What Really Happened to Bessie and Glen?

A couple's mysterious 1928 disappearance in the Grand Canyon launched a legend. Their story is the subject of two new books.

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by Ann Japenga

IT'S BEEN 73 YEARS SINCE GLEN AND BESSIE HYDE VANISHED ON A HONEYMOON VOYAGE through the Grand Canyon, but what exactly happened to them is still a mystery. On the Colorado River on summer nights, passengers on commercial rafting trips stand around campfires while boatmen speculate about the young Idaho bean farmer and his bride. They say Bessie wanted to be the first woman to boat through the Grand Canyon. She almost made it.

When the Hydes' scow was found floating upright and fully stocked in the winter of 1928, Glen and Bessie were nowhere around. A massive search made national headlines but never turned up a trace of the pair. Did they abandon the scow and attempt the brutal hike out to the rim? Did they quarrel, as some observers claimed, and one kill the other? As the story unfolds, the boatmen whip up the mystery with sensational revelations—for one, that an old woman claiming to be Bessie reappeared on the river years later.

A former white-water guide who has recited the Hyde legend for years has now written a book about the disappearance. "Sunk Without a Sound: The Tragic Colorado River Honeymoon of Glen and Bessie Hyde" (Fretwater Press), by Flagstaff, Ariz., writer Brad Dimock, is one of two new books about the mystery; the second, "Grand Ambition" (W.W. Norton) is a fictionalized account by Healdsburg, Calif., author Lisa Michaels.

The paired timing of the releases is coincidental. "It's amazing that the first two in-depth treatments of the Hyde story are coming out so close together after a gap of 73 years," Dimock says.

Dimock, a long-limbed 48-year-old, doesn't just narrate the Hydes' voyage, he re-creates it. A veteran of more than 25 years as a boatman on the Colorado, Dimock has also worked as a commercial guide on major rivers from Alaska to Tanzania. With his wife, fellow boatman Jeri Ledbetter, Dimock built a replica of the Hydes' heavy wooden scow—a boxy boat then common to the Northwest that is said to resemble a floating coffin. In 1996, Dimock and Ledbetter launched themselves onto the river to find out what really happened to the Hydes.

Dimock's book is driven by his knowledge of rivers, rapids and boats; Michaels zeroes in on the domestic side of the Hyde legend. "I could relate to Bessie," says Michaels, 34, who, this day, is barefoot, dressed in jeans and a black sweater with casually rumpled hair.

Bessie Hyde—only 22 when she vanished—was an aspiring poet, artist and bohemian. Michaels too is a poet and a bohemian by birth- -her last book, "Split: A Counterculture Childhood," was a critically acclaimed memoir of growing up the child of '60s radicals.

"My husband is Mr. Outdoors, so we've always had this push-me, pull-you about risk and caution," says Michaels, the mother of twin baby boys. "We've gone on some disastrous trips in the outdoors, and I became interested in what happens to a relationship in these situations. Who gets strong? Who gets weak?"

Michaels was hooked on this story by a decades-old black-and- white photograph of Glen and Bessie. She admired the modern "aviatrix cool" of their bomber jackets, the couple's tense but determined stares. "I thought they were beautiful," she says. "Not beautiful as in 'pretty,' but they had this fierceness, like something intense was happening to them."

Both Dimock and Michaels used as their primary resource the Huntington Library collection of an obsessive river historian, the late Otis "Dock" Marston. From those documents, the writers found that Glen Hyde's plan was that he and his young bride would run the canyon, then go on the lecture circuit and make money reliving their adventure. In the Hydes' time, like now, outdoor daring was chic. Charles Lindbergh had recently crossed the Atlantic; George Mallory had disappeared on Everest. The public craved more such heroes.

In those days, the Grand Canyon was a hero-making run. There were no commercial river trips. The rapids were the domain of seasoned explorers and professional expeditions—not honeymooners in a homemade boat.

Launching on Oct. 20, 1928, the Hydes made a successful run through many major rapids of the Green and Colorado rivers. Almost a month into the trip, they spent a few days restocking at Grand Canyon Village on the South Rim. During the layover, they talked with a reporter from the Denver Post—thinking their final destination, Needles, Calif., was just a few weeks away.

Before departing civilization again, Bessie admired a girl's shoes and announced wistfully: "I wonder if I'll ever wear pretty shoes again."

The newlyweds set off into gloom and cold; at that time of year, the sun never touches the canyon floor and the granite walls close in oppressively. They were last seen on Nov. 18; the couple's scow, Rain-in-the-Face, was found floating fully loaded near the lower end of the canyon three weeks later. People who encountered the newlyweds during their layover would later inflame controversy by saying Bessie seemed to want to abandon the trip. Did Glen push her on, insisting they needed to complete the run to reap publicity?

