

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Bruce McElya (BM)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Bruce McElya recounts his Nov. 4, 1992 solo river trip through the Grand Canyon and taking pictures with a large format camera. PART 5

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TM: Today is Tuesday, May 21st, 2019. This is Part 5 of a Grand Canyon oral history interview with Bruce McElya. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning Bruce, how are you today?

BM: Good morning, Tom. I'm doing good, I hope you are, too.

TM: Yes sir. Thank you very much for this Part 5 interview that we're gonna do today. Last time we talked we'd gotten right up to that November 4, 1992 solo river trip. You talked about cameras and how you rigged out the boat. Were you nervous there at Lees Ferry on the 3rd of November? You talked about Tom Workman saying, "You can't do this," and you said, "Yes, I can."

BM: Well, Tom didn't say that. It's legal to do this. He was concerned for me as a friend. We're friends, we like each other. He was concerned, rightly, that I'm going down the river. It's a time of the year when there's not a lot of people down there. He said, "Can you find just one other person to go with you? I'd feel better about it if you could just find one more person to go with you." I said, "Well, Tom, why don't you go down the river? I've never been down a river with you." He goes, "I'd love to do that, but I've gotta work. I gotta work." So anyway, he was a bit concerned about it.

Anyway, the time came. He always helped me. Anytime he could help me with this, he would do it. I always checked out so that I could get an early start. I loved starting early. I knew I wanted to. Just from the very start I knew I wanted to start as early as possible. So he would check me out the day before and give me my permit and I was ready to go at first light. You can't do that anymore. They won't let you. They have a routine that's set in stone and I understand it. If they break that routine, it's gonna foul them up at the park. So you can't start anymore... The earliest you're going to possibly be on the water launch day today is 10 or 11:00 in the morning. 10:00 if everything goes well and you're lucky. That's a lot of hours I'm losing and I don't want to. I want to spend as much time as I can down there on the river. So anyway, I start. I drift down and once I get to the Paria Riffle (that's the first bit of whitewater), it's noisy and the water comes rushing in through the front of the boat. I get hit with cold water and it's like, oh man, I'm in it now. I can't go back. I can't row into the eddy. I'm on my way. This is it.

Once you're below there, it's quiet. There's really nothing. There's nothing going on until you get to the bridge and then you have people looking at you, talking to you. Once you're past the bridge and you can't see the bridge anymore, you are truly on your way. It's just me and the river. It was very surprising to me on the first trip and all the subsequent trips, how different a solo raft trip is. Many things come to

you that will never come on a group trip. If you stay quiet and your boat is not real noisy, making a lot of creaking and crazy noises, the animals come to you. They're tolerant of you, much more tolerant of you, and wonderful things happen. The first thing I remember, and I believe it was the first trip, I came around the corner somewhere in Marble Canyon and over on river right in the heavy shade of some tammies was a deer, a big buck, laying down on the sand. Not asleep, just sitting down on the sand. Five feet in front of the buck is standing a bald eagle. They're just sitting there ever so peacefully. I never knew that deer and eagle communed or that they got along or anything. I've never seen an eagle anywhere near a deer unless the eagle was killing a young doe or something like that. I thought, how astounding is that? I was too far away to shoot a picture. I shot one and you couldn't tell what it was it was so far away. But I had binoculars and that was a good move on my part. Binoculars are a great way to see things. The early Marble Canyon drift was magic. You know, there's that flat stretch in there for miles, there's not even a riffle. It was a cool morning, there was no breeze at all and I didn't have to put an oar... And I didn't, I didn't put an oar in the water because after I'd seen the deer and the eagle, I thought I'm going to stay quiet here and see what else I can see. The red tail hawks would come down close to you, much closer than normal.

Speaking of that, I was in a side canyon down below in that white polished limestone like you see up in National except it was not National Canyon. You would never see this in National, too many people go there. This was a no-name place that I had pulled over to investigate. Never been there before. There are little terraces down low. That's how that rock formation does. I came around the corner and there was a red-tail hawk standing on the lower terrace. We startled each other. I stopped and I stood there and I remembered something one of the guides told me. He said, "If you don't have eye contact with a big bird, they won't readily fly away from you." So I thought, okay, I'll try this. So I stood there and I looked away from the bird. It didn't fly and I slowly, slowly took my pack off and set it down really easy. Everything real slow and easy. Then I got on my belly and I crawled real slowly. This whole thing was about 10 minutes. I crawled over to the bird. I didn't look at it, I didn't look at it. I had no eye contact. That was the deal. I got over close enough to rub the feathers on it just above its talons, to rub those little pin feathers that grow on their legs. And it let me. How cool, this is really great. How wonderful. I've never been this close to a raptor before. So I pulled my hand back thinking bad things could happen here. This thing could rip my hand to shreds with either its beak or its talons without any trouble. So I pulled my hand back slowly and I put both arms and I covered my face and ears in case it felt threatened. Nothing happened, nothing happened, and then finally it got tired of the encounter and it flapped its wings to get away. As it did, it hit me on the head with its wing a couple times until it got moving. As soon as that happened, I turned around and looked and watched it gain a bit of altitude and then drift on out of the canyon, out of sight.

Those are the things that a solo trip will afford you if you open your eyes and let it happen. That's one of the great beauties of it. It's the animal life. They're much more tolerant of you when you're by yourself and if you're quiet on your boat. I saw many eagle on that trip and I hardly ever saw them before. I would see the snowy egrets. They used to buddy up with the blue heron. They were kind of partners/buddies and they would fly around. You don't see that anymore and I don't know why. The egrets left Grand Canyon and I don't know why, but they're gone now. Still see the heron of course but snowy egrets are gone. It's a sad thing. They're beautiful birds, fun to watch, great to be around. But things like that, you know, just really nice, nice things. There was some kind of a large bird that in the lower canyon came to my boat while I was on the water. It sat up on one of the tips of the cataraft tube. Was just standing there looking around, looking around, looking around. It would fly away from the boat, go to shore, do stuff, and then come back to the boat. Back and forth, back and forth. It stayed the

night with me two nights. Two nights this bird stayed in camp with me. Traveled down the river with me and then the third day it was just gone.

Then there was another trip where these two raven adopted me. They stayed in camp with me for two days. They went downriver with me. They really didn't even go to shore. They would get up and fly around the boat once in a while, but basically they stayed with me. When I went into camp in the evening, they were right there. They would sleep in the rocks and I'd sleep in the sand and the next morning they're up there cawing. Well, they'd wake me up. They're cawing and carrying on before I'm ready to get up. So I'd just wake up and get going. Nice little alarm clock, I guess. What are they thinking? I don't know, but I have never seen that behavior with even one other person with me. Only when I'm alone have I seen these things. That's one of the great joys of running a solo raft trip. But the first trip was...it was an eye opener. I learned what to bring and what not to bring and what to be concerned with and what not.

TM: Like what, you got any examples?

