

The Wildest Boat Trip

Just 100 years ago, in the most adventurous exploration in American history, a one-armed army major led four small boats down the unknown canyons of the Green and Colorado Rivers. Last summer PM's editor retraced the journey of Major John Wesley Powell — the hard way — through the ferocious rapids of the Grand Canyon.

in the World

BOATING

By ROBERT P. CROSSLEY, Editor

FRANK MASON BROWN was a man with a vision. He dreamed of building a railroad through the awesome canyons of the Green and Colorado all the way to California. In 1889 he started down the rivers with a surveying party. When he got to Marble Canyon, the Colorado drowned him. So

here we are last June at the very spot where the river saved the Grand Canyon from the iron horse. We're climbing over the boulders at the mouth of Soap Creek, gazing in horror at the most ferocious furlong of wild water we've ever seen. And we're supposed to go right smack through it. We've



"Ride the wilderness whitewaters in reverence before God with a prayer His strength will be in you."

— LESLIE ALLEN JONES



Map of Colorado River in the Grand Canyon Country

already run one major rapids, Badger Creek, the afternoon before. Badger was wild enough. The Park ranger who checked us in at Lee's Ferry and made sure we had bought \$12 life preservers that provided all the freedom of a space suit, stood on the bank and took movies. He had never seen a raft like ours go through. I think he wanted documentation to protect the Government if we didn't make it.

Badger had been photographed from a canoe fitted with outrigger-mounted oars. Veteran river-runner Leslie Allen Jones mounted a camera in a helmet and shot movies through a hole in its rear. Ever since, he's been known as "Buckethead" Jones.

Now, after camping on a sandbank below Badger and a prebreakfast swim in the clear, icy water, I was unrolling a 40-foot map I had ordered from Jones. It wound like two rolls of toilet paper in a watertight polyethylene bag. I squinted at Buckethead's scratchy notation by Soap Creek Rapids: "Worst in canyon at high water."

Well, the water wasn't really high, thank God. Or maybe, "Thank Glen Canyon Dam," which has regulated flow since 1963. But it wasn't really low either. The fact is, you can't win on water flow. Soap may be the worst at

high water. Some say Unkar—Dread Unkar, our raft captain, photographer Joe Munroe, kept calling it—is the worst in low water. It was still ahead of us, along with Hance, with the biggest drop of any rapids in the Grand Canyon, and nearly 30 others.

Soap Creek carried an average rating of "8" on Jones' map. Ten's the worst. Buckethead had also scattered such reassuring notes along the route as: "Brown—upset and drowned," "Upset on Goddard trip—near drowning," "Bert Loper upset, not seen again," "1960—jet boat sunk going upstream."

A voice boomed out above the crashing of the rapids: "Anyone who doesn't want to go through can walk around. We'll pick him up downstream." The voice was Martin Litton's. Martin, long-time travel editor of *Sunset*, now a senior editor of that magazine, was our leader. Like a TV wagon boss, he roused us at 6:00, picked our campsites at night. He also decided how to run each rapids.

Martin made his first Grand Canyon trip in 1955, has run the river nine times. Like a golfer who keeps going back to a challenging course, he spends three weeks in the Canyon each summer. This year he plans to make two trips. He and Clyde Childress, who is



HANG ON! HERE WE GO! Unlike surf, rapids stay in one place. The water moves, hurls you through waves



FROM TURQUOISE POOLS of Little Colorado you see wreckage from 1956 airliner collision



BRONZED CLYDE CHILDRESS, noted for photos of Grand Canyon, is too busy battling river in inner gorge to take pictures. (Below) PAUL GEERLINGS, who has run most of the rapids on western rivers, cuts one a bit close



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drowned July 10, 1889 opposite this point." It was carved by Peter Hansbrough, one of Brown's companions. A few miles downstream he was drowned, along with a third member of the railroad party. No one volunteered to carve a memorial for Hansbrough; it seemed like tempting fate. However, someone did, below President Harding Rapids, so named because a survey party camped there heard the news of the President's death on their primitive radio. We climbed a hundred feet or so to Hansbrough's shallow grave covered by rocks. Nearby is buried a Boy Scout drowned 62 years later in Glen Canyon.

It's amazing how much you learn about a river when you don't have a motor. I had traveled hundreds of miles on the quieter parts of the Green and Colorado in power boats. All we looked out for were sandbars. Here, besides listening for the warning roar of rapids a half-mile ahead, you learn to seek out the current. You watch for eddies that can spin you around like a top. Once, the first afternoon, we actually floated *upstream* under Navajo Bridge, which we had passed going *down*.

