

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society Oral History

Interviewee: Richard Hanson (RH)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Richard recounts his series of river trips producing the Paul Winter Consort album and movie

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TM: Today is Tuesday, October 27, 2020. This is a Part 6 Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Richard Hanson. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Richard. How are you?

RH: Good morning. I'm doing fine, thank you.

TM: Good. I kind of want to say good afternoon but that's where I am and still morning where you are so good morning. Richard, may we have your permission to record this oral history interview over the telephone?

RH: Yes.

TM: Thank you. We wrapped up Part 5 talking about your time at Grand Canyon as the trail crew foreman and I wondered if you could tell me a couple more stories about your time there as a foreman, some of the other interesting things that you did or participated in.

RH: Yeah. You know, I'm just gonna be...can't be specific on dates but it's gonna be through like a three year-eight month timeframe was all I was at the Canyon. I think we were talking about basically how I was in over my head the first year, and then finally starting to kind of get a feel for the job, and playing baseball. I think that's pretty much where we left it. Playing on a pretty much all ranger baseball team as one of two maintenance guys on the team. At that time, maintenance and rangers were like oil and water, although some of the rangers are some really good friends of mine now, more so than... I still have contact with a couple of the guys that worked with me on my crew but... So stories. Different things, basically, is after my first river trip, I think we talked about that—and then meeting Crumbo, we talked about that, and Larry May and some other people—I really got a feel for the river cause that was another thing that I had no experience doing. Crumbo and a guy by the name of Sam West basically taught me how to row a boat. Crumbo was brute force, power through everything. Sam was more finesse and strategy. I took a little bit from both of those guys and kind of developed my own little style. I did Park Service trips. We used to do them about twice a year. We would bring on some volunteers and my crew, and we would spend 28/29 days on the river; three or four days at different spots where we had work lined up. I think we talked about Nankoweap and South and some other projects, Deer Creek. I just fell in love with the place. It was, again, for me still part of the process of healing, of just being out there, and it was wonderful.

TM: Nice.

RH: Then I hooked up with a guy by the name of Paul Winter. Let me know if you've ever heard of Paul.

TM: Oh, yeah.

RH: We hooked up on the rim. I think he was there for a night sky conference, dark sky—they first started talking about light pollution, you know—and we started talking. The next day I hiked him into the Canyon. We took a sax. He says, “I’ve always wanted to play my instrument in the Grand Canyon.” So we hiked down the BA for a couple/three miles and he started playing his sax. We were looking down on the river and...

TM: So he’s got this saxophone kind of on a strap over his shoulder or does he like have it in a little case?

RH: He’s got it in a case, and then we sit down and...

TM: You’re just walking?

RH: Yeah, we just walked down a couple miles.

TM: Okay. Like down to Three Mile House or something like that?

RH: Yeah, right in that area, yeah.

TM: Okay.

RH: He started playing and the acoustics were just insane in there. Then we started talking. He was looking at the river and I told him about the trips that I’d done. I’d probably done maybe four or five trips by that time. He started talking about, “Man, I want to do an album down there. I just want to do this and I want to do that.” So we went back up to the rim and I hooked him up with my friend Sam, who was also my next door neighbor. He was probably the lead boatman for the River Unit at the time. We started talking about how we could make this work. And Sam was good friends with George Wendt and rowed for OARS for an eternity. So Sam took it from there. I think it was the next spring when we did our first trip with the Paul Winter Consort through the Grand Canyon. We brought the whole friggin’ band. There was a portable organ, it was big. You know a guy by the name of Steve Trimble? He’s a photographer there, but anyway, he’s got some great pictures of this trip. I would recommend to you to check out Canyon Consort. It’s an hour long, 70-minute documentary on making this album.

TM: Where does Steve live?

RH: I thought he lived in Flag.

TM: Okay.