BM: Well, I would take food down there that I just didn't really want to spend time cooking. The whole kitchen thing. I went down there like I was on a commercial raft trip and had the best of everything. I ended up throwing food away at the end because many times I was having way too much fun in the canyon to sit down and waste time, seemed like wasting time, in the kitchen preparing food. I would just grab a granola bar and a piece of jerky and go on hiking around, looking at stuff, shooting pictures. So I didn't need that much food and it didn't need to be all that fancy.

Then, yet, another solo trip I thought, I've been a backpacker in this canyon for years. I'm going to run the river as a river runner, but I'm going to eat like a backpacker. I thought that's the logical thing to do here. That was too extreme. That was too far the other end of it. I didn't like that too much. I really wanted a hamburger. I wanted a steak or something. So I moderated my food thing so that I was somewhat satisfied with the food situation, but it wasn't overbearing. On most of your non-commercial trips, everything revolves around the food thing, really. You know, people always want more than they need so they end up having to spend all of this time and effort and stress. I'll often stress in the food preparation kitchen department. I learned to avoid that. It just became second nature. I would eat a big prepared meal if I had time and felt like it. If I was having fun or involved with taking a photograph, I would just blow off the food thing. Sometimes I wouldn't eat until an hour after dark because then I couldn't shoot pictures anymore. Some things I did at night. So often I would eat really late.

I tried to get up early, but I never really could get up like that Canyoneers schedule. When I was working with Canyoneers, I was up at 4:00 in the morning every morning. First light comes at about 4:30. I enjoyed doing that because that meant we could be off the beach and be on our way downstream at 7:00 AM. That is so early. But, you know, that's the best way to see as much as you can if you're out there soon as possible. That was kind of the Canyoneer thing was try to get on the river at 7:00 if you can. 7:30 would be okay. 8:00, something's wrong if we were on the river at 8:00.

So anyway, the first trip the whitewater startled me at first because I'm on a small boat and the water is just hitting me in the face hard. Every little riffle I'm getting wet. It was cold, not miserably cold but uncomfortably cold for the entire trip. I just dealt with it. That's the way it's going to be, I'm learning something here, next time I won't do this to myself. And I didn't. The next time around I had a drysuit and that was the ticket there. Stohlquist made me a... I got their cheaper dry suit with a plastic zipper and it finally failed. Man, if your dry suit zipper fails, you got trouble.

Then you have to duct tape yourself into it every time, etc., etc. That was time consuming and lots of duct tape. When the zipper broke on one of the trips, I didn't have enough duct tape to get in and out of my dry suit every time. And every time I wanted to urinate, I didn't have a pee zipper in that thing either, so I had to rip out of it then as well. It was a time-consuming hassle is what that was. Anyway, it wasn't worth replacing the zipper in it so I got a new drysuit that had one of those brass/steel, you know, good zippers in it. I still have it and I think it'll last me the rest of my life.

But the first trip was a real eye opener. The weather wasn't all that great. That's when I found out that the winter trips photographically are not that productive. There's a lot of haze and cloudiness and the light never really gets down to the river. About half of the places in Grand Canyon in the winter time, the sun never gets there. Maybe more than that. It's cold and I found myself... I was just so cold. I would see some sun up 300 foot above me, I'd pull the boat over and just hike up there and get into the sun for a few minutes 'cause it was so cold. That was a tactic, if the sun came down low enough, just stop, hike up there to it, lay in the sun for 20-30 minutes, warm up, get back down to the boat and carry on.

But it was tough trying to get... I would see things, especially in the gorges. The Vishnu schist is... The fluted schist in the two gorges are the most beautiful forms of rock that I've ever seen anywhere. They're so hard to photograph unless you have a motor that you can hold yourself against the current or move back and forth across the current and shoot pictures of the schist. It's hard to row. It's almost impossible to get to where you want to go in a rowboat. You have to just kinda try it over here and if it's good, fine, if it's not, well that's it. So subsequent trips, I think about five maybe six of my solo trips, no five of my solo trips were motor rig trips, I was motorized. They would let me. Man, I could really shoot some pictures that way. That was the ticket. I'm not a big motor guy, but the fact that it was a great enhancement to the photography, I did it. I hate the smell of it and the sound, everything. I still drifted a lot. I'd just turn everything off and sit there and drift and look at things. You don't have to turn that thing on.

I got down to Phantom. The other nice thing about a solo trip I learned was you're a novelty. When you're alone down there, you are a novelty to everyone else. They go, "What are you doing? Are you by yourself?" That's the first question. It's always the question, "Are you by yourself?" "Yes." "Well, why? Why would you do that? I mean, it seems dangerous. What are you doing down here solo?" And people will help you. They offer you things, they'll help you if you need it. Especially the commercial outfitters. I used to do that...we know each other. They would give me anything that I want. Oftentimes they would lap me two or three times because they're on a seven-day or six-day trip and I'm on an 18-day trip. So they said, "Do you want anything because I'll be down here next week." I said, "Yeah, sure. Bring me something, you know, whatever. Bring me some cookies or some sandwich meat or something. By the time I get down there, I won't have any ice left." "Yeah, sure." Bring me fresh stuff. And they would do it. It was kind of neat. Kind of nice. It's just a community down there. I made a lot of friends. I made more friends from other boatmen while I was on solo trips than I ever did working for Canyoners because we're so busy you don't have time to really strike up a friendship.

So I got to Phantom. I went up to Phantom Ranch to see if Paul... A guy named Paul was working there and I knew him. He got me in. Oh, I forget the fellow's name that was running Phantom down there. A small kind of wiry guy like myself. I'll remember his name in a minute. He was running the place. Anyway, he gave me a warm place to sleep. I slept in their dormitory there up in the attic somewhere and he gave me some bedding and pillow. He says, "Hey, look, just sleep up here for the night, warm up. Stay parked on the boat beach down there. It's no problem." At the time it was not, no one cared. Man, it was great. I got to get up and have a hearty hot breakfast with the rest of the mule hiker folks. It was just so kind of them to help me out that way. I'll never forget them. Warren, Warren was his name. I

don't remember his last name. Warren and Paul both left there and after that I didn't know anyone at Phantom Ranch.

So on down the river I go. I got to Horn Creek and it was... This was the time when they would turn the water down to 3,500 cubic feet per second on the weekends and leave it. They would just leave it there. Then Monday morning they would ramp it up just unbelievably fast. It'd just come screaming up. Well, I got to Horn Creek and I looked at it and my heart just sunk. It was like, "Ah god, I can't run that. I'll kill myself and destroy the boat. I can't go in there. I just can't do it." It was running at 4,500, you're not splitting the horns at 4,500. Not doing it. I thought about it. I looked at it from every angle. I went back upstream, crawled up high, looked at it. There was no way around it. This thing was going to eat my lunch. I think it must have been a Sunday, so I just curled up in a ball and went to sleep there at Horn Creek frightened, truly frightened. I got up the next morning and it's still evil but the water starts coming and when it comes, it comes fast. Pretty soon that hole started filling in somewhat. Filling in, filling in. I thought, well, you know, the longer I wait, the better it gets. I waited and waited and then I walked up high again to look over at the horns 'cause you can't see anything at river level. I went down below the rapid, walked all the way down below and looked up at it to see if I could get through those horns, what it was. Well, finally, there was enough water that I thought, yeah, yeah, I can get through the horns now I don't even need to go over there on the right. It's still big over there, it's always big over there. We trashed a Canyoneer boat over there one day. It wasn't even low water. I don't remember who was driving, but it's just luck of the draw. That second wave hit the boat just right and it surfed it all the way over and slammed it down on those rocks on river right. Tore up a lot of aluminum on the bottom of the boat and ripped a tube up that couldn't be repaired on the river. Outrigger tube had one bad chamber 'cause it had a giant rip in it. Man, it was a bad hit and that was a big motor rig it did that to. What's it gonna do to me...even worse. So anyway, I went up and I looked at it and I thought I think I can get through there. Split the horns. I did and got through it fine. It's bigger than it looks because you can't see how wide the chute is until you're looking at it.

