



The Geography of *Wildfire*

by Dr. Kevin Blake, Professor Emeritus of Geography
Kansas State University

The geography of *Wildfire* (1917) is among the most significant in all of Zane Grey's western romances. It weaves together four places that shaped Grey's vision of the West more than any other prior to 1917: Lees Ferry (Grey's fictional name is Bostil's Ford), the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley, and Wild Horse Mesa. Most importantly, this is the book that launched Monument Valley to worldwide fame and thus greatly shaped the image of the American West (Blake, 1995; Harvey, 2011).

In this article, I explain the geography of *Wildfire* by following the chronology of the book from Lees Ferry to the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley, and finally Wild Horse Mesa. Though this is a story about a wild horse named Wildfire, and is one of Grey's greatest horse stories along with *Riders of the Purple Sage* and *Wild Horse Mesa*, the setting trumps the story (Wheeler 1975, p. 165).

Bostil's Ford is a nearly constant presence in the novel. The ford is a crossing of the Colorado River near the "wild Utah border" (p. 7; all pagination Grosset & Dunlap edition). There can be no doubt that Bostil's Ford is modeled on Lees Ferry based on its description in chapters 1 and 2 (especially p. 18), as well as its approximate location (Pfeiffer, 1991; Pratt, 2014). (Official U.S. place names do not include apostrophes, and on December 1, 1905 the Board on Geographic Names ruled the name of this ford should be spelled Lees Ferry.) Through Lucy Bostil, the reader learns of Zane Grey's ambivalence toward the Lees Ferry landscape: the river and its canyon are "red, sullen, and thundering" and "grim and aloof." The "vast sloping valley of sage," on the other hand, is "soft and beautiful" (p. 2) and is where the most dramatic moments of the action set at Bostil's Ford occur, including the race when Lucy rides Wildfire and knocks Sage King, her father's favorite horse, to the ground.

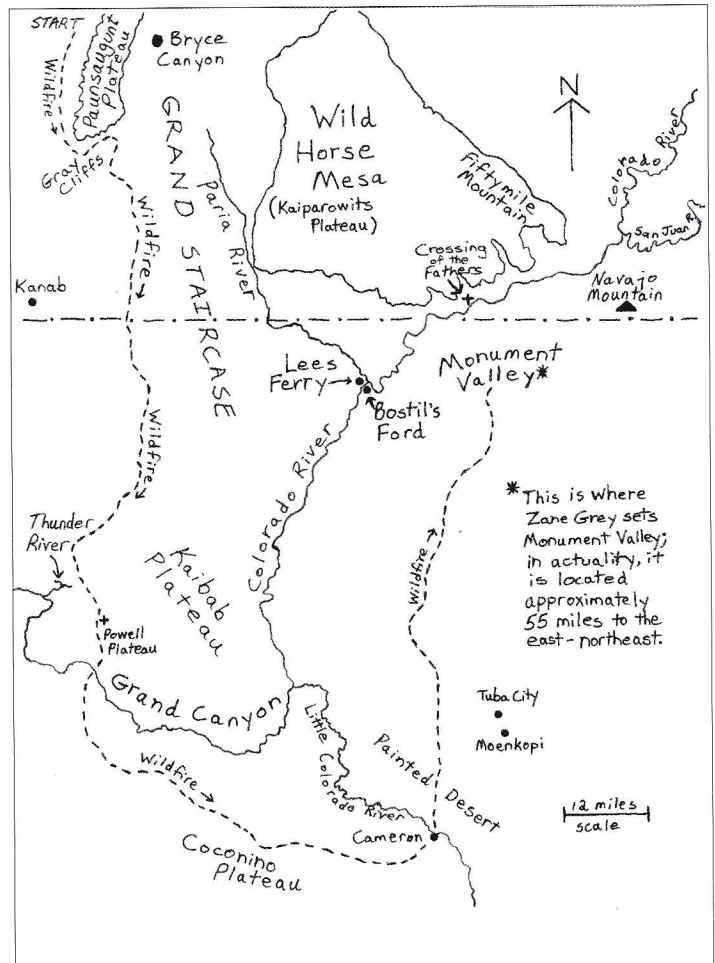


Figure 1: Map of the geography of *Wildfire*.

