



## Zane Grey, *Wild Horse Mesa* and the Kaiparowitz Plateau

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

Zane Grey was obsessed with climbing Wild Horse Mesa in southern Utah from the moment he first saw its imposing Straight Cliffs from the Glass Mountains in 1913. He described the sight on his first expedition to Rainbow Bridge: "One striking landmark seemed to dominate the scene – Wild Horse Mesa – a stupendous red-walled mountain, frowning, black-fringed and isolated. Insurmountable as it seemed I vowed to climb it some day" ("Trails Over the Glass Mountains," 1924).

On each of his subsequent expeditions to Rainbow Bridge in 1922 and 1923, Grey attempted – at great cost and effort – to cross the Colorado and San Juan rivers to reach the mystical ramparts of Wild Horse Mesa, but floodwaters foiled his efforts both years.



*The Straight Cliffs of Wild Horse Mesa rise prominently on the horizon beyond the Glass Mountains in this west-northwest view. This image may be from one of Zane Grey's expeditions to Rainbow Bridge. Photo credit: Zane Grey's West Society.*

Even though Grey never made it to the top of the promontory, he wrote extensively about it, pouring his hopes, experiences, romantic sensibilities, and

even his frustrations over unrealized ambitions into four magazine articles, all published in 1924 (see the reference list on page 23). Then he penned *Wild Horse Mesa*, his western novel that is essentially an ode to a landscape. (*Wild Horse Mesa* was first serialized in 1924 and published in book form in 1928.)

Personally, I've been fascinated with the geography of *Wild Horse Mesa* since I first read the book thirty years ago. I can't help myself; I repeatedly photograph it from every possible viewpoint whenever I've been nearby on multiple trips to Rainbow Bridge or Lake Powell.



*Wild Horse Mesa, rising 4,000 feet above Lake Powell, June 2009. Photo credit: Kevin Blake.*

In this essay, I explore Zane Grey's complicated relationship with Wild Horse Mesa, or Kaiparowits Plateau, as it is more commonly known. To tell the story of Kaiparowits Plateau, I chart the geographical imaginations that Grey and others imprinted on this land through their explorations and writings, and I speculate on the cause of Grey's changing attitude about the plateau that he once said would "haunt him" until he climbed it ("Surprise Valley", 1924).

Grey probably first heard the name "Wild Horse Mesa" from either John Wetherill, his Rainbow Bridge guide, or one of the horse wranglers on the expedition.

Grey fictionalized the first moment he saw the escarpment in *Robbers' Roost* (1932, pp. 45-46): "See that high, sharp, black line that makes a horizon, level as a floor. That's Wild Hoss Mesa. It's seventy-five miles long, not countin' the slant down from the Henrys. An' only a few miles across. Canyons on each side. It reaches right out into that canyon country . . . My father said only a few Mormons ever got on top of Wild Hoss Mesa . . . Its reach seemed incredible, unreal – its call one of exceeding allurements. Where did it point? What lay on the other side? How could its height be obtained?"

Though Grey popularized the name Wild Horse Mesa, Almon H. Thompson of the Powell Survey made the first recorded climb and named it Kaiparowits Plateau in the 1870s, using the Paiute name for Canaan Peak at the north end of the plateau for the entire tableland. Debate continues to this day on the meaning of "Kaiparowits." It could mean "Big Mountain's Little Brother" in reference to the higher eminence of Aquarius Plateau to the northwest (Urmann, 1999); or "Mountain Lying Down" in reference to its long, gently undulating summit (Roberts, 2003); or "One Arm" in reference to Major John Wesley Powell, or "Home of Our People" (Van Cott, 1990).