When you're on the shore, everything is oblique and the angles are bad. You can't judge, really, the distance. You can try, but you might make a mistake. You really can't judge those distances. It was a great run, got through Horn, but Hermit was a monster. I got to Hermit and I looked at it. I already know what it looks like, but I wanted to look again. That fifth wave was... The flow must've been about 16-, 18- cause that's when Horn Creek is at its meanest. It was cresting and breaking. It was a breaking wave at the top. I sat there and counted it. It was 17 seconds between the times when that fifth wave would just come crashing in on itself and explode in your face if you happen to be there. It'd just be bad news. I thought, well, I can't time it. I thought about how I would time it. But you can't do that. You can't time the fifth wave. It was a thought, but you can't do it. So anyway, I got up there to it and it didn't quite blow up in my face, but it was ready almost. The boat stopped and it shuddered and the water hit me so hard in the face and chest it knocked the air out of me. I couldn't hold my air in. I thought my ribs were broken from the hydraulics of that. I thought, uh-oh, uh-oh, I'm going over backwards is what it felt like, but you can't tell because you're underwater. I mean, the front of that boat is under the water. Well, it finally came through and when it did...when it let go, there was so much force that the boat squirted out the top of the wave at number five and the boat was completely out of the water.

It just shot it like a bullet over the top of this wave and then it slammed down on the backside. You could just hear the pow when that rubber hit the water. I thought, oh my god, that was too hard of a hit. That was way too hard. But I got through it and, you know, it was very exciting on the other side of it. But had I flipped end for end, it would have not been very exciting at all. So anyway, the whitewater was really eye-opening in a small boat like that, especially rowing it from very front of the raft. You hit everything; everything hits you. I've seen cataraft guys row from the back and I don't know how they

control their boat when they do that. It'd be a drier ride of course if you didn't flip it, you can't control the nose way back there. So anyway, different strokes, of course, no pun intended.

The rest of the gorge rapids were big, pushy, powerful things. I had never experienced them four inches off the water in a little small boat. I'd had always been on that 40-foot monster Canyoneer rig and that thing settles most every wave down. There's nothing really to hit you very hard in one of those. But a different story, very big different story. I began to understand about kayakers. Man, they must really have a wild ride in there. It's big water, high volume water, a lot of it, and makes big waves. So I got through the gorge and I got down to... I went on down to Hance, I think. No one around. I did a layover there, just, you know, I was jittery...

TM: Sorry. So this is down to Crystal or to Bass?

BM: Oh, oh, let's see. Let's see. Yeah. Hermit, Crystal...I ran all the...I ran the Gems all the way down to Hance. No, no, no. I stopped at a place called 104-mile. There used to be a camp there.

TM: Shady Grove, something like that?

BM: Ah gosh, I don't know the names. I just remember 104-mile. Small place and beautiful, beautiful. What I discovered was that I truly love camping anywhere in the inner gorge. The water flows through there with authority. You can feel it. You can feel that water just moving the ground below you. You can feel it in your chest. There's something about the power of the water in the gorge there that is appealing. The camp at 104-mile was just real pleasure. I could have stayed there another day I guess just enjoying the power of the river. It was great, really wonderful feeling. That's another thing about Grand Canyon that you find out is no matter what... If you have a cold or the flu when you start one of these trips, by day two you're feeling pretty good. By day three, you're pretty much over it. You're well. The canyon does that. It heals you. Every time I went down there with a sniffle or a cold or something, it was just a matter of a few days and wasn't even in my thoughts anymore. It was gone. I'm left with possibly a little bit of weakness from being sick, you know, but it doesn't last down there. It's a really wonderful healing place. I'd live down there forever if they would let me. I would, I could live down there and stay in the Grand Canyon forever. I just can't imagine ever becoming tired of it. There're a few people out there that got to live that dream, not in Grand Canyon. There's this fellow named Glade Ross. He knew where he wanted to be up there on the Green River. He finally got his spot and he stayed there. I don't think he left until he retired. Don't know if he's still even with us, but...

TM: He is. How did you know Glade? How'd you meet him?

BM: I went to run the Green River and he was there.

TM: Gates of Lodore?

BM: Yes. I'd heard about him somewhere in a book or something. So it was lively conversation. I wanted to talk to him about anything I could. He was a genuinely interesting, fun guy to be around. He just had this snow-white silver hair. He looked like a deity or something almost. He was so much fun to be around and he knew everything about everything down there. I was pumping him about, well, tell me places I can go that regular folks may not go. He had a few ideas for me. We all have our little secrets down there in our rivers. Some of them we will never tell anyone about just 'cause we want to have at least one secret. But he told me a few things and I had a great trip. I was on a solo trip down there, too, and he didn't like that idea much. He warned me about a couple of places. He said, "I want you to wait until somebody comes along before you go do that." I said, "Alright Glade, I'll wait. I'll wait there." And I

did. Some other people got in trouble there, but I didn't. Ended up staying there anyway trying to get these other people off the rocks. They got stuck on something, couldn't get them off, so everybody pulled over trying to get them off. Anyway, it was... I liked that river. I liked the Gates of Lodore. It's a nice place. Enjoyed it. I couldn't get a permit for Grand Canyon, so I thought, well, I'll go there. It was good, it was good. It wasn't good enough to commit my life to in photography or whatever but it was sure a nice place. I really like it.

TM: To get a chance to go boating. Yeah. So 104-mile... I did want to ask you, how much film did you bring on that November 1992 trip? How much 4x5 film?

BM: Let me think. 64 sheets. Had 32 holders, 64 sheets. I shot two of everything, at least two frames of everything.

TM: So how many photos are on a sheet?

BM: One.

TM: Okay. So this is 64 photos, 4x5 photos.

BM: Actually 32 pictures.

TM: Okay. Because you were taking two of everything.

BM: Right.

TM: Now, this trip was a 40-day trip, so you're really limited to a picture a day or less.

