

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Bruce McElya (BM)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Bruce McElya recounts his solo river trips through the Grand Canyon and taking pictures with a large format camera. Part 7 of 7

Date of Interview: 06/19/2019

Method of Interview: Telephone

Transcriber: Anonymous

Date of Transcription: 02/18/2020

Transcription Reviewers: Parker Brown, Tom Martin

Keys: Ken Hawkins, Marty Voorhees, anxiety, injuries, helicopter evacuation, commercial trips, Fossil Rapid wreck, solo trips, seasons, permit clubs, Superintendent Dick Marks, Dr. Chuck Minkley

TM: Good morning. Today is Wednesday, June 19, 2019. This is part seven of a Grand Canyon oral history with Bruce McElya. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Bruce. How are you today?

BM: Oh, good morning, Tom. I'm doing fine. Thank you.

TM: Good. May we have your permission to record this interview over the phone?

BM: Oh, sure, sure. Of course.

TM: Thank you very much. Through part six, we still hadn't spoken about your summer of 2016 solo trip, the last solo trip you've done to date. And so I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about that.

BM: Well, sure, sure. You know, each of these solo trips has got unique events in it, and they stand, you know, alone in their diversity. They're just so different. They're not a little different, they're always greatly different from one another. Surprising to me. I thought after a while these things would become kind of routine or...I was kind of hoping so, because it would make it easier for me to do photography if the rest of it went nice and smooth. But it doesn't. It's a huge thing and so many things can change and happen on a river trip. And the solo number 10 was unique in a number of ways that...the last three that I've done have been really different the way that I rig and launch the trip. Normally, I show up like everyone else and I take...at 10 o'clock I'm allowed to access the ramp and build my boat and go down the river the next day. That really never has worked for me very well because it's a huge undertaking. I'm by myself. I'm doing all of it and I never can get it done. And so hardly ever do I leave in the mornings. Normally, I'm finished rigging by noon the next day and I can take off and half of my first day has gone. So what I did the last three trips...we have an aluminum car hauler. And this thing's about 18 feet long, double axel. And I got to thinking, well, what if I rigged my boat here in South Carolina and have it all, you

know, 80% rigged? And then I'll just drop that thing in the water like a bass boat. And put the coolers on it and do a few things and I'll be done. I'll be done for the day.

And I can just pull around to the, you know, to the camp and take a break and be relaxed. And that's something I've never been able to do at Lee's Ferry. I really don't like that part of the experience. It's a nervous place and people are testy: everyone and the outfitters, the non-commercials. The blue weeny boats are coming and going from up above, and it's a nervous place. You've got the trout fishermen on top of all that. So I don't really like it. It's not a great way to start a trip, but it is necessary. Most river trips are that way. You have got to kind of get your act together and get your boats rigged right there at the front and then go down the river and relax. So anyway, this last time, my friend who works maintenance up there, Ken Hawkins, he's been the maintenance engineer at Lee's Ferry for 20 years.

So he always helps me with what's going on. So we get the boat launched and it's a wonderful thing. The raft is in the water, rigged, pretty much everything except the coolers. So I pull it off the trailer and pull around to the launch ramp. There's another non-commercial trip that's rigging. So they gave me a spot. The ranger said, I want you right here. And I said, okay, fine. So...and then we loaded the coolers and I pulled on around to the first beach. They have two beaches available for noncommercial trips that are getting ready to leave. So I took the first one because I just did, that's closest...and so anyway, these other guys finish about three o'clock and the wave of these rafts all come around the corner and they invaded my camp spot without even asking. They just pulled in. It was a complete breach of protocol. Didn't talk to me. Didn't say, hey, can we also camp here? And they just pulled in and I thought, well that's rude. But I let it go cause I'm easy going guy. And so the trip leader...this was an obvious permit club and it was a bunch of college professor club thing. And anyway, the boatmen, you know, they're all...most of them are ex-commercial river boatmen. That's how the permit club thing works. And anyway, the trip leader's a pretty highfalutin guy, high-strung guy. Most of them are, it's just the nature of it. So we got to talk and I was just trying to be conversational and while I'm tripping over all of their kitchen, trying to get my boat, you know, rigged up and ready to go...there's not much left to do, but still, I had to trip over all of their stuff and it was not fun.

So anyway, I was talking to him, I said, you know, I wish we had as many launches as those commercial guys, you know, cause they're launching six trips the next day. We're launching two. And man, he jumped up and apparently, he has a different take on that. He says, no, that's wrong. That's not right at all because we need those outfitters to take people down the river who'd never been before. They have a purpose in life. And those motor rigs get them down and out of the canyon in a week. And I could fully support that whole thing. And I thought, whoa, that was unexpected from a non-commercial trip. But at any rate, I looked around at this permit club and I said, how many of these people have never been down the river before? And now he's, you know, caught in a contradiction. He says, well, eight have not been down. So I said, so actually the outfitters are not necessary to take new people down the river. You're

taking eight people who've not been down before, so why can't it happen that way? It doesn't have to happen with the outfitters. And that was the end of the conversation. He just looked at me and clammed up and went about his business.

So that was, you know...so I knew right away that I didn't want to be around this trip going down river. I knew what it was and I just didn't really want to be around it. And I knew that my routine, my modus operandi is I have most of the photographs that I want from early on in the trip. And I will go ahead and roll on ahead. And most of the time I will never see the people I launch with until I get to Diamond Creek where we have to see each other. That's the takeout day, and you will see them at that point. So that was a good thought. "Okay, great. I'm going to be ahead of these guys the whole trip and I'm not going to have to talk with them." So at any rate. I usually get there a week ahead of time just because I like to relax into the trip.

You know, kind of get back used to where I am and 'cause I don't live out there. And I stay with my friend up there at Lee's Ferry and we just take a break and relax and have a nice time. And so anyway, about three days before the trip started, the winds picked up. Really picked up 15, 25 knots blowing hard sometimes gusting 40. Whirlwinds of sand everywhere. And I'm thinking, well good. It's usually a three-day event on the wind or a storm, either one, and it'll blow itself out and then I'll be ready to go. It'll be fine for me. Well, it didn't. It didn't quit. And in fact, it did something I've never seen on any trip down there in 40 years. The wind blew incessantly every day, all day, all night for the 20 days that I was down there. And what that means is that when the wind blows hard enough that the current is incapable of dragging you downstream. You simply must row, period. That's it. So 10 hours a day and everyone else is doing the same thing. The motor rig guys are okay. Pretty much on the river they're okay. But as I'm going down stream, it's a nightmare, really. The motor rig companies, you know, they set up those big long double tables and the wind is coming by and blowing those things over. All of it. Everything. All the food. And you know, now they're having to have granola dinners. And you can't set up a camp. You can't set up tables without the risk of the wind blowing them right over. Unless you can find, you know, a little protected cove, to put, you know, amongst the tammies or something where the wind can't do that to you. And my trip changed. My plan was in the toilet from the beginning. Once I got on the river, it was just work. In order to make the necessary amount of miles, you have to average out the miles and...

TM: Bruce, was this pre-monsoon this launch? When did you launch?

BM: That was a June 9th launch.

TM: Okay. So a monsoon season...that sort of daily buildup of big cumulus clouds and then rain in the afternoon. That with a wind...

BM: That haven't happened yet.

TM: You hadn't happened yet. It would have been hot, dry wind out of the southwest and nonstop.