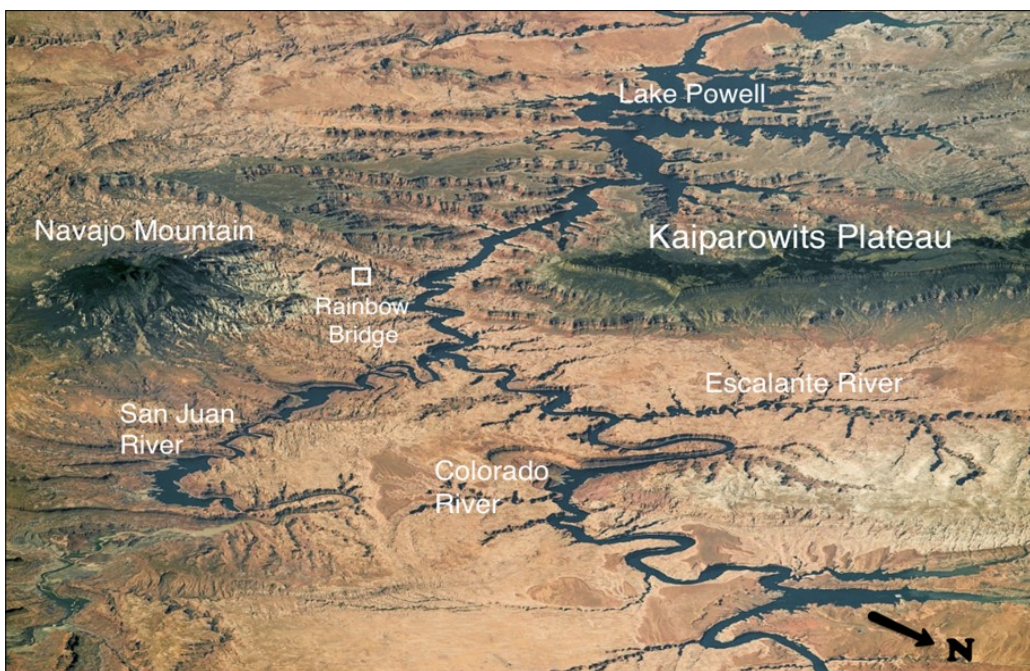
There is no doubt that Wild Horse Mesa and Kaiparowits Plateau are one and the same. Wallace Stegner (1954) asserted this in his Powell biography, and scholars of Grey's geography have unequivocally concurred (Pfeiffer, 1991; Blake, 1995). Adventurers inspired by Zane Grey to discover Wild Horse Mesa for themselves have written detailed accounts of their expeditions to Kaiparowits Plateau (Roberts, 2015).

For some reason, though, editor Jon Tuska in his forward to *Panguitch* (2016, p. 5) egregiously muddies the issue by stating that Wild Horse Mesa is in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado. Tuska is mistaken; though one of the Google search results for "Wild Horse Mesa" is a rural ranchette subdivision by that name in Colorado, Grey's *Wild Horse Mesa* is set in the "canyoned fastnesses south of the Henry Mountains" in southern Utah, according to page one of his book.

Kaiparowits is an impressive plateau, and it is easy to see how it caught Grey's vivid imagination. By itself, it encompasses more land than all of Utah's national parks combined (Arches, Bryce, Canyonlands, Capitol Reef, and Zion) (Urmann, 1999). Rising to over 8,000 feet above sea level, and more than 4,000

feet above Lake Powell, Kaiparowits is bordered by fortress-like ramparts on the east that rise approximately 2,000 feet in a wall for well over fifty miles, giving rise to local names for this part of the plateau: Straight Cliffs and Fiftymile Mountain (Topping, 1997).

When viewed from the south or southeast, whether from Lake Powell or from land, the sedimentary rock cliffs of Kaiparowits are often described as looking like a giant ship's prow (Preston and Child, 1999).



International Space Station photograph, September 2016, looking southwest.  
Photo credit: NASA (public domain).