BM: That's right. You have to be picky. And I was. I knew what was down there. I'd been by those places many times. I thought I knew where I wanted to shoot. That doesn't afford you the... There's two kind of photographs that you can shoot. The well-planned, well conserved photograph where you know the time of the day, the time of the year, what the light's going to be, where you want to put your tripod poles and when you want to shoot it. Then there is the off-the-cuff photograph that just appears out of nowhere and you rush to get your equipment ready to possibly shoot that. You have to make room for both of them. Arguably the most famous black and white photograph in history is Moonrise over Hernandez, New Mexico by Ansel Adams. He is most known for his very deliberate, well-considered photographs. He was the master of preconception. This photograph was one of those off-the-cuff pictures. So the most famous picture in the world, he caught it out of the corner of his eye, slammed on the brakes, shot a couple of pictures, and then went home. Had no idea what he'd photographed and it turns out to be the most famous black and white landscape in history. So you have to allow for those things to happen. Those are the hardest because you have to be attentive and be ready. And in Grand Canyon, it's not stopping your car. You're trying to stop a raft in current if you see something. And many things go by you that you think, boy, that was a very cool looking scene there, but I missed it and that's it. It's water under the bridge.

TM: On the other trips that you did, was 64 sheets...did you stick to that or did you change that?

BM: No, I ran out of film on that first trip. I had the view camera and I had a Mamiya M645 roll film camera. I did not run out of roll film. The roll film camera allows me to shoot from the boat. Same thing: you got to get your gear out, stop what you're doing, unstrap the box, open the box, get the camera ready, take a meter reading, and shoot a picture. I found that to be the very hardest thing I was trying to do down there was shoot from the river. That's really technically difficult. Anymore it's easier. The digital

cameras now, you can just hang them on your neck. Don't ever take it off and boom, you got it. You see it, you shoot it. It's a little easier now. I like the bigger format and so I try to do that when I can. Yes, I ran out of film on the first trip.

TM: Where did you run out of film? Did you still have film when you got to 104-mile?

BM: Yes. Oh, yes. I ran out of film. I saved two sheets for emergency just in case there was some colossal image that just came out of nowhere. I thought I should save two sheets no matter what. So I ran out about... Except for those two sheets, I ran out of film at about... I shot a picture at Lava Falls, so I ran out at Lava Falls. Shot my last sheet. It was sad like, oh man, I need some more film. But that's a big deal because film holders take up a lot of space. I didn't actually buy more holders. What I did was I purchased a film changing light tent. This is a little bitty dome. It's two and a half feet square dome tent and out of each side of the dome tent are sleeves. You put each arm into the sleeves and those sleeves give you access to the inside of the dome. What you do is first you open this tent up. It's a double tent to keep the light out. Double zippers, double everything. You open it all up and you put your film in there, your box of film, and then you put your holders in there. Then you zip it all up, and then you put your arms in there and blindly you have to take the old film out and put it in a special box of film that's been exposed. And you hope you don't get these mixed up.

And then you get the new film and reload your holders. There are problems with that. The biggest problem is it's a dusty environment down there and you introduce grit. This light silty grit gets into everything, everything. Your cameras, your holders, everything. So once you start changing film on the camera, you're now introducing grit and it ends up on your film when you're shooting a picture. The way that manifests itself once you've developed the film is you have these little bitty pinholes is what they look like. Where the grit was, no light hits it there so the film is clear. What that amounts to is extra time dust-spotting prints. I don't know what you know about black and white, but the last part of a black and white print is you lay it out flat with a magnifying glass and you take special retouching fluid that is different like from light to dark and you retouch all the little imperfections in the print that exist on the negative. What exists on the negative gets transferred to the print except bigger. You can't see it on the negative maybe cause it's so small, but once you make a print, you exaggerate that imperfection, that dust spot. I call it dust spots. You sit there and you carefully put pigment onto the print until you have fixed all of the dust spots. That was the biggest chore about changing film on the river was all the silt and stuff. Not lots of, it's not like you throw a handful of dirt at it. It's just a little, you know, you can't avoid it. You can't stop it. You keep as clean as you can and then you get it down as good as you can possibly get it and then you change the film knowing now that you're going to have problems. That's part of the game. If you want to keep shooting and you don't have room for an infinite number of film holders, which no one does, that's what you do, you change film while you're on the river. I got used to doing that. Got pretty good at it. I would do it late at night, just make sure that no light could get through the tent. And I did it inside of my own tent so that it wouldn't stir up dust and stuff.

TM: Okay. That makes sense. Yeah.

BM: That's part of the gig. The river is very hard on equipment. I imagine there's a ton of Nikons at the bottom of that river if you ever drained it. Find some interesting trash in the bottom of Grand Canyon, I'm sure.

TM: Okay, so you got to 104-mile. The big water is up above you. There's a couple more rapids down below to worry about. Did you move down to Bass from there and spend some time there or where did you go from there?

BM: I did, yeah. I ran...well, something caught my eye on river left. I can't remember if it was above 104 or below it. One of the Gems, there's a little rapid right there, number two or three. The sculpture of the rock in that side canyon just caught my eye. And all those years I had never seen it. I saw it once and you have to be at the right angle, at the right light to even see this. It's fluted schist. Really beautiful. It's not Emerald. It might be Emerald. There's a little side canyon up there. So anyway, I pulled over there and boy, it's real touchy, man. I mean, the current's fast in there. If you fall, it's real steep, slippery rock and everything. Got up there and shot a picture or two of what may be the most beautiful fluted schist I've ever seen in Grand Canyon. Really spectacular. Hiked as far up into that canyon as you can go, which isn't very far, and shot a few frames. I think that was above 104. I'll tell you, 104 is a nice place and I wish it was still there. That would just be a wonderful camp for me on any of my solo raft trips. It's a great place to stop and break up that whole run through the gorge. I just love it in the gorge. I really like to stay in there as long as I can but there's not many camps in there. 104 was one of them. I pulled over there in the last 10 years, there's nothing left. I didn't feel like I could camp there. I could. I could sleep on my boat and just stay tied up. But I can do that anywhere. So yeah, I stayed at 104 and then went on down to Bass. I figured out a way to get my cameras over to the little waterfall there. What is that called? Shinumo?

TM: Yes.

BM: No. Is it Shinumo Creek?

TM: Yeah, where the water is. I mean, you can't camp there, but you can pull in. There's a small little mouth there.

BM: Yeah. I rigged myself to where I could row the eddy and get all my camera gear out, shoot pictures there all day, and then come back to Bass Camp. Yeah. Yeah. It was really cool. It's a trick. You got to kind of tie your boat off and then... You've got to tie in the rocks before you get there, chock into the rocks, and then let yourself go on down there to the little sandy beach. If you don't have the rope to pull yourself back, you're never going to do it. You can't row hard enough.

TM: Right. What a clever idea!

