Memories of a Grand Canyon Journey

-- Dan Styer; 3 April 2014

In 1976, I took a float trip down the upper Grand Canyon from Lee’s Ferry to Phantom Ranch. I took scattered notes at the time, but most of what I record here is based on memory. (I also took a number of photographs, and carefully captioned each one, but we lent them to a friend, Lambertine Hood, who lost them.)

In the July of 1969, when I was 14 years old, my family took a vacation to the American southwest. Like all of my father’s trips, it was fast-paced: private flight to Flagstaff, Arizona; rent a car and drive to south rim of Grand Canyon; Glen Canyon Dam; Zion National Park; Cedar Breaks National Monument; Bryce Canyon National Park; north rim of Grand Canyon. On our drive from the north rim back to Flagstaff, my father saw the National Park Service sign for Lee’s Ferry and swerved from our planned route for an excursion down to the Colorado River. There, three huge motorized rafts were being loaded with food, equipment, gasoline, and several dozen tourists in preparation for a float trip down the Grand Canyon. (The group leader was a woman, and in retrospect, it must have been the famous Georgie White, “Woman of the River”.) I was entranced. I knew that Powell had floated down the Grand Canyon one hundred years before, but I had no idea that it was still being done.

After we piled back into the car, I mused aloud from the back seat “I’d like to float down the Grand Canyon someday.” My father replied with a harrumph: “You can do that,” he said, “when you’re twenty-one.” (His standard reply for any unsound suggestion.) We drove back to Flagstaff, and then flew home to Langhorne, Pennsylvania, with a stop on the flight to tour Carlsbad Caverns National Park.

There matters stood while I went to high school, and then to college. But then in 1975, my mother offered: “I’d like a Grand Canyon float trip next summer. I know you can’t afford it, but I’ll bring you along and that gift will replace all your birthday, Christmas, and Easter gifts for the rest of your life.” It didn’t take any convincing. Mom did the planning: she, and I, and my brother Bill, and my cousin Meg, would float down the upper Grand Canyon from Lee’s Ferry to Phantom Ranch, then we’d walk out of the Grand Canyon to the south rim. For reasons I can’t remember my sister Ellen declined Mom’s invitation … and it wasn’t the sort of thing my Dad liked. Nor would we be going on a huge, motor powered expedition like the one we had seen at Lee’s Ferry: Mom booked a trip on small ore-powered rafts from a company called “Moki Mac”.

I noted with satisfaction that I’d be floating down the Grand Canyon when I was twenty-one.
On 6 July I met Mom and Meg at the Las Vegas International Airport. They had flown in from Philadelphia. (I had left Philadelphia a few days earlier and laid over in Chicago to visit my girlfriend Katie.) We were astounded to find slot machines within the airport. The three of us walked down long corridors to a distant corner of the airport where we boarded a twin propeller aircraft with about five passenger seats for a flight to Page, Arizona. A uniformed man took care of passenger check in, the same man loaded the luggage, the same man collected the boarding passes, and then the same man jumped into the pilot’s seat and flew us away.

It was not a long flight, but it was over the hot desert in the afternoon, with many updrafts, so the small plane bounced merrily. I felt like throwing up several times, and the passenger next to me actually did so. We landed in Page, where the pilot unloaded our luggage and gave it back to us.

Somehow we got to a motel in Page. After sitting for so long in airplanes, my Mom wanted a walk, so we struck out into the desert. It was stark and mesmerizing, and after just a short walk, we were all parched.

For the next morning, 7 July, Mom had chartered an even smaller plane to fly us to Marble Canyon Airfield. The flight lasted ten or fifteen minutes, and then the Moki Mac crew picked us up and drove us down to Lee’s Ferry along that same road our family had traveled in 1969. There beside the Colorado River we met up with Bill, who was at the time living in Grinnell, Iowa, and who had traveled to Lee’s Ferry by a completely different route. Our group of four was complete.

Two groups had signed up for this trip: the four of us plus a group of sixteen. But the sixteen had to cancel at the last minute, so we four would be the only passengers. Moki Mac had to bring the staff and supplies for twenty passengers, however, because they were going to pick up twenty passengers at Phantom Ranch.

There were five four-passenger rafts, plus one larger raft for supplies. The boatmen were: Clair Quist, in charge; Mark; Roger; Ote. There was also one boatman in charge of the large supply raft – I forget his name. And there was one boatman that we didn’t interact with much: When the group of sixteen cancelled, Clair let his boatmen invite friends. This one boatman invited his ex-wife, with the explanation that they were getting along much better now that they were divorced. This one boatman always took his ex-wife as the passenger in his raft, so we didn’t get a good chance to talk with him. (I got the impression that, by the end of the trip, they were planning to remarry.)

