

Elusive & Remarkable

Stories, a few facts and many speculations... George F. Flavell's 1896 Colorado River voyage & more.

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By: Marieke Taney

George Flavell was born somewhere around 1864 in Jefferson, New Jersey to a farming family. He was one of six children and left home in his early teens. He traveled around quite a bit, became an expert sailor and shipwright in the east, and then headed west to become a commercial hunter and trapper. For unknown reasons he changed his last name to Clark out west and became known as “Clark the Trapper”. Somewhere around 1890 he started trapping with his younger brother along the lower Colorado River around Yuma. Here he found Stanton’s boats and examined them, about the same time he also read Stanton’s account of his journey called “*Through the Grand Canon of the Colorado*” in Scribner’s Magazine, probably giving him the idea for a trip. Flavell had many interesting traits, he was a mild mannered fellow, who wrote sensitive poems, was a prolific letter writer, a lively gossip and a tattoo artist – he always had a kit of tattooing needles and ink among his meager possessions.

Ramon Montez remains somewhat of a mystery. He was a Hispanic from San Fernando, California and by Flavell’s description was somewhat of a “tenderfoot” – unskilled in the techniques of wilderness travel. He was truly a “passenger” on the voyage.

In August of 1896 the two left San Fernando, California and traveled by rail to Green River, Wyoming. They reached Green River on August 17th and commenced building a boat which they named *Panthon* for some unknown reason. There are only 2 descriptions of the *Panthon*. One is in a letter which John Hislop (who was on Powell’s second trip) wrote to Stanton after Stanton found out about the trip and started making inquiries (Hislop saw Flavell and Montez in Glen Canyon). In the letter, dated October 4th, 1896, Hislop describes the boat as:

... a flat bottomed boat with broad, square stern, two oars worked by one man in the bow who sits face to the bow and pushes on the oars. No steering or extra oars. The other man sits on the load in the stern. The oarsman sits on a box when not standing. No airtight compartments. Boat built by themselves and shod with wagon tires, etc. Have 750 feet of rope weighing 125 lbs. (Flavell, 1987, p. 11).

The other is a letter from Dave Rust (*In 1906-1907 David Rust constructed a tramway across the Colorado River for the Grand Canyon Transportation Company. It connected the trail he built into the Canyon from the Woolley Cabin on the rim to his camp near modern-day Phantom Ranch*) dated November 9th, 1948. Apparently Dave’s brother Bill had seen Flavell somewhere along the river as well and was so enamored with his boat that Bill tried to build one just like it. In the letter Dave states:

He (Bill Rust) vouches that the boat-on-the-Rogue picture (which I return herewith – there is a picture of a boat with a high pointed bow, square stern and flat bottom included in the letter) looks very much like the Flavell craft which was decidedly superior to other boats he had seen on the river... And in response to severe cross-examination, he is pretty certain that both fore and aft of the Panthon were decked in canvas. And... old light wagon tires had been fastened around the edge of the boat to protect against the rocks. He judged the boat to be about 18 feet long. You seem to know that it was only 15 ½ feet long. P.S. – The Rogue River boat looks to me very much like the one Bill fashioned after the Panthon. And, it rode the riffles admirably. (Dock Marston Collection 276:44)

Additional notes mention that the boat was open, 15 ½ feet long with a five-foot beam. There are a few interesting possibilities things about the boat: The first is that Flavell may have built it so he was rowing facing forward which is the superior technique used nowadays but not back then. All of the previous expeditions pulled on the oars facing upstream. Nathaniel Galloway (1909) has been credited with this “facing forward” technique but may have been Flavell! The other interesting thing is that the boat may have been more of a “whitewater” boat than had previously been built. Flat bottomed for stability and shallow draft, stoutly constructed to withstand the punishment of rocks and rapids and relatively light.