BM: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I sat there and looked at it for a while and thought about it. I thought, how can I do this? I know what's there, but I don't really want to walk all the way the hell up there and drop down into the creek and walk all the way the hell back down there. You know, get down through the waterfall and then shoot a picture when it's only a hundred feet away from me. So how do I do this? I looked at it, looked at it, looked at it. I carry a bunch of chocks and things, rock climbing gear. I learned about that from Canyoners 'cause we had to have those things to tie off to the rocks with. So I got an assortment of things I thought... Wire nuts and this and that that would do it for me. I rowed over there until I thought I shouldn't go any further 'cause if I did, the current would catch me and then I'd be committed. My camp is still up there and if I can't get back, I'm screwed. So I stopped and chocked up...had a nice double chock, one pulling against the other. It looked pretty secure. I pulled it at every angle just in case the wind blew the boat the other way. I thought, I think I'm safe. I think it's going to hold no matter what. So I slowly let the rope out, the current caught it and drug it on down to the beach. Went and shot some pictures. It was pretty hard pulling the boat back. It was harder than I thought. I doubt that I'll ever do that again. But to do it again, you'd want a two-to-one Z-drag on that. If I did it again, I'd do that. But you don't know 'til you try it.

TM: Or the little rope puller.

BM: It was way too hard, way too hard. But I had to do it. It was like, oh god, this is hard, man. I don't know if I can pull myself up here or not. But I had to because my kitchen and camp gear is up there. Like, no, no man, look, I got to get up there. I have no choice here. So anyway, I wore out my shoulders and arms trying to do that. And it wasn't worth it, actually, in the long run it was not worth doing that and I won't do it again. If I do that, I'll camp there, then drift over there, shoot the pictures, and then go on downstream. It's the only thing that makes sense. Anyway, Bass Camp is a nice place. It's pretty. There're some things to shoot there. One of the really nice photographs that I've ever taken down there I got at Bass Camp. The stars... It opens up, it's very pretty and there's no real light pollution, at least not back then. You have to go a ways into the canyon to get away from all the light pollution. There, in fact, is only a few miles in Grand Canyon where you're away from it, truly away from the light pollution and then you get back into it as you go on down. But it's pretty clear at Bass. So I set up and I wanted to get the stars streaking through the night sky with all the canyons in the back of the scene. I noticed that my tent was kind of in the way there, and I couldn't really move the camera around and get the shot I wanted. So I just left it there and I went back to my tent. I opened the camera up so now its exposing and it's going to expose the film for about eight hours. So I set it up, I hit the shutter, and then I walked back to my tent. I thought, well, if the tents going to be here, let's let it be here. So I turned the flashlight on inside of the tent for about eight seconds. I said, well, that ought to be enough to make it show up in the picture. And it did. It worked out to be a really fun, interesting photograph. I like that picture. I really do.

TM: So did you have a timer on that to turn off after eight hours or did you have to set an alarm to get up and get out there and close the shutter?

BM: Well, that's a good question. No, it does not have a timer. The timer is the alarm clock in my tent. So I set it for what time I thought there could not possibly be any morning light which was about... I thought 4:00 would be safe. I turned it on at about...it was dead dark at 8:00. So I turned it on at 8:00. When you do that, you just... It's easy to do on a view camera. You can set it on a setting called...it's not B, but it's down below the rest of the numbers. When you hit it, the shutter stays open and when you hit it again, the shutter closes for you.

TM: Okay. But you've got to get out there before dawn, before first light.

BM: Yes, you do. So the alarm goes off at 4:00. I stumble out to the camera. It's cold, I'm grumpy, and like, guy, why do I have to do this? I just want to be in my warm sleeping bag. So I get up, get out, put the dark slide back into the holder, and I just left it. I didn't do anything else. Just put the dark slide back in there. Well, I closed the shutter first. Then I put the dark slide back in there and went back to my tent and slept. I slept-in that day; I was laying-over anyway. I wonder what that's going to look like. That's a one-shot deal, you don't get to shoot two of those. I could have shot one the next night, but I didn't. I got home, developed it and it was just a charming looking photograph. People like it. Other people like it, too. You never know, things just come up like that. Like, what can I do here? Think about it a while, something comes up, shoot it.

So Bass Camp on down, I'd have to read. I haven't read back through the notes on trip one. I just remember it as a cold...it was cold. I didn't warm up the whole trip. Did not warm up. Got a little bit more sun down... Once you hit Separation, you get pretty good sun after that. That felt really good.

TM: So let's talk about Lava a little bit. I mean, even below Bass, right away is Walthenberg. Once you clear Walthenberg, there's miles and miles of flatwater all the way down to Upset. So there's a huge run of 40 miles. Well, you've got Bedrock in there and that's a little challenging around 135-mile, something

like that. How did Bedrock and Upset work for you? That's the last two big rapids before you get to Lava Falls.

BM: Yeah. They're worth talking about, aren't they? Bedrock is just Bedrock. Bedrock actually has a little thing there, as you know, called the Doll House. You familiar with the Doll House?

TM: I am, but please describe it to us.

BM: So, well, the Doll House is a giant piece of resistant schist on the river. It wasn't a boulder that washed down, this is Vishnu schist that has been worn away by the river. At some point during higher water years, the flow there was such... You know, the currents and eddies do different sculptural things to the schist and in this one spot it hollowed out this big beautiful room. On the inside of it it's like a museum of beautiful sculpture. It's all around you. It's above you, it's all besides you. On the floor of it is sandy, it's a sandy kind of floor, and there's openings up through the top of it where the water eroded through it and put windows into it. It's a charming little place. If you're not paying attention and all you're doing is scouting the rapid, you'll miss the Doll House and that would be a shame. Everyone should see the Doll House. It's a cool place. I never got any really good pictures there, but I think it has potential. One day I think I can get a nice photograph of it. So anyway, the run of it, ugh, that's a dangerous place. If you go left you're in trouble and trying to get right of this rock is hard work. You have to start at the top and there's guard rocks on the right hand side of the river that keep you from easily sneaking...doing an easy sneak run of that rapid. So you try and sneak in there and get your tail just as close to those guard rocks as you can and then pull for all your worth. Pull right, pull right, go right, go right, stay right, get right and pull. And still, the current's taking you right into this rock. It looks like you're going to slam it at 20 miles an hour. You don't. The water pillows up onto this thing right as it gets to it. You slow down enough to go ahead and just turn on around backwards. I've hit it before, but not hard. I haven't slammed into it. Others have and so forth and broken oars and things. But if you work it hard enough, you can get around Bedrock without too much damage or not even hitting it at all. I usually don't hit it. Sometimes I scrape it a bit, but I get through it. But the first one was, ah, it was terrifying. I thought it was going to take me left and I'd never seen the left side. I don't know what's there and I don't know how to deal with it. I would probably get pinned or flipped if I went left, because I don't know what's over there. So that scared me.

TM: Did you not get the idea to pull in below and walk back up and spend some time looking at that?

BM: At the left run? I never did.

TM: Well, next time go over there because there's some gorgeous rock in there.

BM: Oh yeah?

TM: Yeah. So ponder that one.

BM: Is it something you would...you take your raft over there or just your person over there?

TM: Well, once you've exited the bottom, there's a little bit of kind of calm water with all this air bubbles coming up from below and then you just pull on over to the left shore, float on down, don't have to work it real hard, and then tie up and walk back. So next time, put it on the next time...

BM: Never done that.

TM: ...to-do list. Okay?