BM: That's what it was. Never seen anything like it. And I knew in the back of my mind that those events are there because you look at the sandstone and you see how the wind has sculpted these formations. And you know that wind is a big part of it. And it had to have blown during that era whenever it sculpted that rock. The wind blew hard for years and years maybe. Who knows? And it's out there. I knew it was out there. But I thought we were in an era that it didn't do that because I hadn't seen it in my life in 40 years. I'd never seen anything like it. You know, everybody's having to row hard down the river. The advantage of a group trip is you can spell each other off on the oars. I don't have that option. I've got to do it and it's 10 hours a day at least, rowing hard. And that's what it was. 10 hours a day. Sometimes I was rowing 12, just 'cause I had an extra mile or two I wanted to make. And there was no getting around it. So it was a rough, tough trip. And because of the time that I was spending at the oars, there was very little time to shoot photographs and it was the most unproductive trip photographically that I've yet had. And that's just, yeah, well, that's the way it is. And you know, the canyon can deal you cards that just don't work out. It's just happened to be what happened to me. And the photography was off. And early on I figured out that, well, I'm just not gonna be able to do much that way.

So let's just enjoy the trip for what it is. Get on down the river and have fun as much as I can. But it was after the first day of hard rowing, I thought, I've got to replace these calories or I'll be dead the next day. I won't be able to make it. So I'm eating 3 and 4,000 calories. I'm just pulling out all the pure protein I can out of my food stocks to keep up. And I launched on that trip weighing 156 pounds. And when I finished that trip, I weighed...and this is after eating 3000 calories a day or more...I finished that trip weighing 132 pounds, meaning that I lost 24 pounds on a 20-day raft trip. That's more than a pound a day of weight loss in spite of eating 3 or 4,000 calories of food. It was just that hard. Now, a week later after that trip is over, I feel like a million bucks. I'm strong as an ox. I'm just a piece of spring steel with no extra weight on me, and I'd love to, you know, maintain that. I can't, but...a week later it was nice enough, but it took me a week just to recover from it. But anyway, I was unable to get, you know, I was unable to get any photographs. And I had my doubts about...am I gonna make it or not? I was in Marble Canyon and the current is so slow there. And the wind and the sand is just whipped up all across the river. It's hard to see. I had to wear snow ski goggles in order to see anything because the sand was just in my eyes so much. I couldn't keep the sand out of my eyes enough to see. So I wore those ski goggles and that made it possible to keep going. You can't see real well through those. Well, at least mine, they were all scratched up and old. But it did allow me to get on down the river, so I wore those things whole trip. And fortunately, I was able to stay ahead of trip I didn't like too well. But I ran into the next trip. And you know, the non-commercialists don't like that. They want everybody to run down on the same schedule, so they're not, you know, in each other's way, I guess. So I had to run into the next

trip. And didn't really say much to them. We're just...I'm out there and we didn't have any conversation really until I got to Hance. And they were up scouting and I came up there as they're walking down.

So the TL of this second trip, the one I caught up with, he goes back up there with me and we're looking at down at Hance Rapid. It was a normal day, I don't know, 20,000... 16,000/20,000 CFS. It was okay. And he's looking down and he goes, "Well, you know, we got to miss that Whale Rock." And I kind of looked at him and I said, "Well, I don't think a row-rig..." And he said, "Are you taking that middle chute?" "You're not going to try and go left are you?" He goes, "No, no, no. Yeah, I'm taking that middle chute right there. We agreed on that." You know, that's where we're both gone, and that's... "Well, you can't really hit Whale Rock from over here." He goes, "oh, well, I don't know." He said, "at any rate, I'm pulling into the duck pond so I can shoot pictures of the other ones coming through." And I said, "Well, I don't think you can do that. I think the water is too fast. I don't think you can get there from that middle chute. You might be able to get to it maybe. Possibly if you took that left chute. But that's a pretty rough way to start the rapid run in that left chute over there." And he says, "Well, that's where I'm going. I'm going to get over there in the duck pond and shoot the pictures." And I was like...I don't think this guy quite knows what he's talking about here.

So anyway, he carried on like he does. And so, anyway, we went back down and I said, well, where do you want me to run? Do you want me to run first? Or I'll run sweep, or you just tell me where you want me and I'll do it for you. So "Why don't you run first?" I said, "Alright. Fine." So I'm running and get to the bottom and pull around the corner on river left to...there's a little bit of a cove in there, quiet water.

So I pulled in there to wait for him and one at a time they came down and they pulled in. And then the last one to run was the trip leader. He decided to run sweep and he flipped his boat. It's a big 18-footer you know, the rent boats. And so anyway, we got him over to shore and you know, a flip is kind of a little bit panicky. You know, it's an excitable kind of...and I said, okay, well get him over here. So they pushed his boat over and we got all everybody over there and got the head count right.

Everything's...got everybody. And so everyone is physically safe. And I said, "Well, this is not a good place to re-flip a boat. Let's go around the corner. It's a better spot." So we all rowed around the corner and got the flip boat around the corner. It was a better place. You know, there's a beach there. And so...they didn't really have a plan for re flipping a boat. So I took charge of it and I said, "Okay, here's what we're going to do. We're going to get four guys on the boat, we're going to get three on the other side of it sitting on solid ground, and you guys push upward. And these other four on the backside, we're going to pull down and rig some flip lines." And, you know, got it flipped over. And I looked at the boat...actually, he lost an oar. And I snagged the oar before that went downstream. And I got that safe. And so anyway, we get it over and I'm looking at all of these aluminum dry boxes, and I know what's in them. I know how they rig these boats. And I said, well, you'd probably want to open those hatches

and dry out your bread before it gets moldy or something. And it's like, well, how would you know what's in there?

Well, I used to run these boats. So he opens his hatches and sure enough, there's a, you know, a cup full of water in each one of them. That's enough to wreck your bread. I said, "Yeah, you need it. Why don't you just stay here? You guys stay here. It's nice and hot. And get the water out of all those dry boxes before you go anywhere." And so that's what they did. And so anyway, I ran on downstream. I went on ahead of them. And we were kind of leapfrogging each other, but I didn't want to really double camp them, just 'cause that trip leader was kind of a little too much of a know-it-all for me.

And the other people were completely clueless about running rivers, and they were having their own problems. Actually, they had a bigger problem down below. One of the wives of one of the professors had a nervous breakdown. And I pulled over to shore to see what was going on. My friend Marty Voorhees was driving with somebody, some company, and he pulled in to see if he could help. And I had met the lady. I've met all the people on the trip and I pulled over and there's a doctor with her. And she asked me if I had any of these drugs, any sedatives. And I said, yeah, I do. So I gave her some sedatives 'cause she was, you know, really nervous, the poor gal. And first of all, I said... the doctor lady doesn't know river running. She doesn't understand. So this victim of the mental problems is sitting on this hot boat in the hot sun. So I said, "Well, let's get you into the shade, okay? It's just way too hot out here. Way too hot." The doctor didn't have the sense to do that. She just wanted to separate her from the crowd.

So we got her over to shore and got her into the shade. And life's a lot better at that point. And I looked at her and I said, "Can I just have a minute with her?" You know? And she's...the doctor lady she didn't want to give up control, of course. She said, "Well. What are you going to do?" I said, "I just want to talk to her for a second. I'm not going to do anything. You just stand over here, it'll be fine." So anyway, I got everybody away from her and I said, "Well, honey, what's going on here? You don't want to finish the trip or what?" And she just said, you know, she was very nervous and. And I said, "Is it a problem with the trip leader? What is it? Is it something we can fix?" She said, "I don't know. I don't think so. I've just got to leave." I said, "Well, would it help if you...I mean, can...you want to come with me for the day? You know, it'll just be you and me on the little boat and you'll be away from this whole scene, and then I'll put you back on the beach with them in the evening, and you want to try that?" And that put a smile on her face. And she thought that she liked that idea. And so I brought it up with the trip leader and the physician, and they just poo-pooed that whole thing. So I thought, well, okay. So they called in the park and so I waited for the helo to come. And unfortunately, they took her out and she could, yeah, I think she could have finished her trip. And she would have been fine had there just been some agreed adjustments. You know, with the trip leader, I think maybe, but at any

rate, she had to fly out of there. And I was kinda sad cause she wasn't hurt, you know physically.

