massachusetts), p. 4

[A separately paginated introduction to a musical score by Louis Campbell-Tipton in
Wa-Wan Series of American Compositions, Vol. 3 (Winter Quarter), Part 2 (January 1904)]

I wished at the moment that we might have been alone with the glorious spectacle, or that we might have hit upon an hour when the public had gone to dinner. The smoking and joking tourists sauntering along in apparent indifference, or sitting with their backs to the great geologic drama, annoyed me.

John Burroughs, 1911

“The Grand Cañon of the Colorado.”
Century Illustrated Magazine, Vol. 81, no. 3 (January, 1911), p. 427

X

I was talking with a gentleman who was with the English when they entered Lhasa. He says nothing in the Himalayas can compare with this gorge, this Arizona Canyon, and it is true, I fancy, for when this man first looked down into this wonderful gorge he gasped with sheer pleasure.

Olive A. R. Tobey, 1907

[Letter to the Editor.]

The Nautilus (Holyoke, Massachusetts), Vol. 9, no. 5 (March 1907), p. 36

I pictured the predicament of the first man who ever saw that Canyon I'll bet he said "Damn."

Chester T. Crowell, 1921

"'Straight Down to China'. A Tale of Mules and Thrills in the Grand Canon of Arizona."
The Independent (New York), Vol. 105 (June 4, 1921), p. 602

XI

A vast and depthless wound in nature's breast,
Where silence broods and glooms in sleepless rest:
Some ancient conflict rent the world apart,
Upheaved the earth and cleft its mighty heart.

G. H. S., 1912

"The Grand Canyon."

The Notre Dame Scholastic, Vol. 46, no. 3 (October 1912), p. 35

Where [Nature] throws open the breast of the earth to gouge the Grand Canyon she
denies man the spacious lawn and the tastily arranged yard.

H. D. Ross, Jr., 1919

"A City Park on Shop Roofs."

The House Beautiful, Vol. 45, no. 3 (March 1919), p. 131

XII

We do not hesitate to talk about the Grand Canyon of the Colorado or about the grandeur of Yosemite to those who never expect to visit these places.

G. A. Miller, 1913

“Mathematical Troubles of the Freshman.”
American Mathematical Monthly, Vol. 20, no. 8 (October 1913), p. 241

I never was one of those people who wrote back from the Grand Cañon to tell the folks at home just how it looked!

Corinne Lowe, 1921

“Home We Had To Have—and We Had.”
The Ladies' Home Journal, Vol. 38, no. 5 (May 1921), p. 7
(A story.)

XIII

Boats have passed through the Grand Cañon of the Colorado, but the trip will never achieve popularity with summer tourists.

Maxwell Savage, 1914

“Riding the Fierce Red Flood of the Colorado.”
Outdoor World and Recreation, New Series, Vol. 50, no. 3 (March 1914), p. 142

A recent query about the number of Grand Canyon river runners led to speculation [estimating] about 20,000 per year from the early 1970s. The figure of over one million seemed to suffice, but led to a discussion of what constituted a river runner.

C. V. Abacus [pseudonym of Richard D. Quartaroli], 2022

“River Runners of the Grand Canyon: Over 1,000,000 Served.”
Boatman’s Quarterly Review, Vol. 35, no. 3 (Fall 2022), p. 20
[includes a statistical spreadsheet for 1864–2021, pp. 21-22]

XIV

No picture can ever present the Grand Cañon.

John Ayscough, 1921

First Impressions in America
(John Long, Ltd., London), p. 126

The Grand Canyon itself became a disappointing reproduction of the Kodachrome original.

Daniel J. Boorstin, 1962

The Image : or What Happened to the American Dream
(Atheneum, New York), p. 15

XV

The spirit of the canyon is never revealed to the tourist who jokes upon its brink and who rides a mule to the river, for true impressions come only with sympathy and with silence.

Le Roy Jeffers, 1922

*The Call of the Mountains :
Rambles Among the Mountains and Canyons of the United States and Canada
(Dodd, Mead and Co., New York), p. 195*

... I recalled the complaint of a disappointed girl the afternoon before. "It's so quiet—so horribly, horribly quiet!" she wailed. "Why, a tremendous thing like that *ought* to be noisy. You ought to hear the river roaring. Think of the noise of Niagara. That is greatness, terrific, roaring greatness But this . . . seems to be lying there waiting."

And in another encounter:

... we shared our breakfast table with a young couple.

"No, we don't care much for it," declared the bride. "And I'm awfully disappointed in the colors. I thought we'd have blue and violet instead of all that henna! I'm so fond of blue." She glanced complacently down at her turquoise suit. "We think we'd rather spend what extra time we have at the Los Angeles beaches—Venice, for instance. So we are going to catch the ten o'clock train."

Annette Thackwell Johnson, 1922

"Silence."
The Independent (New York), Vol. 109, no. 3824 (September 2, 1922), pp. 97-98

*T*his little pamphlet was compiled whimsically, to catch incongruously paired observations, conversations, and musings on that great phenomenon, “The Grand Canyon.” There is folly and sagacity alike in first impressions — and there are as many ways as there are witnesses to marvel at (or to be jaded by) this vision. Such a contrast of sentiments has long been realized but not broadly certified by collections of attributable sources, such as these playfully arranged samples.



FRONTISPIECE PHOTO

Carol Spamer (the author's sister) from Tucson, and Gloria and Robert C. Euler from Prescott, at El Tovar, December 26, 1988. Dr. Euler was then the retired archaeologist–ethnologist for Grand Canyon National Park



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