

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Bruce McElya (BM)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Bruce recounts things related to his solo river trips mid-1980s through 1990s PART 6

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TM: Good morning. Today is Tuesday, June 4th, 2019. This is Part 6 oral history interview with Bruce McElya. My name is Tom Martin. This is a Grand Canyon oral history interview. Good morning, Bruce. How are you today?

BM: Well, good morning, Tom. I'm doing good, thanks.

TM: Good. Bruce, may we have your permission to record this interview over the telephone?

BM: Of course you do.

TM: Thank you very much. Last time we were talking in Part 5...you had some stories/some interactions with Georgie White. I should just add that in the 1940s, Georgie was living in California and she ended up doing some hiking with Harry Aleson, and then some river running with Harry, hiking at Parashant. Then, 1952, when she rowed a raft through Grand Canyon all the way through with Elgin Pierce. So she was one of the early river runners. When did you first meet Georgie?

BM: Well, I didn't know her that well and didn't spend a lot of time with her. I just knew her. I knew about some of her history, which is really interesting to me. So one day... Canyoners launches on Sunday and I'm usually up at 4:00 in the morning before anyone else is and it's dark. I fiddle around with stuff until everyone else is up at around 5:00/5:30 and then we really get started from there. Well, this one Sunday morning, I saw the silhouette of someone sitting on a big cooler right on the boat beach there in front of some big rafts, so I went over there. I try to stay quiet in the morning 'cause people are still sleeping. I go over there and its Georgie sitting on this big cooler with her legs crossed drinking a Coors, I think it was Coors. Drinking a beer. I said hello and asked if I could sit down. I knew who she was. "Sure, sit down, have a seat. You want a beer?" I said, "No, ma'am, it's too early for me." I asked her about things. We're just talking about the river and running the river and things that happen down there. I said, "Georgie, I'd really like to hear your story about that time that you and your boatman friends ran Cataract Canyon at 125,000 cubic feet per second." 'Cause I wanted to hear about that. I'd read about it some; it's part of our oral history that we tell people on the commercial trips. Here I could hear it firsthand.

So Georgie, she likes telling those stories. She starts out, she says, "Well, you know, the average they just don't know. They just don't know." What she means by that, the average is just people that are not boatmen. There's no way they could understand what that was. I said, "Well, Georgie, I'm a boatman. You can tell me. I want to hear about that." They heard Cataract was running high. They wanted some excitement, so they rigged a motor rig, I don't know, 25/30-foot long motor rig of some sort, launched

and ran. She said it was just immediately dangerous. There was so much water flowing down through there that it was creating these giant whirlpools. She said you can't really see those things. They're flat on the water. You can't really see them till you're on them. One of them caught her boat and sucked it down in, turned it straight up, and just violently hurled that thing out the top of the whirlpool, bent the frame, broke some straps and what have you. It was a pretty hard hit that whirlpool was. I've never seen anything that big myself. She said, "We were able to pull over and we had rope but not many straps." So they roped their frame back on as best they could, kept going. She said when they got down toward the bottom of it, these waves started showing up. She said they're 50-foot-high waves. They're mostly on the side, not in the middle of the river. She said you couldn't go there. You just couldn't go in something that big. I said, "50 foot, Georgie, are you sure about that?" She says, "I'm not exaggerating at all. They were 50-foot-high crashing waves from those big boulders on the side of the river." She said, "We were fearful, we couldn't pull over once we got into that. We had to keep going." Anyway, it was a wild, rough ride, apparently. Her comment was, she said, "It startled us, and I'll never do that again." I don't know. That's a lot of water. I don't know how you run it at 125,000. It'd just be so dangerous. But anyway, it was that. We'd sit down and talk about things like that. Then come about 5:00/5:30, it was time to get to work and we'd part company. She was on every other week launch and we were on every Sunday to launch. So I saw her for about a month or so. Every other week I'd be up at 4:00 and her and I'd sit down on that cooler in the dark just telling stories about stuff.

TM: Fun. This was 1983 or '82/'84 ish? Do you remember the year on this?

BM: Yes, that's right. That's right. '82 is my first year, '83... Would have been one of those years. I don't remember which one. Then, you know, Georgie and I were friends. We'd see each other on the river sometimes at Deer Creek or something. We'd sit down and talk on the boats. I just enjoyed her. Some years later when I started doing the solo trips, just a few years later, I was parked down below Diamond at Travertine Falls or something. At any rate, I was sitting there, and Georgie came roaring up with one of her big rigs and she was by herself. There was nobody on the boat. She was just going full speed ahead, just fast as that boat would go. I waved at her 'cause usually she'd pull over if she sees me. I waved at her and smiled. She looked over at me, didn't take her hand off the tiller, nothing, just turned her head back straight, and kept on motoring down the river. I thought, god, did I do something to make her mad or what's going on here?

Well, what was going on was they'd flipped a boat in Upset I think, and they couldn't get the count right. So one of her boatmen apparently swam under the boat to find the missing person and was drowned. She was driving her boat out after the incident. I could be wrong on those details about where and... Then another commercial company came down. They were deadheading on out. They dropped everybody off at Diamond and were deadheading. They pulled over and told me that something had happened with Georgie and she lost one of her boatmen. I thought, oh my god, oh my god, that's horrible. That's the worst. That's it, worst news I could hear. I was crushed and I thought, ah Georgie, man, I'm so sorry. But that's it. That's pretty much the last time Georgie and I really saw each other. I was not running commercially anymore and really didn't see her much after that. But that's my little bit of Georgie story.

TM: What else would you guys talk about there on the cooler?

BM: We were just talking about going down the river. She knew Gaylord. She knew all the old-time river runners and she'd tell me about people. I don't remember many details. It was just kind of fun hearing about the old days, you know. Just small talk. We'd talk about how we rig our boats and how they run through the rapids and how all the different boats handle so differently. You might drive one, but you

might not be able to drive the other until you learned how to run it 'cause they don't act the same at all. Never really thought about that because I've only ever driven the one big boat and didn't know anything else. Just, you know, things like that. Really not that much. I just remember her driving by that one day. She was just so...she was...she seemed real upset and there was a reason for it. I just didn't know. Does that sound right? Did she have a wreck at Upset and lose a boatman?