And I tried to do something and I couldn't. I guess, you know, those are the hardest injuries is mental ones. It's not, you know, you can't put a splint on it. You know, you can't put pressure on it to stop the bleeding. And it's just the way it is. Now I've never run into that before. That was the first I'd run into someone who couldn't mentally finish the trip and had to be extricated. I just...I've never seen that.

TM: Really? So you hadn't seen that on your commercial trips? Because I know there are stories of this happening on both do-it-yourself and commercial trips where, you know, the park has to come in with a straight-jacket and they're gonna fly somebody out. They're going to make sure they're not gonna hurt themselves or the flight crew. And that happens.

BM: It never happened on any of my trips. I don't recall it happening on any of the other Canyonier trips, but I'm not privy to everything that happens. So anyway, she was gone, and I went on down and we're all having to row against the wind. And I get to Diamond Creek, and I decided to stop there because a couple outfitter friends of mine were in the neighborhood and they'll always throw their ice at me at the end of the trip. And you know, it's hot! So anyway, I waited and a couple of guys came by and gave me some ice and food and whatever I wanted. They just let me go shopping on their boats at Diamond Creek 'cause they were gonna throw it away anyhow. So I get all restocked and then, you know, head on down.

Oh, oh, oh! I have to tell you about my run of Lava Falls on solo trip number 10. I scout it. There's no one around. I'm slow about it. Hoping somebody will come. Nobody comes. I'm alone with it. One more time it's just me and the rapid, which is probably the way it should be. I mean, if you're on a solo trip. Maybe you should be by yourself there. So anyway, I scout the left run. I've got it. Just the same old thing. It hadn't changed it. I know what I need to do here. And so we had a lineup on that left side and I catch the bubble line with my nose in my boat. And I tucked the nose in right behind this little rock that's making some bubbles right before I go in there. And that's the run. Well, this time I was a little...my nose was a little too far into the current behind the rock and it spun me around backwards. It's like, rats. Darn it. I don't really like this. I don't really like running it backwards. Anyway, I hit the big opening wave. Wham. Just slammed me hard. But now I can't see. I can't see the rapid now in front of me, so I'm looking backwards trying to figure out how to get straightened up for each of the waves that are coming. And I never did quite get it turned around and slammed into the waves at the bottom, and I got down below it and it was like, dammit. I ran that thing backwards again. That's about the fourth time I've done that and I got through it. Didn't flip the boat. So I'm looking around and I have my camera and a map and a number of things in a pelican case, which is right beside the oars. It's my day box and I always do a double good rig down for Crystal and Lava and Hance. And for some reason, old age, I don't know, I didn't tie down the pelican

case! It was unlatched. It wasn't even latched down. It wasn't strapped. It wasn't latched. I opened it with my finger after going through Lava Falls rapid. And here's the deal. Had I gone through there straight ahead, the water, the hydraulics would have immediately opened that pelican box and swept every bit of gear out of it in a microsecond. It would have been gone. The fact that I had turned around backwards, the hydraulic pressure of the water is now working to close the case, not open it. So if there's such a thing as the river gods, they were watching down on me that day. The river gods saw that I forgot to close that case and spun me around backwards and made me run it backwards. So it was lucky. I was just lucky that I got spun around and ran it backwards that day. Had I not, I would have lost a camera. I would have lost your map, my journal, and other little objects would have been donated to the river. So anyway, that was my run of Lava Falls and sometimes I ended up running it backwards because I cheated a little bit...leftish...it can happen.

TM: That's a nice left run. It's...if you did it right, it's fairly safe over there and the chances of flipping, if you get it right, are I think maybe a little less than if you get the right run right. But maybe there are about the same.

BM: No, no, no. It's safer on the left. There's no doubt about that. The run is more technical on the left. And you can muff it as I did. But if you get it right, the opening wave is the big deal. It's the reflection off of that shelf. It's just a monster amount of water coming off the side of that shelf. And if you get through that, you're done. And so yeah, I try to run it left. I haven't run Lava Falls right in probably 10 years. You know, I just don't do it anymore. I don't want to. If the water is low enough, I don't know how long that left run stays open at Lava Falls. I'm guessing it closes off at about 12,000 cubic feet per second. That's my guess. But it may stay open a little longer than that.

TM: Yeah. We've run it lower. You have to kind of look at it, but sometimes the right just looks so much nicer and easier and the right gets easier as the water drops. So it's a funny thing, one or the other.

BM: That rapid changes up in between flows, it can grow.

TM: Well, there is that.

BM: 8,000 can be murder. 7,000 can be a walk in the park. There's no rhyme or reason to it after looking at it all these years. It changes up so much. At such a little change in water flow, it can make a big change in Lava Falls. Which is surprising. You would think it would be linear, but it isn't. Not really. Anyway, I got through Lava Falls backward. Didn't lose any gear.

TM: Which is amazing. I wanted to go back for a minute to the incident you had with the do-it-yourself group and the woman who ended up being helicoptered out for anxiety. Something I've noticed on a number of trips, and this can be commercial, but oftentimes on do-it-yourself trips, is a level of anxiety which can be just...it can be

temperature induced. It can be not drinking enough water induced. It can be people being so far out of their normal world induced. It can be a fear based on the picking up the fear of others. What are your thoughts on ways to minimize that anxiety amongst a river running...the river running community?

BM: Well, it's just water. It's not gonna hurt you. If I fall off of a seven-foot cliff and I land on rock, I'm probably going to get hurt. But if I fall off my boat, which is only two feet above the water, I'm not probably going to get hurt. That's it.

TM: The injury tables certainly agree with you. And if people are wearing their life jackets, I mean, that was identified back in the 40s. You wear a good life jacket, your chances of success are pretty good. But still people worry.

BM: The anxiety part I got over that after solo raft trip number one, which was a pretty anxious trip. But I came out of it learning that I didn't need to be. I didn't need to worry about it as much as I had been going into it because, you know when you're alone down there, everything comes across that can go wrong. Because you're by yourself, you have no help, and there's all these extra things that can go wrong because of that. And those things rooted on me at that first trip. Gee, I can't mess up here. I just can't. I can't do this. I would normally do this if I was with a group trip, but I will not do it today because I'm by myself, and those kinds of things. It was an anxious trip. But when I finished after the end of solo number one, I wasn't anxious anymore. It's like, well, yes, I can flip a boat in any number of...there's 108 different rapids down here that are capable of flipping this boat. They can, if I've run them wrong, I can flip in there. And what's the consequence? The consequence is that I'm not going to die. I'm not going to drown. You know, I can swim a little bit, but swimming is not necessary. I've got a 26-pound flotation device on me. And the cold water is my biggest worry. That's the thing that'll get me, so I need to get out of it. I got about 12, 15 minutes, you know, and it didn't take me that long to get back on top of my upside-down boat.

It won't. That's just too cold. You're not going to stay in that any longer than you have to. And then after that, I didn't worry about it because it isn't worth spending the mental energy. There's other things to do besides worry about what can happen to me down there. They're out there. It's out there. All of the things that can go wrong are still out there. I just don't think about them anymore. I think about things that are in front of me at that moment in time if you want to call it worry or concern. I look at Hance and that's what's in front of me at that moment in time and 30 seconds later when I'm done with it, it's gone from my concern. And then I'm back doing whatever just going down the river, looking for a place to shoot a picture or looking for something to do or whatever it is. So any more now I'm not real concerned. I was at first, but it's just water.

TM: What would have helped you decrease your anxiety on that first trip? I guess that's the question because clearly, I think that it's like driving a car. When I learned

how to drive, I was alert and looking right and lifting the mirrors and my hands were clenched on the steering wheel. Not anymore, I get in the car and I'm not supposed to text, but you know, there you are, and this and that and not paying attention through familiarity.

