

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: John Weisheit (JW)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: In this six-part interview, John recounts swamping river trips in Grand Canyon with Georgie White in the 1980s, collecting Colorado River History, doing river trips for the Bureau of Reclamation Glen Canyon Environmental Impact studies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, writing a book on Cataract Canyon, working with David Brower, and forming Living Rivers. **(Part 2 of 6)**

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TM: Today is Thursday, November 21st, 2019. This is a part 2 Grand Canyon Oral History interview with John Weisheit, and my name is Tom Martin. Good evening, John. How are you tonight?

JW: Just dandy. [Tom laughs.]

TM: Good. Thank you so much for your willingness to carry on with this interview. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

JW: Of course.

TM: Thank you very much. At the end of part 1, it was 1979, 1980. You’d been working in Phoenix on a lot of construction that was happening there. But somewhere in there, you ended up taking a fiberglass boat way up into the headwaters of Lake Mead, up – actually up into the Western End of Grand Canyon, past Separation Canyon, up to Gneiss Canyon. Quite a ways up there against a flow of current. I think you remember – you mentioned you’d camped out in a boat, was high and dry in the morning. And a river trip went by and they were laughing and you thought, “I want to do that.”

JW: Yes.

TM: Can you pick the thread up from there?

JW: Well yeah, I would have to wait. ‘Cause I didn’t have – well, I didn’t know anything. I didn’t even know there were commercial trips or private trips. I just – I mean, I knew people were going down the river. I didn’t understand how it worked back then, but, you know, I just logged into my mind I’m gonna do that someday. And, you know, I put it to rest at the time, and sure enough, it wasn’t very much longer after that.

It starts with my parents. They had very good friends, Alan, and Mimi, and Paul, and they did lots of things together, outdoor things. And they did do a commercial river trip with Arizona River Runners in 1978. And I think Connie Tibbitts was the boat person. She was her inaugural trip, you know, running a boat, not a swamper. Anyway, they had a great time. They got commemorative t-shirts and everything.

But, you know, they decided that they were gonna do this on their own from that point on. So, Alan was good about getting them permits, and he got a Desolation permit. And they invited me to go. We rented 16-foot Yampas from the company in Green River, Utah. It's – I don't remember the name. It's the company that was owned by – I forgot his name.

TM: So not Dee Holladay, it's not –

JW: No, it's a cowboy.

TM: Not the Quists?

JW: Not an Ekker.

TM: Not an Ekker. Okay.

JW: Not a Quist. He died in an airplane crash about 20 years ago, I think. [A.C. Ekker]

TM: Oh, kayaker?

JW: No, he was hanging out in Robbers Roost. He's somehow related to – maybe it was Ekker. I can't – I'm sorry, I forgot. I'm wasting tape time.

TM: No worries.

JW: Anyway, there's a – one of his boatmen, I think his name was Steve Acerson. So anyway, we rented those, and we used them for shuttle services. They took us to Sand Wash, and that was the very, you know, that's my first overnight river trip. I mean, I've done daily river trips in canoes.

TM: Do you remember the month and year of that trip?

JW: It was like May. It was delightful there. Didn't know about Desolation Canyon mosquitoes until much later.

TM: Okay. The water would've been coming up, maybe?

JW: Yeah, it was 20,000. Anyway, we had a great time. I mean, I just loved it. I, you know, I said, you know, I'm gonna do this again and –

TM: Wait, before you go away, what do you remember about that trip? Who was on it? When you think back on it now, what do you remember about it?

JW: Well, it was – actually, there were just – there were eight people on that trip and two boats. And Teresa Yates, myself, we were married at the time. And Mimi, and Alan, Paul, Don and Donna Weisheit, and some friends. I can't remember their last names. When it comes time to type out the narrative, I'll fill in these blanks.

So anyway, we just, you know, we hiked, played cards, cooked, did all the fun things that you do on a private river trip. It was just absolutely glorious. Made our own decisions, scouted, learned how to operate oars. You know, I did okay. We did take turns. I didn't dominate the oars. It must've been a seven-day trip, if I recall. And we had 20,000, so it was very leisurely.

