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Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)
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TM: Today is Thursday, December 27, 2018. We are at the home of John Parsons. My name is Tom Martin. This is part two of an oral history interview with John. Good morning, John. How are you?

JP: Great, Tom. Thank you for coming. We appreciate it so much.

TM: Thank you for having me. Last time you'd talked about some amazing things and one of the things I'd like to know more about is your solo kayak through the Little Colorado River. What year was that?

JP: That was 1982.

TM: Can you tell me about the water flow in the Little Colorado River. Is it permanent? Does it go up? Does it go down? How did you get aware of that water flow?

JP: Well, thanks Tom. I started studying the Little Colorado River drainage from a distance in 1980 and up close and personal in 1981. I've actually carried my affection for the LCR watershed; and I use LCR as abbreviation for Little Colorado River. I just really have always been intrigued, smitten, mesmerized, romanticized, fascinated by the LCR watershed. Its unique foibles and characteristics and behaviors are some of the most fascinating I've ever encountered. And you know my interest in predicting peaks that we've talked about in the past. Well, the Little Colorado water is thousands and thousands of square miles above the confluence with the Colorado. I think it's over 20,000 square miles. It's just enormous. And it takes up some of the most beautiful country in America. There's just nothing else like it. There's a longstanding mythology, if you will, about the canyon of the Little Colorado from Cameron to the confluence and it goes back into prehistoric times with the Hopis and their ancestors, and the salt deposits there, and the Sipapu and all the other cultural resources for which the canyon is known. And the geology and the hydrology is just phenomenal, you know, the springs that come out of the side of the wall and the caverns that exist in the Redwall underneath the plateau over there. Who knows, maybe even the blowhole at Wupatki is actually connected to the LCR canyon. Someday, perhaps, we'll find out. So that was the source of my fascination. It was more than a thrill ride from Cameron to the confluence. It had to do with my fascination with the entire watershed itself. That's where it performs its final crescendo before it makes it to the Little Colorado...I mean the main big river.

I had the good fortune of meeting Jennifer Burns in September of 1980. Her name is J-E-N-N-I-F-E-R, standard spelling, Burns, B-U-R-N-S. She was working for the NPS at the South Rim at the time and her responsibility was writing that first backcountry management plan that came out in the early

80s. She was a very conversant canyon hand, if you will. She was filled with daring and courage and all sorts of characteristics that were relatively uncommon. One of her personal feats when I met her is that she had hiked solo, solo hiked, the LCR canyon from Cameron to the confluence by herself. She did this to simply learn more about the resource. So she told me stories about what she had seen down there and it sounded like it was in a completely different world. It sounded like something that you would be reading about in a fiction novel of The Hobbit or something like that. Well, Jennifer was also a pilot so she took me up in an airplane and flew me over that vicinity. We flew a significant part of the mainstem of the Little Colorado River up past Grand Falls toward Winslow just to help me familiarize myself between the relationship of that last part of the river and the San Francisco volcanic field and the canyon of the Grand Canyon itself. How these pieces were sort of interrelated to one another and how the lava flows had moved down and encroached into various parts of the flow of the Little Colorado changing the direction of the flow to create Great Grand Falls or whatever the case may be. You can't really see that from the ground. You have to see that from the air. Once you start looking at that river and its watershed, it has a profound effect on you. [laughs] It's just fabulous. The key thing with doing that stretch of river is understanding the flow. Obviously you can't boat it when it's dry and you never would want to boat it in a flood. [laughs] So there's a very narrow window of success down there and if you're outside of that window either above or below, you're not going to have a good time.

TM: So what was the flow? What were the flow parameters you were looking for?

JP: Right around a 1000 CFS. You probably could easily do it above that level. But it would be really marginal much below that level. So my idea was that if I was on the lower end of that type of a flow envelope, that I wouldn't be pushed into some obstacles that I couldn't handle. She had told me enough, Jennifer had told me enough to know that there were features down there that could probably kill you. And so why would you want to take that chance? As you know, the springs that come out of the Redwall down there are travertine-forming springs and they create travertine dams in the canyon; dam upon dam upon dam. Then the big flows will come through and break them out and then the calcium carbonate will reform. Some of them are wall-to-wall dams and some of them are just only in a portion, some are stair-stepped and interconnected. It's a type of travertine that's sharp as a razor. You know how any travertine is very abrasive and rough, but really super newly formed travertine can often actually maintain an edge. It's just part of the way that that material forms in its relationship with the air.

TM: So you were looking for enough water to stay on top of the travertine, to float over that, but not so much water as to make for a terrifying ride?

JP: Right. So in other words, let's say that… Cause the canyon's very narrow, by definition. You can look at it from the Navajo bead stands and whatnot on the various overlooks along Highway 64. It's a legit chasm. I mean, in some context you could actually consider being down there kind of canyoneering. It's just shear wall, very narrow. And then you have the wildcard of new rockfalls happening fairly frequently. So if someone said, well, this is an okay stretch, that may not be the case when you might go through it. But when you get into the area where the springs have created the travertine, that's a completely different world.

What if you were down there when the water was so pushy and moving so fast with no eddies and no way to stop and no way to scout, what might happen to you then? [laughs] Since she had told me so much about it in advance, I had a very good idea of what to expect. I'm sure I would have never gone down there without her knowledge and insights into what was there. I just would have never done it.

TM: So how were you trying to judge the flow? Tell me a little more about the typical yearly Little Colorado River flow.

JP: Well, it's similar to most all other southwestern streams. Some of them benefit from winter snowmelt runoff and some of them benefit from monsoon rainfall or tropical storms, as the case may be. The Little Colorado is sort of a hybrid. It may or may not benefit from snow and it may or may not benefit from the monsoons in any given year because of the size of the watershed and the distance of the snowpack from the canyon. In this case, there was a good snowpack, so I was looking at that and understanding when it was coming down in March, which is typically when it would peak in the LCR. Waiting to see if it was going to be uniform or a surge flow or a spike flow or whatever. It had a really good base flow that year. When I put in at Cameron I had confidence that it was going to remain consistent and I was only going to be on there two days, you know, so it's not like wondering what might happen next week.

