

**Transcription:** Grand Canyon Historical Society

**Interviewee:** Peter Brown (PB)

**Interviewer:** Tom Martin (TM)

**Subject:** Peter recounts the thirteenth segment of his tule reed boat trip, travelling from Trail Canyon to river mile 243

**Date of Interview:** January 24, 2021, Part 13

**Method of Interview:** In person at river mile 243

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TM: Today is Sunday, January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021. This is a Part 11 (actually Part 13) Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Peter Brown. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, Peter. How are you today?

PB: Pretty good, Tom.

TM: Today we are at river mile 243 doing another layover on this river trip through Grand Canyon National Park on the Colorado River. Today is day 26 of our river trip. This is a Part 12 (actually Part 13) oral history, and the river is quiet here—dead, deathly quiet.

PB: Dead.

TM: Dead quiet. The rapids are all behind us now. Can you recount the last day of running the rapids in the Grand Canyon from Trail Canyon at river mile 219.75 to here, river mile 243? That's a little over 23-mile day.

PB: Yeah. Yeah, we had a great day yesterday. Ran the last rapids of the canyon, and now we're down here in the old Lake Mead sediments. The rapids we did yesterday included Diamond Creek, which was a lot of fun, a nice long rapid. And then of course we get into that fast water down there in that lower inner gorge, which tends to have a lot of eddies. It's the eddies that, again, the tule boat seems to have the most trouble with just because it does tend to get pulled under pretty easily with those. I took a couple of—actually, the raft flipped in I think it was 232.

TM: Killer Fang?

PB: Not Killer Fang.

TM: Below there.

PB: Killer Fang it did just wonderful.

TM: Okay. That's 232.

PB: Okay. Then 231 is when...

TM: Above there.

PB: Above there. What was the rapid we stopped at at lunch?

TM: Just above 231.

PB: Then that was it, 231. But otherwise it was a very good day, no problems at all. Raft's doing great. One issue that we've got with the raft right now—so it's probably good we're getting near the end here—is that the nose is getting very weak on it. Now whether that's from us pulling it, whether it's from running into rapids—weren't running into the waves so much—or a combination of both more than likely.

TM: So I should mention that the rigging on the tule raft nose includes an additional cordage going from the very nose about a quarter of the way toward the back of the boat, to use as a handle when moving the boat in and out of the water. So it gets yanked on pretty hard.

PB: It does.

TM: And it's anchored on a dowel on the one end, and on the other end it's just wrapped around the nose of the tule. So it's kind of bending or breaking the tule tip.

PB: Well, and it was originally designed as well—that cordage—there's sort of a pullcord to actually get the nose up a little bit. And it's been up for most of the trip. And that tends to be out of the water, but I think that's mostly because me sitting in the middle tends to...

TM: Right. Out of the water as your paddling it.

PB: Yeah, as I'm paddling it.

TM: Okay. And so people do yank on that pretty aggressively to help you get that boat out of the water at the end of the day. And so that would...

PB: Or just at lunch or wherever we stop at any place.

TM: Right. Whenever we stop during the day to pull the boat out of the water. I also wanted to mention that we had a very high wind gust in the middle of the night...

PB: At Trail Canyon.

TM: ...at Trail Canyon. The tule had been propped up with a kayak paddle. The paddle was sort of placed between two of the bundles and the tule boat fell over. Drove the kayak paddle right through it and flopped down on the ground.

PB: Kind of got a couple of the bundle cord loops kind of caught. Kind of tweaked those a little bit. But doesn't look like any real structural damage from it.

TM: Right. Looks like it may have broke a couple of the reeds going from bow to stern—the full length of the boat run these reeds. But otherwise, it didn't seem to trouble it at all.

PB: No.

TM: So at this point, we are—243, -53, -63, -73—we are 35 miles from the end of Grand Canyon. The question I have for you is: if this was a pre-dam trip (*PB laughs*), we would have Separation Rapid and Spencer Canyon, also called Lava Cliff, and a number of smaller rapids, none of which you haven't boated through before. Do you think the craft still has the ability to handle 30 miles of flatwater and occasional rapid?