RH: But that was a long time ago, too, so... But anyway, we made this trip and all the musicians and stuff were from New York. Paul was an artist in residence and the Consort was the artist in residence of Saint John of the Divine Cathedral in Harlem. The organ player was the organist for the church also. I mean, these were fabulous, fabulous musicians. And a vocalist by the name of Susan Osborn, Paul Halley, Gene Friesen, David Darling on cello. We had all these friggin’ instruments. That was the first time on that trip... That was my first time as a captain of my own boat. I had made, like I say, four or five trips and had

been picking up some rowing time here, rowing time there, starting to run some of the bigger rapids. The naturalist on the trip was a man by the name of Peter Warshall and he was a lifelong friend.

TM: Nice. Was he working for the park as a naturalist?

RH: No. He had been the editor of *Whole Earth* for a while and had just kind of backed away from that and had moved to Arizona. He was living down at Tucson. Still did some work for *Whole Earth* but...

TM: How did you meet him?

RH: We met on the bus trip down to Lees Ferry. We were making introductions and Peter goes, "Yeah, Peter Warshall." Actually he still was doing some stuff for *Whole Earth* cause he mentioned *Whole Earth* and some other things that he'd been doing. I had another friend that worked for *Whole Earth*. He just looked up at I said, "Do you know J. D. Smith?" He says, "Oh, yeah, I know J. D. well." I just pointed my finger at Peter and I says, "Well, you're on my boat. This is gonna be my first trip rowing a boat and you're gonna be on my boat." He said, "No problem." The sound guy was a guy by the name of Mickey Houlihan that, again, turned into another lifelong friend. He had done a bunch of work with Paul before. They had gone down and did whales out in the Sea of Cortez and lots of different things. He was an incredible sound man. It was a wonderful trip. I took leave and became an employee of OARS on those trips. I wasn't representing the government or anything. I was an OARS guy for three weeks. Yeah, and it was just... Met so many people that are still friends today on those first couple of trips. We wrapped that first trip up. I think Paul was always tight with money. I mean, that's a big undertaking. He got a sweet deal. We wrapped up that trip by doing a concert in Flagstaff 'cause he needed bus money, I don't know. That was fun. That was really fun. It was a pretty good turnout. He had a couple of the boatmen come up and blow conch or friggin' shake rattles. I did three more of those trips just in support of that Canyon album and movie. That first trip Nancy, Nancy Helene now, had come down to the Canyon with Paul and she was one of his backup singers. She has a voice that's just friggin' incredible. About three or four days into the trip I saw her riding...she was riding in Big Fella's boat and basically the rest is history. I talked to Nancy the other day for a long time. It's the first we'd talked in a while. Those are other people that became on that trip that became lifelong friends.

TM: And Big Fellow is Bruce Helene.

RH: Bruce, yep, yep. They came off of that trip a couple.

TM: Hmm, cool.

RH: Yeah, yeah. It was a river romance that friggin' worked, you know. They've been together now, what, 35 years or more than that.

TM: Yeah, yeah. Maybe 40/45.

RH: Yeah. And made a hell of a life.

TM: Mid 80s, yeah, 35 years, right.

RH: Yeah. They've done really well. The second trip that's when the movie was done and David Vassar, who'd done the Stoneman Meadows movie, was the director on it. The funding behind it was a guy by the name of John Lyddon. Spectacular man.

TM: So John is the friend of... Can I have you go back for just a minute, Richard? You met Peter Marshall in the bus. This is gonna be your...

RH: Warshall.

TM: Warshall. I'm sorry. Thank you. ...in the bus. This is gonna be a first trip rowing. How did that... I mean, were you pretty comfortable rowing? Any surprises? What worked, what didn't work?

RH: Well, by mid-trip I became known as the 'where is your boatman boatman'.

TM: (laughs) What?

RH: The where is your boatman boatman. We were on a tight schedule cause they wanted to get certain places at certain times. It's the only time I've ever done it, was we went from lower Hance all the way through the inner gorge to I think the next night camp was Bass or something.

TM: Okay. Long way.

RH: Lots of river miles.

TM: Plus Phantom.