On the need of traveling light they only brought beans, bacon, flour, coffee, a few guns, cooking utensils, blankets, a tarp, a coil of rope and materials needed to patch the boat. They set out on August 27th, 1896 with, in Flavell's words, *the intention of running down Green River into the Colorado River and on down through the Grand Canyon to Yuma*. They made it to Green River, Utah on September 25th with no major mishaps, resupplied, retrieved their mail and launched again on the 26th. They made it to the South Park Placer Mine that day (22 miles) and met John Hislop and William Edwards who were on the Stanton expedition. The men recommended that they try to procure life preservers and rubber bags at Lees Ferry. They passed the confluence of the Green and Grand (Colorado) Rivers on September 30th and fired a shot from their gun in celebration of reaching the Colorado. Again, without any major mishaps in Cataract Canyon, they reached Lees Ferry on October 12th. Flavell makes a note in his diary on October 13th:

Tomorrow we start. Can a little flat-bottomed boat ever go through such a place? The great Grand Canyon of not only the United States but the world? Can she live? Yes! Yes! An eye that has had its vision blocked by mountains and deserts, and whose bed has been the rocks and sand for years grows weary. What care they for high cliffs or deep gorges? Nothing! They travel in a kind of semi-conscious state, looking neither to the right or left. What care they for scenery? What care they for danger (when past)? What is there to live or die for? If the Panthon and her crew fail to put in an appearance at the other end, what difference will it make? None! She will go through without a doubt, but until she is through the doubt remains. (Flavell, 1987, pp. 47-48)

They launched into Marble Canyon on October 17th, and portaged Soap Creek Rapid. They reached Hance Rapid on October 21st. They were about to portage when they met up with three men on horseback, one a preacher from San Fernando, California. The men were eager to watch them, so they decided to run it. They went down in hair raising fashion but made it through unscathed and camped just below. They made it through the inner gorge needing to repair the *Panthon* after an accident in Grapevine. On October 28th, after a few more repairs, they reached Lava Falls, which they ran without incident and made it to Lava Cliff Rapid. They successfully navigated this as well, mentioning in their notes that ... *it was as dangerous as any on the whole river*. On October 30th they passed the Grand Wash Cliffs, safely through Grand Canyon. Flavell writes in his diary:

We look back at the high and rugged peaks now left behind. We were safe, a feeling no one could feel while in that terrible place! But now the Great, Grand, Beautiful, Wonderful, Fearful, Desolate Canyon is like yesterday – passed! ... We have passed 779 rapids on our journey, 269 being on Green River... We did not count the rapids of the Marble and Grand canyons as their number was already known, but we kept count of the worst ones, which numbered 130. In running those there is an equal chance, one for one, and we won every time! (Flavell, 1987, pp. 74, 76).

The journey took them 65 days. On January 8th, 1897 they reach Yuma, Flavell's diary notes: ... *At 12 today tied up at Yuma, a poorer but wiser man. The trip is ended – 1,685 miles of passing scenery gone! I am now ready for another trip, but before I go farther south, I guess I had better hesitate a moment at least.* (Flavell, 1987, p. 90)

Flavell was interviewed by a reporter for the *Arizona Sentinel* in Yuma, and he states his reasons for undertaking such a journey: *First, for the adventure; second, to see what so few people have seen; third, to hunt and trap; fourth, to examine the perpendicular walls of rock for gold.* (Flavell, 1987, pp. 1-2).

Flavell and Montez never sought to publicize their exploits, and until Dock Marston's discovery of Flavell's written account of the journey called *The Log of the Panthon* in the 1940s, they remained in obscurity. Ramon Montez left the Colorado River and was never heard from again. George Flavell died unexpectedly in 1901 in Mexico. Their trip was truly a spectacular journey. They had run all but six rapids without a single upset of their boat or dunking of the crew. They made it from Lees Ferry through Grand Canyon in 14-days (43 years would go by before a boat ran it in less time), and ran every rapid except for Soap Creek. They were the first to run Hance, Lava Falls (not run again until 1928) and many others. They were the first to trust their lives to only a single boat (another 41 years would go by before another single-boat trip) without lifejackets and a large crew. And last, but not least, Flavell may have been the first to row facing downstream!

Flavell, G. F. (1987). *The Log of the Panthon*. (N. B. Carmony, & D. E. Brown, Eds.) Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing.

[Please see Marieke Taney for more references from the talk]