



Hole-in-the-rock expedition

David E. Miller

1973, pp. 186-191. <https://doi.org/10.56577/FFC-24.186>

in:

Monument Valley (Arizona, Utah and New Mexico), James, H. L.; [ed.], New Mexico Geological Society 24th Annual Fall Field Conference Guidebook, 232 p. <https://doi.org/10.56577/FFC-24>

This is one of many related papers that were included in the 1973 NMGS Fall Field Conference Guidebook.

Annual NMGS Fall Field Conference Guidebooks

Every fall since 1950, the New Mexico Geological Society (NMGS) has held an annual [Fall Field Conference](#) that explores some region of New Mexico (or surrounding states). Always well attended, these conferences provide a guidebook to participants. Besides detailed road logs, the guidebooks contain many well written, edited, and peer-reviewed geoscience papers. These books have set the national standard for geologic guidebooks and are an essential geologic reference for anyone working in or around New Mexico.

Free Downloads

NMGS has decided to make peer-reviewed papers from our Fall Field Conference guidebooks available for free download. This is in keeping with our mission of promoting interest, research, and cooperation regarding geology in New Mexico. However, guidebook sales represent a significant proportion of our operating budget. Therefore, only *research papers* are available for download. *Road logs*, *mini-papers*, and other selected content are available only in print for recent guidebooks.

Copyright Information

Publications of the New Mexico Geological Society, printed and electronic, are protected by the copyright laws of the United States. No material from the NMGS website, or printed and electronic publications, may be reprinted or redistributed without NMGS permission. Contact us for permission to reprint portions of any of our publications.

One printed copy of any materials from the NMGS website or our print and electronic publications may be made for individual use without our permission. Teachers and students may make unlimited copies for educational use. Any other use of these materials requires explicit permission.

This page is intentionally left blank to maintain order of facing pages.

HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK EXPEDITION

by

DAVID E. MILLER
Department of History
University of Utah
Salt Lake City, Utah



Platte D. Lyman.
(Photo Courtesy: Lucretia L. Ramey).

During the spring and summer of 1879 a company of Mormons consisting of 26 men, 2 women and 8 children with a dozen wagons and over a hundred head of livestock passed through a portion of northern Arizona to found a settlement on the San Juan River at Montezuma and Bluff in present Utah. This was an exploring party headed by Silas S. Smith, recently "called" by the Mormon Church to establish a Mormon outpost somewhere in the Four Corners region.

Before Brigham Young's death in 1877 the Mormon program of colonization had been very well developed under his leadership. If church leaders wished to have a settlement established in any given location, church members in good standing were simply "called" on colonizing missions. The faithful saints enthusiastically accepted these assignments as having come from God through his agents on earth—the presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. At a regional stake conference of the church held at Parowan late in 1878, such a call was made for the San Juan Mission. However, the whole movement eventually took the name of the Hole-in-the-Rock expedition because of hardships encountered enroute, especially at the Colorado River crossing of the same name.

There were several reasons for founding a colony in the general area of the Four Corners: (1) Indians of the region had quite regularly crossed the Colorado to raid Mormon settlements in southern Utah. It was believed that a Mormon outpost there would be able to stabilize that part of the frontier; (2) non-Mormon cattlemen were pushing into the area from Colorado and New Mexico. L.D.S. Church leaders were very much concerned about any infiltration of outsiders into the fringes of the Mormon empire; (3) the United States govern-