TM: Yeah, nice. And in the spring, no mosquitoes, per se.

JW: Lots of flowers. Big, shady cottonwood trees. I just – I was – loved it. Still like Desolation. I would rather do a Desolation Canyon trip than any other. I mean, I've done them all, but Deso is my favorite. If there's such a thing as a favorite. You know, I have a problem with that word, actually.

TM: How so?

JW: Well, I think, you know, I'm just glad to be on any river, any section. It doesn't really matter. I think the reason why I like Deso the most is it looks more authentic than the others. All the others are kind of mangled by dam operation. And Cataract is in good shape too, until you get out of the national park and into Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. Then it's a national disaster area.

But, you know, Deso starts and ends in a very pristine wilderness, and it's a treasure. I don't even think I want to say that because people who read this might want to do it, you know. Keep it a secret, but it doesn't get as much use, and actually, this is an interesting thing. I've been looking at statistics. There's less people going down the river than there used to be. I'm trying to figure out why that is.

TM: Interesting.

JW: I mean, I did four Cataract Canyon trips this year, and when I was down there, there was nobody there. All four times.

TM: Nice, that's a good thing.

JW: It is a good thing, but what's going on? Are people more interested in doing one-day things and not committing themselves to overnight, longer trips?

TM: That's what I've been told in the commercial world is happening.

JW: It's very obvious. I think the glory days are over with. It's gonna be very different in the future, I think.

TM: Well, we shall see. In the meantime, 1981. Deso started its river management plan in the '70s. So, you would've had to get a permit.

JW: Yep, we did.

TM: And did you, you know, everybody wore their life jackets. How did that – extra oars and did you pack out your solid waste at that time?

JW: Yes, we did. Things haven't really changed since then.

TM: Okay. Did you run into any other river trips on that?

JW: Yes. I don't remember it being uncomfortably crowded. I think the spacing, the ability to get camps was good. It was just a nice, perfect trip. It was a great introduction to, you know, how it should be.

TM: Alright, and so this is in May of 1981.

JW: No, 1980.

TM: Sorry, May of 1980. Okay. And you're living in Phoenix at the time?

JW: Yes.

TM: Alright. And working construction.

JW: Yep.

TM: And then what happened?

JW: Well, so I'm looking for boats. Of course, I don't have a lot of money. Boats are expensive brand-new. And then you have to do the frame, you need trailers, you need vehicles, you know. So, I'm searching newspaper ads for boats, and I was lucky. There was this guy that moved to Phoenix who was interested in selling two ten-mans and one seven-man. These were military surplus from World War II. And I got all three of those boats for \$800, and I bought them.

TM: Who was the guy who sold them? Do you remember?

JW: No, I don't. I just know he lived in Idaho, and he moved to Phoenix, and he didn't want them anymore, and I don't blame him. They needed a lot of attention. This is how – buying those boats is how I got into doing river trips with Georgie White.

TM: How so?

JW: Well, so I – they needed work. They were neoprene, cotton neoprene. Master Tire & Rubber, Findlay, Ohio was the manufacturer. They're defunct. You know, I'm trying to call people to like, "What kind of glue? What kind of rubber do I? You know, how do I do this?" and –

TM: Hey, John.

JW: Yeah.

TM: What was the manufacturer again?

JW: Master Tire & Rubber.

TM: Ester?

JW: Master, master.

TM: Master, okay. Never heard of them.

JW: Findlay, Ohio.

TM: Never heard of it.

JW: Neither did I.

TM: Okay. Were they still in business?

JW: No.

TM: Okay.

JW: So, I went to the Phoenix Library. Got on the card catalog system, and they're looking in, you know, river runners, Grand Canyon, Colorado River. And there's this book about Georgie White, called *Thirty Years of River Running*. And I checked it out, and I read the book. And, you know, this is the days before internet. So, then I saw she lived in Las Vegas, so I got a Las Vegas phone book out, found her phone number.

