

Jim Aton, Author “The River Knows Everything” Transcript

Nancy Green

Tell me how you fell in love with desolation canyon and the Green River?

Jim Aton

When I moved here in 1980, I just absolutely fell in love with this landscape -- took my first river trip in 1983 and was absolutely hooked on rivers, and knew that this is what I wanted to do. Which was to research the history and the environmental history of rivers, and how people lived along them, and so that's how I got into doing books on rivers.

Green

What is it about the river that pulled you in?

Aton

Good question. There's just something magical about rivers, being on the water, I felt like I was in my element and the canyons, the beauty of the rocks, the landscape, the history, camping out, being along river - there's just something absolutely magical and almost indescribable. And almost everyone who comes down the river experiences the same thing, lives are changed. I've seen people's lives change, I've seen marriages come about, I've seen marriages break up, it's quite a place.

Green

It seems like it's almost impossible to describe what that is like, why the river is so alluring, it's hard to put it in words, but give it a shot.

Aton

I think it's possible to put into words, but I've never (chuckle), other people have done it better than me - Ellen Malloy and many others, John Wesley Powell. There's just something about being on the water, you're off your secure land base, you're in a different element. I have dreams at night about being on the water when I'm on the river, and I just feel it pulsating, vibrating, going through the rapids.

Green

You have a quote, that actually prefaces your book, what is it?

Aton

The quote, and I can't give it exactly, but it basically said "heart that ends its journey at the end of seeking enlightenment. He comes down to river and' a ferry man says, 'stay here, listen to the river, it'll teach you how to listen, the river knows everything, one can learn everything from it'.

Green

Why did you choose that quote?

Aton

I remembered reading it years ago in college when I read that book, and I remember that section. And it just struck me as a good metaphor for this book. That is, learning about the river, studying all its variety and its subtleties, and its history, and its deep geologic time that one could learn pretty much everything from the river if you just spend some time here.

Green

So what do rivers teach us?

Aton

Well if you spend time here you can see how to live in a landscape, if you study it long enough, you can see what it's about, its natural history, its geologic history, its riparian history, its natural history, animals, plants, and how water works. And water is this, something we all have to have.

Green

It seems like a lot of people throughout time have used the Green River, and Desolation Canyon in different ways. Can you go through and give us a general idea, just a very broad brushstroke, about the different types of people, who have used the river?

Aton

Well there's thirteen thousand year history of people interacting here and it's what - water's what brought various groups of people here. It's an extremely difficult arid environment and water draws people, water draws animals, and that drew various hunting gathering groups in the Clovis, the archaic. The Fremont came down here because there was water in the river, and water in the side canyons, because they were part-time farmers. The Ute also came down here to hunt, and gather plants. There's a rich riparian zone. When you get far away from the river there's not a lot of plants to gather, but when you get close there is, so it's always water that drew people through time here. The fur trappers came essentially for one animal, the beaver, and they didn't stay here all that long. Other ranchers obviously came down here because there was water, and there was grass, and this was pretty much the last chance at free land, and free grass for their livestock.

Green

And then after the ranchers?

Aton

After the ranchers, this became truly Desolation Canyon. It became truly desolate from about 1950 on, no one has lived here permanently, in the canyon

it's largely been administered by a variety of government agencies and the Ute tribe.

Green

And now are rafters some of the few people who come through?

Aton

Now, rafters are the people who know the canyon. Most of them just experience it as we do, going down the river, spending five, six, seven days here.

Green

It's interesting to me that it's so remote here in Florence Creek, it's hard to believe that anyone even came out here. What was the allure for certain ranchers, and outlaws?

Aton

The allure was grass and water again, some of the same resources that others wanted. There were good pastures in these bottoms, there was water in the river, and water coming out of some of the side canyons, like the one right behind us here. And all the other good land had been taken up in the West, this was the late 1890s. We're close to the end of the frontier as it was defined. 1890, Frederick Jackson Turner says 'the frontier is gone'. So these were really the last opportunities for free land in the west, a place to do livestock, cattle, and water.

Green

And there are some colorful stories, I think, about Butch Cassidy, and about how outlaws actually use this region. Tell me a little bit about Butch.

Aton

Well there - the first people down here were the outlaws, Butch Cassidy, Joe Walker, Flat-nose George, Curry, Tom Dilly, Elsie Lay, and they came in here because it had grass, it had water, and it was a good place to hide stolen livestock. It was midway between Castle Valley and some of their hide outs a farther north in Brown's Hole and Hole in the Wall in Wyoming. So they would bring their cattle, stolen cattle here they would fatten them up and then take them out.

Green

And the first settler, **Aton** McPherson, who was he?

Aton

Aton McPherson came in here as a fifteen-year-old teenager with his uncles, his two uncles, one of whom was named Alexander, in 1887. They heard about this area from a guy named Trapper Jack who had a cabin about three miles up from where we're standing. Trapper, who worked the river, and they got here before a

couple of other groups, or individuals who were also thinking about this place, they got here first. They bought it, as it were, from Trapper Jack, and moved in his cabin three miles up in the slew and started running cattle.

Green

What kind of a person was McPherson?

