

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Peter Brown (PB)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Peter recounts the sixth segment of his tule reed boat trip, travelling from Basalt camp to Grapevine camp

Date of Interview: January 7, 2021, Part 6

Method of Interview: In person at Grapevine camp

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TM: Today is January 7th, 2021. This a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Peter Brown. We are at Grapevine camp at river mile 81.7. Pete, how are you doing today?

PB: Pretty good, Tom.

TM: Great. This may be Part 5 [actually Part 6] of an oral history interview. Peter Brown is paddling a tule reed raft through the Grand Canyon, and its gone 81 miles so far. Today Pete ran some big rapids—Unkar, 75 Mile, Hance, and Sockdolager. So Pete, did you go swimming today?

PB: *(laughs)* A couple of times.

TM: Where?

PB: Well, in 75 Mile I did hit... Of course I've done this every time I've gone through the 75 Mile on a raft too, I've hit at least one of the boulders, if not all of them. And I did today. Slid off the raft. I really didn't let go and the raft didn't flip—pretty sure, yeah. So that one was just sort of a slide-off. But then Hance was a different story. I just completely messed up on Hance. My entry was completely wrong. Got knocked off the raft pretty early on; held onto it; was able to get back upright about half-way through the rapid; went through a couple of big holes—upright, I believe. And then Son of Hance, did okay down there.

TM: Cool.

PB: Sockdolager was a blast. Sockdolager was a lot of fun. Well, Hance was a lot of fun, too, but it just was not on-the-raft fun. *(TM laughs)* Sockdolager was a lot of on-the-raft fun, flying off a couple of those rollers in there and just having a good time.

TM: Cool. So how's the little raft doing?

PB: Still about the same. It seems like as the day progresses, it does tend to get a little more sluggish and heavier. Today, of course, after Sockdolager... We've been down in the inner gorge here all day long and so the water's moving pretty fast anyway. Not having to really work to get it to move anywhere. But the draining, I think, does help quite a bit. It did seem quite a bit lighter after a day of sun. We had a layover day at Basalt and it had a chance to dry out. So every evening we're tilting it up to 90 degrees and giving it a chance to drain a little bit. It is looking a little worse for wear. There are some wear-spots. I don't think any of the ties—the lots of knot ties—have failed at all. So they're still going strong. So I see no reason why it can't go another 80 miles, at least.

TM: One of the things I notice is that the strands of tule appear to be breaking between the wraps. There's a nylon cordage wrap every 6 to 5 to 8 inches, maybe 10, here and there, and it seems as though the tule is breaking at a wrap and then it will bend backwards.

PB: Particularly on the nose of the craft—the bow—it seems to be doing that.

TM: Which is surprising, because your weight's in the stern; your weight's in the back.

PB: It's hitting some of those waves pretty hard. In terms of righting the raft, I've gotten much, much better on balance and making sure my weight is where it needs to be on the raft. But there's been a couple of those bigger ones where it's just broken right over the front of the raft, and there's a lot of weight of water coming over there.

TM: Wow. Okay, alright.

PB: I don't know if that's it or not. I mean, I haven't run into any rocks or anything with that. Trying to stay away from the other boats, those kinds of things.

TM: Have you been running conservative lines, or have you just been running the run?

PB: Just running the run, pretty much.

TM: Okay, alright. So no trying to cheat down the shore or...

PB: No. I'm definitely going to cheat on some of them that we can, in terms of Crystal or Upset.

TM: Right. But some of these—Sockdolager, Grapevine, Unkar—

PB: Yeah. Sockdolager you just miss the hole on the left and you go right down the tongue.

TM: Are you able to keep up with the rafts, or do you find that the little tule boat goes slower than the rafts?

PB: Oh no, the tule boat can keep up just fine. In fact, quite often, particularly going into the rapid, I've had to back off because I'm starting to come up on the raft.

TM: To catch up. Okay.

PB: I think it was in Basalt where I just about overran the raft in front of me. So I need to make sure that there's a little bit of—

TM: On the flatwater are you able to kind of boogie along on the flatwater?