All six boatmen were rugged outdoor types. Clair was somewhat older than the others, Ote somewhat younger. Ote differed in other ways as well: (1) She was a woman. (2) Although she had rafted down the Grand Canyon several times before, this was her first trip as a paid boatman rowing passengers. And, (3) while most of the boatmen were taciturn, Ote was bubbly and
expressive. I later found out that her name was Ote Tesch (now by marriage Ote Dale), but that her parents had named her Sue: she picked the name Ote herself because she admired coyotes.

Off onto the river. I was in Clair’s raft. At the beginning of the Grand Canyon the river is placid and the scenery floats by like a dream. I took a photograph and tossed my camera into the bail bucket. When Clair told me to put it into my ammo box lest it be tossed out in a rapid, the possibility seemed so remote as to be ludicrous.

We stopped on a sandbar for lunch and the crew brought out a folding table and spread it with nuts, cheese, bread, peanut butter and jelly, lettuce, yogurt, Pringles potato chips … a vast spread. I was used to getting into the wilderness by backpacking, and this, to me, seemed opulent in the extreme. I dug in. After lunch Clair held an orientation briefing, most of which I’ve forgotten. But he did emphasize that we were not to throw out any trash of any sort, and that if we found someone else’s trash we were to pick it up. He called such trash “lucky trash”.

We went through Badger Creek Rapids. Fun! We approached Soap Creek Rapids. Ote, sitting down between the oars in her raft, kicked her legs into the air several times and shouted “Soap Creek!”. I asked her later about this, and she said that Soap Creek was a fun rapid with lots of waves and water splashing, but no real danger. At the end of the run Clair said “Those waves were big.”

A bit later we looked for the Frank M. Brown memorial inscription, but it was too eroded to be noticeable. We tried pulling in to camp at, I think, 18 Mile Wash, but one of the rafts couldn’t pull fast enough, so we ended up camping on river left opposite 19 Mile Canyon at a site now known as 19.4 Mile Camp.

At camp, Mom asked each of us how we were enjoying the trip. I said it was superb. She said that she’d prefer more hiking. I said that of course I would prefer more hiking too, but it was superb nevertheless. Mom passed her preference on to trip leader Clair.

For dinner, the crew grilled steaks and boiled corn on the cob. I looked in disbelief and said “This isn’t like backpacking at all.”

The second day on the river, 8 July, I was on Mark’s raft. We floated only about a mile before stopping at North Canyon on river right. We walked up that side canyon about a mile and encountered a pool of water in the red sandstone of the upper Supai formation. Then back to the river, floating through a series of fun, splashy rapids called “the roaring twenties”. I discovered that the best way to stay comfortable in the hot, dry desert air was to get wet, either by splashing through a rapid or by jumping overboard for a quick swim. I dried off quickly.

We stopped for the night on river right at South Canyon. Walking around we found the foundations of a long-abandoned Indian dwelling, and a skeleton, and a hole in the rock wall,
and Stanton’s Cave. I also walked part of the way to Vasey’s Paradise, a dramatic spring supporting a vast growth of greenery, but stopped when the rock got too steep.

I think it was at this campsite that I found a sand scorpion near my bedroll. Clair came by gruffly and crushed it underfoot. Ote told me afterward that she felt so sorry for the poor sand scorpion, which was my feeling as well.

Day three, 9 July. I was in Ote’s raft. All the boatmen were full of knowledge and skill, but travel with Ote was special. She dipped a jar of alfalfa seeds into the river and hung it from the edge of the raft, so that they would sprout and we’d have fresh sprouts in our salads. We glided past Vasey’s Paradise and stopped at Redwall Cavern. Clair searched through the equipment looking for the Frisbee that they usually play with on the sandy floor of Redwall Cavern. When he couldn’t find it, we flung a plastic plate as a flying disk instead. Some folks even started up a game of Frisbee – or rather plastic plate – football.

Back on the river Ote pointed out the new rock formations as we came to them. I was particularly surprised by the lenses of purple Temple Butte limestone. We paused at Nautiloid Canyon to look for fossil Nautiloids, but they were covered with sand. As the day warmed up Ote wanted to take off her jacket and put on her bathing suit top, so she told me to look out the front of the raft and not look back toward her. I did that, but she didn’t tell me when she was finished, so I stared out the front of the raft for a long time. About mile 40 we stopped and explored the abandoned tunnels excavated to support the old proposed Marble Canyon dam.