TM: You know, I can't say for sure. I haven't researched into that yet. I can't say. I know that she had a fatality in Crystal, but that would've been...oh, was that '83?

BM: Maybe that's where it was. Maybe that's where it was. You'll know the details of that better than me 'cause I don't have any way to research it. But, anyway, I always enjoyed her company. She was interesting and easy going, always nice to me. I enjoyed her company. Now I know that she wrecked a lot of boats, but I never brought that up, of course.

TM: How do you say that? Was that stuff you had heard, or did you see things like that?

BM: Ah, no. I never saw them have any trouble, really. One day I pulled them off a rock with my rope puller – it was a low water day or something. I don't remember. Yeah, it was. It was running one of those research flows running 8,000. She got stuck in MNA rapid. Real rocky. Rocky mess in there. They kinda got hung up and I was able to pull them off with my rope puller. That was about it, you know, that's about the most I ran into her.

TM: And she was running her elephant rig there. The triple donuts tied together?

BM: No, not that day. She knew she couldn't run Grand Canyon with that big triple rig if the water went below...I think about...I think like her cutoff was 16,000. Below that, she knew she was gonna have trouble so she had smaller boats she'd run. That was what I ran into that day. Man, MNA, it's not a rapid, really, it's just a god darn rocky mess.

TM: Right, it's a rockfall there that has peppered the river with boulders. So at low water, those boulders you have to weave and dodge through there. It would be fairly simple, still today, catching the occasional river runner there.

BM: Well, it's caught me before. I don't know it. I don't see it enough to know how to pick my way through there. Some of those rocks you can't even tell. There's not enough current moving past them to show any waves. It's just sitting down there six inches under the water and it'll grab you. Like, oh man.

TM: So were you on a Canyoneers trip or was that on one of your solo trips that you ran into her there?

BM: Solo. It was one of the solo trips.

TM: And you had your rope puller, which was neat.

BM: Yeah, I did. I use that more for other people than myself as it turns out. It's a handy thing to have. Somebody ran up on a rock. Somebody lost their motor at 24- or 24-and a half. At that time, I was on a summer solo. They just real easy ran up on the rock on river-left there. I mean, straight up it, too. The passengers all came off the top of the boat and walked across the top of that rock down to the beach. I said, "Well, boys, I got this gadget here." They said, "What do you got?" I said, "It's a rope puller." I said, "I think we need to pull you off the same way you went on there. That's what makes sense." They said, "Yeah, but how are you going to do it?" "Go upstream and just start yanking, see what happens." They weren't stuck that hard, just kind of stuck a little. His boat was standing pretty much straight up, too, or

45-degree angle. It was dramatic looking. So anyway, it took about an hour. Got some rope long enough, got some bow lines and stuff, and I roped up to it. Found a rock that we could tie to and started cranking. Came off of there an inch at a time, you know, until the motor could get a grab. Then gravity pulled it on off. No problem. Took a while. They weren't bad stuck. So anyway, I used that gadget for that. Seemed like once in a while...come in handy. Mostly for motor rigs is what I ended up using it for. I had it for myself, but mostly motor rigs. Actually, I did use it one time. I got stuck high on the beach because I let my pants down, didn't think and the tide got me. I was able to get out in the water and put an anchor in and started yanking my...dragging my boat back into the water. Well, I guess I was mad about it and I was like, oh man. It cost me an extra hour, then the Sun's on the beach and it's in the morning. I'm just like, I gotta get outta here, man, it's getting hot already. So anyway, I did, but it took an hour. Took an hour out of my day. Better than a day out of my day...If I had to wait for the tide to come in then I could've got off. So anyway, there was a couple of events I should probably tell you about. One of them...

I've never told this to anyone, not my wife, anyone. It's not that it's secret or sacred or anything, it's just, I don't know how to tell you. I don't know how to tell you. It's just so different. One day I wanted to see the river from up above. Just look down on it, get the big picture 'cause once I'm on the river, I don't get that. So I went to South Rim and got out of my car and was walking to the Rim and I'm greeted with the smell of belching diesel from all these tour buses and people speaking in tongues and it's crowded and smelly. Finally got to the South Rim to look over, but it wasn't very satisfying. I just don't feel very well when I go there when it's that crowded. So I thought, you know, I know of a place and nobody really knows about this. There's a road that takes off from a little bit... You go a little bit south on the main road into Grand Canyon Park there and there's a road that goes through a couple of miles of the Park and then it gets into national forest and BLM. It finally ends up on Hualapai land and it parallels the South Rim.

It's a four-wheel drive road. I thought, I'm going down there, so I got in my truck and drove hard about 20 miles down that road and got to a really beautiful place. But the updrafts are just, ugh man, are blowing hard. It's in the afternoon and there's no guardrails or anything out there so I just kinda crawled to the edge there and looked down. Cliff walls, straight down. It's really pretty, but it's just drying my eyes out the updrafts are so bad. I looked down there and I saw something. There was a bird way below me, big bird, and it had its wings outstretched and it was coming up fast on those thermals, man. I went, holy mac, what's that? And man, here it came whoosh right by me and went a couple hundred foot up into the air on that updraft. It was a bald eagle just playing the thermals. So I crawled back away from the rim, I wanted to watch it. Anyway, I got away from the rim, and the bird, he's out of the thermals and he came and he made a pass right over my head.