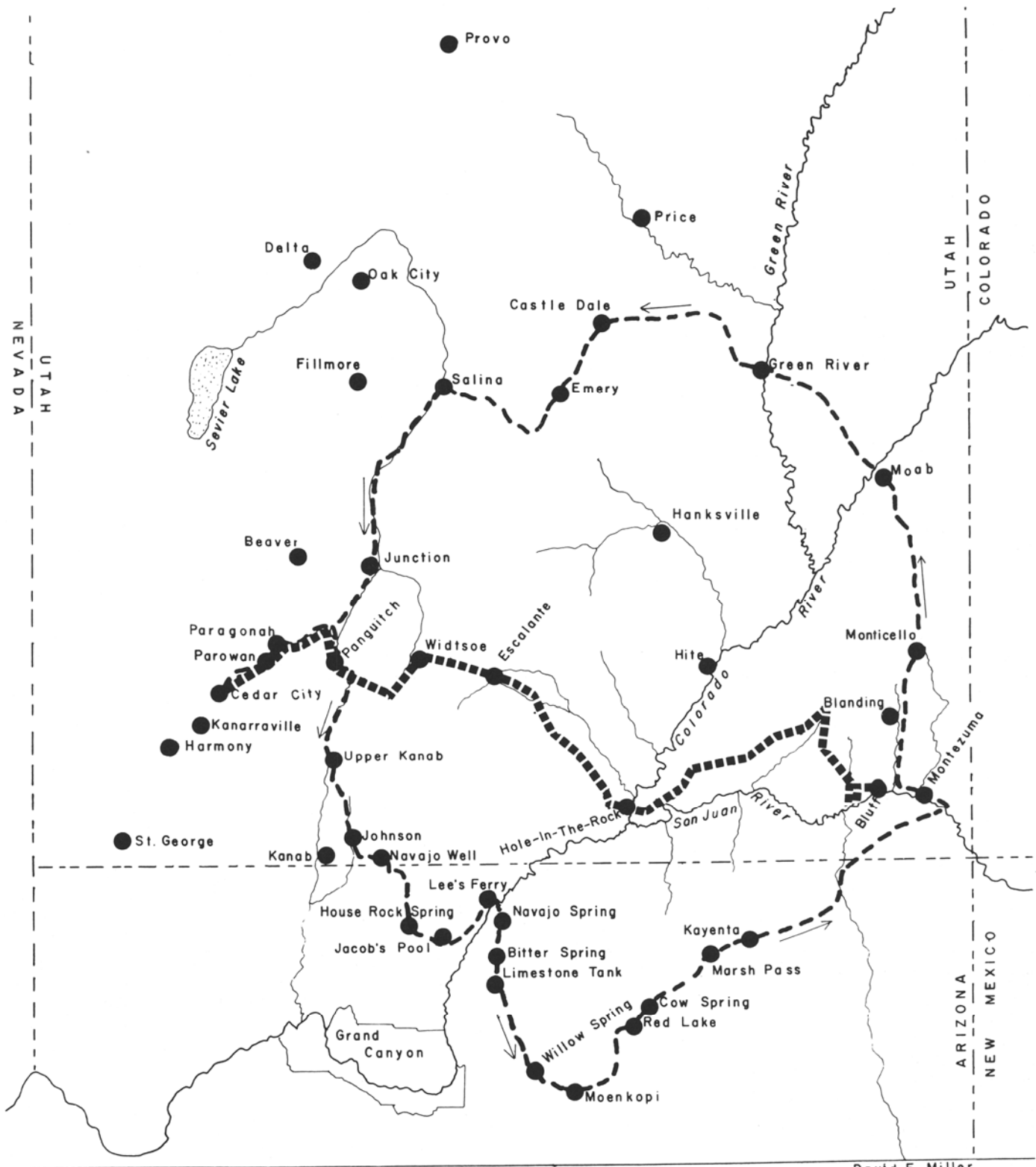
ment (aided by non-Mormons of Utah) were conducting a vigorous campaign against Mormon polygamy. The Anti-Bigamy Act of 1862 had been reenforced by the Paland Act of 1874. Both were calculated to stamp out polygamy in the territories. Mormon leaders considered the anti-polygamy legislation as violations of the First Amendment guarantee of religious freedom. The famous Reynolds decision of the U.S. Supreme Court was pending at the time of the mission call. Mormon church leaders expected a favorable ruling; (4) many Mormon converts from the southern portions of the United States had been settled in the San Luis Valley of Colorado; but the winters there were too cold for the comfort of the southern saints. Church leaders hoped to find a more favorable climate on the San Juan River.

With all of these objectives in mind, plus the obvious desire on the part of the colonists to find additional rich farm and grazing lands, Silas S. Smith and his exploring expedition set out from Parowan in mid-April 1879 to locate a definite site (or sites) for the proposed colony.

At the time of the mission call Mormon leaders knew very little about the Four Corners region. Thus, it was necessary to send an exploring party to (hopefully) locate a suitable settlement site. The plan was to leave a couple of families at the new location during the fall and winter of 1879-80 while the majority of the explorers would return to the settlements with the intention of moving to the new colony during that same winter. The bulk of the colonists hoped to be comfortably settled on the San Juan in time for the 1880 spring planting.