The key thing with that trip though was coordinating with the park service because if... As you well know, for decades now you can't be on the mainstem Colorado without a permit. The permitting requirements have changed over the years with different administrations and perspectives, and undoubtedly will continue to change in the future. In 1982 there was a standard set of perspectives about how one got a permit to go on the mainstem of the Colorado. Someone coming onto the mainstem of the Colorado from the Little Colorado could not get a permit. Permits were not issued for that. They simply were not part of the program. They may or may not be now, I haven't checked. At that time, Kim Crumbo was the head of the river unit. They had recently introduced the idea of training trips in the spring, fam trips, where they would familiarize the participants with the resources of the river. That was somewhat of a new concept in 1982. I don't know when it started, but it hadn't been in existence very long. May have started in the late 70s, and you can check into that. So I went to Kim and I said, “I really want to boat the Little Colorado. I'm doing all my due diligence of doing everything to have the correct gear and skills and understand the water. But I understand the situation with the permits. So my idea that I want to present to you is that I would boat the Little Colorado to the confluence and stop and wait for you to come on your familiarization trip and then join your trip. Then you would take me to Tanner, take all my gear out, and I'd hike out from Tanner.” He said, “Well, that sounds great.” We really thought we had everything coordinated and he was very gracious and hospitable. He was enthusiastic about me doing that trip solo. So there was no secrecy involved. This is what I was doing. I was trying to coordinate everything. We'll talk about running that canyon later, but let's get to this part. So, I successfully ran the LCR in two days and one night.

TM: Before you get there, I would like, at one point, to talk about what was in your boat besides you.

JP: What was in what?

TM: What was in your boat besides you?

JP: Not much. [laughs] Just a small sleeping bag and some food and a change of clothes.

TM: Were you carrying any water?

JP: Well, sure. You can't drink the Little Colorado water. You have to carry plenty of water. I did take six beers. [laughs]

TM: Alright. And so I'm assuming your boat weighed, I mean with you in it, a couple hundred pounds.

JP: At least.

TM: How long was your boat?

JP: It was one of the old four meter boats.

TM: So 16 feet roughly.

JP: Right.

TM: And was it fiberglass or plastic?

JP: It was plastic. I believe by that time... I can't remember if I had an old Holoform or a... I can't remember the boat that I had. That's a good question.

TM: That's a long boat. Four meters. I mean, today the boats are four feet long, they're a meter and a half.

JP: Right.

TM: So was it difficult to turn in tight places?

JP: Absolutely. In those days, nobody even thought of the short boats. That was a concept that had not arrived. Everyone paddled those longer boats. To shorten a boat even a foot was kind of heresy.

TM: So you had room because the boat is long to put all kinds of junk.

JP: Right. You bought stow bags. They were super thick mil plastic with a roll top and a plastic slider. You would put the stow bag and in behind you, and then there were two in front of your foot pegs and then stuff your stuff in there. There were no hatches in the boat or anything like that. You just move these bags in there. Generally, when you were at camp, you'd pull the big stuff out and then eventually pull the whole bag out and then use your paddle to push the bag back in the next day. That was standard practice for self-support kayaking. And even today, I think it is to a degree.

TM: Let's back up a minute. As an expert peak picker, which I learned about in part one, this was before the days of the internet. There were stage gages, one being at Cameron that would judge the height of the water. Did you drive out to Cameron to see what the river was doing?

JP: Absolutely. Absolutely. And to Winslow. The government has maintained Snotels, places where they measure snow, for decades. I had access to the people that were running those Snotels. Also at that time, I knew one person in Salt River Project. So there were kind of the rudiments of an intelligence network back then. But because the Little Colorado watershed is so large, if there's sufficient water running down the creek that goes into Winslow, it's either East Clear Creek or Chevelon, I can't remember which, if there's water running up there coming down the mainstem above Holbrook down from the White Mountains, and if there's good water coming along through Joseph City and into Winslow and it's flowing through Cameron it's simply not going to disappear quickly because it has such an extensive backup. Some of these little streams in Arizona, the bottom can drop out of them overnight because they don't have anything behind them. That's not the way it is with the LCR. It takes a long time to build itself up and it takes a long time for itself to drop. Unless in the summer when the storms come and it’s real flashy. But in the winter runoff seasons, totally different ballgame. Once that baseflow gets established, it stays there.

TM: So how cold, I mean, this is snow melt, isn't it? How cold is the water?

JP: It’s not that bad. In fact, I think it's warmer than the release out of the bottom of the dam because its traveled a long ways.

TM: So it might be 50 degrees, 50/60?

JP: That’s be about right. So its not bad, and it's just pure mud. [laughs] And then of course, even then, there was the big discussion as to whether I should get a lead plate and sit on the lead plate. Why would that be? That's a quiz for you.

TM: Well, if you're going over travertine rocks that cut things, I would assume that the lead plate was a butt protector.

JP: No, it's radioactivity in the flow because all that water in the Little Colorado is coming from uranium rich soils and even directly from some mines and from some tailing piles. If there's water running in Moenkopi Wash, there's a really good chance that that has a very high radioactivity level because of the dumps up there by Tuba City and Moenkopi. And, you know, that's strange water. [laughs] We had a big debate about that and I decided not to do it because I wasn't going to be on there long enough. But I wouldn't think that it would be a wise plan to expose yourself to that water on a long term basis. Someday somebody will get out there and actually monitor that water and whether that's a myth that it's high in radioactivity or whether that's a reality would be really nice to know. But at the time, we believed that it was so there was a quite a bit of discussion among myself and my friends as to what effect that might have. As far as I know, it didn't have any effect.

TM: What did you bring for food?

JP: Just things that you would cook on a little backpack stove. The typical backpack stuff. I can't remember.

TM: Cans of chili and things like that.

JP: You know, dried food and whatever. You don't want much weight.

TM: Right.

JP: So something that you add water to is preferable over something that is already has water in the can because you can drink the water if you need to.

TM: And only two days of food.