BM: Well, if I had advice for somebody, and it's advice that I give, is put on your life jacket and go jump in a cold river and swim around in it for a bit and then swim back to shore. That'll give you an idea of what it is and then you're ready. You're ready for it. Whitewater is just water that's stirred up a little bit. It's not a big deal. The water down there is not going to hurt you compared to something like the Selway or some of those technical rivers where you can get in trouble. You can get in trouble in a hurry on those things if you're off your boat. But Grand Canyon is pretty forgiving. Really, if you think about it, there's not a lot of places. The Whitewater is all fairly straight forward. And if you get out, you can run all of them without a boat which those two California insurance guys once. And I kind like doing that. I'll run Hermit three or four times a day if I can camp there.

I just walked back up to the top and jump in the water and go run Hermit. Splash around and have some fun at it. And those are big waves in there. And I don't...you're not going to drown in there and pull myself out and walk back up. By the time I get to the top, I'm hot, man. And it's like, golly good, it's good to be cool again. So I'd jump in and swim around, get into the tongue and have a merry ride. It's fun. So I would just say to people, don't worry with it. If you can, jump in the water with a cold water somewhere. Jump into somebody's swimming pool in the winter with your life jacket on. That's about how it's gonna feel. And then you'll be ready.

TM: Right. Okay. Yeah. It's interesting trying to figure out what...looking at the actuary tables, the injuries statistics for Grand Canyon river running, the place where you're most apt to get hurt is trying to find the bathroom at night through slip and falls. And that's just what the figures say. And people aren't worried about that. They don't seem to go "I just not gonna make it through another night! I know I'm gonna slip and fall and break my hand on the way to the bathroom!" That's not what they're worried about. So it's really to question on what simple things could people use so that they enjoyed their trip instead of...

BM: Enjoyed it more. I don't know how you not enjoy

TM: Enjoyed it enough that they didn't think they needed to be helicoptered away. Here was someone who said, gee, if I just got on your boat, and putzed along for a little bit, I could calm down. And oftentimes what it takes is someone who, you know, is a little more relaxed and able to impart that sense of relaxation and joy and look where you are. Everything's going to be just fine. Everything *is* just fine. People don't get that. And so the question is, why? And what would be a way to impart that?

BM: I think it's inherent in a non-commercial trip. You know, it's a once in a lifetime thing. They're not practiced at it. And they don't have a level of experience down there

to draw upon. It's all new and unknown territory oftentimes. You know, I didn't realize it would be this hot this late into the evening. I didn't realize the water was that cold, blah, blah, blah. I think that's a lot of it. But what I say is try not to be nervous about it. Try to enjoy it as a brand-new thing that you've never done before and enjoy it for its newness, not for its danger or not...And so to the trip where the lady had to helicopter out, she was surrounded by stress. Her husband was nervous for her. The trip leader was an over-the-top ego trip leader. And it was hot. And she had all of these people around her...the physician, you know, had taken control of her situation, telling her what to do, when to do it. And it wasn't helping is what I'm getting at.

And she got to a point that was hard for her, and I don't know the circumstances of how she got to that point. But I felt like maybe they could wind it down and keep going. But there was too much nervousness right around her and I couldn't...it's not my place. I gave her sedatives, which I take a number of things down the river with me. I take sedatives. I take pain medication. I take powerful antibiotics in case of, you know, a raging infection. I've got a chance, I take those things as you know, prophylactic, if something happens. And I'm...no, no, I'm not a doctor. The doctor said, "How did you get these?" It's not your concern. You'll see a physician's name on this bottle and it's a legal prescription. And if you wish to give it to her, that's your deal. You're a doctor. I can't give it to her. And so anyway, then I went on down and I ran into them again at Havasu. And there were a number of people on the trip that I enjoyed, but the trip leader I did not enjoy.

So the trip that I launched with I did not enjoy (the trip leader), and the trip I caught up with, I didn't care for them either. I don't know what that says. It's just that was the way that was the way solo number 10 went. And so anyway, I lost everybody at Diamond Creek and I took another six days on down below there. I ran into another extrication on down below, well below Diamond. I forget the mile marker. It was about...anyway, it was well on down there. And I came around the corner and I saw a chopper come in and I'm like, oh god, now what? So anyway, I come around the corner and here's a helo sitting on the beach and there's a guy that was a dory trip with the motor rig support. So six or eight dories there, and it was a fellow named Doc and he runs with the...I can't remember...GCE, I think. Anyway, I said, hey. Well, I introduced myself. I said, who's your trip leader? And the dory people were very smug about me. They thought hey, we're cool, and you're not 'cause you're on a raft.

"Okay, forget you. Who's your trip leader?" So I went found Doc, and I said, "what's going on here? Can I help you?" And he said, "oh no, this guy broke his leg getting off the dory" or something, or slipped while he was in the dory and broke his leg. Compound fracture. Bad deal. And he was on a helo, but they couldn't take off because the helo now was disabled. It had a bad part. And I went, oh man, you gotta be kidding me. So I said, "Doc, you guys going to camp here?" He said, "Well, we will, if we have to, I guess." He said "They called in... they've got a word in. They're going to try and get the Park down here." So anyway, another helo comes in and now there's two helicopters on the beach, and a mechanic, and a part. They flew in a

mechanic and some parts. And it was a very small little insignificant part, but you can't fly without it.

So they put the new part in and fired up the helo and they weren't getting the error message anymore. So the first, helo...the second...the one that came in a maintenance helicopter left. He got airborne and then the first helicopter, the one with the injured person got airborne and then they followed each other back up to South Rim, and that was the end of that incident. But it was fun talking with Doc. He was really a nice guy, and once they figured out who I was and who I knew, that I used to work for Canyoneers, etc., etc., he told those dory drivers. I think he must've said, "Look man, this guy knows all the people that are in this business. And you need to, you know, throw him a little respect." So, anyway, when they came by me, they passed me. I pulled over in some shade and they passed me and all of the dory drivers were smiling and waving after that. So I don't know what he told him, but he changed their attitude about me. And this is good: One of the solo trips I got all the way down...I got all the way through and didn't tear up anything really, and I got to 232 mile rapid, and they had turned the water down and it wasn't coming up. And it was at 8,000, and that's a bad flow for 232 mile rapid.

TM: Could you describe that rapid a little bit to people who might not know there how it works?

BM: Well, sure. It's...232 is a narrow place in the lower schist gorge. And any schist gorge, there's three of them. The schist's gorges. The water runs through faster because the schist is far more resistant to getting cut, to downcutting, than say sandstone or limestone or any other rock. So the canyons are generally narrow and the current is swift. And the rapids...the 232-mile rapid is rare in that the obstructions in the river are actually bedrock. It's not from rocks that have come down from the side canyon... it is, the top of the rapid is full of rocks, and that's what makes the rapid, but as you run through the rapid on river-right, down below you are these schist. They're called fangs and that's exactly what they are. These are very beautifully fluted, sculpted, smooth, sharp rocks. The waters run over the schist. They're at a high rate of speed, and the result are these various fangs of rock that extend up above the level of the water. And they point, unfortunately, they are aimed at you instead of away from you. And since they're aimed at you, it's like pointing a knife at someone: instead of pointing the blunt end of the knife at somebody, which won't hurt them, you point the sharp end and that will hurt you. That's what's happening with those fangs down there, and they're very dangerous in certain waterflows. If you hit them, you're gonna rip your boat to shreds.