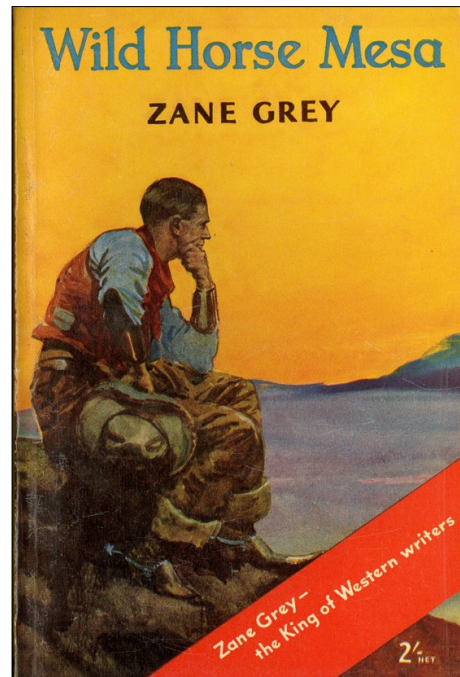


To the north and northeast, the land is drained by the Escalante River. On the western boundary of the plateau is a striking monocline ridge called The Cockscomb; west of there is the Paria River watershed, whereas precipitation falling directly on Kaiparowits for the most part flows southeastward toward Glen Canyon of the Colorado River.



*One of the spur ridges on the southeast part of Kaiparowits Plateau looms over Lake Powell like a giant ship's prow, June 2009.  
Photo credit: Kevin Blake.*

The steeply dissected terrain of Kaiparowits severely limits access to the Colorado River. The Dominguez and Escalante expedition, desperate to return to New Mexico before winter, skirted the southern margins of the plateau in October 1776 to reach a ford of the river at what became known as Crossing of the Fathers. After this, except for the Paiute, the region fell into obscurity. It was the last area to be explored by government survey in the continental U.S. due to difficult access, scant vegetation, semi-arid climate, few water sources, and lack of human population. Mormon expeditions searching for crossings of the Colorado traveled around the plateau in the 1850s and 1860s, and then the Powell Survey came in the 1870s. Mormons and Paiutes often roamed Kaiparowits to graze cattle and sheep; geologist Herbert E. Gregory found ample evidence of this when he surveyed Kaiparowits in 1915, 1918, 1922, and 1924 (Heath, 1997).



*The Hodder & Stoughton paperback edition, 1955. The cover art is reminiscent of Grey's longing views of Wild Horse Mesa. Photo credit: Kevin Blake.*

Meanwhile, Grey continued to gaze upon the Straight Cliffs from afar, dreaming of reaching the summit of the mesa, where he mistakenly believed only Paiutes had stood before: "Standing alone, grandly isolated, shrouded in thick sunset haze, loomed Wild Horse Mesa, with its seventy-five-mile front of red wall and black-fringed level. It reminded me of my longing to climb where no white man had ever trod . . ." ("Surprise Valley," 1924, p. 7).

After he was thwarted in May 1913 and April 1922 by Colorado River floods at the outlet of Forbidding Canyon downstream of Rainbow Bridge, Grey returned in September 1923 to try a different route. Wetherill led Grey down Cha Canyon to the San Juan River, where they hoped to swim horses across, ride overland to the Colorado, swim it with horses, and then reach Kaiparowits through the Hole-in-the Rock trail cut by Mormons through cliffs on the west side of the Colorado. (Grey called Hole-in-the Rock by the name Hole in the Wall.) Flooding on the San Juan turned Grey away yet again. His frustration with – and respect for – the wild rocky terrain grew: "Wild Horse Mesa looked down upon the union of cañons and rivers as if to guard them from intrusion. The place beggared description. It was like entering the portals of Dante's Inferno" ("The Heights of Wild Horse Mesa," 1924, p. 54).



*Cha (Beaver) Canyon, looking north toward the San Juan arm of Lake Powell, June 2009. The green vegetation in this view is tamarisk, or salt cedar, an invasive plant that would not have been present in 1923 when Wetherill and Grey passed this way. Photo credit: Kevin Blake.*

On this last outing, Wetherill mentioned to Grey that he had accompanied Gregory to the summit of Kaiparowits, and he had heard reports that Mormons had also climbed the plateau from the north. Grey vowed if he ever made a fourth attempt to climb Wild Horse Mesa, he would go in from the north. By the end of the decade, however, Grey forsook any further attempt to reach the heights of the mesa. Even when he was on an automobile trip in southern Utah in 1929 with the means and knowledge to visit Wild Horse Mesa, he apparently made no effort to visit the place that earlier had sang a Siren call like no other. Surprisingly, Wild Horse Mesa is not even mentioned in his unpublished 1929 manuscript of this trip.

