Arth Chaffin & Cass Hite

The Adventures of Two Colorado River Pioneers

By Barry Scholl

In the annals of southern Utah history, September 17, 1946 was a day to be remembered. With proper pomp and circumstance—even the San Juan County High School Band—the Hite Ferry was dedicated. With the completion of the ferry it was now possible to travel by automobile all the way from Hanksville, across the Colorado River to White Canyon and onward to Blanding. The opening of Arth Chaffin’s homemade ferry represented the first vehicle crossing between Greenriver, Utah (for years, the name was generally written as a single word) and Lee’s Ferry, Arizona.

Pioneer riverman Harry Aleson was the first speaker of the day. Before a crowd of 400, including Bishop E.F Pectol of Torrey, southeastern Utah pioneer Zeke Johnson, Utah State Roads Commissioner K.C. Wright, and Utah Governor Herbet Maw, Aleson described the effort that had gone into making the ceremony possible.

“For years Arthur Chaffin’s ranch was unquestionably the most isolated in the United States. He lived 120 miles from the nearest railroad and his nearest neighbor downstream on the Colorado was at Lee’s Ferry, 162 miles distant. The next neighbor on the river was the Bright Angel Trail, 251 miles away in the bottom of the Grand Canyon. His third nearest neighbor was my father’s son, who lived at MY HOME, Arizona, 442 miles away in the bottom of the mile-deep Grand Canyon.”

Hard as it is to believe today, only 50 years ago one-tenth of Utah was cut off from automobile traffic, a region of scenic wonders known to only a few prospectors, adventurers and cattlemen. After years of what historian/journalist Barbara Ekker described as “construction work, sleepless nights, borrowed equipment, begged funds and sheer hard work,” Chaffin managed to almost single-handedly improve the road from Hanksville down North Wash to Glen Canyon, thereby opening the area to vehicles and tourists.

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Historical Hite

Long before that day, Hite was already a popular river ford, its gravel bottom and relatively broad banks providing the best—and, at times of high water, the only—crossing between Moab and Lee’s Ferry, a distance of 300 river miles.

In 1883, prospector Cass Hite—a colorful, romantic figure known as Hosteen Pish-la-keen, or “Mr. Silver Hunter” to his Navajo friends, crossed the Colorado here and carved his name on a nearby cliff face to record his arrival. Hite’s reputation as a tough character was already widespread, and stories circulated throughout the river community that he had been a former member of Quantrell’s Civil War Raiders, or at the very least a cattle and horse thief on the run from his crimes.

In hindsight, it seems more likely that Cass Hite was simply a larger-than-life figure who enjoyed his notoriety and did nothing to discourage others from spreading his legend. Thirty-five years old when he arrived in the Colorado River country, Hite was already a veteran prospector who had roamed all over the West in search of riches. In 1870, his travels landed him in Monument Valley, where two silver hunters, Merrick and Mitchell, had recently been killed while seeking a fabled Navajo silver mine. Undaunted, Hite befriended the renowned but notoriously touchy Navajo chief Hoskaninni.

Hite spent the next several years pressing Hoskaninni to reveal the location of the mine. Hoskaninni, who had defied the government’s attempts to force his people into exile, had, in 1863, led a small band of followers and relatives into exile on rugged Navajo Mountain. Despite the almost complete absence of wild game and the constant fears of recapture, Hoskaninni refused to give in to Kit Carson and the U.S. Army. It wasn’t until the government finally allowed the Navajo to return home from New Mexico’s Bosque Redondo in 1868 that Hoskaninni and his followers finally left their refuge.

So it’s not terribly surprising that Hite was unsuccessful in attempting to pry the secret from his friend. Hoskaninni undoubtedly understood what would happen to his people if prospectors began flooding into the country. He also had good reason to fear what his fellow Navajos would do to him if he spoke too freely with this obsessive character. With his recent years of furtive living undoubtedly still fresh in his memory, he strongly suggested Hite go elsewhere—in fact, he offered to show him a place where gold was deposited in abundance.

Sensing that this was the best and likely the only offer he was going to get, Hite agreed. The two left Monument Valley, forded the San Juan River, went down White Canyon past today’s Natural Bridges National Monument, and ended at the Colorado River.

“There,” Hoskaninni said, motioning toward the oxbow bend in the river below. “That’s where you’ll find your riches.”

When Cass Hite arrived on September 19, 1883, the Dandy Crossing area had a population of one, Joshua Swett, a horse thief whose activities antedated the heyday of Butch Cassidy’s Wild Bunch, who also made use of the canyon, by almost two decades. But Hite thought Swett’s illicit activities would draw too much attention to the area and perhaps bring unwanted competition from other miners, so Swett was invited to take his activities elsewhere. Such was Hite’s burgeoning reputation that Swett apparently complied with only mild protestations. Not wanting to waste materials, Hite promptly moved Swett’s small (9’312’) cabin downriver from Tracheyte Creek and reassembled it closer to the river, where the three-building “town” of Hite would soon spring up. The notched-leg cabin remained at that site until the waters of Lake Powell inundated the site in the 1960s.

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After only two years, word of Hite’s activities began to spread to the outside world, and Dandy Crossing, so known because it was a dandy place to cross the river, became the unlikely center of a mining boom. Hundreds of prospectors began seeking the fine flour gold of the Colorado River and in July, 1889 a post office was established at Hite, with John Hite, Cass’s brother, named the first postmaster, a position he held until 1914 when waning interest (and lack of success) doomed the mining boom, and the post office was shuttered. As recently as the 1950s, the stone foundation of the Hite post office was still visible.

