

UDISCO Raft History

By Herm Hoops - 2013

Udisco boats were the choice of many frugal and beginning rafters since the company's inception. Udisco (Union Distributing Company, Inc.) began business in Salt Lake City, Utah on November 27, 1972. Their rafts were manufactured by the Formosan Rubber Company.(9,#b) As time went on and better rafts came into the market the Udisco's were often jokingly referred to as "U-folds," "Volksboot" or "Udeathco."(4)

The Union Distributing Company, a division of Malone & Hyde, Inc., imported and wholesaled a plethora of items from golf, baseball and dance equipment to camping gear. Malone & Hyde was a very large wholesaler whose principal owner was Dick McGillis.(20)

The Union Distributing Company was originally set up to service the expanding Sunset Sporting Goods stores owned by Dick McGillis who was also a partner in Campways.(8,19) Sunset Sporting Goods had more than 20 stores in the Western United States.(8) Udisco imported many of its products through Los Angeles and Ralph Smith's R B Smith (or Triangle Truck Service) delivered their products to a warehouse in Salt Lake City on 900 West about 2400 South.(2) Udisco closed its production on March 5th of 1987.(2) The Union Distributing Company probably discontinued when Sunset sold out to Herman's or Big Five Sporting Goods National Chain stores.(9,19)

Dick McGillis and a couple of other surplus distributors began business after WWII.(19) Dan Baxter's father, who had a big surplus store in Portland, Oregon met Dick while waiting for a bid auction to open. They both started out buying military surplus and wholesaling it to farm co-ops, general stores and hardware stores which is where most people shopped before the big chain stores began.(19)

McGillis was the money behind Harold Horne and the start-up of Campways, a take-off on Camp Trails. Camp Trails was the large Arizona manufacturer of backpacks and frames before imports began copying their products. Dick's son Mark McGillis was owner of Pro Advantage, which was a distributor of Riken.(19)

Gart Brothers (now the Sports Authority chain of sporting goods stores) on Broadway in Denver sold Udiscos for many years(4), as did Sid Sports in Salt Lake City. Bill Parks, owner of Northwest River Supply (NRS) sold Udisco rafts for many years.(9) Recreational rafting was growing every year and Udisco would call Bill Parks before they placed their order because NRS was becoming a major customer.

{Numbers in parenthesis (1) are REFERENCES; letters in parenthesis (#a) are described in SIGNIFICANT NOTES.}

Parks estimates that NRS sold more than 100 Udisco rafts every year from the late 1970s until the mid-1980s. In 1983 NRS ordered a large number of rafts. Demand exceeded supply and many dealers thought the demand was even greater. Dealers would say, I ordered 6 rafts, but could have sold 20. So, the next year dealers ordered many more rafts. What they didn't realize was the same potential customers would call multiple dealers looking for a raft. So, the next year the dealers ordered even more Udisco boats and became way overstocked!(9) NRS started buying direct from the manufacturer around 1980 and soon had their own line of rafts. They improved the dimensions and handling characteristics of the rafts, but the material and workmanship left a lot to be desired. NRS sold about 1,100 rafts in the mid to late 1980s. Almost half of them were the original Otters - a redesigned boat with cross tubes, front and back baffles and a larger stern cross section similar to the Udisco.”(9)

Udisco boats were manufactured from three different materials. Their early boats were made of coated nylon. Depending on availability and cost of fabric, some later boats were made from EPDM(#d.) and Hypalon.(22) The coated nylon used by Udisco was not ripstop fabric and those boats were the least expensive models. Udisco fabric was low grade and of low quality, it was very thin, and very flexible. If two people were paddling in the center of the boat and hit a big hole the boat would squish them between the tubes. This is not a great advantage because people tend to get slapped in the face when the boat folds in the front, and they may end up in another person's lap. After a few years most Udisco rafts would develop a plethora of pinhole leaks, and after many years the outer fabric chalked off making repairs difficult.(3,4)

One of the distinguishing features about Udiscos were the threaded brass valves that stuck out of the tubes about 3/4 inches. They had a brass cap and inner ring that was removed to deflate the boat. The boat came with a long, red metal cylinder hand pump that screwed into the valve. The boat also had a pouch attached to the tubes for a repair kit.(4, 15)

Around 1973 I was in Salt Lake City and stopped in at Sid Sports, then known as Sid Ski and Cycle. There I saw and purchased a 12' Udisco for \$250. I used it on the rivers of Vermont and in the West. At Willoughby Falls, which fell about fifty feet in a quarter of a mile on the Barton River, I made several successful medium water runs. I ran it again in the spring freshet of 1974, with giant ice blocks floating in and jamming on the banks of the Falls. Going over the first drop the boat folded and shot me out like a catapult and I swam the rest of the falls alongside the Udisco.(4)