Slone's route tracking Wildfire is represented by the dotted line, beginning in the upper left corner.

Cartography: Kevin Blake.

Grey re-locates the orchards, fields, and buildings at Lees Ferry, which are on the western side of the Colorado River at the mouth of the Paria River, and sets Bostil's Ford on the east bank (p. 8). Perhaps because of this geographic shift, Grey introduces another name for the ford: Crossing of the Fathers (p. 116 & 164). This has the potential to create much geographic confusion because there is an actual Crossing of the Fathers further upstream from Lees Ferry in Glen Canyon.

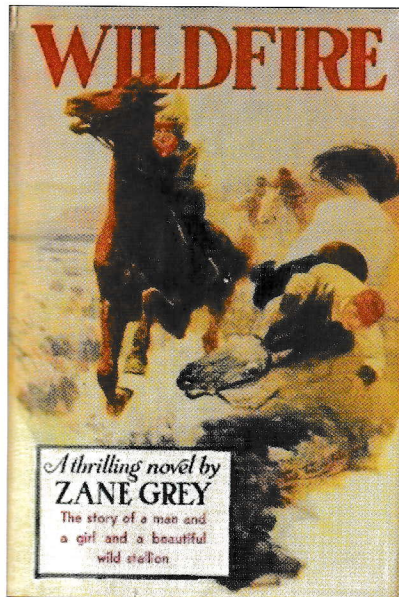


Figure 2:
Grosset & Dunlap
dustjacket illustration
by Frank Tenney Johnson
of Lucy racing Wildfire
on the sage slopes
near Lees Ferry.

Source: Kevin Blake.

(Crossing of the Fathers was where the Franciscan priests, Dominguez and Escalante, were led by their Paiute guides to ford the Colorado River on their desperate effort in the autumn of 1776 to return to New Mexico prior to winter; it is now deep beneath Lake Powell due to the construction of the Glen Canyon Dam, completed in 1966.) The model for Bostil's Ford cannot be Crossing of the Fathers, however, as it was never accessible by wagons, nor did it feature a hamlet oasis such as that described in *Wildfire*.



Figure 3: Lees Fort was constructed at Lees Ferry in 1874 due to rising tensions between the Mormons and the Navajo.

The Vermilion Cliffs soar in the background.

Source: Kevin Blake, June 2009.

Grey knew the northern Arizona landscape extremely well even though he chose to change the relative distances and positions of the geography in *Wildfire*, as prior to its publication he visited the area eight times (Kant, 1984). He did not even mention the majestic intervening scenery between Lees Ferry and Monument Valley, including Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge. Grey had already published *The Heritage of the Desert* (1910) with its settings at Lees Ferry and the Grand Canyon, and his great Rainbow Bridge romance, *The Rainbow Trail* (1915). He later wrote compellingly about Navajo Mountain and Monument Valley in *The Vanishing American* (1925), and wrote much more about Wild Horse Mesa in the 1924 novel by that name. *Wildfire*, though, was his chance to introduce his adult fiction audience to Monument Valley and Wild Horse Mesa, and he does so in a most memorable fashion.

The temporal setting of *Wildfire* is established with two decisive clues in Chapter 3. Though John D. Lee did not arrive at the ferry named for him until 1871, the first recorded riverboat crossing there was by Jacob Hamblin in 1864. Grey refers to the action as happening shortly after the Idaho gold fields (p. 28) and just before the new railroad joining east and west (p. 29). The Idaho Territory gold rush occurred in 1863-1864, and the transcontinental railroad was constructed from 1863 to 1869. Interestingly, Grey had already fictionalized the Idaho gold fields in *The Border Legion* (1916) and would soon pay tribute to the transcontinental rails in *The U.P. Trail* (1918). The temporal setting is a bit confused by Grey's mention in Chapter 11 that Bostil had been at his ford for twenty-three years (p. 165), but most evidence suggests the book is set during a three-month period, April to June (p. 32), in the mid- to late-1860s.