About mile 46 Clair pulled off river right at an unlikely place. “Several times, rafting by here, I’ve noticed unusual rocks up at the base of the Redwall atop this talus slope. They might be a moki house [Native American structure]. Since I finally have a group that likes to walk, I’m going to stop here and climb up to them.” I started to go up as well, but I got frightened on the steep heights and had a hard time coming back down. Clair got to his site and, back down at the bottom, reported that they were nothing but travertine deposits.

We spent the night at the mouth of Saddle Canyon on river right. While most of the crew cooked, Ote guided us on a hike up this side canyon. She wouldn’t tell us what was up there, but she said it was worth seeing. The trail first climbed up the main canyon wall, then turned into the side canyon. The trail was rising through rocky desert, but the canyon floor was rising even faster, so at one point the trail came to the dry stream on the canyon floor. There we found a little oasis: soil underfoot instead of rock, trees instead of cactus. Ote said “Isn’t this just a little Garden of Eden?” and I could only agree. I thought this was our destination, but she kept walking. We came to place where the walls rose more steeply, where the stream was flowing, where the vegetation was even more lush, and where the sense of being protected was still stronger. I again thought this was our destination, but again Ote kept walking. We came to where the stream flowed out of a ten-foot wide slot in a rock wall and over a five-foot tall rock
making a waterfall, and I thought this was surely our destination, as we couldn’t possibly get over that waterfall, and it couldn’t possibly get any more beautiful, but Ote found footholds over the rock and led us up into the slot in the rock wall. There was a magical corridor of stone, carpeted with singing water, hung with ferns. At the far end, a thirty-foot waterfall. We had finally arrived.

We rushed forward into the waterfall, to shower, to drink the sweet water, to incorporate ourselves into the magic of this place. And then we turned around to walk back through the many layers of beauty to the river and dinner. I was walking with Bill when we rounded the curve from the side canyon out to the main Grand Canyon and there, perfectly framed between the two canyon walls, hung the full moon. I gasped, then reached for my glasses for a sharper view. They were gone! I had left them on a rock ledge beside the waterfall when I showered.

So the next morning Bill and I got up early and we walked the Saddle Canyon trail once again to retrieve my glasses. Best mistake ever.

On our fourth river day, 10 July, I was on Roger’s raft. He talked about visiting his girlfriend in Chile. “It’s so dry there, that they wouldn’t call the Grand Canyon a desert … they’d call it lush greenery. To them, a desert is pure sand for mile after mile.” And I think it was on this day that we passed a broad shallow portion of river. Roger said to keep my eyes open: often in this stretch they would find food and equipment that had been tossed from other rafts in the rapids. I kept my eyes open, I saw something, I jumped from our raft to retrieve it. It was a six-pack of Coke with two cans remaining. I was inordinately fond of my find, but I don’t like Coke so I tried to give it away. No one else wanted Coke either! Finally I drank it just so my find wouldn’t go to waste.

Two more things that certainly happened on this trip and that I think happened on this day: (1) Meg was in Clair’s raft, and he let her row, not just in placid water, but through a small rapid. (2) Mom found a quarter. Since this find was, in Clair’s words “lucky trash”, she considered it her “lucky quarter”. As such, she through it might give her the jackpot in, say, a slot machine. On our return trip, she tried out her theory in one of the Las Vegas airport slot machines, but got no jackpot.

We stopped for most of the afternoon where the Little Colorado empties into the Colorado, and watched the robin’s egg blue of the Little Colorado swirl into the brownish green of the Colorado. Then floated a short distance from this junction and camped on a sandbar river right.
11 July, our fifth day on the river. A somber mood hung over the crew … there were big rapids ahead. Ote put on a button that read “COYOTE: an organization of loose women” (Cast Off Your Old Tired Ethics). I was in Ote’s boat, and she said “I’m glad to have you on this day of big rapids. If I flip, you’ll probably enjoy the swim.”

We went through Unkar Rapid, and afterwards Clair set up the lunch table and all the passengers ate, but the boatmen were too excited: they talked among themselves about the technical twists and turns of the rapid they’d just run. One of them (Mark, I think) took the passengers for a tour of the Indian ruins beside the rapid.