Now, when I ran it that day at 8,000, the fangs are well out of the water. And the sharpness is up top of it and not so much down lower on the rock. At any rate, 232 does not allow you to make a sneak run of it unless you're a motor rig. Once you enter that rapid, the tongue is very small, the entry is very narrow, and the current is extremely fast, and the first wave comes quickly. So what all that means is you can't

cheat it very well. You can get a couple of strokes in right at the top, and then you'd have to straighten out, or you're going to be upside down and possibly hit those rocks and you don't want to hit them if you're swimming. You wouldn't want to do that – that could really hurt you. That's one place that it truly is dangerous in Grand Canyon, if you're a swimmer, is Killer Fang Rapid. That's its nickname: Killer Fang Rapid. So at any rate, I ran it and I wasn't obviously going to miss the Big Fang. So I turned sideways and tried to push off of it and it just bent the oar over and I slammed into the side of that thing with just huge force. It really jarred my teeth. It just hits so hard. There's no chance of flipping, it's not that kind of a place, but I hit it really hard. I got down below it and I was just cussing about it and like, “god dang it.” I really didn't want to hit that thing that hard, but I did. So in one rapid, in 30 seconds, I bent two oars. Ruined them. I did the whole rest of the Grand Canyon run above it and didn't hurt a thing, and here I wrecked two oars in one rapid. I was not pleased about it. Pretty mad about it, but the good news is it's over. There's no more Whitewater that's going to hurt me. There's some more Whitewater below there, but...one more rapid, I think, below there. But I know it and it's not going to hurt me. So I got my two oars bent, got the bent oars off, and put the last two good oars back on there and kept going. But that sort of thing is when you're alone...there's no help, and had I slipped in there...That's probably my worst fear, is 232 alone in low water. That gets my attention no matter what. I don't see that kind of low water anymore, thank goodness. I haven't seen that in many years. But I saw it once and it wrecked my boat pretty good. But anyway, I was going to tell you, on the last trip I got, I developed a couple of tricks that I like and might be worth it for somebody coming along after me.

The sleeping cots...it's hot in the summer in the hot sand. And normally, you take and either sleep with a wet sheet on you, and/or pour water on the sand around where you're going to sleep, and that helps too. It really does. But this time I carry a couple of ammo cans, which have three different dimensions on them. So what I did was I set up my cot in wet sand and the front feet are right there at the beginning of dry sand and the other two feet are down the hill in wet sand. And I use the ammo cans to put under those lower feet to make it level, and man, it is cool sleeping. That is the way to go. And the only risk is certain parts of the canyon, the water will come up in the night, but still the cots out of the water a little bit, not by more than an inch. But I've gotten up in the...and the waters all around me. Boy that's the ticket. That's the way to sleep down there in the summer.

And I was gonna tell you something about...oh, on that wind trip, I got down below the rapids and I put two buckets in the water, one on the front of the boat, one on the back of the boat, hoping to grab a little more current and it helped some. I ended up having to row all those miles against the wind every day. Took me four days of hard rowing to get out of there. Man, it was the worst. And the outfitters were having their problems. They were setting up camp like normal, but their food is utterly sanded, and who wants to eat sandy food? It's just a bad deal. And their tables are blowing over. You know, I'm comparing notes and I'm saying, “How are you guys dealing with

this?" "Well, you know, our table blew over last night. All the foods in the sand, and it's just a mess." "Yeah. Well, it's just one of those trips."

So anyway, the one thing I may not have mentioned about my time driving motor rigs was I'm a small guy and I have small bones. And bad backs are just, you know, endemic to that job because of the way the rigs are built. You're gonna probably hurt your back working for those things if you do it long enough. And I found that rowing, on the other hand, is the other side of the coin; it is therapeutic. My core gets stronger. My back feels better. I feel better. Everything is better when I'm rowing a boat versus driving a motor rig. I've had two back surgeries, partly because of working on motor rigs for so long. And the lawyers...and they know it. You know, the lawyers come in... Gaylord hired a lawyer to tell us what to say and not to say during a certain bad... If something bad happens, here's what we want you to say. Here's what we don't want you to say. You know, please don't say this if this happens and so forth. So, one season, the lawyer comes in and he's giving us instructions about how to keep our core strong. And it's like laughable. Here's an attorney that is warning us about the job and telling us how to strengthen our core so that we don't have a problem with our back. Which I thought was odd. Basically, they were inoculating themselves from medical claims from boatmen whose backs went bad while they were on the river.

Well, our lawyer came in and told you about the problem and told you, you know what to do to keep from having the back problem. And that was their way of mitigating any lawsuits that might come from somebody's back that blows out while they're on the river. I don't know. It's just lawyer stuff and they do it. But poor Gaylord, he had one of the worst backs of all of us. He really did. He couldn't, you know, he quit doing that because he had to. He quit running the river because he had to. His back is just a wreck. He would go down the river with us once a year, you know, just to keep his finger on the pulse. And we wouldn't let him lift anything because it would just hurt him, so we wouldn't really let him do stuff.

I might've told you he was with us one time and he's not practiced driving these big rigs. Canyonier rigs are the biggest ones down there, 40-foot. We came to...tell me if I already told you this, but Fossil Rapid, you start at the top and it works its way left and then there's a sharp right turn at the bottom of the rapid. So in one of those boats, you have to have a pretty good...you got to catch a ferry angle halfway through that rapid and you know, take the waves sideways, which isn't comfortable really, but you know, you got to do it. And get yourself some angle against that right turn at the bottom.

Well, Gaylord missed it and he didn't turn soon enough, and when he did, the tail of that boat is now swinging around at a high rate of speed, and it slammed into the rock wall down there with great force and speed and kinetic energy; these rigs weigh 12,000 pounds. And he hit the rock so hard that the...there's a 210-quart Gott cooler on boat left and right sides. Those are the big coolers on the boat. He hit that thing so hard that it didn't break it, it exploded. And heads of lettuce were flying 15/20 feet up

into the air. And it's so hard that the top blew off of it and food shot up into the sky. I mean, it was funny! It was a funny looking affair. And...it was a panicky thing when it happened 'cause you know, there's food all over the boat and we hit hard, and it slammed and it made a loud noise and scared everybody. But no one got hurt or anything. It just exploded that cooler. So Gaylord didn't drive anymore. He left it to us to drive the boats after that one. And we had to work around the loss of food and everything. You know, those boats are big and you gotta deal with it.

So anyway, I'm glad I don't do the motor rigs anymore because I've had two back surgeries, because of it, and I don't think I actually could do it again. I don't think my back would be able to do it. But rowing strengthens everything, it seems like. And I feel much stronger. My back doesn't bother me. And I'm in better shape than I've ever been when I get off of one of those rowing trips. And that wind trip, like I said, it was just pure work, just physical caloric energy for 20 straight days as much as you could handle. And, man, I was strong after that. My wife looked at me when I got home. She says, "You look different. You look different." I said, "Well, why? What do you mean, sweetie? Is that a bad thing or a good thing?" She said, "Well, let me look at you. Take your clothes off." So, you know, I stripped down to my underwear and she says, "My god, do you have any...look at yourself in the mirror. Look at yourself." And I looked in the mirror at myself. I hadn't done so; I just got home. And I looked at myself and there was nothing left but bone and muscle. It was just that. That's all that was there. No fat, no nothing else. It was just like...I've never looked like that in my life. And it lasts a couple of weeks and then it goes away. So anyway, it was a hard, physical trip. I'm not complaining, really, except the only complaint I have is that I didn't get to shoot pictures. But it's not a complaint, really. The canyon showed me a side of itself that I've never seen.

And I'm swearing about it all the way down because I'm eating sand and my eyes are just scratched up from the sand, and it's not comfortable, and I don't like it, but you know, it left me in the best physical condition I've ever been in. And it showed me something I've never seen before, good or bad, however you want to look at it.

TM: So having done these solo trips by yourself with photography in mind: of the 12 months of the year, when do you think is the best time to do a solo trip if you're thinking to do photography?

BM: Well, summer.

TM: Still?