RH: Yeah, yep. And there was big water. I was knocked out of the... Never flipped, but I was knocked out of the boat like three or four times. And Peter, yeah, Peter never lets me forget it. So basically grab a rope and they'd pull me back in and I'd sit back up there. When we got to that camp I was just friggin' fried and they said, "Hey, you're the 'where is our boatman boatman'." I wasn't in the chair, I wasn't up there on the cooler.

TM: Right, right. Well, it's lucky people get to hold onto straps. You get to hold onto a couple of toothpicks flailing in the water.

RH: That's it man, you know, and it's like... But I survived. I did the Bubble Run at Lava cause Big Fella told me everybody was gonna cheat left, do what they call the Spider Duster run, 'cause you went over left and as close to the brush there as you could get. We're sitting there...

TM: Yep. Ah, the Spider Duster. Okay.

RH: The Bubble Run was like four or five friggin' bubbles just in the water. You had to line up totally on those bubbles or you would just hit the fall hole. We're sitting there looking at it, and actually sat there for way too long because we were waiting on a helicopter to film going through Lava and they had to have perfect sun. I think we sat there and looked at that for three or four hours, which was just f***** as far as I was concerned.

TM: Oh, that's hot.

RH: Yeah. So everybody was talking about their runs and Big Fella says, "This your first trip rowing through Lava?" I said, "Yeah." He says, "Well, you're not going over to Spider Duster. Let's do the Bubble Run. You and I will do the Bubble Run." I said, "Okay." He went first and I followed him, made it through. I've got an epic picture of myself, Peter Warshall's in the boat, and Paul Winter's in my boat during this first run. They're going, "It's your first trip, I'm going with you." Got an epic photo taken by a guy by the name of John Dumont who, again, that's another lifelong friend. I bet I've said a dozen people's names that I'm still friends and in contact with today if they're not...a couple of them are dead but John Dumont... Interesting character, had worked for Greenpeace. Always been a huge environmentalist, and still a wonderful guy. Now he's gone from photography into painting and he's doing good. So that was the end of the first trip basically.

TM: Was this 1984-ish?

RH: I think so, yeah, yeah.

TM: Because you're talking about the Spider Duster run, for the water to be high enough to go into the vegetation on river left it's gotta be running 35-/40,000 maybe?

RH: I don't know if that much but...

TM: They were trying to get that reservoir down. They were trying to get water out of that thing, too, so they spent a lot of time at, you know, full generator capacity.

RH: Yeah, I remember that. Sometimes back in the day there, was in the peaking power days, they would cut your friggin'... If you happened to be anywhere with weekend water we would call it, you didn't have any friggin' water.

TM: Right, it would just go to ground. They just turned the dam off.

RH: Yeah, yeah.

TM: Well, they did let out a minimum base flow but then they would crank it back up on Monday morning and so that wall of water would eventually catch you somewhere downstream.

RH: Right, usually a couple of days. So I can't really say what the water was. It was big. Everybody was commenting on it, it's big. Crystal, the first time I ran that that was big.

TM: Yes.

RH: And, God, I forget the guy's name... Yeah, so interesting stuff.

TM: Fun. So that trip I'm assuming ended at Diamond Creek?

RH: Yeah. Yep.

TM: For someone who had gone through what you'd gone through, did that trip help you at all in kind of rebuilding your self-esteem or your ability to say, you know what, I can do this?