PB: It certainly has ability to handle the 30 more miles of flatwater we've got. No question about that. That is a good question. If we had these 30 more miles of rapids. If we were doing this trip 500 years ago, could it handle that extra mileage? I think it probably could. It's still got a good structural integrity to it, so I don't think it's going to be too... It would still be able to handle it for sure.

TM: Okay.

PB: Bottom line is, a tule raft could go through the Grand Canyon if someone ever wanted to take one through it.

TM: This is the beginning of a new year, 2021, and you are completing a first—assuming that you get all the way through the Canyon here and another 30 miles of flatwater with the little tule boat and the wind and weather and whatever doesn't detain us.

PB: And snow, supposedly.

TM: If water doesn't come up in the middle of the night and float the little boat away. (*PB laughs*). Firsts are rare in Grand Canyon, and more especially boating firsts. And this is a boating first with a documented tule raft, possibly the first boat to raft through the Grand Canyon. Do you have any thoughts on what you're thinking, as you paddle along about setting a first record in Grand Canyon?

PB: Yeah, for sure. First of all, I've mentioned this to you, and I hope I mentioned it in this oral history, but it's an incredibly intimate way of going down the river.

TM: Can you talk about that?

PB: Very much in contact with the water. Right there two inches above the water every little riffle is a blast. I mean, it's even fun going through the riffles, and certainly it's been fun going through the rapids. As for me, I certainly thank you for the opportunity to do this. Secondly, anybody could have ridden that raft that had a dry suit on and didn't mind getting wet occasionally falling off the raft. Certainly going through the rapids has been an adventure. But just traveling the canyon. It's such a quiet way to go down the river. It moves well, it floats well. I never did see any big horn sheep right next to the water but I bet I could just get right close to them and they might not freak out as much as a big old raft, or something like that. But yeah, it's been an adventure, certainly, and it's been a lot of fun, certainly.

TM: Would you do it again?

PB: Oh yeah, for sure. Yeah, let's build a two-person one next time (*TM laughs*) and can carry a few bags and... (*TM and PB laugh*)

TM: Yeah. Well, I want to thank you for paddling the thing, for being committed to paddle it all the way through (*PB laughs*). That's a commitment in itself. We assumed, Hazel and I,—Hazel Clark, my wife—

before the trip, that the tule raft would make it a day or two, and that you were going to row her boat the rest of the way.

PB: I apologize.

TM: And day 10 Hazel's like, "When's Pete boat going to row my boat?"

PB: And I have to apologize to Hazel for failing to help on the boat, I guess. Next time.

TM: Yeah. I'm totally amazed that the little boat did so well. Of course it's my own ignorance for not knowing that it could do this, and should do this.

PB: Yeah, who knew that first of all, that the tule reed would have that much buoyancy. I mean, we have been able to get it out of the water and dry it out on layover days and such. But I'm quite amazed. I figured, for sure... I think in our first interview it was like, that's going to be the question in my mind is it's going to be able to keep floating for that long. And it certainly has.

TM: I remember you talking about that.

PB: Yeah.

TM: And what happened? How did that buoyancy work out?

PB: I'm pretty sure it's about as buoyant... I mean, I think I've got as much side clearance on it right now as the first day we put it in the water.

TM: Okay. So it really hasn't—it's not like it's sinking.

PB: Not like it's sinking at all. And it's not like it's getting any harder to move through the water or anything, that it's completely waterlogged or anything like that.

TM: And so where it's wearing out is abrasion...

PB: Wear abrasion.

TM: ...from your feet, and just rough-and-tumble being yanked around here and there.

PB: Yeah. I do think that hitting some of these waves has impacted some of the structural integrity to it for sure. Because I know they've whacked into me quite hard (*laughs*).

TM: Right. Well, you're sitting up. Yeah, so there would definitely be some structural force put into the craft by the water.

PB: Yep.