I turned around and watched it and it flew on down, got some altitude, came back and made a pass over my head again the other way. I went, what's going on here? Well, there's no high rocks or trees in the area and I thought to myself maybe it's looking for a perch. It had gone down the other way and so I stood there with my arms extended like a scarecrow and stood there to see what it was going to do. It flew over my head again, but this time I didn't turn around. I was just going to stand there. A few seconds later, I got hit with a jolt. It just almost knocked me over. This bird landed on my forearm and as it did it dug its talons into the flesh of my forearm and the pain was just overwhelming. I can't look at it because I know if I look at the bird, it'll be gone. Blood begin to dribble down my arm, down my torso to my belt. I'm just, agh, agh, agh, god this hurts. We're both trying to stay balanced and each time we move, its talons dig into my flesh further and it hurts. So finally, I can't stand it anymore and it's heavy. This eagle is heavy on my arm. So I look over. I want to look at it and I know it's going to fly. I look at it,

its head cocks around, turns and looks at me. It turns around straight ahead, it squats, jumps off of my arm and takes flight and disappears.

This is a dream, Tom. This is one of my Grand Canyon dreams. I thought, oh my god, what was that all about? What was that? The canyon is pretty overwhelming. It takes all of your senses to appreciate it. It even permeates your mind when you're asleep in the way of dreams and I'm susceptible to it. I dream of the place while I'm down there. There's this one dream I have to try and tell you about. One night I'm asleep and a symphony plays in my head. A symphony orchestra is playing the symphony of Grand Canyon and it's beautiful. It is spectacular. When I wake up, I can't recall a single note of it. I only know that it was there. This happened first time, oh, I can't remember where I was. Oh, oh, oh, there was something I forgot to tell you on that eagle business. When the eagle flew away, I dropped my arms down to my side and then I couldn't move my arms or my legs. I feel like I'm suffocating, I'm panicking cause I can't move. I wake up and I'm tangled up in my mummy sleeping bag and that's why I felt trapped. When I unwound myself, I realized that it was just a dream and I'm in the Grand Canyon and this is night one. So I get out of my sleeping bag and it's like, my god, let angel trumpets sing. I'm in the Grand Canyon and I'm on a solo raft trip. But I don't know what to make of that dream.

TM: Have you been able to interpret that dream since then? Has it made sense to you as you've lived your life then after that?

BM: A bit and I'll tell you about it. Let me get through this second one and I'll tell you about that interpretation of it. So anyway, each time I get below Lava Falls, without fail, I don't know when or where, but I will have the dream. The symphony that played on the first solo trip plays through with a new movement on the next trip, and a new movement on the next trip. After about four or five solo trips, the symphony begins creating its...the orchestra creates new instruments, new sounds, new music that could never be heard because those instruments do not exist except in my dream. And they carry on. To this day, I now expect to hear my Grand Canyon symphony sometime below Lava Falls with a new movement.

It'll be a new movement there. And I'm a musician. I study music, I play it, I sometimes write music, but I can't write a note of this because it is just beyond that and I can't remember it. I can't remember the notes from it. I try, but I can't. It is only in my mind. As time goes on with this symphony, it becomes a language that is just as clear as you and I speaking to each other right now. I understand the language of Grand Canyon in this symphony. It speaks to me through the music in a language that I understand like human speech. That's why I've never told anyone, because how do you explain that? It doesn't...

So anyway, a friend of mine, a friend of the family, is a psychiatrist. He's written books on dream interpretation and he loves to hear about my dreams. I told him of the eagle landing on my forearm, and I told him of the symphony, and I told him of one other dream, which I'll tell you this one then the whole thing will make sense with the psychiatrist.

But I had yet another dream. It wasn't in Grand Canyon, had a little bit to do with it. I was doing a show of my photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. They gave me a room to hang my photographs. It's a purely political show. The photographs were of beautiful places that dams have destroyed. They were hung in pairs. One photograph was the dam, the destroyer, and the other photograph was the beautiful place. I had a McDonald's cup of tea or something I'd finished, and it was empty. I looked at the show, I hung it. Hung all of the dual pictures up of about seven or eight different dams and something seemed missing. I had never seen all of my photographs of all the dams and all the beautiful places hanging at one time. I had never done it myself.

I was just so mad about it. So upset that these beautiful places were gone. There's one more thing, I can do one more thing that will get my point across here. I took a razor blade and I made a small slit in my wrist and I filled the cup with blood. When the cup was full, I stood in the middle of the room and I spun around quickly and it splattered blood all over the walls and all over the photographs. Just a spattering of blood here and there on everything. Then I thought, okay, I'm happy. That's what I mean to say, and I left. Show is ready to see, whoever wants to go see it.

So I told this to the psychiatrist guy, and he was like, oh man, those are wild dreams. His interpretation of those two dreams, the dream of the eagle on my forearm with the blood running down my waist and then the museum show, he said the meaning of those is that you are so passionate about this place that you will spill your own blood to be there. I thought, you're right. I will. I'll do anything to be there. There's nothing more important in life than for me to be on that river in Grand Canyon. He's probably correct that I will do most anything. The blood is just symbolic of the fact that he thinks that I will do whatever is necessary in life in order to be down there.

I think about shooting photographs. Is it because I want to see the photographs or do I want other people to see the photographs? After many trips down there, I've decided that it's neither of those things. The reason that I shoot photographs is because it forces me to pay much closer attention to places in the Grand Canyon that I wouldn't normally notice. Maybe not even notice at all. But if I'm shooting a picture of it, I'm watching it very intently. I'm looking at the light. I'm looking at the time of day. I'm watching it change moment by moment and deciding exactly when it is that I'm going to shoot that picture. So I'm looking at this piece of Grand Canyon very closely and over a period of time. Normally I don't do that, I'm busy with other things. I think that is the deep-down reason that I shoot photographs down there...is that because it brings me closer to the Grand Canyon. I can't seem to get close enough to it no matter what I do. I think the photographs are one way that I try to do that. So anyway, that's my dreams.

TM: I'm curious because two of these dreams really seem to be talking about your life, I mean your life's blood. The desire to be there and connect with this place that your photography allows you. The second dream is interesting. It almost seems like it's more of the canyon talking to you or trying to communicate back to you. Is that how you see that?