BM: Yeah, I will. That's a part I've never seen and I want to see it. I've seen YouTube videos of it, of course, there's millions of those and boy did they have trouble over there.

TM: Glen and Bessie Hyde, 1927 went left and spent a long time getting their sweep scow out of there, but I digress.

BM: Oh, okay. They did it then, too bad, I'm sorry.

TM: Well, they got out and they kept going, so it was alright. Of course, below Bedrock is Dubendorf, another rapid, and then 150-mile. But along that way, there is Deer Creek Falls. Did you shoot a picture there? I'm kind of curious to know how you were thinking to frame that area through your camera?

BM: Well, Tapeats... You know, I'd been to all these places as hikers, of course. So the first place was Tapeats Creek. I hauled those cameras up there, that trail, and that was not helping my back situation at all. I already wrecked my back working for the motor rigs and this whole business with carrying a 60-pound pack was not a good idea, but I did it anyway.

TM: Where did you want to go in Tapeats Creek? So from the river in those days, you could camp right in the mouth and then there's a trail that goes up the creek right side through kind of a broken-down area. There's a switchback up and then you can walk more or less level into the side canyon with a lot of water running in it. Where did you want to go? You can go for miles up there to capture that. I'm curious to know what you were looking for.

BM: Well, Tapeats is different than Deer. Tapeats, the drainage there...Thunder River comes together with Tapeats Creek and goes on down. It drops really a lot and it's torrential. I would describe the flow in there as being torrential. It's noisy. It's fast. It's hard to find a place to cross. I remember crossing it several times just 'cause the trail was better on the other side. Had to get my pack and cameras across that creek. The current in there is pretty strong and it's just beautiful stuff, oh man. The whole drainage...the entire length of it is just beautiful. It's just beautiful stuff. I didn't have time to hike all in between those rocks. But I shot a few pictures in the drainage: Tapeats Creek as it approaches the river, that section of it, and then I went up to Thunder River and shot pictures there.

TM: Wow. That's a long walk with a heavy pack. Okay.

BM: Yes, it is. My goal and dream, and I never have done it with the cameras, is at Thunder River there's a real dicey move around a jutting, pointy rock in order to get around the corner and then go up into the two holes and go back into the cave. I've done it just with me, but I never had the cajones to try it with the pack. I felt really pretty uncomfortable doing it on foot. I saw other people do it and I knew that it was possible. I watched their move: they'd hang on and they would swing themselves around that rock. With enough momentum, you have a good foothold when you get around to the other side. That's the trick. I watched a few people do it, and they said, well, here's how you do it. I'll tell you what, I did it a couple of times backpacking and it was river runners that showed me the trick. They said, "Here's how you do it. You hang onto this one and there's another handhold on the other side. You pull yourself around and you get a little momentum and got a foothold on the other side. And you've got this rock, you can't see it, but it's there. You grab that and boom, you're there." This one boatman guy said, "Look, I'm going to go around and then I'm going to be right there. As soon as you come around the corner, I'm going to grab some part of you so no matter what happens, you're coming." I'm like, "Okay." So I did it on a leap of faith and it wasn't as hard as I thought it was going to be. Fear of the unknown is way bigger than what's really there. I didn't know what was around that corner. I couldn't see it. But it's okay. It's not too bad. I wanted to go up into the cave and maybe shoot some pictures. But I never...and at this

point in my life, I'm not gonna do it. Not gonna do it. I'm 68 and one little stumble right there, its death. You're not scratched up or broken up, you're dead. It's a long fall.

TM: There's enough other wonderful places to hang out that you can let you that one go by. Yeah.

BM: It'll keep. Somebody else can shoot that.

TM: There you go.

BM: It won't be me. So anyway, I like Deer Creek. At one time I hiked up all the way to the mouth of Tapeats. That's pretty far, too. I ran into Mark O'Neil. He was up there doing patrol one day and he hiked up there. He has a routine, man. He goes up there and they take a little raft into the back of Tapeats and they go all the way back in. They've got waterproof flashlights and stuff. They start swimming and crawling upstream through the caves that empty into the lake. I didn't know there was anything back there, but there is. There's more to explore. But, you know, this is stuff I won't do. I'm not a caver and I don't have the equipment or the knowledge or the skill. Its great stories. I love hearing them. I'm just not going to do it. That's all. I like the area.

TM: Yeah. So I'm going to try to see if we can in this interview get to the takeout. So I'm going to scoot you along a little bit down the river. Upset, in Canyoneers 40-foot motor rig is no problem. But in a 16-foot little row boat, it's a little more dicey. How did that work out?

BM: Well, I've heard all the stories and the pie plates down there and Upset's a killer. It's a smoking hole and the rivers in the middle of it. And the sneak right run is the way to go. The first trip I was able to sneak right of that monster. Had a good run but my arms were just toast at the end of that and all of my subsequent runs of Upset. That's the only way to run Upset. You go into the tongue on the left, right straight into the V-waves, and you run the rapid. And that's it. That's the safest fun ride. I've never had a problem over there. I'll never try and sneak right again, ever again. It's not worth it and the water on the right is no bigger than... Certainly not as big as Hermit or anything like that. There's nothing to get you over there unless you go too far left. Excuse me. If you go too far left, it's gonna slam you into the wall. But if you take the tongue in where all the water is, the fast, big water is into the tongue, just like any other rapid, that's where I go and it's a good run. Good run. Also, I was going to mention to you, this is worth knowing I think for every boatman: the run at Horn Creek, you can split the horns with an 18-foot Domar down to 8,000. Most people don't know that or not willing to believe that. But if you ship your oars properly so that they can't hook or grab 'cause it's going to scrape – you're going to scrape going through. But you don't get stuck. You just kinda rumble through there. Did you know that you can run it down at 8?

TM: Oh yeah. Yeah. And smaller boats will run it a little lower than that. But anyway, I digress. Yeah, there's...

BM: Okay. Got that. So that's worth knowing for boatmen who want to go down there. So now I'm down below... I did Deer Creek...

TM: So did you run Upset on the right that first time, and then the left on the subsequent trips?

BM: Yes

TM: And then before you get to Lava and the big bend down at Whitmore, it's kind of cold as Marble Canyon. There's not a lot of sun in there.

BM: That's true.

TM: It's a cold area. Then you get to Lava and you can see the sun downstream and it's cold. Did you run into any other trips on this trip? Were there any other boaters down there?

BM: I don't know if I did. You know, I don't remember seeing anyone on that trip. I might have had one encounter. It would have been one... No commercial trips down there, of course. There might've been one trip that I saw. I'll have to go read through the notes, but it would have... What I recall, if it happened, was I ran into a trip and they passed me. We didn't stop. I was on shore and they rowed by and we just waved and that was it. That's all I saw. I saw a lot of animal life though. Boy, the animals just...the beaver. The beavers, man, and the otters. Oh man, what crazy creatures. They were all over the place. There was this one place where it was beaver everywhere. All day. All night. Where was it? Cardenas. Beavers everywhere at that time. They were fun, they were fun. They'd come around.

