



THE RESURRECTION OF GLEN CAN YON

A photographer rediscovers a landscape that briefly reemerged in the wake of a prolonged Western

drought *Text And Photography By James Kay*



In the first half of the 20th century, the Bureau of Reclamation embarked on a program of massive public works projects to begin harnessing the water resources of the American West. In 1928, Congress authorized the first mega-project of this new era in the construction of Boulder (Hoover) Dam on the lower Colorado River. This enormous concrete structure was the first installment on a vast scheme by the Bureau to convert virtually every mile of the Colorado River into a series of stair-step lakes from its headwaters in the Rockies to its delta in the Sea of Cortez.

With the successful construction of Hoover Dam under its belt, the Bureau turned its attention to other potential dam sites along the Colorado River. Two massive dams were proposed for the Grand Canyon, but died due to public opposition. Licking its wounds, the Bureau soon found an exceptional location for its next dam just a few miles upriver from Grand Canyon's Marble Canyon. The sheer Navajo sandstone walls of Glen Canyon were a dam-builder's dream and would form an ideal foundation for the 10-million-ton concrete plug that soon rose from the drawing boards. Due to minimal public opposition and nonexistent environmental-review laws, the plans were fast-tracked and construction began in 1956. By the time the last bucket of concrete poured into Glen Canyon Dam in 1963, a nascent Lake Powell was already beginning to pool at its base. It took another 17 years before the reservoir finally topped off in 1980, flooding 186 miles of the Colorado River and countless miles of side canyons beneath hundreds of feet of water.

Beginning at Hite, Utah, and ending just above Lee's Ferry on the Colorado River, Glen Canyon was named by the Powell Expedition of 1869 due to the many deep, sinuous side canyons that branched off the Colorado River every few miles. Adorned with their hanging gardens of Maiden-



ing as I realized it was about more than beautiful, glowing sandstone chambers; it was about witnessing the transformation of these canyons as life reclaimed the barren ground.

Willow Gulch provided the most remarkable example of this transformation process. Located several miles north of Davis Gulch, Willow has carved a deep groove into the Navajo sandstone on its short journey to the Escalante River. For my first trip into Willow back in 2005 to photograph its dewatered section, I dropped in near its headwaters and wound my way deeper and deeper into its labyrinth until I encountered the old high-water mark of the reservoir. I always feel as if I'm walking into a time machine as I descend into these formerly reservoir-flooded canyons. As I wandered down Willow, I was dismayed to discover a mile-long devastation zone of crumbling sediment banks, oozing mud, windblown tumbleweeds and swirling clouds of dust. Not a pretty picture. Other than a few shots of the apocalyptic scene, I saved a lot of money on film that day.

Exactly two years later, I returned to Willow and witnessed a phenomenal transformation. Where there had been nothing but devastation, life now flourished. Thick stands of willow and cattail crowded the sandy banks along the shallow stream. Fifteen-foot-tall cottonwood trees restaked their claims. The wind-blown tumbleweeds were nowhere to be seen, and the canyon echoed with the sounds of birds, frogs and gurgling water. A sculpted 10-foot-tall waterfall, which had been entirely buried beneath the reservoir sediment on my previous trip, was now fully exposed. Further down the

canyon, as I rounded that last bend in the walls and saw the stagnant waters of the reservoir, the scene immediately changed back to one of devastation.

In what I came to refer to as "The Dead Zone," that place where the reservoir meets the land, bubbles rose through the oozing muck at the reservoir's edge while dead cottonwood logs floated on the scum-covered water. All greenery had vanished and the canyon was dead silent except for the sound of an idling powerboat around the next bend. Anxious to return to the living world of the canyon above the reservoir, a profound feeling swept over me as soon as I retreated upstream around the first bend. As though a line had been drawn in the sand, I was immediately out of the Dead Zone and surrounded again by willows, cattails, cottonwoods and the sounds of life. It was like flipping a switch. Down canyon was an example of how we manage our world, and here was an example of how the forces of nature manage things.

The water level of Lake Powell dropped to an all-time low of 145 feet below its full-pool capacity in April 2005. Last winter's above-average snowpack raised the water level to its highest point since 2002. As I write this, it laps at the dam, 71 feet down the face. Much of what I saw has once again slipped beneath the waves. It's difficult to say where things are headed. As we continue to conduct a vast global experiment by dumping CO2 into the air, we will undoubtedly affect the precipitation patterns in the West. Scientist's suggest that our planet's wet places will get wetter and the dry places dryer. If this assumption is correct, we can look forward to more prolonged and severe droughts in the West with all their ramifications, including their effect on the lost canyons of Glen Canyon. OP

See more of **James Kay's** explorations in *Glen Canyon* in the forthcoming book *The Resurrection of Glen Canyon: A New Vision for Living in the American West* by *Annette McGivney*; *Photographs* by *James Kay*. Go to www.BraidedRiverBooks.org for more information.

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