BM: Yes. The canyon is an inanimate place. It's not like a human. It's a different being, but it's alive in its own way. I just want to communicate with it. I do so when I'm awake by looking around at things and enjoying the place...try to get down there without killing myself. And I do it in my sleep, apparently. It communicates with me in my sleep. It's bizarre, but the dreams are pretty bizarre. I guess that's not anything new. I don't feel badly about those. I mean, they don't make me hurt, they make me think, is what they do. The continuing dream, the symphony, I look forward to that every time. I look forward to what's gonna be the new movement or what's going to be the new instrument that my mind invents to play this new movement?

I kind of look forward to it. It's there and I know it will come because it has for 10 trips. It's been there every trip. Odd. And I don't tell people. This is the first time, except for the psychiatrist, that I've told this to anyone, and it may be the last. I don't know.

TM: Well, it would be really wonderful if you found the ability to actually try to convert that symphony to a human paper there some day so...

BM: I know how. I have rudimentary skills that I can write music. I know the notes, the scales, everything. I know that. I studied that in college. That was my minor. I just can't do it, Tom. I've tried. I

just can't get the notes on paper. They're not there. They're only there in my dream, in my sleep. Maybe one day someone like you will invent an instrument that interprets people's dreams while they're asleep.

TM: It won't be coming from me, that's for sure. Interesting. I'm just curious to hear more of your solo stories.

BM: Well, let me give you one from someone else's perspective. A friend of mine is a technical writer; she's a professional author. She writes for universities for grant writing and she writes for big corporations, their annual stockholder meetings and annual report statements and whatnot. She's very good, apparently. So anyway, I told her about Grand Canyon and she's just fascinated. She's never heard of anything like this. So she wrote something after a couple of years of hearing about all of this. She wrote a kind of a poem and gave it to me. I'd like to read it for you because I think it's pretty good. Anyway, her name is Lisa Lemole. Her poem starts... The title of it is Mistress of the Canyon. 'She is a mistress, this canyon of yours. You long for her sweet smell and languid curves that belie her nature. She makes you wait to gain your strength. No ordinary lover will she have for she will take the best of you. She is a lover, a vixen, a temptress that you cannot refuse. She knows your hand so steady, so familiar on her face she almost sleeps. You have mapped her body and studied her depths, and yet each time with her will be exactly like the first, dangerous and uncharted. She is a river. She is an ocean. She is a goddess and you are her constant companion. All the secrets that are shared upon that bed of rolling current are kept between the walls, between the veil of dawn and dusk. A tryst, a turn, a little death. And she, the fairest of them all, may bring you to your knees and make you gasp for air. But you will thank her once again for feeling life so dear.' That's it.

TM: Wow. Very nice.

BM: It is, it's beautiful. So anyway, I wish I could write. Some people can. I'm not one of them.

TM: Well, you write with your photographs.

BM: Oh, there you go. Yeah. So that's really the only things I didn't want to miss was her poem, which I really like and then the dreams. So what else do you want to pick up with here Tom?

TM: Oh, I was just wondering about other experiences that you had on your solo journeys. Photographs that happened or didn't happen. Yeah, animals.

BM: Yeah. Well, the animals... The creatures down there, they keep their distance pretty much because most river trips they've got a little bit of noise going. The rigs make noise, the motor rigs make noise, people talking. But if you're down there alone and you stay quiet, the animals come in. They're curious and they'll come into you. One day I was on a beach down near 220 way down there. I don't like camping on river-right because that's where everybody else camps and it's full of ants and I don't like it. So I'm camping across the street on river left. I'm sitting there and not doing much and then I hear a noise. I turn it around and it's a big old bighorn, big, big rack, the elder. He's looking around, you know, so I just sat there, didn't move. Pretty soon the whole crowd comes down to the beach and they have a big party down there. There are the big bulls and then the women...the females are running around and the little babies they're playing in the sand on the beach. Pretty soon, a couple of the big ones square off and do the whole head butt thing.

Let me tell you, I had not been that close to it before, but when they hit, it will hurt your ears it's so loud. It's a crack. They did this a few times. Just whack, unbelievable loud sound. They all kind of went

down to the water and got a drink and played around on the beach for a bit. Then they began walking away and pretty soon they were gone, just like that. But I've never had that. Never had them come down to my beach on a group trip. Never seen that.

Then another thing I saw in Specter Chasm, I'd heard stories about the elusive pure white bighorn sheep. I thought, man, is that just rumor or is that just folklore, probably. So anyway, I'm going down Specter Chasm, I think it's maybe the drainage for Fishtail or something else right in there, right at the top of Specter Chasm. I know the beach where... There's a beach where they come down so I'm always looking over there. This one day there it was, there it was, a white desert bighorn sheep. I couldn't believe it. I could not believe it. So I struggle to get... I couldn't get over to that side, so I pull over to river-right. This was on river-left. I pull over and now I'm pretty far away, but I got my binoculars out and I looked at them. There's about five of them had come down to the water. It was just gorgeous. It was pure white, and it was not an albino. It didn't have a pink nose. It didn't have red eyes. It was just a regular bighorn that was white instead of buff. They went away and I went on downriver. Some years later I saw it again. I saw another white bighorn sheep.

I was at Carlsbad National Park – we were doing a video for ESPN about something. We were interviewing the superintendent and between takes I asked him if he'd ever heard about these white desert bighorns before. He said, “No, but that's something that you might see.” I said, “How would that happen?” He said all of the animals have different genes that will express different colors in their coat or in their makeup or whatever. He said for that animal there's a white gene, you could probably see a coal black one, and you'll see a buff one. He said the gene is there and if it's expressed, then that's what you get is a white one. Nature is always trying new things. It'll try a white desert bighorn and if it doesn't work it won't express itself very often. If it does work, the gene carries on and expresses itself and that's what you get. So buff is the color that works best out west so that's what they are. It makes sense – just evolution.

TM: This was near Fossil, so this is upstream of Specter do you think?

BM: It's at the beginning of Specter Chasm on river left. Fossil is up, just a little bit above there.