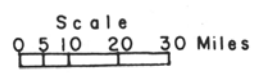
As the accompanying map shows, the expedition traveled southward from Panguitch, following the regular wagon road into Arizona, crossed the Colorado at Lee's Ferry during the first week in May and continued southward to Moenkopi where they arrived on May 6. "From Moan Copy the explorers looked to the northeast, over dry mesas and glistening sand hills where the lonely Navajo guarded his sheep and goats in a wild wilderness all his own." (Miller, 1959, p. 20) The route led up Moenkopi Wash (east of Tuba City) thence northward to pioneer a wagon road that is currently paralleled by present U.S. Highway 160 all the way to Kayenta. Enroute the company passed the columns of Elephants Feet, drank at Cow Springs, traversed Klethla Valley and pushed on through Marsh Pass to Kayenta, a favorite Navajo center. From that site the route led down Laguna Wash to Church Rock, past present Dennehotso and along the base of Boundary Butte to arrive at the south bank of the San Juan River about halfway between McElmo Wash and Montezuma Creek.

Some Navajos objected to this incursion through their domain; their chief concern was that the intruders might use up all of the too sparse water supply, leaving none for the natives' flocks. In a few instances, near-hostilities developed as



David E. Miller

EXPLORERS' ROUTE - - - - -
 HOLE-IN-THE-ROCK ROUTE



whites forced their way to water their stock at Navajo tanks. However, general friendship was bought through the simple act of digging wells at various places, then formally presenting them to the Indians as the pioneers broke camp to move on. It is claimed that some of the wells so provided still furnish water to Navajo livestock. George Hobbs reported a near miracle in locating water at a point designated as Lost Springs: "By accident one of the brethren struck a vein under a rock and at once a large stream of good water gushed forth." (Miller, 1959, p. 32).

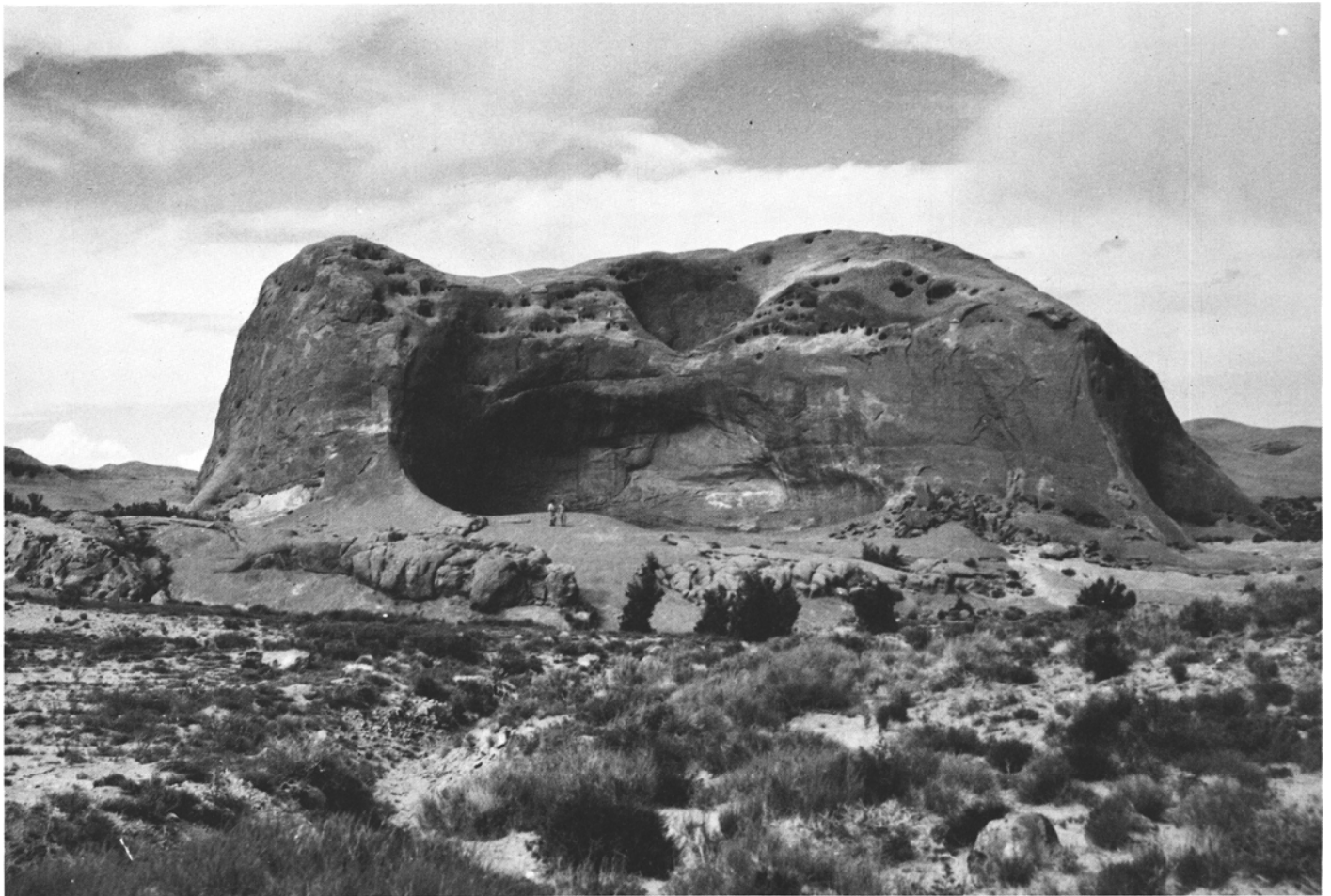
The explorers found the San Juan at flood stage but managed to ford the stream on June 2. Members of the company spent the next several weeks exploring the river bottom from above McElmo Wash downstream to Butler Wash. Every piece of possible farmland was located and claimed; a few houses were built at suitable sites. Some crops were planted and a dam constructed across the river in an attempt to obtain irrigation water—all without much success.