In Chapter 4, Lin Slone begins his hunt for the magnificent wild horse with a coat the color of fire (Wildfire) in the Sevier Valley of southwestern Utah (p. 44). (This is in the upper left corner of Figure 1.) Slone rides upstream toward the "black, bold, flat mountain to the southeast" (p. 53). This is possibly a reference to Wild Horse Mesa, which Grey describes with similar phrases later in the book, but Wild Horse Mesa is actually hidden from view by many miles of high, intervening plateaus.

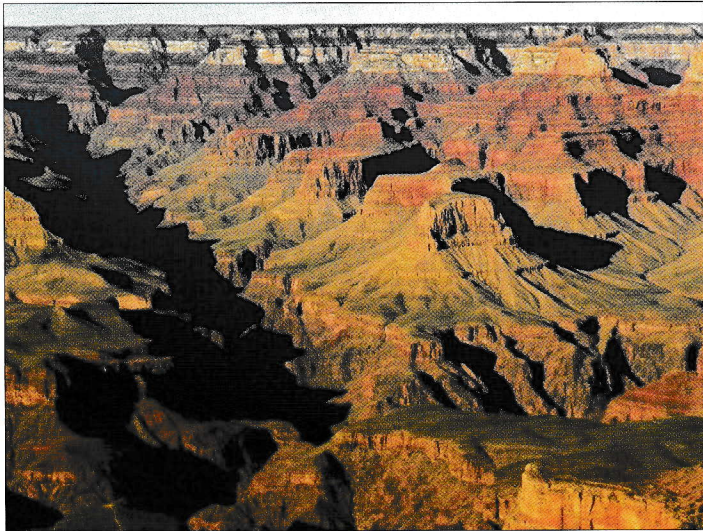


Figure 4: The Grand Canyon at sunset, looking northeastward from Powell Point on the South Rim into Bright Angel Valley (in shadows) and the North Rim.

This type of topography is featured in Chapter 5.

Source: Kevin Blake, March 2009.

Alternatively, Grey could be referring to the Paunsaugunt Plateau that towers on the southeast side of the Sevier Valley. Tracking Wildfire, Slone next climbs into some gray cliffs (p. 55). These are the Gray (sometimes spelled Grey) Cliffs portion of the “Grand Staircase,” a series of giant, step-like, sedimentary escarpments rising northward from the Grand Canyon that include the Chocolate, Vermilion, White, Gray, and Pink Cliffs.

Slone crosses the height of a divide on a plateau in Chapter 5 and turns more eastward (p. 60). At this point, he is likely crossing between the Sevier River and East Fork Virgin River watersheds, around the south slopes of the Paunsaugunt Plateau. Later, Slone is “intoxicated” by the view southward over the Grand Staircase and into the Grand Canyon: “gigantic cliff-steps and yellow slopes dotted with cedars, leading down to clefts filled with purple smoke, and these led on and on to a ragged, red world of rock, bare, shining, bold, uplifted in mesa, dome, peak, and crag . . . the great cañon” (p. 62).

The next day Slone descends into the canyon from the Kaibab Plateau and hears thunder (p. 68), then the source of the sound is apparent when he crosses a plateau with a “white torrent of a stream” (p. 70).

The book provides no place names inside the canyon, but Grey may be referring to Thunder River and Powell Plateau, two separate but nearby places he became familiar with on his North Rim explorations (Kant, 1984; Pauly, 2005; Pratt, 2013). The entire rim-to-rim traverse of the Grand Canyon in Chapter 5, including Slone’s swim across the Colorado River on Nagger (p. 74), is drawn heavily from Grey’s 1907 and 1908 journeys on the Bass Trail (Pratt, 2013).