TM: Yeah, a little ways upstream of there. That's a bigger area for bighorn. In the 1990s I remember seeing a white sheep in there a couple times.

BM: You have seen it?

TM: Yeah, yeah. It's been seen by folks, so it's in there. I don't remember seeing it that far downstream. You get into the schist down there and the Tapeats is kind of higher up. Was it down on the delta then of the rapid? You can walk that...

BM: I'm trying to remember. I think Tapeats was down close. So it would have been above Specter.

TM: Alright. So that puts it right back in the same area. So yeah, that would make sense. Alright. Cool. 'Cause I always assumed that it was an albino, but you've got some other data here that says you know it could actually just be a white sheep.

BM: It was white sheep. It didn't have... I could tell. I had binoculars and I could tell if it had eyes and pink feet. You know, albinos also have pink skin. They're pretty distinctive. I know what an albino animal looks like and this one just didn't fit. It was just white instead of buff, that's all. I'd love to see it again. I always look, kind of wait there, maybe they'll come down. I wait a few minutes anyway, just to see. I'm

always looking around that area with binoculars cause there's bighorn in there and I'm looking for that white one again. I desperately want to photograph it. I have not seen a photograph of those white sheep and I'd like to get one, I would. I'd like to get a photograph of one. Don't know if I ever will. Chances are not good, but that's on my mind.

TM: The lifetime of those sheep is so short. I'm sure that this one has passed, but there may be others, so...

BM: Well, there can be apparently. They've got the gene. Mother Nature might just try it again to see what happens. See if the white one does any good. Let's see...what else on solo trips. You know, the animals, I love that part. I think I told you about the deer and the red tail hawk, or maybe it was an eagle. Do you remember that? Did we talk about that?

TM: That doesn't ring a bell right now, but it doesn't mean that we haven't.

BM: Well, it was up Marble Canyon, real quiet and on river-right there was a shady area in the tammies and a big deer with a big rack, a big buck, was laying in the sand, just laying down relaxing. In front of him, five foot away from it was a big red-tailed hawk just standing there. Yeah. It's like I didn't know you guys were friends. But I guess they are. They don't threaten each other so I guess they're friends. If they're not enemies, maybe they're friends. Things like that come to you on a solo raft trip that never came to me on a group trip. Never. Never so intimate as that. I really enjoy being close to the animals.

There was a pair of ravens that followed me for three straight days down the river. They stayed with me and hung around the beach. They'd be with me for hours while I'm getting ready, doing dinner, shooting a picture, whatever. They're right there playing around, hacking around, just having fun. Then they would leave. I think they would fly up into the rocks at night. Then they'd come down the next morning and we'd carry on. They'd land on the boat. They'd land on the raft once in a while as I'm going downriver. They'd go out ahead of me and then they'd be back behind me and they'd cross back and forth across the river. When I'd come into camp at night, there they'd be. Went on for three days – same couple. They weren't begging for food. I mean, they'd take it if they could get it, of course. They'd always try. Always try and scarf something if they can get it. But that didn't seem to be their motive. I think they were curious.

Then another time there was a bird that followed me, and it never did leave. It would sit on the boat all day long. Once in a while it would fly off over to the shore and then fly back. But mostly it'd just stay on the boat. Then come into camp at night and it would either stay on the table. If it was too noisy there it would go hang out on a rock. Don't know what kind of bird it was.

TM: Huh. Big bird? Little bird? How do you describe it?

BM: Pretty big bird. I bet it was a pound and a half or two. Probably 8/10, well no, 10/12 inches tall. Kind of grayish, had a funny, almost kind of an ugly, not ugly, but kind of a fat penguin face maybe. I think I got a picture of it. You'll know what it is when you see it.

TM: Yeah, it'd be fun to see a photo of it.

BM: Yeah. I'll send you one of those. You want that and the Canyoneer flip pictures, I guess.

TM: Yeah.

BM: I'll send you both when I get the darkroom going, which I'm close to that now, finally.

TM: Okay. Alright. Fun, fun.

BM: So, what else can you think of?

TM: Did you ever have the boat float away from you? Did you ever run into people and have interesting interactions with people? Certainly, in the winter... I mean, in the summer there's a lot of people down there and that's kind of a different deal. But in the winter.

BM: I've had interactions, yes. One in particular is very interesting. Peggy at the Ferry said, "There's another solo rafter out ahead of you." I said, "Oh, tell me about it." She was kind of sheepish. She said, "He may need some help." "Oh, okay. If I see him, I'll see what he's up to." Anyway, first day I got down there and he was over on the beach on river-left rerigging his boat. Which sometimes you do.

You rig your boat the best you can. You get off into the current and you go, oh man, I didn't do that right. Pull over, take your boat apart, put it back together right or the way you want it, and go on down the river. I've done that a time or two. So he's over there, rerigging his boat, and I pulled over and...curious man. I said, "Why don't we camp down at Soap Creek?" He says, "Okay." I got down there first then he came in. He's a solo rafter, but he's a hiker is his big deal. He's a trans-canyon hiker. The main reason he's rafting is so that he can leave food caches at various places so he can do his trans, from start to finish on the South Rim, start to finish on the North Rim, that sort of thing.

TM: Does he want to hike from Lees Ferry to Pierce Ferry? Is he a through-hiker or does he simply want to hike rim-to-rim across the canyon?

BM: No, no. ferry to ferry.

TM: Okay. So he's doing the through-hike is his intent. Okay.