JP: Right. Because I was assuming I'd join that trip. While I'm on the topic of joining the trip, I'll jump forward just a little bit to that and then we'll come back and talk about running through the canyon. Well, anyway, I wound up down at the confluence late one afternoon and there was no one there, not anybody. So I sat around on that point there of river-left of the mainstem and river-right of the Colorado, kind of where the boats tie up. I just sat there [laughs] and waited and kept looking up the river and hoped to see some boats come around and none did. So I spent the night in the Beamer cabin down there cause it was really a very strong wind event that night. Sheets of sand were blowing. I thought, well, no one's going to care if I get in there and no one will ever know. Then the next day, same thing. Hours, hours, and hours, I just waited and waited and waited. Well, when you're by yourself, you start second guessing yourself. I convinced myself that I'd missed them and they'd already passed me. [laughs] I thought, well, I guess I blew that. So now what am I going to do? I knew that Jennifer Burns was hiking in to Tanner to meet me to hike out with me. So I said well, I'll just go down to Tanner. I went down there and sure enough she was there. We talked and she and I both said, well, you must've missed him. About that time, uniformed rangers hiked down Tanner to the beach at the same time that Kim Crumbo’s trip showed up from upstream and I hadn't missed him. [laughs] That's when I got into some really serious trouble being on the mainstem without a permit, of course. So that’s what makes the story so entertaining was how that all played out.

TM: I will want to know about that. But before then, let's back up and talk about your trip through the Little Colorado River. Where did you actually put your boat in the water?

JP: Well, back when they were starting to build Glen Canyon dam, they had to transport 100% of the cement to build that dam from Clarkdale, Arizona, the Phoenix Cement Plant. That's why it was actually created was to supply to demand for Glen Canyon dam. And that's why a lot of the transportation infrastructure between Clarkdale and Page was changed, was to facilitate the transport 24-7 of all that cement. So anyway, to take the load off the bridges at Cameron there… You remember that truck bypass that was down there? That's where those trucks went on that little shorty bridge at the bottom…that was the truck bridge.

TM: And that shorty bridge looked like a bunch of telephone poles that were…

JP: Well yeah, but it was really stout.

TM: …pounded into the river bottom there and then tied all together as a truss bridge like you would for a train across a gap.

JP: Right. Well, that makes a fabulous put-in right there. There's parking and Navajos use it to get close to the river, cause on the tall bridges they're hundreds of feet from the river. So everybody goes down there. There's places where they kept the tammies out and it's just a nice little spot. At least it was, I don't know what it is now. But that's where the trip started.

TM: Okay. Who did your shuttle for you? Who drove your…?

JP: Jennifer. She drove me out there in a '70-something Volkswagen.

TM: [laughs] With a four meter boat on top.

JP: Yeah! Yeah! [laughs]

TM: In high winds. [laughs]

JP: [laughs] Good luck John. [laugh] We'll see you on the other side.

TM: [laugh] Uh-huh. So you weren't nervous.

JP: Well, I didn't expect to be nervous, but it turned out I was very nervous. It was a very nerve wracking trip. I wouldn't recommend it to anybody. [laughter] But I didn't know any better.

TM: So you can drive right down to the river there, put your boat in the water, load it up with all your bags, say goodbye to Jennifer, and then you go under the regular road bridge and there's the old metal one lane…

JP: Suspension bridge right?

TM: …190_ whatever it was bridge. And then what happens?

JP: Well, it's nice going. It drops into the canyon right there just past the trading post. It goes poof, you know, the walls come up and it just gets deep as they get taller and taller and taller until they reach their maximum height. And pretty narrow. I mean, it's not that narrow where you would think that you could reach out and touch the sides, but it's just psychologically very narrow. And lots of rocks, lots of rockfalls, lots of rock dodging.

TM: Before you get to the rocks and the rockfall, there's a narrows that has a bridge overhead. What was it called, the Coconino damsite? There's a name for that.

JP: I don't know. I noticed that structure up there, it didn't look safe to be on by any means.

TM: That's a narrow, that's the first kind of really narrow area.

JP: That's the narrowest part.

TM: What were the hydraulics like in there?

JP: Nothing. It was interesting, but there was nothing unusual there at all.

TM: When did you get into your first rock?

JP: Probably a couple of miles maybe. As soon as it starts to get really steep. If the walls themselves are fairly low to the water, there's not that much surface area of the wall to shed rocks. Whereas when the height of the wall relative to the river is much taller, then there's a much larger surface area that has the potential to shed rocks. And also, typically, a lot of those things that happen on a river are because high flow of a river undercuts a sedimentary layer and the overburden load is too much for its foundation and that's why it'll tend to… And then the freeze and thaw cycle are typically what knocks those rocks off. So pretty much right on cue, when the walls got pretty tall then sure enough there were the rockfalls.

And due to the fact that's sandstone and limestone, it erodes pretty quickly depending over however long it may have been since those rocks have fallen in there. So most of the rockfalls were old and there weren't any total channel blockages or anything like that. There had been some new rockfalls but they were close to the bank where they fell so they were easy to navigate around. So I didn't feel overly threatened by any of those midstream rocks. They were easily visible ahead of me and there were channels between them that were very distinct and there was ample water between the rocks. There weren't any contiguous piles of rocks that had no route to run. I mean, every rockfall had a route.

TM: Okay. Were you able to maintain a three or four mile an hour speed?

JP: Right. The goal was to get halfway through the first day and I had an approximate idea of where halfway was.

TM: There's a big kind of loopy area in there that's got a name.

JP: It's out there by the bead stands.

TM: Yeah. What's it called? The Devil's Corkscrew or something like that.

JP: Yeah. There were some pretty goofy runs in that area, but it wasn't... I mean, there was a couple times I got out and scouted and things, for sure, in there. You know, you don't want to do something stupid when you're by yourself. But then you could see your route. Okay, you go here and go there and come through, you know.

TM: So how difficult was it to get in and out of your boat? I'm thinking about mud.

JP: Well, there's actually little beaches down there. That the thing about when you go on the lower end of that flow envelope, you're going to have these little micro beaches. If you were to go when the flow was higher, you wouldn't have any beaches. The water would be up against those walls for pretty much the entire trip. [laughs] I don't think that would be any fun at all. I found a real nice beach to camp at. It was actually a pretty sandy beach.

TM: Were you in the corkscrew area that first night?

JP: In that general vicinity. Right.

TM: Okay. So you were on schedule. That was pretty good for the first day.

JP: And, you know, it's not that far. What is it about 50 miles or something? In a kayak, 25 miles is not all that much if you're going three or four miles an hour.

TM: Six hours, six/seven hours. Did Jennifer drop you off at the bridge early in the morning?

JP: It was probably nine/ten-ish in that neck of the woods.

TM: Okay. Okay. So by mid-afternoon…

JP: And then it was March so the day length is about equal. That's plenty of time. I didn't feel like I was under any kind of duress or anything like that.