By the middle of August most of the explorers had completed their initial work and most were eager to return to the settlements to escort their families and other missionaries to the new site. The families of James L. Davis and Henry H. Harriman remained at Montezuma to form a permanent nucleus for the new settlement. The long difficult trek through unfriendly Navajo country had convinced the leaders that they should return by a northern route that would connect with the

Old Spanish Trail near present Moab. They followed this track back to the settlements of south-central Utah.

Upon their return the explorers made favorable reports of the country they had located and began finalizing plans for the move to the San Juan. Two choices were open: they could backtrack along the Old Spanish Trail or retrace their tracks through Navajo lands. Either route was calculated to require six weeks. At this time word reached Parowan that a shortcut route had been discovered by way of the recently established hamlet of Escalante. Without conducting any additional investigation, and anxious to avoid the long haul along either of the routes already known, leaders of the San Juan Mission eagerly listened to this report of a direct and shortcut road. It was rumored that some difficult terrain would be encountered along the newly discovered route, but pioneer wagon masters believed that there was virtually no country too rugged for a wagon. In October, 1879, under the leadership of Platte D. Lyman, the new route had definitely been adopted and final preparations were under way to start the migration.

The missionaries left various southern Utah towns in small groups with the general understanding that they would all assemble at "road's end" some forty miles southeast of Escalante. By mid-November most of the colonists had arrived at a point called Forty Mile Spring. Altogether there were some 250 persons (men, women and children) with 83 wagons and well over a thousand head of livestock. The migrants were



Dance Hall Rock.

soon shocked to learn that no road went beyond the spring. Explorers sent ahead reported the worst country wagons had ever attempted to pass through. Some wanted to turn back, but early deep snows had fallen in the Escalante Mountains, virtually cutting off the return route. As a result the decision was made to push on; to build a wagon road to the San Juan if it took all winter.

While explorations were being undertaken and council meetings were being held, the pioneers found pleasure in dancing away their cares at nearby Dance Hall Rock—to the tune of violins which some members had brought along. Meanwhile road builders forged ahead.

By mid-December the advance wagons had reached the rim of the Colorado River gorge. Facing them was a narrow, natural crevice in the sandstone wall, barely wide enough for a skinny man to squeeze through. Through that narrow slot they could see a glimpse of the river three-quarters of a mile away and 1500 feet below. This notch they immediately named Hole-in-the-Rock and proceeded at once to widen it into a passageway.

With hand tools and a small amount of blasting powder the men of the expedition literally clawed out the Hole just wide

enough for a wagon to scrape through. Six weeks were required for the task—much of it in bitter cold weather. By January 25 the job was pronounced finished and ready to feel the bite of wagon wheels. The worst part was near the top where the pitch was measured at eight and a half feet to a rod (50 percent grade); below that was a steep rocky crevice leading to a long sand hill sloping down to the river's bank.

With wheels roughlocked, a steady team up front and a dozen men hanging on behind, Kumen Jones mounted the driver's seat and drove the first wagon down the precipitous notch. Twenty-five wagons followed during that same day (January 26, 1880); the remaining outfits followed within two or three days. All made the perilous descent without a serious accident; not a wagon was wrecked.

Meanwhile, Charles Hall had constructed a ferry boat at the river's edge and in less than a week all were safely across the mighty Colorado.