RH: Yeah, I think so. Once you're down there, man, there's no way out. It's more like you can and you have to do this, you know, "I have to do this. I'm the captain of this boat." After getting through it and being just physically tired and beat up as I've been in a long time. I look back on it today and I go, shit, that was just... You only do something the first time once, you know, and that's it. That one there and still having so many people that you're friends with and talk about it. A couple/three years ago I went and another boatman on the trip was Tom Huntington, another huge environmentalist. He worked for... What was the river, Environmental River... He was on the Save the Tuolumne team. He was one of the three people that chained themselves to rocks down there. Just a great guy, and we're really tight. He lives in San Francisco now. He worked Environmental Defense Fund. I used to go there twice a year. He's got a beautiful place on Russian Hill, yada, yada, yada, and still fighting the good fight, still real active. Right now he's working for the Getty Foundation handling all of their grant applications for environmental causes. Just to be tied up with those kinds of people. Peter was something else. And it all to the good fight, you know. I was active in a different way. I was active in the war, active streetwise, and here I am with a bunch of people that are much more environmentally conscious than I was and knew much more about that fight. I walked away from there after that first trip with kind of a new cause and new friends and new learning. I was one of those guys that, and I still try to today, I think I told you this, you try to learn one new thing every day. That was my philosophy. If you learn one new thing every day and you're 72 years old, well, you know, f***, you know a little something. I took to learning more about dams and water and pollution and, you know, it set me up. I'm definitely not a scholar. I struggle with writing a little letter but if I want to be I can get articulate. So I got a lot out of that trip.

TM: Cool.

RH: Then I did three more with them, with OARS. The second trip was making the movie. They had Vassar, that added a whole new element to the trip.

TM: Like what? I'm just thinking you gotta keep sand away from the machines and the light and so much that's gotta work out right and you got one shot at it.

RH: Yeah. And film people are much more demanding than music people. Vassar, he wasn't that really nice a guy, and we were just... On that first trip everybody was part of the friggin' band. I mean, everybody was...it got tight, everybody was real tight. The second trip there was a little more people because the film guys and all the cameras and all that s***.

TM: Was Paul there with his band as well?

RH: Yeah.

TM: Whoa. So now it's not just like the organ and the singers and all the cellos and all that stuff but now you got all the film people stuff.

RH: Umm hmm, umm hmm.

TM: Whoa.

RH: Like I say, they were... I think it was just weird. They would say, "Okay, we're gonna be filming up here," so you had all... We were sherpas. We ended up being nothing but f***** sherpas. We did have

a sherpa rebellion day when all the boatmen just told Vassar, "F*** you, you want that s*** up there you take it up there." So there was some conflict. The end product was actually pretty good. I watched it with the money guy John Lyddon three years ago, John and Tommy and I. The first time I'd seen it in probably 10, and we just laughed. God damn, we just f***** laughed. We'd have to pause it and laugh and tell stories. My daughter came down on that trip. She would have been 12 maybe, 13. We had a karmic friggin'...and I'm sure it was karmic. Sam was supposed to get permission from some of the tribes of Matkat whether we could go up there and set up and record.

TM: Okay. That's a heavy lift to get stuff up to the patio up there if that's where you were going.

RH: Yep. When you camp downstream for about half a mile, that one camp on the left.

TM: Yeah, Matkat Hotel. You carried all your stuff back up?

RH: Yeah. That was when we had Sherpa de Maya day.

TM: Whoa, I'm not surprised.

RH: Yeah, yeah. I came to find out that we had been denied permission. Is that the Hualapai or who controls the... It's not the Supai, but anyway, we were denied permission to haul gear up there. We were gonna be there for two days 'cause the acoustics are just...they're insane there. Sam had taken me aside or something and said, "You know, we gotta do this. We're not supposed to do it but we gotta do it," that kind of shit. So we had our afternoon Sherpa de Maya and we got the shit up because those guys definitely... Instead of us just doing all the carrying, everybody got involved, the film crew, the musicians and all of that. Paul's manager at the time, named John Azzaro, really wonderful guy, we were up listening to the music and then they wanted a couple of people to stay with the instruments 'cause we were gonna be back up the next day. I told Sam, he was the trip leader, that I wasn't gonna do it. I didn't think it was right that if they didn't want us here that we were here in the first place. Anyway, we wrapped up the next day and went down, got everything on the boats. Now, Matkat to Havasu's how many river miles?

TM: Well, let's see. Upset's about 150, Havasu's gotta be about 156, and Matkat's gotta be about 146-ish, so maybe 10 miles. I'm just guessing.