TM: That first day, did you see any wildlife? Birds or sheep or anything?

JP: No. Nothing. Every now and then you could look up and see a human on the lip of the rim looking down at me pointing, but that was it. No, I don't remember seeing any kind of wildlife whatsoever. Zero. In fact I don't know if there're sheep in there or not. I've heard legends that at one time there were wild sheep in there but the Navajos shot them all. I don't know if that's true or not. That's just something I heard.

The next day, that was the travertine day. That's just totally ridiculous. Some of those dams they seemed considerably taller than me, vertical. Just a sea of razors, a sea of jagged sharpness. Everywhere you looked was something really unfriendly. All of that travertine is just collectively a large nightmare because if you fall or if you happen to roll in the wrong spot or it... I mean, even putting your hand down in some cases is just... You'd look at it and you'd go, I'm not touching that stuff. It's so unbelievably sharp.

TM: Did you have a helmet?

JP: Oh, of course. But I didn't have a face mask. I was thinking to myself what a really fun thing having a face mask would be if I was... While I was there I was going, "Boy, what in the world would happen to my face if I rolled over and hit that stuff with my face?"

TM: So the options with three or four foot high dams, if you will, low head dams, when the flow is running enough, you can kind of boof over the dam.

JP: In some cases, and in some cases I did. But in some cases that's not a good idea. So, in a four meter boat… One of the reasons that the industry went to the short boats is to reduce the entrapment threat. So before the short boats, if you went over a certain verticality and the tip of your boat hit a certain type of a formation, the tip of that boat's going to stay there and you're going to be pinned there. Numerous people have perished in that manner. The short boats don't tend to do that. They can still do it with them, but it's a lot less likely. Well, a lot of those low head dams, you could just look at the run. I mean there'd be a flow and you can think, well, that's where I'm going to go, that's where I would go. But then you look below it and you go wow that'll just pin me there and keep me there forever and I'll never get out. Well, then you'd portage those [laughs] and the portages were just ridiculously difficult because of the travertine. I was concerned that it was gonna rip a hole dragging my boat. I couldn't carry my boat, that was out of the question. If you tripped carrying a heavy boat, you were out of luck. So I was definitely going to have to drag it. I was concerned that that stuff was sharp enough that it would cut my boat open.

TM: Wow. [JP laughs] Was there room to walk on the sides?

JP: That was the problem. No, in most cases there wasn't. In some of the cases, the dams had no littoral areas beside them at all. They were just wall to wall right there so you just kinda had to pick an area. You could see there was areas of the dam where there's no water going over it so you go, well, okay, I'll go over there and then I'll try to get out of this boat without getting cut and then we'll figure out how to tie the boat so it doesn't run off, because there's nothing to tie it to, and then we'll figure out how to scout it. The portages were very, very difficult. Very anxiety producing because of the anxiety of fear of falling onto the travertine. Even though I was wearing a wetsuit, it wouldn't have been any protection at all if I'd have fallen in the wrong… It would've cut right to the neoprene and got right to me. That stuff is wicked.

TM: Were you wearing any gloves?

JP: I had those...what they call them…pogies, where you hold a paddle and it kind of covers your hand and everything, but they were made out of cordura. They didn't have fingers, they just had Velcro. So that was very anxiety producing and lasted all day. Once I got into that travertine it really didn't quit until near the confluence. Where the people go to swim, those beautiful little terrace things, well those things are easy to run. I mean, they are nothing. But when you get way up in there, it's a whole different ball game. Where the fresh calcium carbonate water is coming out of that Redwall that's where that stuff is really precipitating and creating that travertine. The closer you get to the source of those things is where those big dams are.

TM: When you got to...I think its called Blue Spring, did you notice the flow increase or…

JP: A little bit, but by that time the chocolate water is so much more than the pure blue water that it's not super noticeable. It's just a little bit. But seeing the springs is just really an otherworldly experience because a lot of them have created their own cathedral-like rounded pedestals where the water is coming out and then it makes sort of a bowl that's stuck to the Cliffside. Then it comes out over the lip of that bowl and down into the river. It's just like…its like being in church. When you're down there with those springs, they're not just one spring. There's numerous of them. Seeing what they've created in the river and seeing them and everything, it's just a once in a lifetime experience. It was unbelievable. It kept my spirits up for sure because I felt like I was in nature's finest cathedral. Even though it could cut me to shreds. [laughs]

I don't really want to talk too much about the Sipapu because that's a sacred place for the Hopis. That's the place of their origin as a people and as a culture. They hold that spot incredibly sacred within their culture and they have many cultural rituals and legends and things like that. I will say that you can feel the power of that spot when you're there. When I was there I realized that it really wasn't my place to be there at that place. I just asked for forgiveness and understanding from the spirits that tend to that place for me passing through there. I believe that it was okay. I've heard some people just going to that spot just because. I personally don't think that's a real good idea. I mean, that's theirs [laughs], that's not ours.

TM: So by the time you go past the Sipapu, you've passed the Salt Trail Canyon and the canyon's starting to open up a little bit. The Redwall is now up above you.

JP: Yeah, getting much wider. And when it widens out like that, well then the effect of those travertine dams is far lessened because they don't have enough bulk and mass and material to span that width of a channel. It's really only up in that narrow stretch from where the travertine springs come out to where the canyon widens out that it's really a problem because below that you can always find a route to run and just go over it and know that you're not going to get pinned by newly-formed travertine. When I got down to that point, I felt liberated. [laughter]

TM: So this is day two, by noon or mid-afternoon...what?

JP: It was late in the afternoon when I got down there.

TM: So it's been a long day.

JP: Yeah. Well because of the scouting and the portages, they took up the time. It wasn't pure paddling. I mean you'd almost no sooner get in your boat, take a few paddle strokes and you have to get back out of your boat, you know. I mean, there's an awful lot of structure stuff in there. Some of what I think I understand is that if there's a giant crashing flood in the LCR of epic proportions, like we've both swapped messages on, blows them out and then they have to rebuild. So if you're down there after a protracted period of relatively low flows out of the watershed, it's likely that those dams and structures will be more significant than if you are passing through there after a big crashing water year when they've been blown out or at least worn down. Because the more water flow that goes over the top of them and the longer duration of that water flow, the more likely are those sharp edges to get totally sanded off cause of the amount of silt that's in that water. It's one of those places that you could probably safely say probably would never be the same on any two given experiences. [laughs] Yellowstone Park loves to say that in their stuff now: your experience here is unique to today and it may never be this way again.