TM: They were chewing down the willow there. Those big willows, they would chew those 2-foot diameter trees.

BM: That's right. I think they were logging them. I think they had a contract with Burlington Northern to cut the trees down for money. So let's see, the trip is going okay, but I'm getting... I'm tired. By the time I get to Lava Falls I'm tired and I'm running out of food and what have you. But I think the falls was...I think it was running 10 or 12 when I went through there that day and oh my gosh, I got hit so hard. I knew it was going to happen. There was no left run. I really didn't know how to run it left over there. Didn't seem like enough water to run it left. But I have a little bit different of a run in Lava Falls. At certain water, you gotta run it right, really, so I thought I had to run it right. What I do is I come down the bubble line and about 50 feet before I get there, I angle my nose at the ledge hole and I row towards it for all I'm worth. I just row as hard as I can. Row hard because the current is now picking you up and it's going to take you right. So what I do is I like to hit the edge of that hole. I hit it pretty hard, it turns the boat up pretty smartly. But the good part about it is I tend to end up on the left side of the second hole down there, which is pretty big. That's a nice place to be, nice place to be. If I do it right, I slam the left side of the ledge hole there and that spins the nose around, then come the two V-waves. But at that point, I'm drifting. I'm already a bit left and I miss the meat of that second hole. First hole I seem to hit it no matter what. The second hole, little left of, a little easier, and then I don't even have to worry about the pillow rock. It's not a factor. Just not a factor. I don't have to row away from it or nose into it or get scratched up. So that's my run. But if I can run it left, of course everybody runs it left if they can. The last trip... Okay, well you don't want to talk about that yet, but I had a very funny thing happen on the last trip in Lava Falls.

I made this really... Something's always gonna... There's always seminal moments on these trips. I don't care, it never gets boring. It's never the same. It's never even anywhere similar. They're not, they're not. These are individual adventures that could have been anywhere else in the world. They're so different from each other. I thought they would kind of settle down and be similar, but they're not. Every solo raft trip is monumentally different than every other one of them. It's just never even close. Nothing is ever close. And you know, the old adage, it's true. Every time you go there, the river is not the same and you're not the same. So, of course it's going to be different but it's radically different for me down there. So once below Lava, boy, my stress level goes down and life gets a whole lot better cause there's nothing to get me except down there below Diamond Creek, that one rapid.

TM: 232, Killer Fang. Yeah.

BM: Yeah, Killer Fang, man. So yeah, nothing to get me, nothing to worry about. I just really kick back, relax, just look around, shoot a picture if I see something. I don't worry about it if I don't. I'm just enjoying life, man. Life is good below Lava Falls, it really is. I like it down there. There's plenty to see and it's beautiful and the water's moving. It really moves faster than you think. You can make 25 miles in a day in the winter down there below the falls. It's fast current. So I try to stop, I like...

TM: Were you late for time? You had 30 days to Diamond and you were going to do 10 days on to Pierce to the lake there by Scorpion Island.

BM: Yeah.

TM: So by the time your 27th or 28th day was going to be done, how far up toward Lava were you?

BM: Gah, I don't remember. I still had a week or so after Lava Falls.

TM: Okay. Alright. So you had some ample time. Great.

BM: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I didn't want to rush through any of it if I didn't have to and I wasn't. I didn't feel rushed anywhere at all, ever, on that trip. I had lots of time. I had to slow myself down actually, because I didn't want to get out of there 10 days early. Didn't want to do that. That'd defeat the whole idea. So I've got plenty of time below Lava Falls. I stop in here and there. 205-mile is a pretty neat place. You can actually run that rapid over and over.

TM: In the eddy, yeah.

BM: Yeah. So I ran it three times one day. We did it in Canyoneer boats so I thought, oh, let me try it on a rowboat. It works fine. So ran that one three times just for fun. I like camping... It seemed like I like camping at Pumpkin Spring just cause there's some cool schist around there. Real cool. It's not schist. It's...

TM: Tapeats. Tapeats sandstone right there on the left with the little blow holes in it.

BM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Tapeats, is that what that is?

TM: Yep.

BM: Well, yeah, it's good looking stuff.

TM: Mm. They're nicely fluted there.

BM: Tapeats, it doesn't usually do that. Sandstone usually breaks apart. It doesn't flute, but it does right in there. I think the sandstone must've been built a little differently or something. I don't know the geology of it.

TM: It's a very funny little spot where within the scope of just a half a mile, you see that. You don't necessarily see it back up where the Tapeats first comes out by the Little Colorado River because the river is a little wider there. Down at Pumpkin Springs, the rivers much narrower and much more forceful. And at high water, the river goes up over the top of the Tapeats and then sheets back down. It's a very fascinating, unique little bit of geology right there that makes that happen.

BM: Yeah. Yeah. It must be something unusual cause you don't see it very often. You're right, it's only a little stretch in there where the fluting of that sandstone happens. Anyway, I like that area. It's real pretty. There's a few things in your book that I have been meaning to go explore because you think highly of them in the book and I've never even been there. But every time I've tried to go, there's somebody else there. So obviously people are reading your book.

TM: So much to see and do. Yeah.

BM: I'm thinking, god, everybody's reading that Tom's book. Now they're going there all the time. I can't get in here. So one of these winter trips, I'll get my... There's something on river left down there. It's a canyon that you like. The last three times I've gone there, I've been aced out by somebody that's been laying over. They're laying over there. So it must be pretty good if they're laying over. So anyway, I like that stretch down there. The water flows through pretty good. Even if it's windy, you don't have to work too hard at it.

TM: So the last rapid of consequence down there is 232-mile, Killer Fang falls, where the current all gangs up and heads to the right side of the river where there are these fins of schist there and you've got to miss them. At high water, you don't even know that they're there, you go right over them. At low water, they stand up like sore thumbs and you can bump into them and go around them on the right. But at certain waters they are there to destroy the bottom of your boat. Did you ever have any encounters in the Canyoneers big boat with the fins over there on the right at 232?

BM: Well, everybody has. The answer is yes. The answer is yes for anybody you talk to. You run that river enough and you're going to get sliced up or banged up at Killer Fang. That's just it. That's the reality of it. You can't hit it at high water every time. That's how it is. You gotta go over there. Those Canyoneer boats, that's a pretty tight little shoot there at 232 and you don't have a lot of time to make time left to get away from the fangs. It's called Killer Fang. If you look at that, and when you're scouting it you see this, there's a series of fangs that stick up out of the water and they're pointed upstream. It's like they're there trying to get you. It's like fingers that are aimed at you. They're very sharp and they want to get you. You have to miss those things. If you go in there, it will just tear your boat to shreds, just like a razor blade. And so, yes, I've had my troubles in there more than once. The water comes in the morning and by about noon it's gonna be as good as it's gonna get. So I have arrived there before and looked at it and didn't want to run it so I just camp there. The beauty of that camp...and that is a beautiful place. Some of the most beautiful fluted schist I've ever seen is on that right side of Killer Fang rapid. Golly, that stuff is gorgeous, spectacular stuff. So I'm occupied with that. I can just be among those rocks for days and not get bored with it. They're so pretty. So I get there, I can't run the rapids, so I get the cameras off the boat, shoot a picture, what the heck, and camp there if you have to. It's a hard walk. It's not a pleasant camp at all. You've got to walk up through the schist, steep, slippery, to get your gear up it. You can camp a few people up there. I don't know, is that considered a camp?