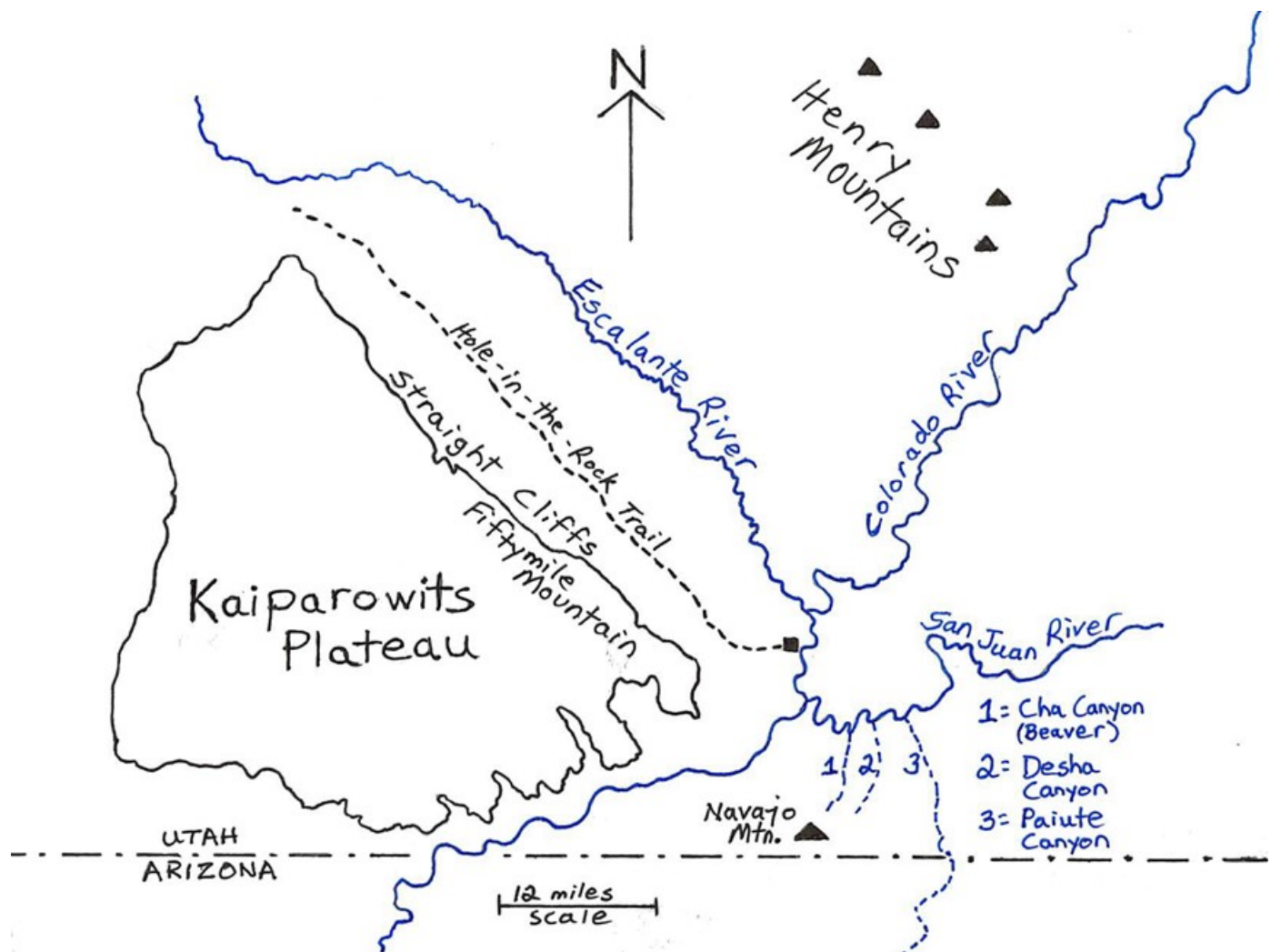
What happened? How could Wild Horse Mesa go from “calling me, bidding me sometime to surmount it” (“Trails Over the Glass Mountains,” p. 302) to not even warrant a passing interest? After Grey learned of the Gregory surveys, he likely consoled himself with the idea that he could be the first non-scientific party to reach the summit of the plateau. Then he heard that Mormon ranchers had grazed cattle on the tableland for decades. Perhaps the final chill upon his ardor to climb Wild Horse Mesa was learning