TM: Well, it's difficult as well because it's not like you can go right around and do it again and again and again and get to know the place and its moods and its shades and its flows and its different runs at different flows.

JP: Yeah. The mainstem is…barring a 1966 crystal forming event…is pretty stable. Generations of boatmen going way back talk about those rapids down there with pretty much the same dialect and lingo then as they do now, whether it's Hance or Granite or President Harding or Lava or whatever. Maybe there's been a few changes in the lower end with big debris flows or Crystal coming along in '66 or whatever. But by and large, it's about the same as it was when Powell ran it.

TM: That hole in Badger right of center has been there a long time as documented in the journals from the 40s.

JP: Right. That's not going to be the way it's going to be in the LCR because of the dynamics of the calcium carbonate water, and the dynamics of the ginormous watershed itself, and the sediment load of the water, and the force and power and channel width and drop. All of those dynamics are different there. So consequently… And travertine is not a strong material. It's not like some of those rocks that are sitting in the middle of Crystal. Those things will be there a 1,000 years or 10,000 years, who knows? But up there that travertine, you can... Have you ever taken a hammer at a travertine and it just…

TM: Yeah, it'll break apart. It's calcium carbonate. It's not cemented really well.

JP: Right. It's like when they use ultrasound to blow plaque off your teeth. [laughs]

TM: So when you got to the confluence of the Little Colorado River and the mainstem toward the end of the second day, what were you thinking looking back? Was it as you had anticipated it to be?

JP: Well, I felt overwhelming emotions of having safely traveled that distance. I felt blessed to be safe and not to have shed any blood. I did not get cut by the travertine which in hindsight with the bacteria load in that water, too, that would have been a really bad idea. And I hadn't thought about that at all. [laughs] I didn't even have any Neosporin with me. If you got cut up in there, you're in just super contaminated water that has flowed… Lots of the LCR drainage is used as a dumping ground still by people of different cultures that live there and that gets carried right down into that. If you doubt it, just go to Grand Falls and look at the trash load at the bottom of the falls. [laughs] Even today, I just go, wow. My angels were working overtime on that one. There were some of those

drops/some of those waterfalls, I'd stand at the bottom of them look at where I just portaged the boat and look at the waterfall and go what in the world am I doing here. [laughs]

TM: Oh my gosh. What was the highest waterfall you think you portaged?

JP: It appeared to be over my head and I'm 5'6".

TM: So six or seven feet.

JP: That's what I'm thinking. Yeah. That's my recollection of it. There were only one like that and the others appeared to be about my height or lower. Then there was more than I can count that were too tall a run and you knew you had to portage them. You'd be standing there going, "Oh, I should run that." And then you'd think, "Yeah, but what if?" Then you'd get out and look, "Oh yeah, I can run that." Unless you can see what's at the bottom, you don't go there. Some people do these days, they run things blind and don't think anything of it. But in a case like that, when you're by yourself in a completely inaccessible location, you really have to be safe.

TM: Well, in a four meter boat as well. That's a long craft.

JP: Right. Which in some cases is very helpful cause it'll slide long over stuff. But in other cases, if it hits the fulcrum wrong and pivots on that fulcrum and sends you like that. Not a good idea. [laughs]

TM: Okay. So you got to the confluence and no one was there. It was nice and quiet. And this is March...early March, mid March, late March?

JP: Mid. Right around the equinox.

TM: Okay. So it's going to be cool at night and there's nobody there because the commercial season for the river isn't going to start until April.

JP: Hasn't started.

TM: Yeah. It's going to be a ways out. So that night, nobody there. The next day, was it later on in the day then that you took off and headed down to Tanner?

JP: Yeah, I waited most of the day.

TM: Okay. And that run from the Little Colorado to Tanner, it must've been a cake walk.

JP: There's nothing there.

TM: I mean, there's a couple little drops.

JP: They're riffles.

TM: But compared to what you had just done… There's a ton of water.

JP: It's just like a big moving lake.

TM: Hmm. [laughs] Yeah. Yeah.

JP: A flowing lake here.

TM: So Jennifer Burns was there at Tanner when you got there.

JP: Right.

TM: Great. And what did you tell her?

JP: Well, we talked and decided that I must've missed them. That was what we both decided.

TM: Had she just arrived like before you got there or had she been there for a day?

JP: No, she showed up about the same time I did. So there was nobody there that evening and we just got up and really didn't know what to do when everybody showed up.

TM: Did you think the next morning, or when you were hanging with Jennifer, I should take my boat and just hike out? That's is a lot of material you would have had.

JP: Right. I didn't really know what to do. We were stumped. In fact, we hadn't come up with a plan. We were just stumped. Can you turn the tape off for a second?

TM: No.

JP: Okay [laughs] I'll tell you then later.

TM: But you can write a little note to tell me something later.

JP: No, that's okay. So anyway, about that time then…

TM: So you spent that night. So this would have been night two. First night would have been about halfway through the gorge.

JP: Well, night three.

TM: Oh, that's right. Thank you.

JP: Cause I spent night two was in the Beamer's cabin.

TM: Night two was there at the confluence and night three…

JP: And she had hiked in some food and stuff.

TM: …was at Tanner. Okay, great.

JP: So anyway, about that time, three or four uniformed park people showed up on the land side.

TM: Coming down the trail?

JP: Right.

TM: Did you know them?

JP: Yes. I can't remember their names, but I knew at least two of them. And then about that time the river trip showed up.

TM: And were you glad to see them? Were they glad to see you? Was it like handshakes, "hey, good to see you."

JP: No. No. No. It was a confrontational and it was really bad. Only by the grace of God did I get out of there the way that I did. What they did was they had eventually six of them surround me like this.

TM: Really?

JP: Yeah. You saw that picture that I sent you last night. I'm wearing that Hawaiian shirt, you know.

TM: You've drawn a picture of basically a Star of David, if you will, with six different corners and in the middle is you. So there's a law enforcement officer standing at each corner. I mean, just surrounding you.