The farther, the deeper

Three miles below Soap Creek we enter a stretch of green water where the river flows swiftly between sheer walls. The farther we go, the deeper we get. At the head of Marble Canyon, or Marble Gorge, as the Sierra Club prefers to call it to indicate it's not a separate canyon, but really part of the Grand, the walls are 200 feet high. At the mouth of the Little Colorado, they're 3500 feet. At Phantom Ranch, the Canyon will be a mile deep!

Here between the sheer walls we stop for lunch on a shelf 40 feet above the river, possibly the same shelf Powell camped on 99 years before.

"About 10 o'clock," he wrote, "we come to a place where the river occupies the entire channel, and the walls are vertical from the water's edge. . . . There is a little shelf, or rather a horizontal crevice, a few feet above our heads. One man stands on the deck of the boat, another climbs on his shoulders, and then into the crevice." It had to be the same place!

Running the cataracts

We run four more cataracts and camp the second night above 24-Mile Rapids. Next day we run nine more. The Canyon is getting deeper and redder. The third noon we pass an "oasis" of mosses and

ferns beneath two faint waterfalls. Powell named it "Vasey's Paradise" after a botanist who accompanied him on earlier expeditions in the Rockies. We had planned to picnic here, but two rafts of young people were already pulled into shore. A mile downstream the river makes a sharp bend to the right beneath an enormous cavern. Powell described it as "a vast circular half-chamber, which, if utilized for a theater, would give sitting to 50,000 people." Just call it Hollywood Bowl with a low ceiling. The entrance was only a few feet above the river, so we climbed up to explore.

Canyon resounds with Romberg

It was Hollywood Bowl all right. Suddenly, *from nowhere* we heard a thrilling soprano voice singing *Indian Love Call*—you know, the "I'm calling you-oo-oo" number made famous by Jeanette MacDonald. Just as suddenly came, close by, an answer from our own Nelson Eddy. Hal Gilliam, a San Francisco newspaperman who had been frightening the deer with *Stout-Hearted Men* each morning. Darned if he didn't know the words to *Indian Love Call*. For five minutes, Hal and the mystery soprano bounced Sigmund Romberg's thrilling duet off the massive walls of Marble Gorge.

We soon traced the soprano to the river. The raft party at Vasey's Paradise had caught up with us. The singer, a blonde in a pink bathing suit, said her name was Carol Neblett and her career was managed by New York's renowned Sol Hurok. She was a long way from Lincoln Center.

Six miles below Redwall Cavern we passed the site of the proposed Marble Canyon Dam, abandoned after protests by the Sierra Club. Martin Litton, the kind of a guy who shakes his fist at the sky when a sonic boom shatters the silence of the wild, pointed to the test borings and rickety scaffolds and snorted: "Look what the Government did to the Canyon!" Two twisted aluminum boats lay on the right bank. "You'd think the Reclamation Service would clean up its junk," Martin growled.

Down the Canyon once too often

That night we camped above the Royal Arches, deeply etched in the redwall limestone. We could see the bleached remains of another landmark, "Bert Loper's boat." Bert was past 70 when he went down the Canyon for the last time in 1949. They found his boat, but they never found Bert.

Next morning I switched into Martin's boat. We stopped for lunch under the tamarisks on a long sandy beach below

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Nankowep Rapids. Now we're in Grand Canyon National Park, which extends this far up Marble Gorge's west bank. The river flowed swiftly offshore, but the curve of the beach afforded a sheltered bay for swimming. Facing us was a sheer, red cliff; behind us the walls were buttressed by dunes.

"What a place for a Holiday Inn!" I exclaimed. Martin didn't think that was funny. Behind us, 800 feet up, was a string of tiny holes, cliff dwellings built by the long-departed Mokis. I joined an exploring party. The climb came close to separating the Sierra Club members from the boys. There wasn't much to see inside the little apartments, but the view of the river was breathtaking.

Befuddled bullfrog

That night, before turning in, Joe and I went down to check the raft. Somewhere in the brush an outraged bullfrog let us have it. We flashed our lights but couldn't spot him. Every 20 seconds he gave us a Bronx cheer. Joe went back for his cassette recorder. Then every time the frog sounded off, we recorded him for posterity. Joe played it back. The frog answered immediately. He thought he owned Marble Gorge; now he wondered where that other frog came from. Then Paul got his recorder and taped both the real frog and playback. The frog must still be wondering what happened.

I ran Kwagunt Rapids with Martin the fifth morning. It made me appreciate the skill and strength required of the oarsman. Joe's raft, which I rejoined after lunch, demanded strength, and the kind of bravery that sends a drunk into a bull ring.