After climbing up to the South Rim on a difficult, winding trail, Slone trails Wildfire heading southeast across the Coconino Plateau. Though Grey does not refer to the Coconino or Kaibab plateaus by name, his familiarity with them is reflected in the comment that the “dry and odorous pine forest” on the south side of the canyon, where all streams flow away from the canyon, is not as “fresh and beautiful” as the north side (p. 77). Leaving the southeastern slopes of the Coconino Plateau, Slone sees the Painted Desert: “a naked and bony world of colored rock and sand – a painted desert of heat and wind and flying sand and waterless wastes and barren ranges” (p. 77). Slone rides down to a stream (p. 78), probably the Little Colorado River at present-day Cameron, and farther into the painted desert, “a tortuous passage through a weird region of clay dunes, blue and violet and heliotrope and lavender, all worn smooth by rain and wind” (p. 78). The “well-defined trails leading away to the right” to Indian settlements (p. 79) probably refers to the route to Tuba City and Moenkopi (U.S. 160).

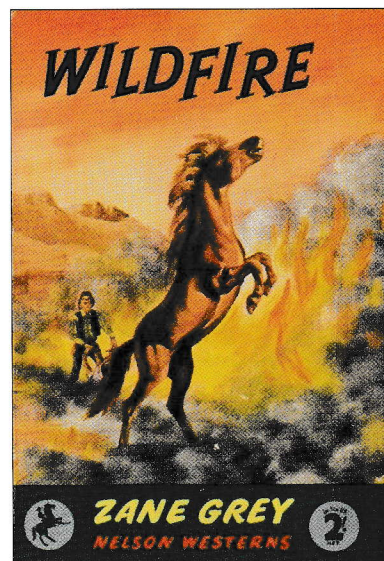


Figure 5: Thomas Nelson paperback cover illustration, 1954.

Source: David Leeson.

Grey exhibits his masterful descriptive powers when finally, after hundreds of miles and weeks of starvation and arduous travel, Slone trails Wildfire into Monument Valley: “a vast valley of monuments . . . huge sections of stone walls, all standing isolated, different in size and shape, but all clean-cut, bold, with straight lines. They stood up everywhere, monumental, towering, many-colored, lending a singular aspect to the great green-and-gray valley” (p. 80). In Chapter 7, Slone herds his quarry into a trap by setting fire to the grasses in Monument Valley.

In Chapter 8, Lucy rides into Monument Valley, passing “a huge square butte, and then the second, a ragged, thin, double shaft, and then went between two much alike, reaching skyward in the shape of monstrous mittens” (p. 113). She spots Slone lying on the ground, thrown during the frantic ride after roping Wildfire, nurses him back to health, and eventually falls in love with him and Wildfire. Grey envisioned this location as the setting for *Wildfire* when

he first saw Monument Valley and rode between the Mittens in 1913 on his way to Rainbow Bridge (Grey 1922, p. 5). The Wildcat Trail at Monument Valley Tribal Park circumnavigates West Mitten Butte, taking hikers to this exact place where Grey once rode. Access to this 3.2-mile loop trail, the only one in the park open to the public, is included with the park admission. Few hikers venture out among the buttes, and it was thrilling to enjoy the solitude while contemplating scenes from *Wildfire* when I followed Grey’s path and stood between the monuments in May 2017 (see figure 7 on the following page of the Mittens in profile).

When Lucy begins secretly riding Wildfire in Monument Valley it is necessary to the plot for her to only be gone a few hours and to not cross the Colorado River. Grey thus re-positions Lees Ferry to the east bank of the Colorado and moves Monument Valley approximately fifty-five miles west-southwest of its actual location.



Figure 6: The Painted Desert. Source: Kevin Blake, October 1998.



*Figure 7: West Mitten and East Mitten Buttes
in the heart of Monument Valley
stand just inside Arizona near the Utah state line.*

Source: Kevin Blake, March 2009.

In Chapter 9, Grey writes that Monument Valley is about twenty miles from the ford (p. 132), and in Chapter 10, another camp in the valley is only fifteen miles away (p. 139). In Chapter 12 (p. 175), Grey notes that the monuments are visible from the racecourse, close to the hamlet of Bostil's Ford.

Grey could have had Lucy ride Wildfire anywhere on the sage near Lees Ferry, but by setting these chapters in Monument Valley Grey evoked a powerful landscape. *Wildfire* was adapted for film twice, as "When Romance Rides" (1922) and "Red Canyon" (1949), yet neither utilized Monument Valley.