JP: Right. And they were all very aggravated. They were agitated and they were upset. They were confrontational and they were pointing fingers. They were raising voices. They were very mean spirited. It was extraordinarily unpleasant. [laughs] Meanwhile, here's the shore and the boats are tied up here. I think there was two boats and the peeps are down in there and they don't know what's going on. They just see force up here and some guy in a Hawaiian shirt. [both laugh] They don't have a clue. They were going to arrest me right there on the spot. They're going to call in a helicopter. They were gonna take me to jail. Every bad option was discussed.

TM: Where was Mr. Crumbo?

JP: He was standing in the group and he was staying silent and the guys that outrank him… Well see, there's blame to go around. That's how I got out of it. I eventually brought the blame back to him. But for the time being, he was quiet and I was just trying to figure out how to talk my way out of the thing. I mean, when people are coming at you from…quite literally you're having to turn around to see who's jumping your case next, you know. What are you going to do? What are you going to... I didn't really know what to say or I didn't know what to do. I was just being bombarded, literally, from all sides verbally by these people with all of the bad things that they were going to do to me. I mean, I have to say it was pretty terrifying. That's when a particular movie was well known and popular. When there was a pause, eventually it ran out of breath or something, I don't know what happened to them, but there was a collective pause, I said, “How many of you here have seen the movie Cool Hand Luke?” [laughs] That lengthened the pause, nobody would own up to seeing it. I just said, “What we have here is a failure to communicate.” [laughs] Then I laid it all out how Kim and I had made the deal and everything and how I spent that time down there, the better part of an afternoon and a day, waiting and I second guessed myself and realized I'd missed him and they'd already passed. I said, “You know, it's not really his fault. He could have been clearer as to the time expectation. And it's not really my fault because there's things that I could have done to communicate it better. But collectively we failed each other in this case. So whose fault really is it? Is it really my fault? Is it really his fault or is it nobody's fault? You say that you're going to helicopter me out. Then that's putting all the blame on me when you could put just as much blame on him, your own employee, and he knows it. Don't you Kim?” And he went, “Mmm hmm,” and he shook his head yes. [laughs] He didn't say much, but it was like... They're all kind of looking at each other and I said, “Put yourself in my shoes guys. What would you do? What would you do if you thought you had a deal and you get down there and you spend the better part of a full 24 hour time period there and there was nobody there, what would you do?” Well, that really set them back.

TM: Well not only that, did anybody realize it worked? The guy came down the LCR. The river trip came along, and we're all together now.

JP: Yeah. Well, that was pretty much... Eventually that kind of... See they were being park police...park guys. LEO’s and that whole park mentality that we discussed in our last interview.

TM: Oh, so it is possible that they didn't know that Kim had arranged with you and that they should be looking for you?

JP: No, they didn't know any of that stuff.

TM: So why did they come down the trail?

JP: They were meeting the trip to go on the trip.

TM: Oh, got it. So people coming down the trail saw you and thought you were running the canyon without a permit. And they immediately went into…

JP: They just immediately went into their pit bull mode.

TM: Got it. Okay.

JP: Yeah. And then when I pulled the Cool Hand Luke line on them and said… I mean it was true. We had a failure to communicate. It was a classic failure to communicate. Kim and I could have done a much better job communicating with each other. And we could have... Well, he could have written things down. I mean, everything was verbal. He could have actually written down precisely what time they were going to be where. He could have given me a contingency plan in case things didn't work. I could have thought of that myself. We both could've done a better job communicating. We just kind of winged it.

TM: But it worked. I guess you could also say maybe the one thing Kim didn't do is to alert the others on the trip to keep an eye out for a guy in a kayak that's going to join us.

JP: Right. But it would only be right at the LCR because…

TM: Yeah, I see your point.

JP: …of the whole mainstem deal.

TM: Right. And maybe it's just possible that the people coming in wouldn't have taken too kindly to that arrangement that he had made with you. “Yeah, I'll meet you there. We'll join up and then go…”

JP: Right. If he’s have told them in advance, he'd have probably got in trouble. Ultimately what happened was that we invoked one of the time honored rules of the forest service and the park service. It's easier to ask forgiveness than it is permission. [laughs] That is a operating rule. Then they went off and they had a little subcommittee meeting of their own. Then they came back and announced my fate. They said, “All right, here's what we're going to do. Consider yourself lucky, Mr. Parsons. We'll carry your boat out on our park boats. You are going to have to carry 100% of your paddling gear, paddles, helmet, wetsuit, float bags, supplies, and everything, up the Tanner trail. We feel that will be punishment enough for your lack of ability to properly communicate. The only other condition is that you must write a full description of your trip in every detail and give it to Mr. Crumbo for the files of the river unit, so that if anybody ever attempts to do this again, there'll be a precedent on file.” I went, “No problem.” It's probably still there, by the way. I love to write so I just wrote out and went on and on and on and on.

TM: You don't have a copy of that, do you?

JP: Leaving no detail. Well, I had a copy, but who knows what happened to it. They probably still have it. You could probably find it. They felt pretty puffed up on that one cause they knew that it was... I mean with the Tanner trail is like one of the longest true... It's not a route, it's a trail and it's a really long trail. What is it, 11 miles or something?

TM: It's a good length. You got a climb out. Its 5,000 feet. You gotta go vertical.

JP: Plus the length. It's not like the South Kaibab or nothing. They’re all steep, but that ones steep and long. [laughs] It goes on forever. [laughs] So we just took turns carrying stuff. We’d just walk a ways. Jennifer would carry for a while and I’d carry for a while.

TM: Did you have a pack frame even?

JP: She brought one. I didn't have one. So we had to rearrange everything. You saw it in that picture.

TM: Yeah. The picture is a huge amount of gear. There's paddles sticking up, there's all this junk. I think Jennifer's carrying the pack at that time and it's just this giant pack of stuff.

JP: Right. And it's funny, several of my friends have commented, they said, “How come you're not carrying anything?” It's like, well, we were taking turns. [laughs] Some of them were my wife and I’s mutual female friends says, “Yeah, let the woman carry everything, John.” It wasn't that way, man. I was like, I carried my share. It's just we took turns cause neither one of us could do it continuously. You can't. I mean that was a huge amount of gear. [laughs] So they thought they was pretty proud of themselves. That's why I said in the caption of that photo. That's back when they kind of had a sense of humor because they thought that was pretty cool, that they made me hike out with all that gear. They just really thought that was... That got him, man. We really got him. He's going to have to hike the Tanner trail with everything.