I didn't actually call her, I actually got her – I wrote her a letter. And all it said was, "I have these old ten-mans and a seven-man, and I see you used to run them. And I'm hoping you can help me with – how do I do patching and stuff like that?" Just a simple question. You know, and I gave her my phone number.

But she wrote back, and she said, "Well, I work with Dave Demaree in Friendsville, Maryland." Demaree Inflatable Boats, I think. "And call him up and get the glue and the rubber you need. And by the way, I need a swamper this coming May. Would you like to be my swamper?" And I said, "You mean you're gonna give me a free trip down the Grand Canyon?" And she said, "Yeah." And I said, "Yeah, I'll go."

TM: So, this is 1981, then?

JW: No, that was 1985. So yeah, sorry. There's some time lapses there.

TM: Yeah, so let's try to fill in this gap from May of 1980 – [Small crashing noise from John's end.]

JW: Oops, sorry.

TM: To May of 1985. Are you okay?

JW: Oh, I'm sweeping my floor, Tom. [Tom laughs.] Really dirty in this kitchen.

TM: Talking on the phone is a good time to sweep the floor. [John laughs.] It really is, that's good.

JW: No, I'm – it keeps me from –

TM: Yeah, that's good. I'm with ya. So, after that trip in May of 1980, did you simply go back and work construction for three or four more years, or did you do more river running?

JW: Well, I did do some more river running. My parents applied for another permit in 1982, and it was for the San Juan. And I don't think – I don't remember where the boats came from. I'm trying to think if they were my old ten-mans. I don't think I had gotten them yet.

TM: Did your parents –

JW: Oh, I know what we did. We rented boats from the same people in Green River. Yeah, so we launched at Sand Island and went all the way to Clay Hills. And of course, Lake Powell was full in 1982. So, I got my first experience of running from a river into a reservoir. Buried rapids.

TM: So, let's talk about that trip. Do you remember the month, 1982?

JW: Yeah, these were all May – June trips.

TM: Okay. So, the flow, I don't know, might've been two to five thousand, something like that? What did you have flow-wise?

JW: Yeah, it wasn't extraordinarily – yeah, two to five thousand sounds right. Really easy.

TM: There's some wonderful – you start at Sand Wash there. No, Sand Island, I'm sorry. And head downstream, there's wonderful petroglyph panels and ancestral Puebloan dwellings.

JW: Butler Wash.

TM: Buildings, Butler Wash, and River House Ruin or River House Pueblo. What did you think about that?

JW: Well, yeah. That's a nice panel. Yeah, so I'm getting – well, don't forget, you know, I'm really interested in Native American heritage and culture. And, you know, that's why I would – to the point when I saw them buried by Lake Powell, I'm in distress. And, you know, so it was nice, you know. And I learned that at Deso too because you went, you know, you went to Flat Canyon. Those ruins, you know, those petroglyphs are outstanding. So yeah, so I'm getting to appreciate, you know, that I'm – that there were people before.

TM: Okay, and then, once you passed Mexican Hat on the San Juan, maybe day two. I'm not sure how many days your 1982 river trip was.

JW: Yeah, it was a week-long trip as well.

TM: Okay. You go for days with no roads, and no power lines, no train tracks. Just like on Deso Gray.

JW: Yeah.

TM: And eventually, as you say, you go past Slickhorn Canyon, and suddenly you come into the headwaters of Lake Powell. And the current stops, and there's a lot of silt and braided channels. And instead of heading onto the confluence with the Colorado River, the take-out is off to the north there. Oh, actually, in '82, did you go down to Piute Farms and take out there?

JW: No, did not.

TM: No, okay. That's right. So, you guys would've been heading north. So, you would've taken off at Clay Hills then headed back to get the boats back to Green River. That would've made sense. Anything else you remember about that San Juan trip? Did you run into other trips? Did you meet other people, besides the First Nation exposure?

JW: Yeah, you know, I learned about anticlines. [John laughs]

TM: Okay, yep. Structural geology, right there.