BM: Yes. I hadn't heard it called that. Yes, that's what he's doing. He's a curious guy. He's not a boatman at all and he's not very good at it as it turns out. Peggy was right. The guy needed some help. As it turns out, he is a real live rocket scientist. He works for somebody down in Tucson, a hi-tech company that builds rocket nose cones or something. He's a mathematical physicist kind of guy and he designs rocket nose cones or something. His name was Bill. I remember his name. His name is Bill Kells. We kind of leapfrogged each other going down the river for the whole trip. Sometimes we'd camp together. We didn't try to or anything. I would just say, well, here's where I'm going today and this and that. I wanted to be with him at the big rapids for both of us cause at least one of us should get through. Well, this guy, it's his second trip down Grand Canyon and his first trip, apparently, he flipped it at 232 and got separated from his boat and mistakenly went to shore thinking his boat was going to come to him. I don't know. Well, his boat goes merrily on downstream and he sat there on the beach for many days, apparently, until somebody came by and gave him a ride down. Then they found his upside-down boat many days later. But holy mackerel, that's pretty harrowing.

And then another time, he misjudged President Harding rapid, the big boulder in the water there. He missed it. He misjudged it and it sucked his boat into the eddy behind it violently. It's a violent eddy back there. It flipped his boat and sucked him under the water and pinned him on Harding rock 10 foot under the water. So now he's looking up at this crystal-clear water. His boat had washed away and he's looking up through all this pretty water at the sky above him, but he can't breathe. He couldn't go up, so he knew to scramble down. He scrambled down and finally caught current that was leaving the rock, which that's what it does.

He got deep enough and it sucked him out and spit him out below the backwash. And then he swam over to his upside-down boat. So that's Bill, man. He's not a real big-time river runner. He's a hiker guy and he uses that river trip. He does it solo because he doesn't want anyone to know where his food cache is. So on the days of his food cache, we agreed that I'm not going to be anywhere near him and we're not going to camp together so that I can't know where his food cache is. Not that I care. It's for his peace of mind. So we do that. We separate and he does his food cache and he catches back up with me again and we run some rapids together. We got through everything that we ran. I lost him about...oh, I lost him about Havasu area and didn't see him again. I wonder whatever happened to that guy. He must have made it 'cause I didn't see his boat wrapped around a rock anywhere.

TM: What year was this? I'm kind of curious. You have a rough idea?

BM: Bill Kells solo would have been... Oh, that'd been solo six or seven, maybe. 90s.

TM: Yeah, mid 1990s?

BM: I'd say, yeah. I'll check the notes that I took on that trip. I can tell you exactly what day it is 'cause I have a launch sheet that goes with it.

TM: Did you stay in touch with him after that? Did you guys stay in touch?

BM: No. No. Never did. He was the antisocial type. He had a house on purpose that was so small that visitors couldn't stay. He didn't want visitors so his way of getting around that was to have a house so small and so uncomfortable that no one would want to stay there.

TM: This was in Tucson?

BM: Yeah, that's just the way he was. And he'd drink three beers every night. First order of business was to grab a bucket of river water and put three beers in it. This guy is... I've never seen anything like it and it's kind of what you want to do if you're a solo rafter. Maybe this is how it should be done. He carried 20 pounds of potatoes, 10 pounds of rice, and 20 pounds of cabbage. That's all that he had. That's it. That was his entire food source for the river trip down in Grand Canyon was three items that he would mix and match every night into something different, I guess.

TM: So it would be potatoes with a little bit of rice and cabbage, or cabbage with a little bit of potatoes and rice, or rice with a little bit of potatoes and cabbage.

BM: Oh, he had miso. He had a big slug of miso. He would mix miso in with everything. He turned me on to miso. I fed him some regular meals and then he fed me what he ate a couple times. And the miso...that makes it palatable. I mean, it's not much of a menu, but it was very simple. He didn't need much and it doesn't take much to prepare for. If you think about it, food is the most time-consuming part of a raft trip easily. He took that out of the equation. I mean, I gotta hand it to him. It's a smart move. Don't have any...

TM: Except all of that potatoes, rice, and cabbage, I mean, it needs time to cook. You've got to get a fire or some sort of stove and fry or boil that stuff. Certainly the potatoes.

BM: Well, but he didn't have to spend all of that time in preparation. He'd go to the store, an hour later he has everything he needs for his river trip. Well, that's pretty good, man. Takes me days and days. I can't do it. I've done it. I did it once. I went down... I know how to do it as a backpacker, right? So I think in my mind, okay, I'm treating this as if it were a backpacking trip into Grand Canyon and I'm going to

bring this food for the backpack trip. I did that one year and it was so boring and lifeless I just, I can do better than this. I'm not doing this anymore. It still took me a while to prepare all of that so I thought, if I'm going to spend this kind of time on it, I'm going to have the best food I can have. And I'm still that way. Yes, I could have many more hours in the canyon if I did the Bill Kells menu, no doubt, but I'm not willing to sacrifice it.

TM: I'm curious to know how he worked out his boat. Did he have a cataraft boat like yours with two tubes and a frame, or did he have a...

BM: He did. He had a cataraft that he bought from a researcher whom you would know if I could recall the name. There was a researcher that had a cataraft, a dark blue cataraft, and he sold it to Bill Kells. I don't know what he bought in favor of it, but anyway, he was a long-time researcher guy that's been down there a million times. I just love research. You can go down the river, just pluck a permit from the trees and go down the river 10 or 15 times to study a rock somewhere or a bird somewhere and just have a great big fun time *and* get paid big money for it. I mean, hey, it's great work if you can get it. I could go on and on about research for a long time. I don't like running into them. I don't like what they do down there and I disagree with what they do. I stay away from them. I have made friends in the research business; they're boatman friends and I like them. I just don't approve of what they do. That's all.

TM: And there would have been a lot of that happening in the late 1980s/early 1990s for the turbine rewind of Glen Canyon dam and then a good amount of steady flow of science after that.

BM: Oh, stupidly. It's crowded. They're falling all over each other, so damn many research trips down there sometimes. A lot of them started running in the fall, I guess, because they were telling them we don't want you taking up summer camps so go down in the fall. These guys would sit on a beach for weeks studying. What's that bird they were studying? Oh, they had to study that bird. Willow flycatcher.

TM: Yup. There was also a study at Nankoweap watching the bald eagles and that was in the early 90s. They had stations set up there at Nankoweap and they would hike/climb up into the hills every day with binocs and watch the eagles feed down there on the trout in Nankoweap Creek.