Most people who visit the Hole-in-the-Rock today find it difficult to believe that wagons were actually driven down through the steep, narrow slot. In fact, visitors are too often told that the wagons were not driven at all, but were dismantled and lowered a piece at a time through the Hole. This is entirely false! *All wagons were driven down through the notch with a team hitched to the front and a driver in the seat.*

Furthermore, the road became a main route to the San Juan settlements for a full year before Charles Hall located a better route and moved his ferry 20 miles upstream to present Hall's Crossing. During the year of its use, there was two-way traffic over the Hole-in-the-Rock road. This seems incredible today; but it is true; *wagons were driven both ways—up as well as down!*

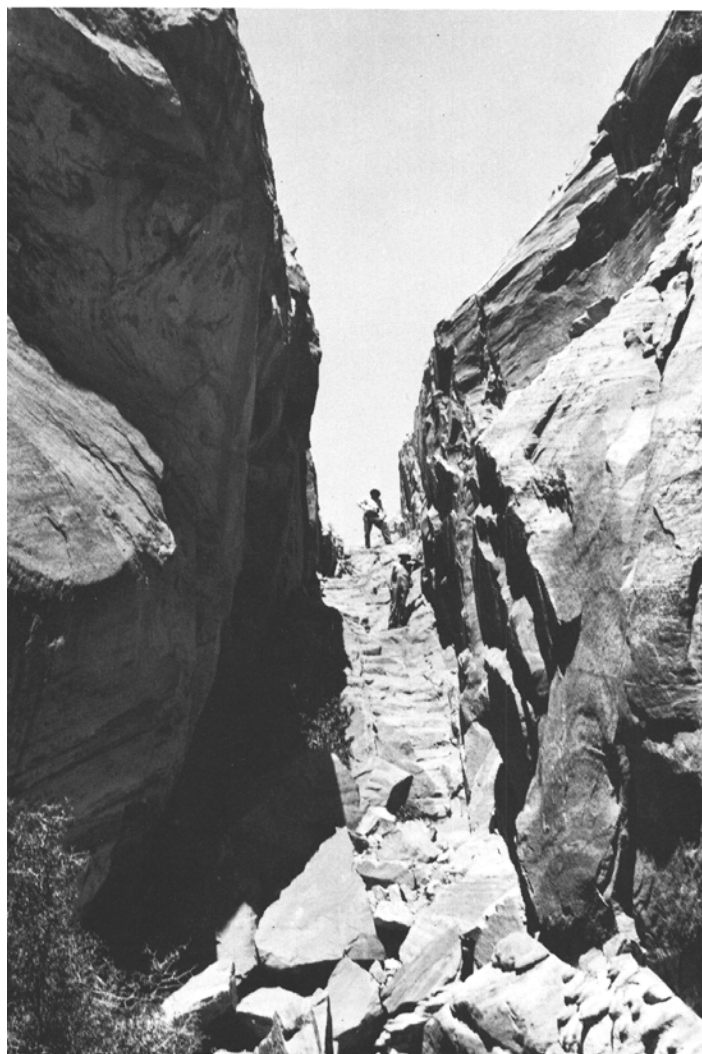
Strange as it may seem, the Hole-in-the-Rock pioneers expressed no doubt about their ability to make the Hole into a passable wagon road. It was the wild, rugged country beyond the river that concerned them. Yet the true pioneer spirit prevailed. Through united effort of that valiant band, the deep gulches, solid rock cliffs and the nearly perpendicular walls of Gray Mesa were overcome. No pioneer group ever demonstrated greater faith and courage, or ever built a road through more difficult terrain. They literally danced, prayed and hacked their way through almost insurmountable obstacles. They proved that there is hardly any country through which wagons cannot be taken. They had been called by their church to plant a colony and with the help of God they would do it.

By April 5 wagons began rolling into the present location of Bluff. The sight of a few level acres of bottomland seemed almost too good to be true. The 20 additional miles upstream to Montezuma seemed just too far; they were simply too tired to go on. William Hutchings suggested the name of Bluff City. Lots were drawn for building sites; land was plowed; crops were planted.