I thought Unkar was going to be the big rapid of the day, but no. In two miles we got to Hance Rapid, which made Unkar seem tame. Most rapids have a definite structure: a tongue of smooth water, a wake of waves, eddies on either side of the wake. But Hance Rapid, as far as I could see, had no structure whatsoever: there was no tongue, and eddies and waves were intermixed into one seething maelstrom. Ote looked pale. She reminded me of the rules: Hold on tight with both hands while in the rapids, and after the rapids bail out the boat so it’s maneuverable. She made some powerful oar strokes, then plunged into the maelstrom. We were tossed left and right, up and down. Water sloshed in and the boat grew unwieldy. I was holding on with both hands as instructed when Ote called out “Bail this funkin’ boat!” I hurried to comply. In the smooth water beyond the rapid she said “That would have been fun if I hadn’t been so scared.”

At the foot of Hance Rapid we pulled off to river right and walked up the Hance Trail to Hance’s asbestosis mine. Ote said that for ten years this had been the most productive asbestosis mine in America, although I didn’t see how it could have been profitable to haul the output so far on mules, across the river, then up to the south rim and off to a railroad station. And indeed, after those ten years Hance quit the hard work of mining and went into guiding tourists.

Walking back from the mine I slipped and fell, which would not have been a big deal, except that I fell on one of the few trailside cactuses. I wanted to stop to pull all the spines out of my shorts and my butt: no sense getting an infection while miles from medical attention. But the crew kept me going, and I pulled out spines while walking. When we got to the rafts I thought I’d have a minute to pull out spines again, but no, they wanted me right into the raft. Ote’s raft. A woman’s raft. There I was in my underwear pulling spines out of my pants and butt while she worked the oars. Not to worry, she said, she’d gotten lots of cactus spines and “they work themselves out.”

Beyond Hance Rapid the Colorado River drops from the sunny reds and yellows and greens of the sandstones and limestones and shales we had been passing through, into the steep “Granite Gorge” of black Vishnu Schist veined with pink Zoraster Granite. The hard back rock wall falls vertically into the river, which narrows and deepens. Do not think for a moment that this defile is gloomy or ugly. The back wall glistens like a mirror, and is fluted into marvelous and fantastic shapes.
I noted all this while in my underwear, pulling out cactus spines. We came to another big rapid: Sockdolager. Ote told me to perform “high-siding”. I would sit on the bow of the raft. Whichever side was pushed up by a wave, I was to sit on that side to stabilize it. I should shift back and forth as the waves pushed up first one side then the other. I was happy to do it, but I felt funny bouncing back and forth across the bow in my underwear. We went through Grapevine Rapid the same way, where Ote called out “Splish, splash, we’re taking a bath.” Finally I pulled enough spines from my shorts that I felt comfortable wearing them again.

We camped a little below Grapevine, on river right. Sandbars within the Granite Gorge are always small, so the camp was compressed. Bill and I went off to explore the tributary canyon above camp, which rapidly grew steep and where I again froze in fear when I ventured too far up.

Our sixth and final day was 12 July. I was in Roger’s raft. We went through a small unnamed rapid past mile 85, and I got a splash of water. Roger said “We’ll name this Dan’s Rapid, because you like to get wet.”

And then, all too soon, we pulled into the big beach at Phantom Ranch. Clair greeted the passengers for the lower half of his trip. We gathered our things and said our goodbyes. Ote had taken a real shine to our group, especially my mother, and said “I wish you folks weren’t leaving.” But we were – this was the end of our float trip.

But not the end of our Grand Canyon journey, because we now had to walk out of the canyon. Bill was met by a friend and they walked to the north rim and eventually travelled back to his home in Grinnell, Iowa. He has stories about that journey but he can tell them himself.

Mom, Meg, and I walked south on the Bright Angel Trail to the south rim, eight miles distant and 4460 feet above. Up through the Vishnu Schist, up through the Redwall limestone: it was a long haul. At one point, working up a steep pitch, I felt a tug. Mom had grabbed hold of my belt and was letting me pull her up.

As we walked further and further up, we encountered more and more people. In Mom’s friendly way, she greeted almost everyone with “Isn’t this beautiful?” or “What a privilege it is to be here!” Sometimes she got no reply, and the individual queried would turn to his companion and speak in French or German.

We reached the canyon rim toward the end of the day, and made our way to the hotel check-in desk. The receptionist was friendly but her news was not good: every single room on the south rim was already occupied that night. We began strategizing for the night when a Japanese couple with a baby approached. They had wanted to rent a small room on the rim, but the only room available was a large room outside the national park. Since we had no room, and they had
room to spare, would we like to join them? Indeed we would. Mom tried to pay the couple, but they refused. Then she said “Buy something for the baby” and under those conditions they accepted.

So that’s the story as I remember it: a story of adventure, of botany, of sweeping vistas, of intimate natural enclosures, of human friendship and generosity. Thanks, Mom.