JW: Yeah, entrenched meanders.

TM: Okay.

JW: I learned about the oil and gas industry. That's something that was very profound to me because in those days, oil and gas were relics from the 1910s and '20s. And, you know, there were no modern-day gas and oil in the Colorado Plateau in the 1980s. And that started changing in the Reagan administration. All of a sudden, drill rigs are showing up on your put-ins, especially for Deso and the Uinta Basin.

Yeah, so that's the first profound change that I witnessed. Other than dams, now we have these oil and gas intrusions. So yeah, I realized that. What did Abbey said? [Edward Abbey] "You're holding a tombstone." In reference to the Colorado Plateau's transformation from an arid lands wilderness to all kinds of commercial enterprises, ranging from oil and gas extraction to tourism and so on.

TM: John, you had mentioned Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* in the '70s when that book had come out. During this period, 1980, '82, '83, what else were you reading at the time?

JW: Well, there were a series of books that came out in the early '80s. Three authors in particular: Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*; Philip Fradkin, *A River No More*; and my favorite, *Rivers of Empire* by Donald Worster. And so, I was reading that stuff. I was learning a very different Colorado River. One that the 1902 Reclamation Act transformed and the Colorado River Compact of 1922,

the Boulder Canyon Project Act of 1928, the Colorado River Storage Project Act of 1956, and the Colorado River Basin Project of 1968. You know, and then I'm learning about Bridge Canyon Dam site and Marble Canyon Dam site and the Sierra Club. And now I'm starting to get into things like *Encounters with the Archdruid*, the story of Floyd Dominy and David Brower on a river trip with John McPhee.

TM: Well, it's interesting thinking about Deso. You mentioned Desolation kind of looks sort of as it should. It has a number of major dams upstream. It's certainly a – Flaming Gorge comes right to mind. But it also has a number of undammed tributaries. The Yampa, the White, the Duchesne, and others. And the San Juan as well, in 1982, of course, had Navajo Dam upstream, and it's flow had been greatly reduced, curbed by that dam. Was this about the time then, '80, '82, that you became aware that these rivers didn't look like they used to?

JW: Yeah. Well, there were others things that were happening to augment that feeling which is the Flood of 1983. And some of the – so like, you know, they had to, for example, speaking of Navajo Dam, they had to evacuate water out of Navajo because it was piping. It was leaking. And they did an emergency release. And this was on the San Juan River trip in '83 or '84. This is the trip where I actually met Bill Belknap. We shared a camp together at Honaker Trail, but it was flowing 15,000.

TM: Woo-hoo!

JW: Yeah, the gradient there is like 15, 16, 17 feet a mile? So, I mean, we're cooking. I mean, you know, we're making, we're eating breakfast, and then we're camping two hours later.

TM: Right. It's a like an hour, hour and a half on the water, and then it's time to camp! [Tom laughs.]

JW: Yeah. But, you know, "Hey, let's go hike the top of Honaker Trail."

TM: Okay, so I really want to stop for a minute, and I want to know about your recollections of Bill Belknap. Before we talk about Bill, between the high-water San Juan trip of '83 and your May 1982 San Juan trip, did you do any other river trips between those two?

JW: Yes, I started doing San Juan River trips.

TM: In the summer of '82?

JW: Not San Juan. Well, I did do some San Juan trips, not with family this time, but with friends. Now I'm expanding to share, you know, I'm feeling confident enough to invite some friends.

TM: Still getting the rental boats from Green River?

JW: No, I think, you know, by this time, I have these – I haven't written Georgie yet. That was 1985. So, I must have – I know what I was doing. I was patching my boat with make-believe ideas.

TM: Ahh!

JW: Now I remember, thank you. I was using shoe glue and like bicycle tire patching stuff, you know, which works, but not forever.

TM: Right. So, you actually bought the ten-mans and the seven-man 1982-ish, then?

JW: Yeah, yeah.