BM: Oh, isn't that amazing? A bird pulling a fish out of the water. I've never seen that before. We've gotta document that. That's important science, man. Yeah. I ran into the owl researchers who I found fairly disagreeable. They were kind of snooty a little bit about what they were doing and they had the right to be anywhere and do anything. They were studying owls back up in the Kanab Canyon. I was doing a layover there. Kanab, there used to be a beach there. Kanab was a place where I would layover because I love the hike and I shoot pictures in there. Also, I would rereg my boat for the rest of the trip and get it really good again, reorganize the food, reorganize the trash. Just kind of a day off to, you know, do some house cleaning/housekeeping. So anyway, the owl bunch pulled in there and... normally I'll double camp anybody, I don't care. But these guys, you know, I just didn't hit it off with them at all to begin with, it was just a confrontation from the start. So I said, "No, I'm fixing to take my boat apart and this beach is going to be full of shrapnel and there's not going to be room for both of us here. So, no, I'm going to have to just let this double camp thing go this time." Man, that guy was furious, absolutely furious about it. They finally left. I think he thought about forcing his hand and camping there anyway, but in the end, they didn't do it. That's the last time I ran into the spotted owl research group. So anymore...for breakfast I make sure I have the spotted owl omelet for breakfast just for those guys.

TM: You must have run into the fish people with their sport boats, nets, and lights in the night. Did you run into those groups at all?

BM: Oh yeah. What a travesty. I mean, that's breaking all the rules badly. Yeah, a lot of it was Brian on Brian Dierker's trips. He loved that stuff, man. He loved his 50-horse little aluminum sport boat that'd go a hundred miles an hour, up-run any known rapid. They love that stuff, man. But yes, they would come at night and shock and kill all the trout and then scoop them up and put them into 55-gallon drums. Then they took them down to the Hualapai who were supposed to have a fertilizer factory set up for all these dead trout. I said to one of them once, I said, "Well, I don't get it. I don't understand this. You're shocking trying to get rid of these trout to make more room for the native fish, yet you know that the trout are gonna repopulate this eddy completely within a couple of years. You know, this, don't you?" They said, "Yeah, well, we got the money for the research and we need to do the best we can for the native species." I said, "I don't see where you're going to help the natives here, pal. I'm sorry." And of course, I'm right. The trout come right back in. And the biggest problem has yet to come. The big problem is gonna be some eggs get through the penstocks up at that dam with the striped bass. If the striped bass get into the corridor, nothing survives except striped bass. That's all you'll have down there. They'll kill off the trout. So if you want to kill off the trout, send down the striped bass, they'll do it for you.

TM: Yeah, apparently the striped bass have come up from Mead and they're all the way up to Randy's Rock, but they don't like the turbidity. The turbidity comes in from the Paria just below the dam. So there's this zone in there where there's enough turbidity that you have a better population of natives. It's a fascinating journey of the whole fish on fish and fish researchers.

BM: Well, I hope so. I hope they don't get far up there. I always fish for them to see how far up I can catch one of those things. Just out of curiosity, how far up it they come. But a friend of mine... On the other end of the scale, a friend of mine was one of the original fish researchers down there. He was at LCR, Little Colorado River, hoping to save the chubs and the flannel mouth suckers and a few other fish. His name was Dr. Chuck Minkley and he was the best of the chub researchers I've ever seen. This guy was a dedicated cat and he was willing to sacrifice everything for those fish. He did a great job of cataloging and doing things that would help keep those fish alive. They ran him out. He pretty much had a corner on the humpback chub research market and others wanted to get in on it. The National Park Service wanted to send their research teams down and Brian Dierker and his bunch, I forget the name of that outfit. They have a name now...was something different back then. What's the name of that research outfit in Flagstaff?

TM: The Glen Canyon Environmental Studies?

BM: Yeah, maybe that's it. They morphed into that from something else.

TM: So then it was the...yeah. That was by the Bureau of Rec for the rewinding of the turbines and then the USGS got funding to do the monitoring and research center, the Grand Canyon Monitoring and Research Center through the USGS. Biowest had the contract for the fish studies.

BM: Biowest, I remember them. Yeah. So hear this. I was down at the Little Colorado, pulled in there one day and hiked up there and I found four different research trips on the ground at one time. Now how absurd is that? I mean, this is ridiculous. You know, you've got these people with nets pulling the same fish out of the water and cataloging it and/or tagging it and/or reading the existing tag on it. It's like, man, leave the fish alone. You're gonna kill a certain amount of them just from over-handling them. I couldn't figure that out. Why do you need four humpback chub research teams on the ground at one time? What is the point of that? I don't know the point of it, but it's out there.

So I don't have a real soft spot in my heart for research. There is some research I think that it's useful. The research into the norovirus, I think was timely and important work that needed to be done because this thing came up out of nowhere and was hurting people and they needed to tie it down. So that kind of research... If you think about it, Tom, of all of the hundreds and hundreds of research projects and the hundreds of millions of dollars that have been spent, taxpayer dollars mostly, to go down there and do research, the results of this research has very little benefit to the public at large, to the public that visits South Rim, or the public that runs the river in Grand Canyon. It has no benefit. So if it has no benefit to the resource or to the people that visit the resource, what is the point of doing the research? The point of it is that they're having fun doing something that's really cool and they're getting paid money to do it. It's that simple I think, and it's kinda wrong. I'd just like to see a little less of it. If you're going to do research down there, I think it needs to, at the very least, it needs to benefit the river running public and after that it needs to benefit the people that visit Grand Canyon in other ways, either hiking or visiting the rims or whatever, and then after that, it should benefit the population at large somehow or another. If they can't do any of that, I don't think it should be done. That's all. But what I say doesn't matter.