TM: So you and I are on a Facebook group called Grand Canyon History. The Grand Canyon Historical Society recently, maybe three or four years ago, had published an article on Stan Stockton, a packer for the park service. Stan’s modus operandi was if you saw somebody in the backcountry, you spent at least 15 to 20 minutes with them trying to make them a friend of Grand Canyon National Park before you asked them if they had a permit. So you really worked hard to make friends, get their buy in.

JP: What a novel idea.

TM: Yeah. Why do you think this Star of David around a known criminal immediately…?

JP: There was a great sensitivity to transgressions on the mainstem by pirates. As you recall, Brad Dimock and his friend had ran the Little Colorado as a pair and they got busted and I believe eventually fined. Cost them a lot of money. They didn't get off on that one. I had tried to call Dimock, he was in Telluride at the time, for advice and he hung up on me. He didn't want to talk to me. So anyway... Sorry Brad, but it’s true. But the bottom line is that it worked out and it's a story and in 36 years of hindsight, it's a fun story, actually. I didn't get hurt. Didn't get cut. Made it okay through the canyon. Somehow escaped the wrath of the parks service.

TM: [laughs] Sort of. Were you working for the Grand Canyon…

JP: As a consultant.

TM: …Natural History Association at the time?

JP: Yeah.

TM: Okay.

JP: And my boss was actually on the familiarization trips. Name was Sandra Scott. She was sitting there in that boat, just kind of looking at me like, boy, you've really got yourself in trouble now. Sandra would remember that part of the story, too. Anyway, Crumbo didn't harbor any grudges. Crumbo was a fabulous...is a fabulous person. And he was, in his capacity with the park, a very accommodating and not NPS... He was not cut from the same cloth as the rest of them. He's a good guy. I wouldn't have been there without his hospitality.

TM: Right.

JP: And he basically helped me get out of that jam. I mean, I didn't get out of the jam scot-free, but at least they took my boat out. That was a gift.

TM: That's a big deal.

JP: I don't know how I'd a got that boat up that trail.

TM: Slowly, painfully. [laughter] That picture would have been different. Jennifer would have had the huge pack and you'd have been dragging the boat.

JP: [laughs] Yeah. Well, anyway that's pretty much that.

TM: Did it ever cross your mind to do it again? Given all the problem that you'd had on the mainstem, the Little Colorado River section in itself, would you have run it again if the exit had been easier?

JP: If I'd have known what was going to occur, do you mean?

TM: Well, if the park service had said, we're going to have another trip. It's going to be there on such and such a date. There's going to be a good flow in the LCR. We want you to run it again.

JP: I don't think so. I think I got just really lucky. Sometimes that type of luck happens the first time you do something. There's clichés about how the universe looks out for fools and people that do things that they shouldn't do the first time. Second time, not so much. [laughs] No, I don't think even if I was physically capable, I don't think I'd ever want to do that again.

TM: Well, it's interesting because people that have run the Little Colorado River gorge I don't know that I've run into anybody who said, "I've done it six times because it's so much fun." It sounds like it's actually a lot of work.

JP: Well, you know, since then people have run it in groups. I don't know how they've managed their mainstem thing, but must've had a way. I think running it with other competent boaters, well equipped and skilled boaters with a very strong safety consciousness, would be okay. I just don't think it's a good plan to run it alone. It worked out in that regard. I may or may not be the only person who has run it, but I think I am the only. I don't think anybody else has done it just because of the hassle of meeting up with the mainstem and the safety issue.

TM: Yeah. That is a hard part to coordinate.

JP: Right.

TM: Yeah. That basically stops the travel.

JP: I mean the whole flow thing. How many people are going to study a watershed like that? I mean, to me that's fascinating, its part of my life. I love doing that stuff. But other people don't do that stuff. They don't know when they look at the flow there at Cameron what's behind it. They may see water there and they think, oh, I see water there, but they don't know if it's going to come up or it's going to go down or stay stable. They don't have a clue of that stuff. Fortunately that's in my DNA and I love that part of it. That to me is as much fun as being on the water with a paddle in my hand. As you well know, I can't get enough of the LCR. In the summertime I'm just like right there [laughter] watching every little thing. [laughs] It's just one of the greatest, most bestest watersheds anywhere. I think if people really fully understood the fascination of the Little Colorado, it would have its own fan club. When it would be running people would go out and become involved in it in various ways. I think I told you we used to run from Grand Falls down to Black Falls. That is just an absolutely exquisite flow.

TM: Black Falls is down near Cameron? Where is that?

JP: It's between Grand Falls and Cameron. There was a bazaar conservation plan, I think in the 30s, that somebody cooked up to build a dam kind of at the... If you're looking north here's 89 going north and here's Cameron. And then over here is Leupp and then here's Grand Falls. Then down here is all of Wupatki and Wupatki's got kind of a strange geometry. Sort of on that northwest corner of Wupatki is where Black Falls would be.

TM: So near Crack-in-Rock?

JP: Yeah, there's a road out there and I believe that road is outside of the monument. I can't remember a hundred percent for sure. Might be parts of it might be in the monument, but I'm pretty sure Black Falls itself is outside of the monument. So if you looked at the map of the monument with respect to the LCR, you would see Black Falls right there. It's called Black Falls because it was built from pure black volcanic rock. It's not obsidian. It looks like some kind of a strange form of basalt because it's beautiful black rock and it's black.

TM: So was this a dam that they had made or was this a natural flow?

JP: Yeah, somebody built a dam in the 30s.

TM: They did? Okay.

JP: They thought they were going to create a reservoir that would irrigate some Navajo cropland. Kind of one of those BIA things. But their engineers forgot to factor in the silt load of the LCR [laughs] and it silted up. [laughs] I think it silted up in the first year. [laughs] So here's this beautiful dam in the dirt. It's just dirt right to the edge of the dam. [laughter] You have to be really careful when you're running that stretch not to go over the dam cause it's one of those low head dams that would trap you at the bottom of it. But luckily there's a pullout right there. But it's just an absolutely magical stretch of river to run between Grand Falls and Black Falls. There's a petroglyph panel down there. If people knew about it, well there'd probably be a tramway or something to it. [laughs] It just goes on forever. I think it's longer than this house. It's like any of those newspaper rocks that you see in some of the national parks. Some of the drainages come in from Hopi and meet the LCR there. One of them actually carries lumps of coal down from up there. You can actually get out of the boat and pick up coal. One of the limestone bluffs is near the Honeymoon Trail. The Honeymoon Trail came real close to the LCR on the north side there and the Mormons built a big stone corral for all their stock. That's still there.