PB: Oh yeah, very much. And that's in the afternoon. So it's not like its morning only, when the raft is a little bit lighter.

TM: So if one wanted to be more conservative with the tule, how would one do it?

PB: So, for example, I mean, I was really tempted today on Hance to actually try to go left of the big boulder and just try to bounce down through the rock pile right there.

TM: The far left side, you mean.

PB: The very far left side. That would certainly keep... For example, in Unkar today, it's pretty easy to get through the first couple of waves right there at the top of the rapid. Pull to the right. It got out of them no problem at all. Unkar was a beauty in terms of going through there.

TM: And then you went left below Unkar at the next rapid, where we all go right and there's a cobble bar, we go right around there. You went left, right down that chute. That went okay over there?

PB: That went okay. Yeah, no problem. Yeah, in terms of just riffles, even with some breaking waves on the riffles, it does fine. I don't even have to put my legs in the water on those. It just bounces right through them.

TM: So I'm kind of thinking, traditionally, if you were a little more conservative and you wanted to walk the tule raft around the rapid, you need a couple people to do it because it's heavy.

PB: Yeah. Well, and the other...well, that wouldn't work too well. I was wondering about just letting it go and then picking it up in the next eddy, but there's no guarantee it would do that.

TM: It would stop. Yeah. And it would still get beat up on the journey down there, you just wouldn't be sitting on it.

PB: I wondered about that in terms of... So, for example, Bedrock. Could we just line it down Bedrock or something like that? One problem I see with lining it is it doesn't really have any good attachment points that would be solid enough to trust it, I think sometimes.

TM: It's a portage kind of thing. You'd have to actually get it out of the water and carry it.

PB: Probably portage, yeah.

TM: Which wouldn't be super easy these days. It might be pre-dam with a lot more sand here and there and easier shorelines to walk, but otherwise not.

PB: I mean, for us, in terms of thoughts of putting it on one of the other rafts—like Lava, or someplace like that. I don't know. I mean, I'm still feeling confident with it and still feeling like it's... The one worry that I do have is I don't want it to be a burden on the rest of the group. Let's make sure that I'm okay and everything, but so far, when I've fallen off, I've not let go of the raft at all. Once I get a little bit of a break from the major waves, it's fairly easy to climb back. It's easy to flip over, it's easy to climb back on to it, and it's easy to get it straight again.

TM: My concern is that if you get separated from the raft, that the other boats don't see it in the water and it passes the other boats. That's a concern as well.

PB: That would be a very big concern, I think.

TM: You with a life jacket in your dry suit are doing great as you go swimming, and you're able to stay with the boat. But if you weren't, for any reason, then where is that... It would be easy to lose the raft, I think.

PB: Particularly if it's upside down, because then the seat's not going to be visible.

TM: Right.

PB: And it's about the color of the river right now, so...

TM: Yeah. No, it'd be easy to lose.

PB: It would be.

TM: But so far, so good.

PB: Yeah, so I'll just plan on keeping hold of the raft.

TM: Yeah, exactly. And tomorrow we go past Phantom Ranch and we run Horn Creek, which for you will be a left run (*laughs*)—wahoo—and then Granite and Hermit.

PB: I was wondering about how to run Granite. I mean, there is a little bit of a left run at Granite, but...

TM: Yeah, maybe. We'll take a look at it.

PB: To be quite honest, Tom, I'm really looking forward to Hermit.

TM: Might be a lot of fun.

PB: I think Hermit is going to be a blast. (*TM and PB laugh*)

TM: Well, let's just run it all wide open and see what happens. And if we break it, we break it. Otherwise, that's it.

PB: Yep.

TM: Cool. Alright, well, this will conclude what we think is Part 5—we may be wrong— [actually Part 6] Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Peter Brown. Today is January 7th, 2021. My name is Tom Martin. This is at Grapevine camp, 81.7 miles. Did you think this tule raft would go 81.7 miles?

PB: Oh, I'm convinced it's got another 200 miles in it.

TM: (*laughs*) I never thought we'd get here Peter Brown (*PB laughs*), I got to tell you, to be frank. Thank you very much.

PB: Alright, Tom.