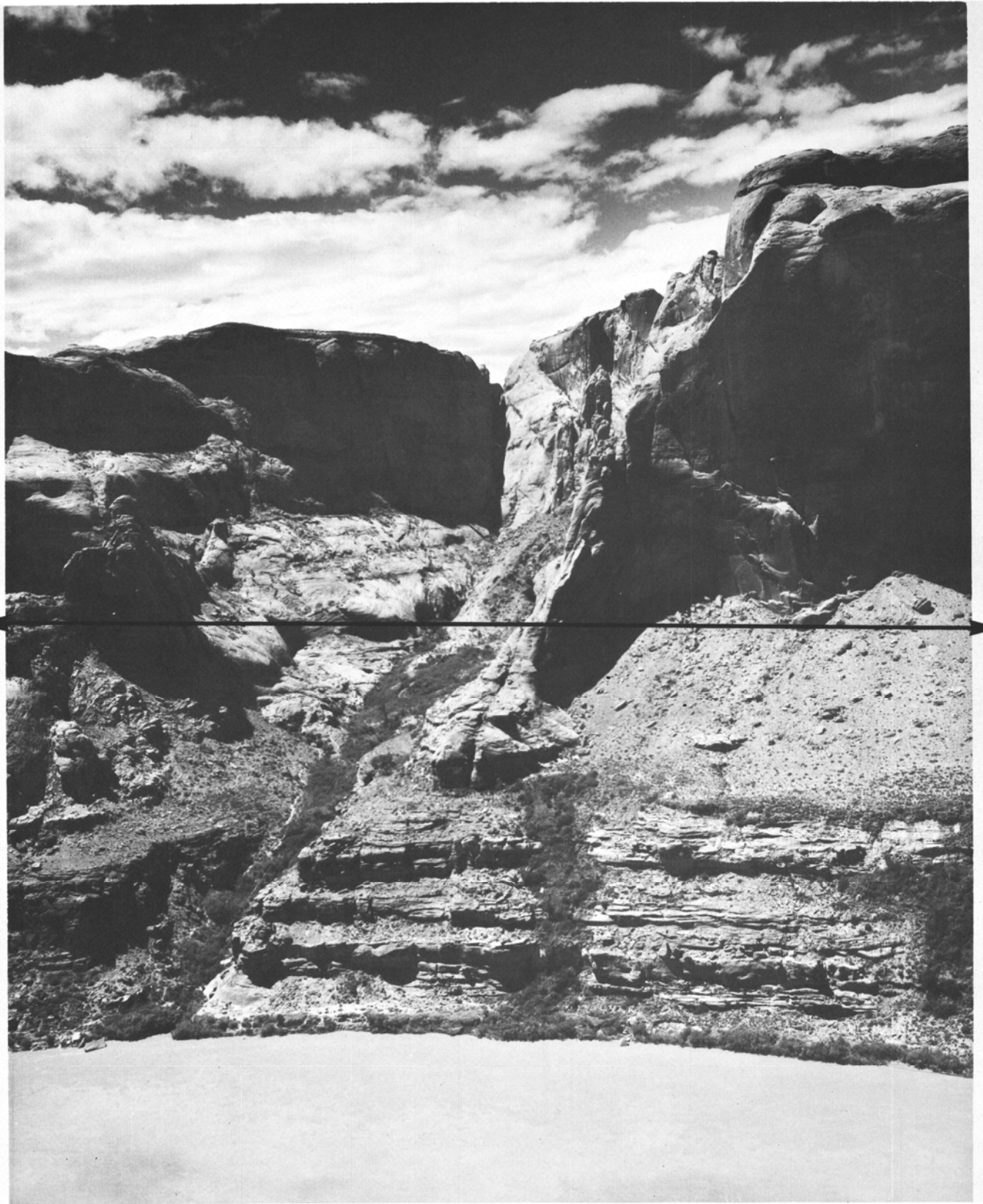
During the five-month journey no death had occurred; all colonists arrived, weary but well. In fact, the number had been swelled by the birth of two babies enroute: Lena Desert Decker and John Rio Larson. The trip had been a rough one but the primary objective had been achieved—a Mormon outpost on the San Juan.

REFERENCE

Miller, David E., 1959, Hole-In-The-Rock: Univ. Utah Press.



'Inside the Hole. This view of the upper portion of Hole-in-the-Rock was taken in 1950. Note rock-fall debris clogging passageway.



BEFORE Lake Powell: View of Hole-in-the-Rock as seen from the Colorado River. The escarpment is approximately 1500 feet high. Arrow line marks current lake level as compared with photo on opposite page. (Photo courtesy: Bureau of Reclamation).



*AFTER Lake Powell: View of Hole-in-the-Rock as viewed from the flooded Colorado River. Inundation has reduced the site to half its original elevation.**
(Photo courtesy: Bureau of Reclamation).

*Editor's note: Lake Powell began forming January, 1963.