At noon we came to the mouth of the Little Colorado, described by Powell as "exceedingly muddy." To my surprise, it entered the main river through clear, almost iridescent turquoise pools. Most of us were soon swimming in this fantastic Shangri-la. Like Shangri-la, it had a darker side. Floating, head back, I could see the shiny wreckage of the United DC-6 which collided with a TWA Constellation in 1956.

Entering Powell's 'great unknown'

Powell had been on the river nearly three months when he camped by the "Colorado Chiquito." On Aug. 13, 1869, he wrote "We are now ready to start our way down the Great Unknown. . . . We are three quarters of a mile in the depths of the earth, and the great river shrinks into

insignificance as it dashes its angry waves against the walls and cliffs that rise to the world above; the waves are but puny ripples, and we are but pygmies, running up and down the sands or lost among the boulders.

"We have an unknown distance yet to run, an unknown river to explore. What falls there are, we know not; what walls rise over the river, we know not. . . . The men talk as cheerfully as ever; jests are bandied about freely this morning; but to me the cheer is somber and the jests are ghastly."

Red walls change to black

Next morning, apparently at the head of Hance, he added: "Heretofore hard rocks have given us bad river; soft rocks, smooth water; and a series of rocks harder than any we have experienced sets in. The river enters the gneiss! We can see but a little way into the granite gorge, but it looks threatening. . . . The canyon is narrower than we have ever before seen it; the water is swifter."

The one-armed major not only had guts; he could write!

After lunch we ran two minor rapids, then Unkar, a long, hair-raising chute curving against an overhanging cliff from which murderous waves ricocheted against us.

By the sixth morning we were well into the inner gorge. The river narrowed between 2000-foot slick, black walls of gneiss. Only occasionally could we see the rim, set back on either side more than a mile above us.

That night we would camp near the mouth of a clear-flowing Bright Angel Creek, which Powell named in contrast to the Dirty Devil at the head of Glen Canyon. I would ride out on a mule next morning. But today we had three of the wildest rapids in the Canyon to run in quick succession. Hance, with the biggest drop of any; Sockdologer, and Grapevine, so-named by Powell for the string of boulders in mid-channel. All three rate "9" or better.

The biggest rapids yet

We pulled in above Hance and clambered over the boulders on the left bank. Here was a RAPIDS! Powell had portaged it. Few try to run it in boats. Powell's observation as to the relationship of rock strata to rapids was clearer here than anywhere else. When strata in the canyon walls are straight and level, he wrote, the water will be swift and smooth. If they incline downstream, it will be swift with a few rapids. But if the strata slant upstream—look out! Here at

Hance they tilted sharply toward the rushing river.

For the first time, Martin ordered the boat passengers to walk around. He debated about Joe's raft. Joe needed at least four to man the oars, two to an oar. That meant three would walk around. Who would ride and who would walk? At Soap Creek I had butterflies about climbing aboard. Now I felt like a kid waiting to get "chosen" in a ball game—or an astronaut wondering if he's going to make a moon flight. Hance was bigger and meaner than Soap, but now I wanted to ride!

Finally Martin turned to Joe and said, "Oh heck, let 'em all go."

We watched three of the boats go through. Clyde Childress, an oarsman on the raft—at home an inventor who sold his company to Monsanto—recorded this play-by-play:

"Martin Litton in the Diablo is just pulling into the stream. You can just see the Diablo coming around the large boulder in front of us. He's rowing hard. He's pulling around the center boulder, dipping. Now he's pulling hard toward the far side of the stream to avoid the big, jagged, sharp boulder directly ahead of us. Behind the rock, he's pulling down the smooth tongue for a moment. Now he's into the rough water, into the first little hole. Now he's approaching a big hole. Perfect! Now he's pulling away from the biggest hole of all. He's coming down this side just right. Just right. Approaching the big, BIG hole. Perfect. He's clear of it nicely, smoothly, along the near side of the stream."

Everyone got through okay, including the raft, although Paul Geerlings, becoming known as "The Great Oarbreaker," lost his balance and fell back into his boat going around that first boulder.

Sockdologer and Grapevine follow closely after Hance and are every bit as hairy. They have to be run with all passengers, there's no way to walk around.

We camp where Powell did at the mouth of Bright Angel Creek. Several of us have to leave next morning, but Martin, Joe, and most of the others will go on for 14 days to Lake Mead. They insist that the "real wild part" of the Canyon is yet to come. (Maybe they were right. Paul capsized in Bedrock Rapids, Martin did the same at Lava Falls, and the raft folded under in Upset Rapids.)

As I ride up Kaibib Trail I watch the boats and raft grow ever tinier at each turn of the trail. For two weeks I will dream of moonlight on the Colorado and picture my erstwhile companions hanging on for dear life as they challenge Major Powell's "great unknown." ★★★

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