TM: Alright, and so suddenly you've got boats. How did you build frames for those? Did you use aluminum or did you just use two-by-sixes?

JW: Yeah, I just looked at the pictures I saw in Georgie's book, and I saw two-by-sixes, two-by-eights, and so – and I remember how Steve Acerson's frames were on his boats, his Rubber Crafter boats. And so, I just imitated him. You know, in those days, you know, it was three-quarter inch pipe, and tire leather, and hose clamps. And so that was, you know, my rig. It was not – it was all very, you know –

TM: It was – well, we look at it as elementary now, but at the time, it was state-of-the-art, more or less. It might not have been spanking brand-new, but wooden frames were the name of the game. And oars, what did you do for oars?

JW: You know, I just – where did I buy them? Gosh, you're asking good questions. Well, I bought them. I don't know where. I must've – didn't have Amazon.com back then. [Tom laughs]

TM: No, and you didn't have the friendly boating supply, you know, on the internet or in town even.

JW: Yeah, what did I do? You know, I remember whenever I went through Flagstaff – that's what I did. I went to the old Outfitters in Flagstaff and asked them if they had any old shit that they wanted to get rid of.

TM: Ah, okay.

JW: Yeah, I bought oars. I bought Rocket Boxes, ammo cans, you know. The stuff they were gonna get rid of. I think I talked to George Marsik a lot in those days. You remember him?

TM: No, but you're gonna tell me all about him. Please do.

JW: I think he worked for ARTA or AZRA at the time. And I think – then he moved – he started a Salt River outfitting organization or company on his own doing Salt River trips. You know, I never met him. Always talked – whenever I visited the warehouse, I talked to some young boatman, warehouse guy. Never actually met him.

TM: Okay, but he was helpful in getting you squared away?

JW: Yeah.

TM: Okay, on oars. Were you running pins and clips or open oar locks? Do you remember?

JW: Tire rubber and hose clamps. [John laughs]

TM: Oh, that's interesting.

JW: On three quarter inch galvanized pipe.

TM: So, the oars had a little, like an inchworm, sort of curve of rubber, a band clamp to the oar. And that hole between the rubber and the oar slid down over the pipe. Is that how that worked?

JW: Yeah, that's what I did.

TM: That's kind of interesting. Okay!

JW: Well, I didn't know, Tom.

TM: No, no, no, no, no! It's – there's a fascinating film from the 1950s showing Harry Aleson taking a sheet of rubber and he has a wooden block that he's bolted to the rubber and the blocks got a little oar lock on it, and he's gluing this down onto the ten-man. [John laughs]

JW: I remember. I've seen that picture, Tom.

TM: Yeah, as an oar lock. And the boat that Georgie donated to Grand Canyon Museum Collection has an oar lock just like Harry glued down. So that was the bee's knees for a little while. And, you know, pins and clips, and open oarlocks, and rubber tire oar locks here. [Tom laughs]

JW: Yeah.

TM: Okay.

JW: I admit it. I was copycatting – being a copycat with the things I saw in Georgie's books and whatnot.

TM: Well, so was everybody else.

JW: Yeah.

TM: So, do you have any idea roughly how many San Juan trips you did in '92?

JW: Well, in '92?

TM: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. 1982.

JW: Oh, I bet by 1985, I had done four trips.

TM: Okay. So, you're coming up from Phoenix. I'm assuming then you actually did take out at Piute Farms?

JW: No, took out at Clay Hills every time.

TM: Really?

JW: Yeah.

TM: Because?

JW: Well, because our vehicles were at Sand Wash, and it was the fastest way to get – not Sand Wash, Sand Island.

TM: Okay.

JW: Yeah, I mean, you know, our shuttle drivers lived in Bluff.

TM: Okay.

JW: Yeah.

TM: Alright, 'cause I know a lot of the Flagstaff people were gearing out of Piute Farms and, you know, they would work their shuttles out and run at that side, on the –

JW: Well, that makes sense if you're going to Flagstaff.

