

William Wesley Hawkins

One of the ten who went on John Wesley Powell's First Expedition down the Colorado River from its head to its outlet in 99 harrowing Days May 1869 to September 1869



William Wesley Hawkins at Age 20

From Cavalry Man to Trapper, Hunter, Mountain Man, Teamster, Wilderness guide, Western explorer, Friend of the American Indians; to early Settler of Eden, Arizona, Religious Leader, and Justice of the Peace, he certainly lived a full life.

William was born in on July 15, 1848 in Liberty, Gentry County, Missouri. When his widowed mother passed away in 1864 William, aged 15 joined the Union Army as a Cavalry soldier and served a 20 month enlistment.

After his stint in the army William went West in search of adventure, and for the next 4 years he was a Trapper, Hunter, Mountain Man, Teamster, and Wilderness guide. In 1868 while he and his friends were camped at a trading post in Colorado they met Major John Wesley Powell who told them he planned to explore the Colorado River and convinced them to join him. He said he would pay them for

their animals and supplies. The payment never eventuated. All William received was Powell's life vest which he eventually donated to the Smithsonian Institute.

All was not serious, as is noted in this experience at Green River, Wyoming preparing for the trip. Powell's brother purchased a new pair of boots at the trading post, and the dye from the boots turned his socks black. They were put to the boil in a kettle by the coffee pot. Meanwhile a young "tenderfoot" joined them. For three days they listened to his complaints about everything from the food to the weather.

Finally everyone had had enough and so William devised a plan to get rid of him. As they sat by the campfire drinking their coffee the next morning, one of them said there was something peculiar about the coffee. William took his Bowie knife and stuck it in one of the socks and yelled "who in the hell put the socks in the coffee?" The "tenderfoot" jumped up and left, and that was the last they saw of him. A little later, when Powell came into camp he inquired about the whereabouts of the young man. William just said "the last we saw of him he was packing up his gear and leaving without so much as a goodbye. I guess he wasn't ready to take on such an adventure."

In May 1869, the expedition was totally outfitted with ten men and four boats ready to begin the 1,000 mile journey. They were referred to as the "Ten Who Dared," in a Disney movie about the expedition.

As the group was made up of trappers, hunters and wilderness explorers, none were experienced river rafters when they started and little did they know what laid in store for them. Six of these men would prove to have the tenacity required for the success of this wild adventure, while four would simply not be able to continue what proved to be a hair-raising, and in William's case a "hair graying" experience. He started the trip as a dark headed young man, but afterwards his hair came in grey. Fear? Terror? Perhaps, at least that was what he attributed it to.

William was designated as the cook, which included hunting game to be cooked when food and supplies became scarce, as they were frequently washed overboard. Because of his hunting skills, Powell named a mountain in the Grand Canyon "Hawkins Butte" and it still bears his name on official maps of the area.

They were a ragged bunch by the end of the expedition. William wrote: "I had a pair of buckskin breeches. They were so wet all the time that they kept stretching and I kept cutting off the lower ends till I had nothing left but the waist band. When this was gone I was left with a pair of pants and two shirts. I took the pants and one shirt and put them in the boat's locker for safekeeping and cut holes in

my shirt tail and tied the loose ends around my legs so they would not bother me in the water”

One member of the expedition wrote of the 99 day trip, “rapids run 414; portages made (pulling the boats out of the river and hauling them past the rapids) 62, making 476 bad rapids. I never want to see it again anywhere. “

One historian’s assessment of William was: “Yet another colorful character on the 1869 expedition, arguably the most colorful character, was Hawkins.” Major John Wesley Powell described him as “an athlete and a jovial good fellow, who hardly seems to know his own strength.

After the expedition William moved to Northern Arizona where he worked as a teamster and trapper until 1873 when he moved to Southern Utah and worked in the lumber mills. There he joined the Mormon Church, married and settled down to raise a family. He felt his exploring days were over, but in 1883 he joined with other Mormon pioneers and travelled to Southern Arizona to the area now known as Eden, in Graham County.

Eliza Jane Curtis Palmer tells an interesting story about William when he lived in Eden: “William Hawkins was our medicine man, he had a wife and three children. His wife and one daughter died with chills and fever, but he went on with his brave work just the same as most all of the families were suffering with the same sickness. One time he swam across the Gila River when it was so high no one else dared to try it. He tied his clothes on top of his head, but in the struggle with the swift stream of water, he lost his clothes. He got over all okay with his bare body but had to stay in the bushes until he could call on someone to bring him clothes to wear into town (Pima) to get the medicine, but he made the trip back okay and began giving quinine and fever pills to all the sick.”

William spent the remainder of his life in his “beloved town of Eden, His life was a life of service both in his church and in the community, where he became the Justice of the Peace, and raised a family of 12 Children. He passed away on June 7, 1919 and was buried in Eden, Arizona Cemetary alongside his second wife, Anna Elizabeth Baumann Hawkins.



William in Front of His Ranch Home in Eden, Arizona



William as Justice of the Peace, circa 1907

In the above photo William looks like he just stepped off the dusty roads of Tombstone and could have been a deputy to Wyatt Earp. Certainly he was a man for that time, when the Western United States was, for the most part, open country inhabited by Indian tribes and pioneer settlements. It was he and others like him who were daring and determined, blazing trails, taming the wilds, fighting when it was needed and standing up for what they believed. He treated others, including the Indians fairly and referred to them as “my neighbors.”