Michaels felt a bond to Bessie because both women were coaxed into outdoor adventures by their husbands. Glen Hyde had run the Snake and Peace rivers in Idaho, and had learned from veteran Idaho boatmen how to operate the ungainly scows. Bessie, on the other hand, had no river experience when she took on the Colorado.

Similarly, Michaels' physician husband, Mauricio Michaels, once persuaded his future wife to go on a December hiking trip into the Grand Canyon, even though she was a reluctant outdoorswoman. The pair encountered zero temperatures at the rim and slogged through the worst snowstorm in 20 years down in the canyon. They had to hike the vertical mile out in waist-deep snow. Lisa Michaels suffered hypothermia and Mauricio's heels and toes turned black. "I started to wonder if this was the way I wanted to spend my vacations," Lisa Michaels wrote in an essay on the mishap.

In Michaels' novel, 90-pound Bessie becomes an active participant in the journey, not just a pliable sidekick as she appears in the campfire tale. Bessie gains confidence as she learns to scout rapids and handle the heavy sweeps (20-foot oars) that guide the scow. Early in the trip, Glen catapults out of the boat on a rapid. Michaels surmises that that was the moment when Bessie realized she'd have to be in charge of her own survival.

"I think Bessie was gutsy," Michaels concludes. "The trip may have been Glen's idea, but she had her own reasons for going. She hadn't found her voice as an artist or poet, and she saw an opportunity to have an experience."

Although Michaels closes her novel in 1928 after the couple vanishes, Dimock goes on to explore the bizarre multiple endings to the story that cropped up in later years. Dimock interviewed participants on a 1971 commercial boat trip during which an elderly woman announced over the evening campfire that she was Bessie Hyde.

"What did you do with Glen?" a boatman asked, half-joking.

"I killed him," the woman answered without looking up. The honeymooners had a fight, she added; she stabbed Glen and hiked out to Peach Springs, Ariz., then caught a bus back East to start a new life.

A series of equally tantalizing twists occurred in the ensuing years, and Dimock investigates them all: A bullet-pierced skull was found in the garage of a deceased river guide; was it Glen Hyde's? A veteran river guide with a secretive streak died, and it was discovered her real name was Bessie; the Hydes' marriage certificate was found in her belongings. "Each appearance carried hints of murder, mayhem, mystery," Dimock says.

He exhaustively tracked leads from New Hampshire to Hawaii, knocking on doors, digging through archives. One of the popular theories Dimock explores is the notion that Glen Hyde was a brute who forced Bessie to continue the journey when she didn't want to, and perhaps even killed her in a fit of frustrated rage. "That was the prevailing opinion down in the canyon," Dimock says. "But I found Glen Hyde was not the wife-beater that a lot of people wanted him to be."

During the course of his research, Dimock gained respect for Glen Hyde as a gentleman and as a boatman. Dimock's own run through the canyon in a homemade replica of the Hydes' boat was "violent and unnerving," he says. Whenever the scow plunged into a large wave, the sweeps would be ripped from Dimock's hands and bludgeon the boat deck like "psychotic helicopter blades." He and his wife took turns wrestling with the sweeps and cowering in the bottom of the boat. By journey's end, their bodies were thoroughly tattooed with contusions and abrasions.

“We had helmets and lifejackets—I was now wearing two jackets in the big stuff,” Dimock writes. Plus, he says, they had full knowledge of the river ahead as well as a friend trailing them in a motorized rescue boat. “The Hydes had none of that. They had wool clothes, leather jackets, and each other.”

Dimock and Michaels each decided that—after 73 years of uncertainty—it would be cruel not to leave readers with a notion of what really happened to Glen and Bessie Hyde. “This is where the novelist has the advantage over the historian,” Michaels says. “I was able to narrate the ending and hope people are left with some catharsis and the feeling, ‘this makes sense, this rings true.’ “

As for Dimock’s ending, it doesn’t give it away to say he pulled his boat to shore right in the middle of 232-Mile Rapid, near the end of the run, and camped on a sand pocket amid tall spires of granite. It’s not a usual stopping place, but based on Bessie‘s final description in her diary, the rapid was probably the last the Hydes ran.

So, Dimock sat there on the bank for hours studying the white water. He mentally ran down 15 possible scenarios of what might have happened to the hero and heroine of his book. When he finished visualizing all the options, he felt like he was watching Glen and Bessie vanish all over again. “I cried and cried,” he says.

The two new Glen and Bessie books inevitably will alter the way the story is told down on the river. But, with luck, passengers hearing the tale for the first time will still go off to their cots half-suspecting they might find a couple of old skeletons twined together or catch a glimpse of a grizzled murderess disappearing up a side canyon.

“The story hasn’t totally left the realm of myth,” Dimock says. “People can still take one of the endings and run with it.”