TM: Well it is interesting thinking about the ecology of the river corridor in Grand Canyon National Park below a dam...below, actually, a series of dams going up the basin. Glen Canyon National Recreation Area was formed behind the impoundment of Glen Canyon Dam, and that dam has completely altered the ecological balance of the Colorado River in Grand Canyon. So I think it makes sense to study that and there's certainly funding for that from the Bureau of Reclamation who makes money with the dam. It is an interesting question about how to manage a dam made for sediment retention, how to manage that dam for beach building. It's a real interesting question. And then all the ramifications of that to the fish and to the insects and to the birds and to the vegetation along the river corridor.

BM: Well, the whole thing, the changing of Grand Canyon, the ecology, is dramatically, drastically changed. Sometimes for the better, most times for the worse. But the research is there for two reasons for politics and money. It's not there to benefit the canyon per se. Oh yes, now we understand down to the 10th of an inch how much sand is lost from this particular beach over a five-year period of time, blah, blah, blah. Well, they can't really change that fact. All they can do is document it. They can change the operation of Glen Canyon dam and to a certain degree they have done that. There have been some improvements, certainly, from when I began there. When I began there, we could see as little as 2,500 cubic feet per second, which we saw that once, all the way up to...at the time they were running it from 4,000 typically to 35,000. 4- to 35-, that's an unbelievable change in a river. So they did change that up. They ramp it slower now, which damages the beach less and they don't ramp it as far as they used to. The range is way less. I think that was good. They probably knew they were going to have to do that, but they're going to keep paying money to continue with the research, of course, because if the research doesn't continue and there is still damage being done to rare species of whatever, then there's a chance that they could have to decommission that dam in order to save the species. And nobody wants that, at least nobody in that ilk wants that. So the way to forestall that, the way to keep that from happening, is to continue researching it. If the research is going on, you can't very well stop the operation of the dam because then the research would become affected and we might have not gotten results that we need to see.

So they just keep going on and on and on and then it will never stop. Because if it does stop, the dam operations would be in danger. The best way to keep that going is to flog it to death with research. But no, I don't like them going up and downstream. It's not as bad as it used to be. I mean, I was down there at a time when I was pulling flagging off of every dang beach down there because they were doing their research at night and stuff. They were hanging this stuff and they wouldn't take it with them. They left their trash. And then they left these... Different research project, but at one point they were doing aerial

photogrammetry and they had these giant aerial photogrammetry points, which are just big giant tarps with an X on them, right? They left them to rot in the canyon. This is major trash. This isn't like a cigarette butt or a piece of cellophane. This is major visual trash and they left it. So when I would run upon it it's already deteriorating, I take it apart, it's either roped or rocked to something and I take it apart, I roll it up and I pick off all the flagging, the red ribbons. I pick all that stuff out of the canyon and take it. At the end of the trip, I drive to the South Rim and I give it to the superintendent. I say, "Sir, here is a bag of trash. It's not my trash and I would really appreciate it if you could tell these guys to pick their own trash up." They would go, mmm. I forget who it was, Arnberger maybe was one of them. He said, "Yeah, this is not right. That's not correct." He said, "Where did you get this?" I said, "I can tell you where one of the photogrammetry points was, or maybe two. I don't remember, I just pick them up when I see them." He says, "Yeah, well, they're not supposed to be down there. They really should've picked him up." I said, "Okay, well here. You show it to them. Send it to them in a letter, tell them quit doing that." So anyway, I'm just not a big research fan.

TM: Yeah. No, understood. It's an interesting issue with so many sides and different ways to look at it.

BM: Well, how about this for research. Decommission the dam, let the water run through there and then do some research.

TM: Well, it's funny because if the dam was decommissioned the amount of research would be really over the top. Yeah.

BM: It would be, but at least I'd have the river back a bit. It could run high again. I mean, if Cat, you know, if Cat ran 150- one year, there's nothing to stop it.

TM: No, that's interesting. The historical hydrograph from the 1880s goes up to 300,000 cubic feet a second. Then what would happen?

BM: Well, the average just couldn't imagine that as Georgie would say. The average, they just don't know. 300,000 would be a fun thing to see and that's about all you could do with it is look at it. You couldn't run that. Well, maybe you could. I don't know.

TM: I don't know. I'm sure I'd certainly be willing to jump on board to try.

BM: Yeah, I'd try it if I thought I wouldn't die. I don't know, that's a lot of water, man. A lot of water. Well, it would take out Glen Canyon. 300,000 hit the dam, if it was high enough it'd just run that thing right over. There was a scenario... The engineers had put together a scenario of a dam breach. In their estimation, hydrologically speaking, the narrowness of the canyon right there, the height of the dam, et cetera, et cetera, they figured that if there was a dam breach the flow would be at about 750,000 cubic feet per second until the lake drained. Then once that happened, the dam's below there, I don't know, seven and a half hours later Hoover goes and then all the rest of them pop down below. So that down below the last dam, the flow rate was estimated to be 1.5 million cubic feet per second. That's a lot of water, man. That's a lot of water. It would flood Imperial Valley two feet deep. All of those folks that live on the river going down through Mexico, they were estimating that 30,000 people would've died, had the dam breached.

TM: And the Salton Sea would fill. It's just interesting ramifications of...

BM: It'd be fun to see.

TM: Right. Yeah, ...the changes that will happen.

BM: Not the 30,000. I'd like to get them out of there.

TM: Well, once again, we have been happily chatting about an hour and 20 minutes.

BM: Crazy.

TM: I'm just curious, should we revisit with a Part 7 or do you think we've pretty much covered what you'd like to cover here.

BM: Hmm. Well, I'll tell you what, why don't I read through my journals and see if there's any other interesting stories that you might like, or some interesting things and I'll let you know.

TM: That sounds great.

BM: If there's any more solo stuff to cover, we can. If there's not, let's just call it.

TM: Okay. So with that, this will conclude Part 6 oral history interview with Bruce McElya. Today is Tuesday, June 4th, 2019. There may be a Part 7, but there may be not. We're not sure about that. Does that sound like a plan?

BM: That's good for me. Sure.

TM: Alright, thanks Bruce and hold the line.

BM: Thank you, Tom.