As the whitewater rafting industry began to burgeon in the mid-1980s, Udisco developed a new model line they named Nova - Avon spelled backwards.(18) The Nova line was redesigned for whitewater use, and although they were of somewhat higher quality using a heavier Hypalon fabric, they continued to be a low-cost, low quality craft. The Udisco White Water Model was a 14' cut on a Campways Miwok pattern with a 1260 denier wrap up floor, 840 denier tubes and bright orange frame wear patches. It retailed at \$600 new from Sunset Sports in 1982.(14)

A lot of people owned Udisco rafts and they still use them today. Doug Smith owner of Eagle Outdoor Sports (2012) has a Udisco boat(2) as does Don Neff.(13) Bill Parks of NRS owned a 16' model and built a wooden plywood frame with a hinge in the middle so it could flex over the waves. It reminded him of a centipede.(9)

When Bill George owned Canyon Country River Adventures he bought a fleet of about a dozen Udiscos that he used in Desolation Canyon on the Green River in Utah.(23) Sheri Griffith's parents owned Colorado Adventures, a river outfitter based in Steamboat, Colorado in the 1970s. They ran a fleet of 10-man and 14-man Udiscos on the Colorado River State Bridge section near Kremmling, Colorado.(3,21, #c) "Ron Griffith brought one on a Grand Canyon trip with us in 1982 or 1983 and it was awesome to watch running the big stuff as it would fold and bend like a gymnast but would otherwise get through."(3) In 1979 Arkansas River Tours also used Udisco boats on the Arkansas River.(15)

Hatch River Expeditions ran Udiscos on the Middle Fork of the Salmon, Dinosaur National Monument, and the Selway in the middle 1970s, planning on them lasting one season before being replaced. The Udiscos were 14' and the cost for the boats was around \$250.00.(10) Frames were wooden to be taken apart for flights into Indian Creek. John Hatch remembers boxes on the frames to stow the oar pins, and duffel boards were used instead of nets. John believes that one tightly rolled spare boat was carried on each trip. Hatch River Expeditions still had some left-over Udisco boats and rented one to Bud and Rick Massey in the winter of 1986. The Massey's used the boats while rebuilding the trail at Flaming Gorge from the Dam to Little Hole after Hatch Expeditions hauled and stockpiled wire erosion baskets in sections of the trail with a 27' Maravia.(10)

Barry Hatch remembers the Hatch Udisco rafts well: "By 1972 our 10' man (military surplus boats) were giving out and we just couldn't get them to hold air any more. There weren't many boats made for river running at that time and we needed something smaller than a 27' pontoon to run Middle Fork, Main Salmon Selway trips. Ted (Hatch) wanted to concentrate on the Grand Canyon operation and didn't want to spend too much money on Idaho equipment, maybe that's why we didn't get any of the more expensive Rubber Fabricators boats. Dad (Don Hatch) bought about a dozen 14' Udisco boats sometime around 1973 and we used them in Idaho until 1977. We replaced Udiscos on the Selway in 1976 with a new brand just out on the market, Achilles."(12)

"My first year as a guide on the Middle Fork (1976) we had three Udiscos and two Avon Spirits." "The Avons were so superior to the Udiscos that we had an entire fleet of six Avons for the next season and we were in hog heaven. We used the Udiscos for training guides for about four or so more years. If you didn't make a good run and ran a hole, you'd get hammered, and some times thrown out of the boat. So they provided a good lesson of why you should make the run and not run holes! In 1974 and 1975 just about all my training trips were in Udiscos."(12)

“After about 2 seasons of use they were given away to the crew or anyone who wanted them as something to screw around with. About the last year we were using Udiscos, Udisco gave us a larger 16 foot model. Because of the flimsy material these boats had no rigidity. It was bad enough with a narrow 14 footer, but the 16 foot boat was bigger and wider. The result was a boat that bent rumped and flexed so much that it took on the exact profile of the surface of the river. We could not keep our guests in that boat! They would get thrown either out of the boat or get thrown on top of another guest or worse, on top of the rower. I saw that boat in action only once, when it came up to Idaho for a late season Main Salmon trip. The crew called it "Silver Slime." I never saw that boat again, thank God.”(12)