BM: Summer is the best. Days are long. The days are really, really long. June...solstice is in June. If you could do a solo trip where the solstice was right smack in the middle of your trip, you would have the most hours per day to do photography. Plus, you have the weather for it. You have the crispness of the summer, the crisp cloud formations, they're all well-defined. And you have the odd storms that come through, which enhance the photography. As you move into winter, the clouds

become...the storms become winter storms. The cumulonimbus have gone away, and you just have high, gray, non-defined clouds which sometimes are a help in photography because the shadows are so black in Grand Canyon because of the contrast. Sometimes those winter scenes are a little nicer or easier to shoot because of the lower contrast. The winter that the winter cloudiness offers. But I've told myself that I'm not going to do another winter trip and try and do photography because it's just too lean. There's not enough there to go to all of that trouble. And I wouldn't and I don't recommend it. The days are very short. The river is slow. The lighting is not very dramatic. And the other thing about summer versus winter for photography is that during the summer, the sun penetrates all the way down to the river. So you have the option of shooting something and choosing the time of day and the angle of light to shoot it. In the winter, the sun mostly is gone from the lower canyons. The only time you see it is once you make the corner at Conquistador Isle. Once you make that right-hand turn, it's lined up with the sun right there. And the sun actually does get down to the river in that place and maybe a couple other places briefly. That's it.

However, if you ask me what is the best time to run the river, forgetting about photography, the most enjoyable launch that I've ever had was an October 1st launch. The weather was beautiful the whole, entire trip. And no, you don't get to swim in the side canyons. It's too cold for that. But good sleeping at night and the days are not hot. The sand isn't hot. The walls are not hot. That was a good launch. The October 1st, it was a group trip. There was 14 of us I think, and it was a dream. It was just a dreamy wonderful weather trip. And I don't know how other October launches go. I've only done it one time at that time of year.

TM: So for photography, you think the summer's best, but for boating, the fall might be best. October.

BM: Oh, definitely. Most definitely. Definitely. The summertime is not a good boating time, in my opinion. The river is jammed up with people and it's just kind of nervous going down the river, negotiating camps three or four times a day with all the boater rigs that come by you. And all the other trips that are on the river that's just very active situation down there in the summer. And not my favorite time, you know, to enjoy Grand Canyon. But it is a good time to shoot pictures. And that's why I kind of gravitate towards summer trips. Plus you have the high water which, normally speaking, allows you to make time down the river.

In the fall, they give you more days, but I don't know if the days they give you are adequate enough to make up for the length of days, the length of time you have in the summer. I don't know. I haven't put the math, to put the pencil to that, and somebody should. I should, just 'cause it's on my mind. But you know, how many hours a day do you have to enjoy the river on an October launch versus a summer launch knowing that the summer launch is less days than the October launch? Do you still have the same amount of total hours to enjoy Grand Canyon on an October launch, or a November launch as you do in the summer? Even though you have more days, they

give you more days, do you actually have more time with the river? Well, I don't think...have you calculated that? Has anyone calculated that?

TM: Well, it's interesting looking at trip length and the number of trips on the river. And what we've seen historically is trip lengths have decreased. You've got to move more miles per day than you did in the past, or there were no trip lengths, like from Diamond Creek down, and now there are. And that's been done to simply accommodate more trips to get more trips through the canyon. And so it's a tradeoff. You trade trip quality for trip quantity. And as a management tool, I understand that. I don't agree with it, but I get it. And so it's in the winter, again, it's a historical artifact that there's not a lot of commercial use then because historically there never was. And that's a time when the park has said, okay, given this historic use, we are going to allow long trips though the days are short. So you get to spend more time there, but you're on the water. Time is very carefully worked out because there's rapid coming up below you and it is late in the day. You'd better be getting to camp. And you don't want to take the risk of having trouble in that rapid. You'll be in camp if you can find one in the dark, cooking in the dark. It's cold. So the danger...it's all considered in. What it does mean is you have to go. You have to move down the canyon.

BM: The other factor which I don't think anyone's thought about that I've read or heard about is: On a winter trip, if you take the amount of time it takes you to get up...on a summer trip, you get up, you cook breakfast, you tear down camp, you don the clothing for the Whitewater and you get on the river. That is a fixed amount of time. In the winter, that same procedure is going to take at least 15 or 20 minutes more out of your campsite time. And here's why. Because in the winter, you have to put on and take off way more protective clothing. And you have to get into a dry suit and carefully, you know, zip this thing up, and you have to have your liners, and all the special gear that it goes with trying to run the river in a winter time. It takes longer to get in and out of camp, and I don't know if that has been figured into it either.

TM: The difference, the real difference, I see, is in the summer, you can get up at first light around 4:30 and you can get on the water by 7:30. In the winter, you're getting up at 7:00 in the dark, and the first light comes in and you're lucky to get out of camp at 9:30 or 10. So there's a three hour loss both sides of the day. And that, again, it factors in. So there's a lot of different factors. People want to do layovers. They want to go nowhere and do nothing, and they don't want to spend time on the water during the day, and I get that. That's a real treat in the bottom of the Grand Canyon. And so, you know, summertime, wintertime, triple length. It's a big deal.

BM: Well, I was disappointed, of course, when they cut it from...they had a 30-day limit on dead of winter. And that was about right, really. Days are so short. And they cut that way back. I don't know what it is now, but 30 days in the winter was just about right. And there was no one down there. They launched one trip every three days. The chance of you seeing anyone was almost nil. And rarely did I. I don't

remember ever seeing people on a winter trip. I don't. I saw campers, hikers, but river runners, no.

TM: It's funny. I remember really being sad because we...a trip passed us. I was out hiking and I was like, dang, I didn't get a chance to meet them, wonder who they were. It's the only trip that passed us that entire trip. And that's a winter trip. And this was before 2006, the latest, you know, increase in winter travel. Again, trying to accommodate the demand to access the canyon. I get that. And I understand that, certainly.

BM: Well, you know what I think would...I think you could change one sentence in the permitting rules and it would make a dramatic difference. The whole thing is spiraled down into permit clubs, in my opinion. That's what I see on the river. That's all I see anymore is permit clubs, which is not exactly in the spirit of non-commercial river running, in my opinion. This is just a way for people to get down the river and not have to use the outfitters. Or you can do either one, but it's not a big difference

TM: And by permit club...can you define that? How do you mean?

BM: What I know of them...and I've been asked to join many permit clubs because they want the boatmen. They like having...so a permit club is a group of people that gets together, 35, 40 people and they all put their names in on the permit list. And after five years comes around, then they can go down the river every year because somebody in that club is gonna draw a permit. And the people that are in the club are not river runners. And they have a cadre of boatmen that will go down the river each year with 16 or 18. What's the...16 people, isn't it? Isn't that the limit?

TM: Yeah, yeah.

BM: So they go down with 16 people. Four of them are boatmen, so they get 12 people out of the club get to go down the river each year. And the way it kind of works out on the numbers is once you go down, then you can't go down until next year. But then they want the other people who haven't gotten to go, so they go next. So it's averaging out at about three years. Everyone in the permit club goes down the river about every three years. And so that's how it kinda works out.

TM: So with 35 or 40 people, basically 16 to 20 people know that they're in the club, but they're not going to go unless they're the winner of the permit. Is that how that works? 'Cause I haven't heard of that.

BM: That's...well, the winner has to go, of course. The winner has to go.

TM: I just haven't heard of a group of larger than 16. I've certainly heard of a group of 16 people get together. They will choose a particular set of dates or only one date in the lottery to all pile up on hoping that that group of 16 kind of dilutes the other people.

BM: Oh, there's very well organized and established groups of 50 people. And they operate...it's a complex situation. You gotta have a leader and you do have to have meetings and people have to, you know, line up and do exactly what they're told to do even though they have no clue as to why or how it's working.

TM: But in a group of 50, if somebody in the group wins, there's going to be a lot of losers. How do they figure out who in that group of 50 actually gets to go?

