

William Flanigan, Father of the Zion Narrows Hike

By Jay M. Jones

Guide Points Way in Zion Narrows Trek



Senior Scouts of Troop 340 get some information from William Flannigan guide, as they prepare to start their trip down the Zion Narrows. Left to right are Flannigan; Lloyd Crawford; William Weber, scoutmaster; Lavan Martineau; Deloy Prisbrey; Gary Terry;

Vernon Condie and Ernest Lloyd, navy recruiting chief. Others who made the trip, but who are not in the picture are Vincent Spencer, assistant scoutmaster; Dr. Franklin S. Harris, Jr.; and William Beal, photographer.

William Flanigan guiding first Scout Troop at the start of the Zion Narrows hike. Clipping from the Iron County Record newspaper, dated 1 Sept 1949.

“My first trip through the Zion Narrows was made alone on June 30, 1900.”

So began the log of a dozen treks by William W. Flanigan down the scenic river trail that is now world famous.

Flanigan was guide in August 1917 for a group of three professors and one student of the Branch Agricultural College in Cedar City, forerunner of Southern Utah University. The party took three days, starting on foot from Cedar City, over the mountain to the southeast, down Crystal Gulch to the confluence with North Fork of the Virgin River, then down the river to Wylie Camp, located where the Zion Lodge is now.

On June 22, 1919, Flanigan made the trip through the Narrows in company with three doctors from Salt Lake City. This Narrows hike was the grand finale for a week-long tour of the scenic wonders of Cedar Breaks, Duck Creek, Navajo Lake and Hop Canyon by about two dozen men from Cedar

City and Salt Lake City. While most of the party rode horseback along Zion’s West Rim to finish at Wylie Camp, Flanigan and the doctors trekked on foot through Crystal Gulch and the Narrows.

Later that year, 100 years ago on 19 Nov. 1919, Zion became a National Park. Prior to that, since 1909, it had been designated Mukuntuweap National Monument.

In August of 1925, Flanigan writes that he led a party of 12 men through the Narrows, starting on the upper North Fork. This was his first time taking this route, which is now the route most often followed. The Iron County Record gives the names of 13 men that planned to accompany Flanigan: Arthur Fife, J. H. Maughan, Arthur J. Morris, Dr. F. H. Petty, Wilford Fife, Otto Fife, Irvin T. Nelson, M. J. Urie, Fred Braithwaite, Cleo Dix, Vergene Simkins, S. F. Leigh, and Elton Jones.

Among later trips, Flanigan indicates that on August 29-30, 1949 he was the guide for the first group of Boy Scouts to hike the Narrows. Five Senior Scouts from Troop 340 of Cedar City made the trip, along with seven adult leaders, according to Flanigan’s notes.

William Flanigan was born in 1877 in Rockville, Utah. In 1901 he assisted his brother David in constructing the cable works at Zion’s Cable Mountain, which was used to lower lumber from the mountain top to the floor of Zion Canyon in the early 1900’s.

Several years later, as superintendant of buildings and grounds at the college, Flanigan supervised the planting of many trees that beautify the campus of SUU.

Besides Zion, other scenic attractions in the area were promoted by an enthusiastic William Flanigan. Flanigan’s Arch in the Ashdown Gorge east of Cedar City was named in his honor.