RH: 12 miles, yeah. Yeah, that's about it 'cause the next day we stopped at Havasu and everybody that wanted to was gonna hike up to the village. A couple or three people, Tom Huntington and I think Dickie were going to head all the way up and meet some paying customers that were coming in for the last week of the trip. Another fundraising deal on Paul's part. Actually had a Rockefeller. I think it was about five people that hiked in.

TM: If they weren't hiking from Supai and they were coming in from the rim that's a 20-some mile hike.

RH: Yeah. I think they were meeting them at the village. The guys hiked up there and were meeting them at the village. They had been there the night before.

TM: Got it. All right.

RH: So I'm the drag guy, the last guy, and we're spread out. I think there's probably 15 or 16 people on the trail from our group. And you know how that trail, man, I mean, it has water and there was no maintenance on it.

TM: (laughs) Lots of water crossings and grapevines and...

RH: Yeah.

TM: Yeah, good place to get lost.

RH: About two or three friggin' miles in John Azzaro falls about 25 feet into a little side creek and fractures his femur. Yeah. And I know, till my wife went thud in front of me, that was the worst fuckin' fall I'd ever seen in my life. I knew exactly what happened. I ran uptrail a little bit past John, started hollering. I got Tommy and I got a couple other ones that were gonna go up and meet the incoming group. I said, "Get us an air evac. We need a f***** air evac. That's the number one thing." I got three or four others, "Come back here, we gotta get John out of this creek he's sitting in." It was an ordeal.

TM: I'm assuming you had very little material to build any kind of split with, you had no meds to treat with. That stuff would have been back at the boat.

RH: Yeah. That's what we did was I sent somebody back to the boat to get everything we had. We got him moved a little bit. He was in shock and doing the whole bit. I still had some medical skills that, you know... I'd only been back from Nam, what, 10 years or something and had taken wilderness EMT and that kind of s***. Long story short, you've probably heard the name Ernie Kuncel.

TM: Yes.

RH: Yeah. What kind of communication did we have? I think...

TM: There would have been a phone at the village.

RH: Yeah, yeah, but Sam might have brought his park radio, which turned in real f***** handy with the flight when the air evac took place. But he was down where he broke his leg for a good four hours. Windy, super windy f***** day, super windy. We ended up making a little, what do you call those...travois, something like the Native Americans used to pull behind their horses. Basically a stretcher, but the cowboy name would be something else. We had to move him a little bit to get him up to the zone. And the whole day... At that time I thought John was the wrong one to get hurt cause I don't think he had any say in whether we were gonna stop at Matkat or not. But, you know, to this day I still believe that was a karmic reaction. We got him out and he stayed in Flagstaff for, god, it was months. Then when he got out of the hospital when he was headed to the friggin' airport to fly back to Cali, one of the pins or something snapped and he broke it again and was back in the friggin' hospital. I had lost touch with him and he eventually quit Paul. Then about eight or ten years ago he calls me up and he says, "I'm in the Big Island. I got your phone number from..." I think Mickey. Him and Mickey were good friends, too. They had been through a few wars with Paul. He came up and we caught up. It was so much fun. He was working for prison reform and, you know, this is a White Jewish boy and he was into it with everything he had. So that turned the rest of the trip into a drag basically. We had all these new people onboard, five of them I think was the number. We were just emotionally drained from

the rescue and the shit that went down at Havasu. But we soldiered through and ended that trip. The movie actually was pretty good.

TM: Hey, Richard, I'm gonna go back to Ernie Kuncl. As some of the other people—Ernie's passed away now—as some of the other people mentioned, you wouldn't necessarily want to hang out with him just for fun but if there was any kind of trauma he was the guy who would save people's lives.

RH: That's exactly right, and he saved John Azzaro's. I think Tom Caldwell was the pilot that day, might have been Doc, but I think it was Tom and, yeah, they did a friggin' amazing job.

TM: On a windy day to get a helicopter into Havasu Canyon, get it up to a landing zone, that's a good challenge.