TM: It's pretty grim, but it could be done. I'm sure it has been done. You did it.

BM: Yeah, I did it. More than once. In the old days they had holiday low water. Remember that?

TM: Yes.

BM: They called it holiday low water and it's the lowest water that the dam ever releases because the holidays required less power generation than any other time of the year. The lowest water I ever ran was 2,500 cubic feet per second. Oh man. What a stupid thing that was. We got to Hance when they did that and all the boats stopped. The dories couldn't go through there, the motor rigs couldn't go through

there. There were all these boats piling up. Ted Hatch, I guess, got all mad at everybody and called Orin and said, "Tell them boys to turn that water back on. Everybody's stuck here. This is stupid. Turn the water back on." I guess they did but everybody got jammed up there for a day. Pretty big party there at Hance. Anyway, I digress. I'm going down a river and I get past...let's see...where were we? Pumpkin Springs...Killer Fang. Killer Fang. Yes, I decided it was a holiday low water event and I didn't want to wait there for four days. Two days maybe, but not four. So I ran it. As hard as I tried, I couldn't get far enough left. It looked like I was going to go right of that rock, which would've been instant death. But actually the current will kinda push you off a little left once you get there but it wasn't near enough and I slammed into that top fin. The side of the boat slammed into it hard and it almost threw me off the boat. I bent the oar that I had in the water and it bent the oar that was strapped onto the side of the boat. Man, I couldn't believe it. Two bent oars in one rapid. Stupid. Come all that way and didn't bend an oar or break an oar and then I bend two of them in something I'm not even supposed to have a problem with. Anyway, it is a problem.

TM: You bet. But you got through.

BM: People don't think about it much. I did, but not without damage to my ego and to my boat. So I'm rowing, I've got two sort of straight oars. The other spare oars were not great. So anyway, I got down there and there's not much after that. I hike those lower canyons just 'cause no one else does. Surprise Canyon is a really pretty hike up in there. You have to go long ways and you've done it because you wrote the book.

TM: There's water in there. It's a gorgeous... There's a little Tapeats narrows. Did you get up that far?

BM: Yes, yes, yes. No one really knows that and they don't go there because it's pretty far. I think they get discouraged before they get to the good stuff. That's what I think. But anyway, it's a pretty place back in there. I really like it. There're other places in the western canyon that are, you know, they're just gorgeous. I like it down there. I just like to dawdle around, going from left to right. The schist, the fluted schist down there in the lower canyon is really spectacular. I mean, it is. It's beautiful. I don't know where you get into it. You get into it below Diamond, but I don't remember exactly where. It's below Travertine I think you start really seeing the schist again.

TM: Right. And the trouble is, you get out onto the reservoir back up behind Hoover dam so the fluted schist gets buried pretty fast. There's nice eroded schist, but the really nice fluting that you see last of there at Killer Fang, it's hard to find good fluting from the river downstream of there.

BM: Yes, you're right. All that silting has covered the good stuff. The good stuff, of course, is right down at river level. That's where the good fluting is. There is no more river level down there. It's all filled in, I'm assuming.

TM: So let's run on down to the takeout. This is out on Lake Mead, there's no current, and you have to row the boat to get it to go anywhere. You pass Scorpion Island on the left and you row on over to this big wash that goes right down into the reservoir. And there's a big...

BM: I do a night float.

TM: Oh, do you? Okay. All right.

BM: Yeah. Yeah. Often, I do a night float, not every time, but often. Now if I'm motorized, I don't have to do a night float. I can do anything I want.

TM: Right. Did you night float on your first trip here in '92? Did you night that?

BM: Yes, I did. I night floated and it's a beautiful thing to do. It's great. I love it. It's dangerous. You gotta be careful. I got tangled up in some stuff on the river while I was asleep. It could have been bad, but it wasn't. It didn't hurt me, but it can if you're not careful. You probably shouldn't do that. But, man, it's a pleasant thing to do. We used to do it on the Canyoneer boats. They're so big you can't hardly hurt them. We did night floats a lot with Canyoneer boats. A really fun thing to do.

TM: I'm curious, when you got to the takeout, what were you thinking?

BM: Well, it's a rush of emotions. You know, I just did something so incredible. I wasn't expecting it. It was more than anything I thought it could be. I'm looking back at this and thinking, man, what in the world have I just done? This was just something. Then the reality of it is I have to leave. That's a sad note, but it was a bittersweet. I wasn't really sad. I was just a little sad because it's over, this wonderful thing, this incredible journey, hey, it's over for now. But the thing that's in my mind now is I got a boat, I think I can do this again, and I'm coming back.

TM: So right there at the takeout, you're thinking to do it again?

BM: Oh, yes sir. Mhm. Yes sir. I'm scheming. Before I even derig the boat, my first thought is, okay, alright. Well, let me think what do I do now to go back down the river? What do I got to do here? Okay. I've got the permit system. I've got to fix my boat. I got to drive back to New Mexico. I got to make some money for a year. I got to eat. I got to pay taxes. All these things rushing through my head before I took one strap off that boat. I'm coming back. I am coming back. And for five years I went every year. But now it's three to five years. So yeah, I can't stay away from there, Tom. I can't stay away from it. I couldn't make the conscious decision... You know, at this age I have different things to worry about. Lava Falls is not my problem. Big Red is not my problem. My problem is an impacted wisdom tooth or appendicitis or a kidney stone. These are things that are going to have to... I'm going to have to get choppered out if something like this happens to me. And it's like, now that's the thing that worries me.

TM: So it's age.

BM: Age related stuff. What if I get a kidney stone, which I've had a couple of those. I know what they can do to me. It's like, oh my gosh, what if I develop that in the middle of a river trip? What am I going to do now? I don't know what I'm going to do. I have to think about that. I have to have a contingency plan here. I got to know. I think what I'm going to do about the kidney stones is, I think I'm going to go to that outfit that deals with that and I'm going to have them do a CT scan and tell me if I've got anything moving through that's gonna hurt me. If they see something, you know, hey, let's get that thing out of there before it becomes a problem. I don't know if they can do that, but those are the things that I have to worry about now. It's not the rapids.

TM: It's the age. Yeah.

BM: Yeah, the age.

TM: Well, once again, we've been yik-yakking for an hour and a half here. Maybe this is a good place to wrap up Part 5.

BM: Okay. We can.

TM: Alright. So this will conclude Part 5 interview with Bruce McElya of May 21, 2019. My name is Tom Martin. And Bruce, thank you so very much.

BM: Tom, it's been a real pleasure. The reminiscing is great fun and I look forward to doing this again another day.

TM: Alright. Thanks, Bruce. Hang on for a minute.