Grey's books, however, tied his name to Monument Valley in the public eye. For example, he is quoted in a 1945 *National Geographic Magazine* article about the spectacular landscape (Breed, 1945). Significantly, Grey extended and magnified the popularization of Monument Valley by taking Hollywood producer Jesse Lasky there in 1923. This culminated in the first film ever shot in Monument Valley, "The Vanishing American," in 1925 (D'Arc, 2010). Monument Valley ultimately became the iconic landscape of the West and its quintessential filming location (Smith 2016, p. 233).

Throughout the middle portion of the story the tensions build between Bostil and his rivals, but a new setting is not introduced until Chapter 16 when Lucy is kidnapped by Creech. Creech takes Lucy "north, toward the wild cañons, unknown to the riders" (p. 254). Grey ignores the reality that travel in this direction would necessitate a crossing of the Colorado. Their destination is in sight two days later: "the long, black-fringed line she had noticed the day before loomed closer, overhanging this crisscrossed region of cañons" (p. 259). This is Wild Horse Mesa (officially named Kaiparowits Plateau), the fourth major setting of the story.

After they climb westward up "such slopes and benches and ledges as Lucy had not yet encountered" (p. 261), Creech tells her it is "Wild Hoss Bench" (p. 262). Creech refers to a striking feature of Wild Horse Mesa, a long, unbroken, tableland above steep cliffs that is today called Fiftymile Mountain, when he says, "Would you believe you could ride over this rim, straight down thar fer fifty miles, an' never git off your horse" (p. 263). While he was never able to set foot on the plateau himself (despite three attempts), Grey portrays the summit as covered with pines interspersed with dry grasses, and uses it as the setting for the final dramatic action: another raging fire and a desperate race between Wildfire and Sage King.



Figure 8: Fifty mile Mountain, a portion of Wild Horse Mesa (Kaiparowits Plateau), looking northwestward from the Glass Mountains.

Source: Kevin Blake, October 2013.

Of the four significant place settings in *Wildfire*, Lucy and Slone reflect Grey's love for one landscape above all others. Some places in their memories are "hauntingly sweet as others are poignantly bitter" (p. 320). Even though Slone rescued Lucy up on Wild Horse Mesa, Lucy shuns even a glance to the north, to "the long, black, pine-fringed plateau." Neither do they dream of the majestic Grand Canyon or pass their leisurely hours by the ford of the Colorado River. Instead, Grey rates Monument Valley first in their hearts (pp. 320-321):

"The monuments appeared close . . . They seemed like sentinels – guardians of a great and beautiful love born under their lofty heights, in the lonely silence of the day, in the star-thrown shadow of night. They were like that love. And they held Lucy and Slone, calling every day, giving a nameless and tranquil content, binding them true to love, true to the sage and the open, true to that wild upland home."

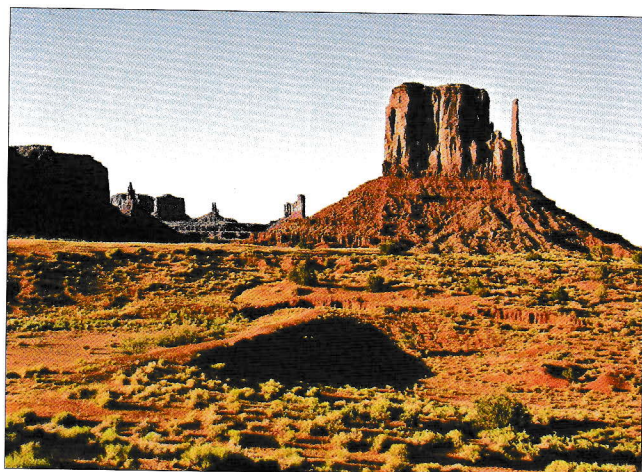


Figure 9: West Mitten Butte and view northward into the Utah portion of Monument Valley.

Source: Kevin Blake, June 2007.

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