Even while the boom was going strong, Glen Canyon and the Colorado River presented unique difficulties. The nearest town on a railroad line was Greenriver, 120 miles away, which meant that a week was required to haul equipment in with a wagon and a
team of horses. The roads in and out were kidney-busters, even by the standards of the Natural Bridges National Monument and from there onward to Monument Valley and the communities of far southeastern Utah had begun to see just a little less depopulation. However, the same office and the Utah Department of Publicity and Industrial Development (PID), which at first seemed an exercise in futility, had begun to pay off with official. With the government having considered little more than an historical footnote (the 1941 edition of the WPA-funded Utah: A Guide to the State devoted a single dismissive paragraph to the Ticaboo Canyons), the intervention of Arthur Chaffin, the state of Utah now began to take a little more active interest in "opening up" the remote and scenic White Canyon country. Chaffin had found one firm ally in oru Bundy, then-head of the state publicity department, who allocated the initial $10,000 for the automobile route that would eventually become Utah State Highway 95. But in September making the point, while trying to give the people of the late-summer sun and the sounds of speakers occasionally drowned out by the calls of Chaffin's nearby flock of peahens, the assembled dignitaries focused much of their speechmaking on Utah's rush to attract throngs of tourists and their much-desired dollars. The comments of Arthur Crawford, of the State Commission of Publicity and Industrial Development, were typical:

"Utah with its rich lore of pioneer background is at last recognized from what President Roosevelt called the 'horse and buggy days,' to claim its share of tourists and of world travelers who seek out the lands of legend and of story—the quiet beauty spots of the world, the last frontiers of loneliness."

Governor Maw was even more direct in his push for what later became known as Industrial Tourism (some things in Utah never change):

"Ever since I can remember I have heard men and women talk as we have talked here on the stand today about the beauties of Utah, and some day it was going to be the one spot where the tourists would come from all over the world. I've heard them talk about the overnight stay which was so necessary to the tourist who was near to the top of Immigration (sic) Canyon and saying, 'This is the Place,' and the more I see, the more I am convinced that all those statements are true. But which chance has a tourist got to see any of it? Now when you come right down to it, as far as I am able to see, neither the state nor any one tourist nor our government慵去做 thing up to it make it possible for tourists to see anything that we actually have.

"It has been necessary for the state government and the county governments and the city governments to put their road building money into highways to get from town to town. They have never had an opportunity to develop these scenic areas. The only place a tourist could really visit in Utah now if they come here are the Temple Square in Salt Lake City, which is well advertised and was built up by the church that most of us belong to; and Bryce Canyon and Zion Canyon, which were built up by the Federal Government and the Union Pacific Railroad Company. But where else can a tourist go who comes to Utah unless he gets on a horse and goes into the wild?"

Maw's final point is an interesting one today, but unfortunately the country has been so transformed by his beloved improvements that few of us will have an opportunity to experience the country of southern Utah as it was only a few years ago—wild and uninjured.

At two p.m., when the speechmakers were at last exhausted and the cold drinks dispensed, Governor Maw's car was tugged across the river to the San Juan County side on the ferry Chaffin had constructed from the engine and chassis of a Model A Ford, as well as a wooden structure and a steel guide cable. On the return trip, a "wedding ceremony" was conducted with Chaffin, Zeke Johnson and E.P. Petol pledged their continuing cooperation in pursuit of “further development of roads through the scenic wonders of Utah and the building up of the glorious state of Utah.”

Today, one can only speculate about how the three would feel, now that Utah has been "built up" beyond their wildest dreams.

Chaffin sold his ferry in 1956, disgusted by the Bureau of Reclamation's plan to build a giant reservoir and flood out his holdings. In 1965, he filed suit against the federal government, which had taken several of his patented claims in Glen Canyon under the law of Eminent Domain. On January 7, 1966, a jury awarded Arthur and Della Chaffin $8,000 recompensation for their lost holdings on Good Hope Bar—about four times what the government had initially offered. With court costs, however, the settlement was eaten up, and the Chaffins were, by all accounts, disgusted with their treatment at the hands of the justice system.

The Chaffin Ferry, which for 18 years had capably provided vehicle transportation at Hite, made its last official run on June 5, 1964. Four days earlier, the elevation at Lake Powell had stood at 3452.8 feet. The reservoir’s (it's not a lake and should never be referred to as such, except when absolutely necessary) had been rising between 2 and 3.5 feet per day during the first week in June. The elevation at the Hite Ferry was 3447 feet. According to the official Bureau of Reclamation report, the "still water of Lake Powell is expected to reach Hite Ferry sometime after the fifth of June.”

Today, the ferry site lies under 250 feet of stagnant water.

The parallels between Arthur Chaffin and Cass Hite are fascinating. Both men worked to develop the country they loved and then found themselves displaced by growing crowds. Both were described as outgoing and generous with close friends, but retiring and somewhat shy in public. Both were, at heart, loners who preferred solitary pursuits in the canyons of the Colorado River to the company of strangers. Both considered themselves victims of the legal system and came to distrust lawyers and courts. Both saw with their dreams disappear; Hite never fully recovered from his debilitating bout with tuberculosis, and Chaffin watched with increasing apprehension as the river he had loved and dreamed of sharing with fellow desert rats disappeared beneath the waters of Powell Reservoir.

But at one time, both men found happiness at the Dandy Crossing on the Colorado. BARRY SCHOLL lives in Salt lake City.