TM: Right. But I'm thinking you were from Phoenix, so that might have put you even further, you know, down south of Flagstaff, so maybe you worked out that side, but not – let's go to 1983. It's high water. The San Juan's running 15,000. Did that, you know, you're like, "Oh well, it's another day on the San Juan, I guess." Did you think it was normally like that, or did you know at the time there were trouble upstream at the Navajo Dam?

JW: Oh yeah, you know, I knew it was unusual because we didn't have that when we started. And, you know, so Bill – we're camped at Honaker Trail, and Bill Belknap shows up in his cute little Sportyak.

TM: Was it just Bill or did he have other people with him?

JW: It was a commercial trip. Fast Water Navigation was the name of the company, I think. And there was a female guide. He had a boat named after a German character. It was blue. It was fiberglass. It wasn't a traditional Sportyak II or III. It was handmade.

TM: Wow.

JW: Had a self-bailing hull in the bilge. It was pretty cool. It had a "Kilroy is here" logo on it. [Tom laughs] But, you know, Bill – God, he has the best tan on the planet. That guy was brown, and he never wore a shirt, and you could tell. He wore a hat, but –

Anyway, he explained to me that there was a release coming down Navajo, and that's why. And, you know, the sand at Honaker Trail was caving in or calving in. And, you know, there was – we said, "We'll let you camp here. We'll just move downstream," which we did. And we tied up on this sand bank, and the sand caved in on my boat and totally buried it. So, I had to spend the day

shoveling sand out of my boat. So yeah, there was a lot of sand excavation. I mean – so, the San Juan’s losing sediment too, bigtime.

TM: Certainly. So, Bill’s first river trip – was that, I believe 1950? On the Marston-Hudson – well the Hudson-Marston, or the Hudson expedition, as Marston wanted it to be called. Did he talk about the early days? Did you even know to ask him about?

JW: No. I mean, you know, I just – you know, I had a Belknap river guide. I just, you know, that’s the guy who makes the maps. You know, he has his – basically his family history in those maps, you know. And so, yeah, I knew who he was. I was thrilled to meet him.

TM: Cool.

JW: But was he very business. He had customers to take care of, which is fine, you know.

TM: Yeah. Did he hike them up the Honaker Trail there?

JW: Yes, he did.

TM: Okay, nice. At that time, was there a sign-in for camps down at Slickhorn? Had that been instituted by then?

JW: Yes, there were. Oh, you know, I remember what impressed me about Bill is all his customers were running their own boats.

TM: Oh, yes. Everybody had their own Sportyak.

JW: They were – yeah. They were – I thought, “Wow, this way cool.” [John laughs] Everybody gets to – they’re equal. There’s no hierarchy, except Bill, you know, making sure they don’t miss camp or miss lunch spot, you know. You know, and that’s actually how Tag-A-Long Expeditions started. You followed Mitch Williams in your own Jeep. You know, so in those days, it wasn’t client-customer. It was everybody, you know, was on the same tier.

And when I look back on that, I think we should’ve – we should all – all our river trips should be on the same tier, no hierarchy. You know, and then I’m looking back too, and that’s the way it is with guides. You have junior guides, senior guides, and old-timer guides, and, you know, they’re all – it’s almost a caste system.

TM: Interesting.

JW: Actually, I know that bothered me back then because that’s part of the reason why I didn’t want to be a Grand Canyon guide because I felt like I was in the India caste system. There were untouchables, and there were Brahmins, and, you know, and I just thought, “Oh my god. This is so high school.”

TM: I’m assuming that you would’ve had to do a Grand Canyon trip to experience that.

JW: Yeah, I did actually.

TM: And when did that happen?

JW: Well, went back to – now, it's May 1985, you know. Georgie and – but, you know, I forgot. You know, I did a Dolores River trip in 1983.

TM: High water.

JW: High water. You know, 10,000 cubic feet per second.

TM: Yahoo.

JW: Memorial Day Weekend. It was a zoo. There were 500 people on the river that day.

TM: Wow!