Aton

Aton McPherson was one of the most respected and admired people around, he did as his grandson said 'everything he did, he did the best'. As you look around at all these buildings you can see that there was a lot of care, a lot of craftsmanship, in what he did. He ran a first rate cattle operation, he later became famous for his Hereford bulls, which are very difficult to handle. And he, everything he did, he did well. He had a relationship with the outlaws, he realized that he had to, for awhile, kind of walk a fine line between obeying the law and being friends to some of these outlaws, but everything indicates that he was an honest, businessman in the way that he ran his cattle operation.

Green

There's a great story about how he was abducted on his wedding day, tell me that tale.

Aton

Aton McPherson was a Seventh Day Adventist, and he met his fiancée, Tora Seamount, in Provo at the Seventh Day Adventist church. In May, I believe of 1898, he was on his way out to get married and he was going up the Price River, and a posse of sheriff, I forget the guys name, came looking for Joe Walker who had maybe robbed something, or killed someone, I can't remember. They knew that **Aton** McPherson knew Joe Walker, in fact Joe Walker had actually worked for McPherson off and on. They stopped McPherson, and they told him 'you're going back with us and show us where Joe Walker is'. So he came back to the ranch, they kept asking him where Joe Walker was, he knew, but he wasn't saying, and then a ranch hand finally told the sheriff where Walker was. They went up on the top of the mountain, and surprised Walker and another innocent bystander in the morning and killed them. **Aton** McPherson was eleven days late for his wedding, his fiancée Tora Seamount, later said she just figured that he had changed his mind, but he - they ended up getting married and she moved down with him, and they had a family here.

Green

Well, they lived happily ever after.

Aton

They did live happily ever after, they lived a long life.

Green

Historically, what's the Ute Indian connection to Desolation and Florence Creek?

Aton

Well the Utes, of course, were here from at least 1300 on. This was Ute territory. The Utes came down to the river first as hunter-gatherer, and then as mounted horsemen. So they use these canyons, the river - they didn't live down here permanently but they would come down to hunt and gather wild plants, so they were in and out of these areas. Then later this became part of the Uncompahgre reservation in 1880 after the so-called Meeker Massacre in 1879 over White River. The Colorado Utes were basically forced onto this reservation, the Yampaticas and the Uncompahgres, and they were pretty shocked when they came here, it was a much drier area than they were used to in western Colorado. And so they had the reservation from 1880, and then about seven years later, gilsonite was discovered and they were - it was taken away from them.

Green

And then -

Aton

Well the Utes were essentially kicked off this land in the late 1880s, even though they still thought of it as theirs, because of the discovery of gilsonite. In the early 1930s, the federal government, the bureau of Indian Affairs bought part of this original reservation back for the Utes, and gave them back the so-called Hill Creek extension. That's when the Wilcox's left here and the ranch was taken over, I'm sorry, let me start over again. The Utes were here for a long time, they were kicked off in the late 1880's. In 1940 the federal government bought the land back from various ranchers, and the so-called Hill Creek Extension, and gave the Ute land back to the Utes. This ranch was essentially given to the McCook family, who were descendants of Chief Ouray; Ouray McCook ran cattle down here from about 1940 to 1946. One October they were coming back down the canyon, and they smelled smoke and they came here and the house had burned. They were quite sure that someone set it on fire, but they have no theories as to who did it, and that pretty much ended their ranching operation - it ended ranching here at this site.

Green

Tell me about the lodge at Florence Creek.

Aton

OK. In the early 1970s, the Utes built a lodge here. The idea was to bring hunters in to hunt the bison herd that they had established. So they built this lodge here, they'd fly hunters in, they would also feed river-runners, give them - sell them cokes and so forth. On again, off-again operation from early 70s to late 80s-early 90s.

Green

Why is the Green River important? I mean why should somebody who doesn't run rivers, doesn't really come out here, why should they care about this place?

Aton

The Green River is one of the last wild rivers in the west. It's an area that is, you can see everything here. Its natural features are still intact, its riparian zone is healthy, its animals - healthy populations of bears and big horn sheep, and other animals. It's a great wilderness experience, and it's water. It's water, and water is key in the west.

Green

What would you like to see for the future for this?

Aton

I would basically like to see things left as they are. Things are in great shape here, the natural features, the cultural features, all the Fremont ruins, the Utes, the ranches. It's a wonderful experience for people to come and experience something out of their everyday life.

Green

What do you say to people who say 'yeah but we've got this population that's growing, we need water for Colorado, we need power?'

Aton

We don't need the power, and we don't need the water. We have enough water to sustain us, unless our population gets too big. We can't dam every river, plow up everything, we have to keep some places wild.

Green

You know earlier you were saying, why can't we preserve this spot? Thinking you know a lot of people might say 'well, you know, resources come over to preservation at times and that, you know, we're just preserving it for a couple of river-runners". What would you say to that?

Aton

Well, we're preserving history down here. We're preserving natural history and human history, the history of this thirteen thousand year interaction with this amazing landscape. Would you destroy the Sistene Chapel, the St. Peters Square, the Acropolis? These are important places and a place like Desolation Canyon has, on a smaller scale, just as important historic and natural features.

Green

Thanks