Robert Tubbs (Tubby) also has memories of the Udisco boats; “I came off of my first commercial river season and bought a used Udisco from Rocky Mountain River Expeditions in the fall of 1977 for \$200. I got to know Mike Ferguson a few years later and he told me Rocky Mountain bought new boats every year for about \$180 and sold them used for \$200 at the end of each season. My Udisco had rounded ends like a Havasu. I added some d-rings, painted it up with gacoflex, and made a steel frame...” “I would have been 19 at the time. I was in school and the project filled my nights and weekends all winter. The evening after my last final exam in early May I took off for Gateway Canyon on the Dolores with a couple of buddies. I got to take the boat down Westwater on a training trip a few weeks later at about 16,000 cfs... Those Udiscos were long and narrow. Later in the summer I took the boat back to Colorado and it lived out its life doing fishing trips on the Pumphouse Run of the Upper Colorado.” “With about 40 gallons of gacoflex (we) got another 10-12 years out of that boat.”(16)

As frail as they were, Udiscos did last. Roy Webb relayed a story to me in 2011: “The other day I went to Sid Sports in Salt Lake to visit with Sid. He was there but was busy with someone in the back so I went out to say hello. He was working with a guy who had an old Udisco boat that he'd just bought. I took one look at the boat and thought "it can't be..." In 1985, some friends of mine went down the Grand Canyon. One of them had a 2nd-generation Udisco that he'd fixed up with extra D-rings and paint and so on. Then he flipped in Hermit and got rattled so after they got past the big hole at the top of Crystal, he didn't get far enough right and ended up on the rock garden, and ripped the whole bottom of the boat out. They took a whole day to sew the huge T-shaped rip with a baseball stitch and waxed thread, and after that my friend sold the boat and pretty much left the river. So there I was at Sid's last Saturday and I looked into the bottom of the boat and there was a huge repair that stretched the length and width of the boat, sewn with waxed thread and a baseball stitch. An almost impossible coincidence but there it was; the chances that there could be another Udisco boat of that vintage with that same repair are much less than it being the same boat. Amazing. The label on the boat said “Udisco Salt Lake City.”

On June 12, 1979 a person was not as “lucky” as the folks above. The Colorado River in Cataract Canyon was running 49,200 cubic feet per second. A private party was running it in a “6-man” Udisco boat and it capsized in the first rapid, Brown Betty. The National Park Service report reads:

“The victim, age 20, was one of two men in the eighth day of a voyage which launched at Ouray, Utah, on the Green River, with an undetermined place and means of exit. Their river running experience was limited to one river in Texas, and their only reference guide was a road map. The survivor stated that they saw the warning sign at the confluence with the Colorado River. They did not intend to run Cataract Canyon, and were looking for a Ranger Station and a road out of the canyon. The survivor claims they did not see the Ranger who tried to contact them at Spanish Bottom. The Ranger was attracted by their not wearing life jackets and other concerns.

The survivor stated that they adorned life jackets before descending Brown Betty (Mile 212.3) in mid-morning, but that his was pulled off by the river after the boat capsized. He survived by grabbing a plastic bag which kept him afloat until he swam ashore. The victim was last seen in the rapid. Within the hour a commercial boatman found the empty raft below Rapid 2 (Mile 211.9) and secured it to shore. The survivor was found at Rapid 4 (Mile 210.9) searching for his companion. The operator of the commercial boat picked up the survivor and they continued searching downstream. The victim's body was not in a life jacket when it was discovered on July 3, near the mouth of Dark Canyon in the part of Cataract Canyon which is inundated by the Powell Reservoir (Mile 182.8) and in the Glen Canyon Recreational Area.”(6, #a)

“In Retrospect

- 1) The accident was the result of ignorance, improper equipment, and inexperience.
- 2) The Type II life preservers used are inadequate for white water, and the two were fortunate to have navigated Gray and Desolation Canyons on the Green River without an accident.(6)(#a.)”

Udisco rafts were inexpensive and they were the first boat that allowed many beginning river runners to experience the rivers, rapids and canyons. But they also took many beyond their skill and ability level. With a Udisco boat you either became a good boater quickly, or you learned to repair boats and/or to swim for your life.