that Clyde Kluckhohn, a young adventurer inspired by Grey to climb the promontory, had surmounted the Straight Cliffs and reached the top in 1928 after previous failures in 1926 and 1927 (Kluckhohn, 1933).

With his lack of experience traveling north of the Colorado and San Juan rivers in southern Utah, the geography of Grey’s novel *Wild Horse Mesa* is problematic. It is a fascinating read, nevertheless, for the parallels between the travels of wild-horse wrangler Chane Weymer and Grey’s planned route to Wild Horse Mesa. In the story, the plateau is the last refuge of Panguitch, a magnificent wild stallion that Weymer dreams of catching. In the Harpers and Grosset & Dunlap versions of the book, the horse is spelled Panquitch – with a Q – but in the 2016 Center Point edition the spelling is with a G, like the town in southern Utah. A misreading of the original manuscript by Harpers is the likely cause for the misspelling of Panguitch in earlier editions (Tuska, 2016).

The action in *Wild Horse Mesa* begins with Chane Weymer in Beaver Canyon, Utah (p. 6; all pagination is based on the Grosset & Dunlap edition), a watercourse flowing northward from the slopes of Navajo Mountain to the San Juan River. Weymer is looking to buy horses from the Paiutes and trail them north to sell to Mormons. Beaver Canyon is the same as Cha Canyon of the Wetherill / Grey route in 1923: indeed, “cha” is the Navajo word for “beaver.” In Chapter 2, Weymer’s Paiute companion, Toddy Nokin, draws a map (pp. 35-36) to help Chane find his way to the Mormons. Toddy suggests the mustangs should be swam across the San Juan River, driven overland to the Colorado River, swam across that river, then driven up through the Hole-in-the-Rock cleft and along the Hole-in-the-Rock trail northward past Wild Horse Mesa to the Mormons. Nokin suggests that Weymer fatten up the horses before the sale at Nightwatch Spring, located north and west of Wild Horse Mesa. This spring is not an actual place in southern Utah, but everything else is accurately described on Nokin’s map.





*A map similar to what Toddy Nokin draws in Chapter 2 of Wild Horse Mesa. Source: Kevin Blake.*

In Chapter 3, Chane Weymer's brother, Chess, is working for the Melberne wild-horse wrangler outfit. The Melbernes, including Sue, who eventually becomes the love interest of Chane Weymer, recently lived in St. George in the southwestern corner of Utah (p. 43). The Melberne outfit moves to Stark Valley, thirty miles from the railroad, to round up wild horses (p. 45). This is where the geography becomes thorny, because like Nightwatch Spring, Stark Valley is a fictional place. Furthermore, there never has been a railroad in south-central Utah; the closest point to Kaiparowits that a railroad ever reached is a spur off the Union Pacific Railroad to Cedar City in southwest Utah, which is many miles and several mountain ranges away.

Later, in Chapter 11, the Melberne outfit drives the captured wild horses out of Stark Valley to the railroad at the hamlet of Wund (p. 240). I agree with Chuck Pfeiffer ("Conestogas to Kanab," 1991) that Wund (a fictional place) is probably modeled after Lund, a tiny settlement in western Utah. Lund is even farther from Kaiparowits than Cedar City, but it is a place that Grey would have traveled through on the Union Pacific Railroad. It is impossible to reconcile the potential far western Utah location of Stark Valley with the rest of the book's action on the eastern side of Kaiparowits Plateau.