TM: Right. Let's kind of make another assumption. Assuming no dam, assuming 500 years ago, assuming you know how to swim, and the water is warm, the water is 70 degrees, without a life jacket, without a dry suit—which, operating this kind of craft in December/January, is a must—what are your thoughts on potential?

PB: And the dam water temperature that we're dealing with right now, too.

TM: Correct.

PB: Yeah, that's a good question, Tom, because if it was the real Colorado, 70 degrees, turbid, lots of sand and silt and so on in it... First of all, in terms of the life jacket/PFD on it, one of the things is I have not had any trouble holding onto the raft when I fall off or the raft flips. So right there, I think someone would have a real advantage to going downstream with the buoyancy of the raft coupled with the ability to climb back on to it. There's a pretty good safety factor on there for a person to do that.

TM: I hadn't thought of that.

PB: It just occurred to me as well, that the PFD... Yeah, obviously I like to have the PFD on and needed it. It's a must-have for us.

TM: Right. It's a requirement, a regulation, a regulatory requirement.

PB: A regulation, yeah. We wouldn't do it without it anyway but someone could. That that would be their safety device, the raft would be.

TM: Right. They would also need to know to hang on to...

PB: Their paddle.

TM: ...their paddle.

PB: Yeah. And I've never let go of the paddle once.

TM: But you're trained in that. You know, okay, hold onto your paddle, hold onto the boat, and then turn the boat over if you need to hanging on to your paddle, and crawling back on and get going.

PB: I think if somebody was actually trying to go down the river, either accidentally or on purpose, they would certainly learn that very soon as well.

TM: Well, I think we need to remember that the Cocopah and the Mohave were excellent boaters, and they knew to hang onto their paddle.

PB: And probably how to climb back onto the raft.

TM: And how to climb back on the raft because they were good at what they were doing.

PB: Sure.

TM: So I think someone skilled in that would have an easy time, and actually might enjoy the journey (*TM laughs*), you know, putting it together.

PB: In terms of enjoying the journey, that's—yeah. I would think that they might... Obviously, they were pretty used to long-distance travel in the first place, in many cases, and so this would be another adventure for them, for someone 500 years ago/1,000 years ago.

TM: Or 2- or 3,000 years ago.

PB: Yeah.

TM: What questions have I not asked you that you would like to speak to?

PB: Well, again, in terms of just the fun part of it—certainly it has been an adventure, but again, I've seen some videos of people actually purposefully swimming some of the rapids at various and sundry times and it's not all that scary. It's actually quite a little adventure with our modern equipment. Certainly 500 years ago it would have been. And obviously we know in many cases there's lots of deaths and disasters that have occurred in the canyon in various rapids and such. But with PFDs and a dry suit on and holding onto a tule raft going through some of those rapids, it was a lot of fun. *(TM and PB laugh)* Swimming through those rapids has been a lot of fun.

TM: Yeah, and river runners were swimming the rapids with and without life jackets in the 1940s and 50s.

PB: *(laughs)* Exactly. Yeah.

TM: Yeah, absolutely. And it is interesting, you're running the tule boat kind of reminds me of Bill Beer and John Daggett, what was it 1954, sitting on their little floats just floating at the speed of the river. Of course they had no paddles, and you're going faster than them.

PB: Sure.

TM: And they really enjoyed it.

PB: Yep. Yeah, this was an adventure that did go right.

TM: *(laughs)* Exactly.

PB: Was theirs an adventure that did...?

TM: Yeah, they completed.

PB: Yeah, but what was their subtitle of their book? "A weekend that..."

TM: Oh yeah. "A cheap vacation that got a little out of hand," something like that.

PB: Yeah, something like that.

TM: Yeah. Well, with that, this will conclude then a Part 12 (actually Part 13) Grand Canyon oral history interview with Peter Brown. My name is Tom Martin. Today is Sunday, January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021. This is day 26 of our Grand Canyon river trip in Grand Canyon National Park on the Colorado River with a homemade tule raft. Pete, thank you very much.

PB: Sure thing, Tom. Thank you.