JW: You know, that was the other thing that I learned. You know, so now I'm going, "Oh, now I understand what the permit system is about." You know, they don't have a permit system on the Dolores because, you know, at the time, you know, that was, you know, McPhee was about to gates it. McPhee were gonna close. Everybody knew the gates were gonna be closed at McPhee, and this was the last time to do the Dolores River on a natural flow. And when we got – we didn't put at Bradfield. We put in at Dove Creek, and there were a zillion people there. I mean, it was just a clusterfuck, but I had a great time. I thought, you know, like, "This is really cool." And –

TM: Did you go all the way down to the confluence?

JW: No, no. We were – these were friends from Phoenix, construction workers. They all headed to get back, so – which is unfortunate because that's the, you know, if I had known how beautiful it is between Gypsum and Bedrock, I would've – you know, to this day, I have never been so charmed by a river. The section between Gypsum and Bedrock is just off the charts. Incredibly wonderful.

TM: Nice, yep. And that was '83?

JW: That was '83.

TM: Okay. So, the San Juan, Desolation Gray, Dolores. What else did you run in this time period from 1982 to 1985?

JW: The Salt. And –

TM: Okay. Now, the Salt is a really interesting river because it has no dam control. And it's really snowpack-dependent or storm-dependent, and you have to be very quick if you want to try to run the storms, 'cause the water goes up and down really fast. So, I'm assuming you ran that in the spring of one of those years?

JW: Yeah. It was, you know, we're talking March, April.

TM: Okay. Water was cold?

JW: Yeah.

TM: But the flowers would've been nice?

JW: Yeah, we – you know, it's usually somewhere between five and ten thousand.

TM: Okay. And this would've been pre-Quartzite Falls dynamiting?

JW: Yes. Learned about portaging. And how heavy ten-mans are. [Tom and John laugh] But I loved it. You know, it's cool. There's sycamores, the geology is off the charts, the saguaros, the beaches, the gravel, the rocks. You know, you have to pay attention. It's a great, great, great river trip. Yeah, I would actually take the time, Tom, to go up there and do dailies.

TM: Oh, really?

JW: Yeah, from the bridge to Cibecue. Just, you know, get up early in the morning, run up there, and just, you know – I was desperate. I just – I had it really bad. I would do whatever it took to get there.

TM: Okay. So as Marston called it, the "rapids rabies."

JW: Yeah, that. I had it bigtime, really bad.

TM: Did you get up on the Gila at all, at that time?

JW: No. But I had heard about the Gila Box. You know, I went – Susette and I went to do that about ten years ago, and we brought our inflatable kayaks and 'cause it was running by the time we got there, it dropped, and we weren't able to go.

TM: Wow, okay, alright. I'm just, you know, trying to think of any other rivers that might have attracted you at the time that were anywhere near Phoenix. Well, of course, that's the Salt, but what about the Verde?

JW: No, never did the Verde. Sure wish I had.

TM: And again, ten-mans on the Salt. Okay, so your boats are seeing – they're seeing some good use.

JW: Oh, yeah.

TM: San Juan and the Salt, that's good. And anything else you want to talk about in this '82 to '85 period, as you're learning how to run rivers, and how to set up camp, and take camp down, and what you need to do to rig, put the trip together, clean up, and take the trip apart when you get home?

JW: Yeah, that was – yeah, that, you know, nothing special there. But I will say my rowing skills were not very good because I never had anybody to ever tell me I was doing anything wrong.

TM: Oh, I see. Okay.

JW: And – or there's, "Hey." There was nobody to say, "Hey, there's a better way to do this."

TM: Or, "Watch my run. Do it like this."

JW: Never did. For six years, I didn't have anything like that, Tom. I just kind of like had to figure it out on my own.

TM: Okay, well that can be good. I mean, you need to learn how to read water. I'm gonna back up a minute here. When did you get married to Teresa?

JW: Oh my, 19 – I was 25. So, it was 1979?

TM: Okay. And is she on the San Juan trips and the Salt with you?

JW: Yes.