REFERENCES

- (1) 1984 Northwest River Supply Catalog, page 7; from the collection of Herm Hoops;
- (2) Doug Smith (2471 S 150 W, Bountiful, UT 84010) communications with Herm Hoops;
- (3) Robin Tierney; email to Herm Hoops, 02/05/12;
- (4) Herm Hoops;
- (5) Roy Webb, C.A., Multimedia Archivist Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah 84112; email to Herm Hoops, 5/9/2011;
- (6) Canyonlands National Park, River Incident Report #790143;
- (7) Earl Perry - email to Herm Hoops, 10/10/12;
- (8) Richard DeChant, HYSIDE Inflatables; email to Herm Hoops, 7/12/12;
- (9) Bill Parks, NRS; email to Herm Hoops, 10/11/12;
- (10) John Hatch; email to Herm Hoops, 10/11/12;
- (11) Roy Webb, C.A., Multimedia Archivist Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah 84112; email to Herm Hoops, 10/12/12;
- (12) Barry Hatch; email to Herm Hoops, 10/14/12;
- (13) Don Neff; email to Herm Hoops, 10/15/2012;
- (14) Dennis Willis, retired BLM River Manager; 2 emails to Herm Hoops 10/15/2012;
- (15) Zeke Lauck; email to Herm Hoops, 10/20/2012;
- (16) Robert Tubbs (Tubby); email to Herm Hoops, 10/20/2012;
- (17) Robert Tubbs (Tubby); email to Herm Hoops, 11/04/2012;
- (18) Greg Yeager; conversation with Herm Hoops, 02/05/2013;
- (19) Dan Baxter; email to Herm Hoops, 04/23/2013;
- (20) Sid Uyetake, Sid Sports, Salt Lake City; telephone call with Herm Hoops, 05/22/2013;
- (21) Mike Tierney email to Herm Hoops, 05/23/2013;
- (22) Sid Uyetake, Sid Sports, Salt Lake City; telephone call with Herm Hoops, 05/29/2013;
- (23) Bill George, Western River expeditions; telephone call with Herm Hoops 05/29/2013;

MISCELLANEOUS

- The UDISCO U.S. Coats Guard Hull Code was UDC.
- The Oddessy U.S. Coats Guard Hull Code was QPZ.
- Montana River Photography has excellent photos of Udisco rafts; Mike Malament
P.O. Box 9266, Missoula, MT 59807

SIGNIFICANT NOTES:

(#a) Robert Tubbs, Dave Huff, and Myke Hughes were on a Wild Water West trip and they found the body of the individual in the above accident at Sheep Canyon. In a curious twist the two men had escaped from a Florida prison. It is unclear whether they stole the boat from some campers or stole the camper's station wagon and the boat was inside and they decided to do a "Huck Finn" river adventure when they saw the Green River at Ouray. Naturally they didn't stop at the ranger camp at Spanish Bottom. The outfitter (Hatch?) hiked the rescued swimmer back to the National Park Service at Spanish Bottom. The Park Service took him to Moab, and set him up in a motel room for the night, and by the next day the individual was nowhere to be found!(17)

(#b) Formosan Rubber Group Inc.

Founded in 1952 and is currently the largest Asian rubber and leather manufacturer. They make the following fabrics used in inflatable boat construction: PVC/Polyester, PVC/Nylon, Hytex® (an inflatable boat material competitive with Pennel Rubber), EPDM based material. The Formosan Rubber Group Inc. is principally engaged in project construction, as well as the production and distribution of rubber products. It is the largest Asian Rubber manufacturer and was founded in 1952 in Taiwan. In 2011 they had an annual revenue of \$124 million dollars, 215 employees and 20 research and development engineers. The company owns 61 patents with another 67 pending. In addition to the many items they manufacture, they produce Botex (TM), PVC/Polyester and PVC/Nylon inflatable boats. They manufacture inflatable craft and pontoons for the Taiwanese Military.

The Japan Rubber Industry was founded in January 1934 with just 50,000 yen and a corporate mission to manufacture a line of rubberized clothing and raincoats. Just one month later, latex condoms were added to the product mix under the name Okamoto Rubber Co., Ltd. Okamoto was formed from the merger of four companies: Nippon Gum Industries, Ltd., Riken Rubber Co., Ltd., and Okamoto Rubber Co., Ltd., with the present name being adopted shortly after the merger. By 1974, Okamoto USA, Inc. opened in New York, operations in Japan and other countries continued to expand and strengthen. Okamoto has joint ventures with Reebok Japan, Inc., Michelin Japan.

(#c) It is unclear whether Colorado Adventures was owned by the Griffith parents or Sheri, Mike, Ron and their other brother.

(#d) **EPDM rubber** (ethylene propylene diene monomer (M-class) rubber), is a type of synthetic rubber. EPDM rubber is closely related to ethylene propylene rubber. It has excellent abrasion resistance, and excellent ozone, chemical, bacterial and ageing resistance. It can withstand temperatures from -40 Deg C to + 90 Deg C. EPDM is mainly used in the automotive industry, for roofing.

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