TM: So this would've been before the bridge at Cameron. This would have been the pre-Cameron trading post or certainly how to get around that narrows there at Cameron. There's some cliffs there, so they were going upstream of that to get across?

JP: Well, the way Honeymoon Trail works is... [drawing] That's kind of the cut out there. The Grand Canyon comes in here goes there, and the LCR is kinda like…the watershed itself is probably about like that and it comes out of the Whites and it comes off the rim and it's got tributaries here and on Hopi and everything. And then it goes down there through the canyon. So, as you recall, the primary initial purpose of Lees Ferry was to enable the Mormons to push the frontier of Dixie, Utah, the southern part of the empire, down there into the White Mountains and control that part of the Mogollon Rim that kind of arcs off toward St. George. So all those little towns over there, Eager and Springerville and Snowflake and Taylor and all that, those are all LDS pioneer towns. The purpose of the Honeymoon Trail was to go over and have their weddings solemnized in the temple at St. George and they would make the trip once a year. They actually followed the LCR down toward what's now Holbrook. At that point in time, that's a non-river. I mean, it's a stream. It just happens to be called a river, but it's real small. So that was easy going and there's forage and everything. Then they would take the river left of the Little Colorado to Sunset Crossing, which was Winslow's original name. They would cross there at a piece of bedrock that wouldn't mire their wagons down and then they would

be on the north side of the LCR. Then they would work north down past where Leupp is now. They would be on the north side of Grand Falls and they would work down there. When they got around those line of cliffs there that's kind of…

TM: It's Goldtooth.

JP: …due northeast of Cameron.

TM: Goldtooth is up there.

JP: Yeah. Then they'd circle and veer north toward Moenave. And then to Willow Springs. Willow Springs had a really great source of water. Hamlin Springs was a much more well-developed natural riparian zone right there in Hamblin Wash by Willow Springs. Those two were kind of related. They camped there. And then they'd go to Lees Ferry, cross, and then they'd go up over the Buckskin and around the Hurricane Cliffs and into St. George.

TM: Okay. Alright.

JP: So they were never on the Cameron side of the gorge.

TM: Right. So the crossing, as they say, was up by Winslow.

JP: Right. Now in Charlotte Halls days when Spencer was bringing boilers up and Charlotte was headed to the strip and everything, they crossed the LCR probably two/three miles upriver from where the bridges are. And you've read in her book, *Charlotte Hall on the Arizona Strip*, where she describes that crossing.

TM: Okay. So its interesting to put that further back than that, but clearly the direct route from the railhead in Flagstaff north to Lees Ferry ran you straight to Cameron.

JP: Yeah, but the crossing was…

TM: Crossing was upstream. Yeah.

JP: So the Indian officials realized that the LCR was a major impediment to economic development for the Navajos. That's why that black bridge was built. That suspension bridge was completed in 1911. It was paid for by funds from the Indian agency and it was designed by engineers in the Indian agency and it was constructed to benefit the Navajos. It wasn't constructed to connect this part of Arizona with Utah. It pretty much was rendered inoperable for a while because the Navajos put too many sheep on it. You saw that thing about the cattle wreck on that bridge and the…

TM: Yeah.

JP: Well that happened a lot. They brought too much stock on those old bridges and they'd kill them.

TM: Well, this is interesting about the Cameron bridge. It is a strong bridge. You can't overtop that with sheep. I mean, you could run the whole thing all the way across with sheep and it would still hold up. It's a very strong bridge. And that makes sense that they had the funding from Bureau of Indian Affairs to make that a strong bridge.

JP: Right. But that's why you see remnants of the Honeymoon Trail on the north side of the river when you're running from Grand Falls to Black Falls. You can actually get out and you can see that corral and you can... I never saw any wagon ruts, but I could visualize how they would be navigating that. Cause if they get too much farther away, they run into much rougher country. There's an area there where you really need to be pretty darn close to the LCR to have good going.

TM: Absolutely. It was all about the manageable terrain.

JP: Right. There's many gifts that the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River have given to me and I don't even know that I could itemize them all. But one of the greatest gifts is getting me involved with the Little Colorado watershed and all of the history, and the legends, and the prehistory, and the hydrology and the geology. Just everything that's going on in that watershed is magical, mystical, mesmerizing, and forever memorable. You know, it's really something.

TM: We've been at this now about an hour and 15 minutes. I would like to ask you if there's anything else about the kayak run of 1982 that you would like to add that you haven't covered.

The thing that really infected me was Jennifer Burns talking about her solo hike through there and what she saw and how it was conveyed to me from her perspective. That provided the motivation for me to want to go see that. It was more of an opportunity… There was a challenge in the whitewater that I was intrigued by, but it was also the visitation to such a special place. So many times these days with adventure sports in general, whether it's mountain biking or climbing or you know, caving or whatever the case may be, it's the thrill of the adrenaline rush and the challenge of my muscle over nature's might and fury and who's going to win. So a lot of kayakers that I know and have known over the years, have always been into that, you know, let's get to the next yahoo rapid. For me it was more than that yahoo thrill. I just, you know, somehow survived these travertine dams. I wanted to see that place. [laughs] I mean, I still have visions of some of the things that I saw down there as clear as if they were this morning and they'll be with me for my life. I don't often use this phrase, but it was right there as a religious experience. It was incredibly a sacred moment in my life. I don't know how else to express it, but it was beyond just a thrill ride. And that's really important to convey. I had reasons for wanting to be down there beyond the adrenaline thrills of the water aspects itself. Although they were an attraction, they weren't the only one. It's a good thing that that place is so inaccessible. It's really a good thing. It really thrilled me to see people fight that tram so much because that was just a direct incursion into just completely sacred space. Thank God that got defeated, at least for now.

TM: Well, with that, should we wrap up this part two? Okay. John Parsons, thank you very, very much for part two oral interview. I hope we get to meet again cause I have more questions. Today is Thursday, December 27, 2018. My name is Tom Martin, and that completes part two with John Parsons.