BM: Oh, that's all decided up in advance. When you're in the permit club, you know that the chosen ones are going to go this year. The next year the people who've waited the next longest go. And then the newcomers go on the third year. So they're looking at going once every three years. And that satisfies most everyone in the permit clubs. The boatmen go every year, of course. They go every year, but they're not pumping the system 'cause they only have one point. They don't count. So they sign up because they have to in order to go down the river. And so that's how they work it. And that's what I see a lot of, is the permit clubs. Especially in the summer because there's a lot of school teachers, and people that work in education somewhere, they have the summers off, so that's when they load up. So mostly what you see down there in the summer is school teachers and educational system people 'cause that's when they have time off. And the last two trips were...both trips that I ran into on my last solo were college professors and their wives and a few siblings, kind of thing. That's what they were. They were all...they were college. Sometimes they're high school teachers, you know, sometimes it's the tennis club out in Phoenix. You know, it's a club of some sort and that's what it takes. So they could change one thing. I don't like the permit club things because it's not...it really should be people that have an interest in boating non commercially. If they want to boat commercially, there is an avenue for that. The commercial outfitters will take you down the river. But this other permit club thing is pretty much the same as going down with an outfitter.

So here's what I say. Instead of making a rule that says you're only allowed to go down the river once every year, change that rule and make it once every three years. If you do that, the permit clubs will fall apart because the boatman will not be there. 'Cause they can only run once every three years, and I think that's the average anyway. If I put my name on the list, I'm not going to get a permit outside of winter. I'm not going to get a shoulder season permit until I've been on that list at least three years, or more likely four years. I'm not going to have a shot at a summer trip until I've been on the list for five years. Then I got a shot.

So, knowing that it's going to be three years before I can go down the river, be the solo guy and not in a club, why not make everybody wait three years to go down the river because that's not a bad number. Now, you can't apply that to the commercial outfitters. And therein lies the problems. The lawyers and the park know that if you do this to one person... you do this to one group, you have to do it to the other, or there's going to be a lawsuit. So do you tell the outfitters that their customers can only go down once every three years? I think that's untenable and I don't think it would

ever pass muster. However, they really should separate it. I don't care how many times somebody goes down the river with an outfitter. It doesn't matter to me. They're going to fill their permit with people. I don't care. It doesn't matter what kind of people they are. If they go down five times a year or if they go down once in their life, there's no difference. It's still a user day.

And that rule shouldn't, the three-year rule, if it ever came, should not apply to them. But because there's a legal situation, they would have to apply it to them. So it would never fly. Well, what do you think? I mean, you've been through the whole mental process of it. What do you think about limiting people to once every three years instead of once a year?

TM: Well, inherent in this question of who gets to go is the distribution of allocations. And Grand Canyon has fallen into an allocation system through a history of favoring giving permits to commercial river trips. And that started in 1956 and in a real big way though. It had been going since the 40s when Norm Nevills got the first official permit to run the river in Grand Canyon. And so you have to look at, alright we have so many river trips that are going to launch a year. Now, who gets to go on those trips? How many...the park can break that out. So many trips are going to be commercial and so many trips are going to be do-it-yourself. And that excludes the church groups and the science people and the boy scouts who are trying to look at a system that is really cut-and-dry, turn-key commercial. Everything's done for you. You can't hire a guide. You can't hire a consultant that would say the pulling for the camp's right around the corner, get ready to get over there. That would calm down the woman who is totally flipped out and looking for a helicopter ride out...would calm them down. That's not allowed in the spectrum of river trips. So you look at this and you say, okay, what we're going to do is we're going to leave this allocation where the commercial people dominate in the summer and the do-it-yourselfers get the winter. And you yourself mentioned most of America has their summer vacation off because their children aren't in school and they get summer off for school. So that really doesn't work for the do-it-yourself subset. And again, the question is, who gets to go. One management tool is to say you can only do one trip a year. Well, or two trips or three trips, or...sorry...one trip a year or one trip every other year or one trip every third year. The do-it-yourself people when they go to start their trips, they face a law enforcement ranger in class-one tactical gear wearing deadly force. And they have to show photo ID. That does not happen on the commercial trips. And so if you want to do a commercial trip more than once a year, you simply use a different ID, or use your middle name and your last name, and different credit card. And nobody's going to check and nobody's going to look. To put a once-every-three-year restriction on who gets to go, that'd have to absolutely be across the board. But then it would beg the question of time of year and should we have the same once every three year in the summer as in the winter? That begs...So this is complicated, I guess is what I'm trying to say...it's very complicated!

BM: Well, let me interject and say I left something out. Once every three years for, say, the summer time or the shoulder seasons. But not...And then for the winter, no, not once every three years. So if you want to go once every year, do so in the winter, and you can go down in the winter once a year. But all the desirable launch periods make it once every three years.

TM: So my question for you is why is it okay for a commercial passenger to go once a year, or as many times, five times a year, as you mentioned, and it's not okay for the do-it-yourselfers. Why do the do-it-yourselfers get restricted to three years? And I'd be curious to have you speak to that.

BM: Well...yeah. There's no resolution of it morally. There isn't. It's just a money game. But what I would...my thought on it is the outfitters are not dealing with...the people that want to go with an outfitter are not dealing with the same things that the people who want to go by themselves with their own gear. So it's two different worlds and I can't compare them. I just can't because they're different worlds. And since they're so different, and I don't really...what one does doesn't have that much effect on the other. There are different sets of rules, different permeating systems. Everything is different. So I don't honestly care if somebody wants to go down the river five times in a year. It doesn't upset me. It would only bother me if the outfitters were given more launch dates or something because they can sell them. I don't agree with increasing any of that. I think it should all go away, myself. And I'll tell you why. The argument is that yes, there's people that can never do this on their own and it's up to the outfitters to allow them to have this experience in Grand Canyon. Well, my counter to that is do you really need a high-performance helicopter to take you to the top of Mount Everest for \$500,000? Yes, you went to the top of Everest, but you didn't get there on your own. So what's the value of summiting Everest if somebody took you there in a helicopter? It's the same thing, you know, for me in Grand Canyon. And there again, the solo raft trip, in my opinion, is the highest expression of river running in Grand Canyon because it's the most difficult river trip to do, to get through it. It is. There's no doubt about that. And so because of that, I think it's the highest representation of river running down there. And then you go to the other far end of the scale from that, and you have a two-boat motor trip with 40 people camping somewhere. It's not that my trip is any better than theirs. I don't think it is. For a lot of people that's their first time to see Grand Canyon. But should they be allowed to see it that easily? That unencumbered? I don't know. I don't think that...I don't think everything should be accessible to every person in every walk of life. And that's what the outfitters are attempting to do. They want to take as many different kinds of people down there as they possibly can from foreign countries, to children, to old people, you know, they want to, you know, fill their permit. So they take as many people down there as they can. But it's a question to me of should they. I don't think that is in the spirit of river running.

TM: You're reminding me of a conversation I had with a staffer for a Utah congressional representative and the staffer's position was America is not river runners

and the majority of America doesn't like camping. Which is true, the statistics show that. The majority of Americans drive cars and the statistics show that. So their vision was that a highway on pylons would go over the length of Grand Canyon right over the top of the river. People could pull off at Phantom Ranch and get lemonade. And they could drive the entire distance through Grand Canyon in a day, a two-way traffic, four-lane deck top. And that makes a very good argument for the "majority of people need X. So that's what we're going to do." But we only have one Grand Canyon on the planet, and it's a national park. And these are places preserved unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. And so, once we set those sideboards as a society, then who and how do we decide gets to go? That's a very fascinating issue when it comes to...

BM: Well, Tom, that's an extreme argument that he's making with highways that doesn't apply. And frankly, commercial outfitters were a good thing in the beginning. I don't have a problem with it. People didn't know how to run rivers. They didn't have rafts, generally speaking. But now things have changed. River running is accessible to millions and millions of people who have the skill, they have the equipment, and the knowledge to go and do things like this. So the need of commercial outfitting in places like Grand Canyon has pretty much evaporated. There isn't a need anymore. In the old days, the only way that you could see Grand Canyon is if you went down there with somebody that knew what they were doing. Does that justify it? Because you can take people down there just because you can? No, of course it doesn't. You don't belong somewhere that you can't go on your own. You just don't. It's not right. It's, it's a resource. It's a national park. It's a beautiful place. It's susceptible. It's very sensitive to, you know, to traffic down there as they found out in '72 when they trashed the place so badly. We learned what, you know, the worst of it. Here it is, 1972. And so, I just don't feel like helicopters should be taking people to the top of Mount Everest. I don't think outfitters should be taking people down the river in Grand Canyon. It's not about an aesthetic. It's about...it's just...it's money. That's all it is. They're not giving them something that they should have that they can't have without the outfitters. It's...and that's my rationale about it. And, you know, the outfitters would call that an extreme viewpoint as well. But I don't know if it is.