The mention of a railroad raises one possible clue as to the temporal setting of the book. No years are mentioned explicitly in the book, just months of the year (September through November).

The Union Pacific reached Lund in the late 1890s, providing one possible temporal clue. Another is the comment that Toddy Nokin's daughter, Sosie, had spent her last nine years in the government school (p. 28). The only government boarding school expressly for Paiutes was in Panguitch, Utah, and it operated from 1904 to 1909. Given the descriptions of the horse wrangling outfits, however, it seems a bit late for the temporal setting of the book to be in the first decade or two of the twentieth century. The best temporal clue might be the reference to the stimulation of wild-horse hunting in Nevada and Utah by the market in Saint Louis (p. 35), which fits with the growth in the demand for horse meat by Midwestern meat-packing plants in the 1890s.

Unlike the location of the fictional Stark Valley, Chane Weymer's journey in Chapters 5 and 6 is mostly based on geographic reality. As Chane flees with Toddy Nokin from the horse thieves in his own outfit, he travels east from Beaver (Cha) Canyon (p. 94) to an area of "great round yellow rocks . . . they at first stood isolated, like huge mountainous beasts, then gradually they grew closer together until they coalesced into the waved wall" (p. 95). Since Weymer is not as far east as the Paiute Canyon ford of the San Juan (p. 96), these rocks are probably what Grey describes in his magazine articles as the Marching Rocks, in the Desha Canyon drainage that flows northward (like Cha Canyon) from the northeast slopes of Navajo Mountain to the San Juan River. Traveling through the "labyrinthine network of canyons even unfamiliar to the Paiutes" (p. 102), Weymer again sees Beaver Canyon (p. 100).



Forced by gunfire from the horse thieves to split from his Paiute companions, Weymer is confronted with one potential path of escape, fording the San Juan: "a terrible red gulf wound from east to west, a broad, winding iron-walled canyon at the bottom of which gleamed and glinted a chocolate-hued river in flood, its dull roar striking ominously in Chane's ear. Miles to the eastward it came rushing out of a narrow split in the sinister walls, to wind like a serpent toward the west, pushing its muddy current into another river that swept on between majestic towering walls. This was Chane's first sight of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado." Actually, this stretch of the San Juan is upstream from the Glen Canyon of the Colorado, which is itself upstream of the Grand Canyon. Weymer's harrowing crossing of the San Juan on his grand horse, Brutus (pp. 112-116), makes it easy to understand how the swollen river could have turned back the Wetherill / Grey party in September 1923 as they faced the San Juan in flood.

Weymer next rides Brutus northwestward through the wild upheaved sandstone of the land between the San Juan and Colorado rivers, then he faces the "sullen red river" (p. 117) in flood; across on the western shore is his destination, Hole-in-the-Rock. Swimming the raging Colorado sweeps Weymer and Brutus far downstream of Hole-in-the-Rock (p. 120), and once across they begin traveling northward. At this point, Weymer is just below the eastern ramparts of Wild Horse Mesa (p. 122) and soon he finds where Panguitch has found some sort of route to reach the top of Wild Horse Mesa (pp. 124-126). Eventually, Weymer works his way northward and then westward around the northern end of Wild Horse Mesa to reach Stark Valley, wherever that may be, and arrives half-starved in the Melberne camp at the end of Chapter 7. It is not clear why Weymer does not reach any of the Mormons to whom he hoped to sell the horses, but it does serve Grey's romantic narrative to have Chane Weymer meet Sue Melberne.