RH: That was a challenge. And it was a challenge for all the boatmen, too, just making it happen, stabilizing and just, you know, all of the above. It was... Yeah, and I'm sure Sam... We did have a radio 'cause we were able to talk with the ship.

TM: Okay. What do you remember about Tom Caldwell?

RH: Well, he wasn't a cowboy. He was very meticulous, nice guy, guy you'd want to have a beer with. The other pilot I preferred, and all I knew him by was Doc. They were both excellent and they were the two pilots. They would rotate working for the park and then doing the tour thing. But I liked Tom and I understand he's dead, too.

TM: That's right.

RH: He died in a... Did he die in a helicopter crash?

TM: He did, two helicopters here in Flagstaff.

RH: Right, right. That's right. One of them was a medical?

TM: They both were.

RH: They both were? Yeah, Doc was a little more of a cowboy. Tom was a...you know, you felt pretty good with Tom. In fact, that was Doc... When I was leaving the Canyon, I got a radio call that I'd been offered the job at Olympic, and I was down at Roaring Springs. They sent a ship in for me and it was Doc. I said, "S***, this might be my last frickin' flight out of the Canyon, Bro. Let's make it a good one." He said, "Yeah." You know, instead of the nine or ten minutes it would take normally, he took off and we flew through the gorge all the way to Bright Angel, never got above the f***** wall, just followed the river. Oh, man, I can see it this day, just all these turns. Then we hit Bright Angel Creek down at Phantom, and then he turned right and flew the river at about 100 feet all the way to Bass.

TM: Wow.

RH: Then we figured, s***, they're gonna wonder why this 10-minute flight took 30-some. Anyway, so that was my last trip out. But yeah, I heard that Tom had been in a crash there at Flag. And Ernie died of cancer or something?

TM: Yeah, I think that's right.

RH: Yeah. Whoever told you what you just told me that, yeah, you wouldn't be hanging out drinking with him, but if you needed somebody to come get you he was the guy. So, yeah, that trip ended, that was the second trip.

TM: So very different from the first.

RH: Very different from the first, very different from the first. Later on that same fall, there was a... And Bruce and Nancy weren't invited on that second trip. (laughs) But the third trip, the three boat trip, Paul didn't come, the band didn't come. It was a couple of pretty famous photographers that were looking to shoot the album cover and the cover for the movie and all of that.

TM: Just to get some stills.

RH: Yeah, get a bunch of stills. Myself, Terry Brian. Do you remember Terry?

TM: No.

RH: He was a river legend. TB, Terry Brian, and Big Fella and I were the three boatmen. Basically those guys had had hundreds of trips. I would have been on my... I didn't do a Park Service, I did one, so I would have been working on maybe my fourth trip rowing a boat down the friggin' river. Oh, what we had also was GoPros on our boats so we could get... Kind of like GoPros, cameras mounted so that they fill out some more rapid stuff for the movie. That was kind of a trying trip also. Like I said, those guys had been on hundreds of trips and there's no doubt that I did slow them down. They left me one day and I didn't see them for 20 miles. I f***** got into camp, I came up to about Big Fella's belly button, and I just told them, "What you guys did was f***** unacceptable, unacceptable." Got into it, started poking my finger in Big Fella's chest and on and on and on and on. That was a tough trip for me. Good friends with those guys and they did apologize but, yeah. So those are the Paul Winter stories, and I would say to watch that video.

TM: Yeah.

RH: Or listen to the album, too. It's called Canyon.

TM: Nice.

RH: Okay. 59 minutes, 20 seconds.

TM: Yeah, I'm looking at my time here going 54 minutes. Okay. Well, this would be a good place to wrap this up then.

RH: Yeah.

TM: Okay. This will conclude Part 6 Grand Canyon oral history interview with Richard Hanson. Today is October 27, 2020. My name's Tom Martin. Richard, thank you so very much.

RH: Yeah, thank you. You're good at what you do here. You've got a nice voice for it and you ask good questions and there you have it.

TM: You're very kind.