TM: It's interesting, looking...doing the research I've done in the historical journey. You know, you mentioned people didn't know and they had no rafts. Actually, the growth of do-it-yourself river running was pretty impressive. People were pretty skilled. They had pretty good technology for the day. But the Park Service made a clear decision to keep the do-it-yourselfers out.

BM: And they did. They made that decision not because they didn't have skill or because they did. That wasn't a factor. They made that decision because it was just a money pressure, political decision. It has nothing to do...

TM: This was actually before then. This was it...the history shows that this comes out of one of the key Park Service individual's decision. That's it. And he did that based

on the disappearance of two people followed immediately by the death of two Park Service employees in the winter of 1928, 1929. And that individual became the manager of the southwest region that included Grand Canyon until the middle 1950s. And that one individual said, we are going to keep the thrill seekers, the do-it-yourself people, off the river because it is dangerous. Now, if you looked at the actual danger, it wasn't that way, but that was his take on it. And I get that. So this is the historical artifact we had to deal with. And the commercial people were allowed to grow their businesses. And they did that. So today we're on such a warped platform. We have these discussions of one trip every three years, or, you know, how many trips, you know, do people get to launch. And we forget this warped history that's put us into this very, very odd place. In a way it's just...it's time to rearrange the entire deck, I think. I think there are ways to do that. But it's really fascinating and you look at the history here.

BM: Well, even if you take into account that the guy that made a mistake back in '28, it was a knee jerk thing, and it was a personal opinion and it was wrong. But to me, that's not important. What's important here is the endeavor itself. Do you continue to make it positive? I mean, do you put somebody on a snowmobile and take them through a wilderness area? When in fact they should be able to hike. And if they can't hike, then maybe they should find a different activity.

TM: Well, you have a really good point.

BM: That's what I'm saying. That's all I'm saying.

TM: That if the playing field was leveled...if the Park Service...and eventually I think they will. They have in the past recognized the wilderness that the Colorado River in Grand Canyon is. They have recognized in the past the need for oar-powered services, either commercial or do-it-yourself, and not motor-powered. The motor power...lots of people on one boat is financially lucrative for the commercial businesses that operate there. I get that. That makes sense. But if we level that playing field out, the demand to boat in Grand Canyon is still big enough that every trip will launch, it will be full pretty much like it is today. In the winter, that's not quite true yet though. The number of people on winter trips continues to grow. It's gone from 8 to 9 to 10 to 11...going to 16. So the concept though of people needing commercial services in wilderness areas...the crafters of the Wilderness Act said commercial services will not be allowed. The secretary has the ability to allow that. And so, okay. We say, alright. We're allowing commercial services in Grand Canyon. But to what extent? And I think there's a good argument to say everybody competes in a lottery. There's no restrictions on...it's one trip a year. Everybody gets to compete. If you win, you can choose to go commercially or not. And that would greatly change the dynamics of the commercial trips. It would be no longer be 30, groups of 32.

BM: Well, I think the evolution of it will be just that. But the final picture is that, I mean, to me that's just an interim measure. There needs to be...there really shouldn't

be any commercial activity on a...in a place like Grand Canyon. And that also includes all of these research trips. These are just rebranded commercial river trips. Brian Dierker runs those just exactly like it's a commercial river trip. And the people that get on it are university professors that, you know, they have a line on an idea for a...and it'll get them a permit, or maybe it gets them 10 permits to do this research. They go in the same pile as the outfitters...and it just doesn't belong down there. It really doesn't. It doesn't belong. Do you, I mean, do you take a D8 Cat and drive to the top of a mountain in the Forest Service somewhere? You can, of course. But should you? Does it make sense to? Is that how people want to get to the top of the mountain?

TM: Well, let me ask you Bruce, this is interesting because now what's happening is there's so much demand for science trips in the canyon that the park is actively telling people that want to do science to join the do-it-yourself lottery and hope they win a permit. And so that is really begging the question I think of, okay, we're not going to let the helicopter take people to the top of the mountain. We're not going to take the D8 Cat, but we're not going to do any set asides either. So you either win the lottery or you don't. If you win the lottery, you can do a science trip. You can do a church group trip. You can do a veterans trip. You can do a commercial trip or a do-it-yourself trip or solo trip. We don't care. The agency says we're only gonna let so many trips launch a day. They're only going to be so big. Good luck in the lottery.

BM: Well, I told Dick Marks that years ago, you know? They never did it.

TM: And what did Dick say?

BM: Oh, I was nobody. I just went in there and had my 10 minutes with him and then he shuffled me on out the door along with everybody else that day. But...yeah. The science people don't need to have carte blanche down there. At the time, they were plucking permits from the trees. They were there. All they had to do was pick one, go down the river. And I had a problem with that because I was having problems with people on the river. These research people I was having trouble with...they were just all over the place, taking up campsites, jamming the place up, running up and down stream with motors at night or in a non-motor season on and on and on and on. And I said, man, you know...I'm waiting in a line that's 26 years long. If you make them wait in the same line, guess what? They're going to go somewhere else to do their research because they're not going to wait 26 years. But they don't care now because all they have to do is come to you with something signed by some university professors, signed by some senator or congressman. And they just take a permit and go down a river 10 times. They'd like to get more than one trip out of this research trip of course.

The chub guys, man...talk about the jackpot, the humpback chub thing was...there was so much research done on that because that is a problem. They got a fish that's fixing to be extirpated from the canyon. And so it seems to demand a lot of research. And I was down there one time, pulled in there. A friend of mine was the original

chub researcher. This guy's name was Dr. Chuck Minkley, and I went down to visit with him and always help him out if I could, take him things down a river. And anyway, I went and found Chuck, and in the process, I found three other humpback chub research trips down there at the same time.! Like...they're all catching the same fish and messing with them. You know, checking the tag or putting a tag on them or, you know.... Poor fish, you know, it might get caught three times in a day. And so I went back to Chuck. I said, "Hey, I thought you were the only chub researcher?" And he goes, "Hell no man. They got all kind of them now. They're down here, thick as flies." I said, "Why? I thought you were the guy." He said, "Because they can. It's a way to get a free river trip out of it. They get to come here. They get food and gear choppered in. They get to enjoy a really cool place in Grand Canyon for a couple/three weeks, or a month, or two months." He said, "It's a great deal." He said, "They don't do research like I do. They said they take it easy. They're on vacation, those guys." "Wow, that's pretty weird, Chuck." And he said, "yep." And down the river I went, like...what the heck was that all about? Anyway, what do you do with four different research trips in one little bitty piece of the Grand Canyon? Crazy. Let's say that I've yakked enough. You can turn this in to whomever and say the end. And if you want to talk to me about something that comes to mind, you can always. You know where to find me.

TM: That sounds great, Bruce. I've certainly enjoyed our discussions...are far reaching and definitely fascinating to learn more about solo river running in the Grand Canyon. And I really appreciate your candor and your taking the time to discuss this with me. So with that, I think we'll wrap up part seven. This will be the final, unless we come up with something else to talk about down the road. Grand Canyon oral history interview with Bruce McElya. And my name is Tom Martin. Today is June 19th, 2019. And Bruce, thank you so very much.

BM: Thank you, Tom. I hope to see you downstream.

TM: I look forward to it. You take care.