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*View northward across the Marching Rocks to the Henry Mountains from near Desha Canyon, October 2012.*

*Photo credit: Terry Bolinger.*





*Hole-in-the-Rock on the Colorado River, at dawn on June 14, 2009. Mormons journeying to Bluff, Utah to establish a settlement enlarged this crevice in the western canyon wall of the Colorado River with shovels, pick axes, and blasting powder. They then lowered their wagons to the river nearly 2,000 feet below on a grade as steep as 45 degrees.*

*Photo credit: Kevin Blake*

Several chapters later, once the brutal barbed-wire roundup is complete in Stark Valley, the Melberne outfit plans to move toward Wild Horse Mesa and Nightwatch Spring (p. 260). At this point the geography of *Wild Horse Mesa* falls into disarray, with some pages stating the Melberne outfit traveled west from Stark Valley toward Wild Horse Mesa and Nightwatch Spring (pp. 171 and 270), but that direction of travel does not fit at all with the rest of the book's geography. In fact, there are conflicting clues through the rest of the book with respect to the location of Stark Valley, Wund, and Nightwatch Spring. The way Grey writes, these three fictional places are variable points moving around the one fixed landmark of Wild Horse Mesa.

Kaiparowits Plateau is so large, it is not often clear which part of the tableland Grey is referring to, though by Chapter 13 it seems that Nightwatch Spring is set beneath the great Straight Cliffs of Kaiparowits, which makes sense as those cliffs were what was fixed in Grey's mind about Wild Horse Mesa. Grey provides succinct statements of the convoluted geography in the second half of the book: "what a baffling country was that eastern lower escarpment of the mesa" (p. 128); "it would take days to get a clear map in his mind of this maze" (p. 313).

In Chapter 15, Chane Weymer finally finds the place he located (back in Chapter 6) when he first spied Panguitch's route to the top of Wild Horse Mesa. After Weymer catches Panguitch, Sue Melberne says she will marry Chane if he sets the horse free, so free he goes. Chane and Sue agree to keep secret the location of the trail to the top of the plateau. The book closes with one of Grey's sterling tributes to the majesty of the western landscape, with Weymer stating, "It may be long before another rider, or an Indian, happens on this secret. Maybe never. Some distant day airships might land on Wild Horse Mesa. But what if they do? An hour of curiosity, an achievement to boast of – then gone! Wild Horse Mesa rises even above this world of rock. It was meant for eagles, wild horses – and for lonely souls like mine. . . . You are Panguitch and I am Wild Horse Mesa" (pp. 364-365). This is what I enjoy most about Grey's books, how superbly he expresses the transcendental meaning of a landscape.



*Piñon pine and juniper trees along the Smoky Mountain Road on Kaiparowits Plateau, July 2000. Photo credit: Kevin Blake.*

Zane Grey would be pleased, I think, with Kaiparowits Plateau forming the centerpiece of Grand Staircase – Escalante National Monument. When Clyde Kluckhohn's party reached the summit in 1928, they found "sagebrush as high as a man's head surrounded by the finest stand of piñon and cedar we had ever seen. . . . We had expected Inferno, but we found Paradise" (Kluckhohn, 1933, p. 194). The top of the plateau is still like that. Although it appears from a distance as though the top might be flat, it is a complex topography of buttes, canyons, and plains. Even today, Kaiparowits is one of the most remote locations in the Lower 48.

When I drove across the length of the plateau on the Smoky Mountain Road, I did not see another vehicle during the entire day. A fascinating sight are the coal deposits on the plateau that were long ago set afire by lightning. This exceptional phenomenon is called Burning Hills, and there you can see smoke tendrils rise into the blue sky, and actually feel the heat from the scorched soil and rock as the coal burns just beneath the surface. The tableland is also a treasure trove for paleontologists, with some of the finest dinosaur fossils ever found (Chesher, 2000). Even though Zane Grey never stood on top of Wild Horse Mesa, he would find it a fine place for lonely souls to wander.



*Burning Hills near the Smoky Mountain Road in the southern part of Kaiparowits Plateau, July 2000. The reddened, blackened earth is caused by coal burning just beneath the surface. The soil and rocks are hot. Only after I peered into the hole did I learn that the soil often gives way underfoot because the underlying strata has burned away.*  
Photo credit: Kevin Blake.

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