TM: Okay. Meanwhile, in Phoenix, what was happening with your construction work? Were you – was that changing at all? Were you working up a ladder? Were you starting to do your own stuff that way, or were you still working for others in a crew? How did that work?

JW: Oh well, at first, it was a little bit of everything, and then eventually I kind of specialized and just did clean-ups. And Teresa and I did that together as a couple. But I – yeah, I developed – I was one of those guys who got home and drank a quart of beer. And then like five years later, I'm drinking three quarts of beer. And then five years later, I'm drinking a box of wine.

TM: A day?

JW: So, I – yeah. So, I found out the hard way that I have that gene. And so, I had to suffer through that for a while. That was not a lot of fun. By this time, I'm a commercial boater. You know, and I'm one of those guys who's drinking on the job, and I'm drinking in the morning and I – you know, in those days, you could get away with it.

TM: Let's go back for a minute 'cause we'll just carry that thread with us as we go. 'Cause I'm assuming that when you had the business going in Phoenix in the first half of the 1980s, you weren't drinking on the job. Did you come home and drink a six-pack?

JW: Yeah. But then I was drinking before lunch.

TM: You mean eventually?

JW: Yeah.

TM: Okay. Yeah, yeah. No, alcoholism is an interesting journey.

JW: Oh, it is a journey. I don't regret it. I just kind of wish I kind of picked up on it sooner. [John laughs] 'Cause I wasted a lot of time, you know? Needlessly. It's a great – if you get sober, yeah. It's a great learning tool. Yeah, it's actually kind of cool.

TM: Yeah, if you make it through.

JW: Yeah, that's the key.

TM: I mean, whether it's recreational drugs or alcohol. It's – yeah.

JW: Yeah, the other drugs didn't really interest me. You know, I'm a classic alcoholic.

TM: Okay. Maybe it's time to introduce that first river trip in Grand Canyon with Georgie in 1985.

JW: Yeah, where you can drink as much beer as you want, all day long.

TM: Oh? Okay. So, you had written Georgie. She wrote back, and you started sort of a pen pal exchange with her?

JW: No, she just –

TM: She wrote back and said, "Come boat with me."

JW: Yeah, that was her response. "Come boat with me." And I – God, my parents and Teresa drove me up to Lee's Ferry. We hung out with Georgie. You know, it took her three days to rig up her G-Rig, you know.

TM: So, explain to me how Georgie did that.

JW: Well, so she would show up with her crew. In those days, it was half firemen and half friends from Las Vegas.

TM: Okay, so half firemen from LA?

JW: Yeah. And she would get there three days before her launch. And she would throw her rubber out of these big trucks. Not semi-sized, more like U-Haul sized.

TM: Sort of stake bed kind of trucks?

JW: Yeah.

TM: Two-ton sort of things?

JW: Yeah, they were enclosed. And inflate them, rope it all together. It was a truly a spider web of rope. Everything was in old military bags, neoprene bags.

TM: The black bags?

JW: Black bags.

TM: Okay. So, there's a couple different sizes of those. There's sort of the generator-box black bag, which is, I don't know, two and a half by two and a half by foot and a half. And then there's the smaller regular, sort of water-type black bag that's a foot by a foot by a foot and a half.

JW: Yes, and they were marked, you know. They were "Day 1," "Day 2."

TM: She was doing that in 1955.

JW: Yeah. There was a bread bag. There was beer bags, but they were called ten bags. They just had the number ten on them. And they were filled with Coors – only one product – Coors. Yeah, and then, you know, there was first aid and all the other things, and, you know, everything. There was no metal on there. There were no ammo cans. In the engine compartment area, there was a wood frame, motor, and compartment transom that she had had. I mean it's the one she started. I mean, that thing was 30 years old. I think her friend Elgin made it for her.

TM: Elgin Pierce.

JW: Yeah. And then there was a big steel box that was just full of ice, insulated. Aluminum, actually, not steel, sorry. And in there was lunch meat, salad goods, perishables.

TM: Okay. Where did that go? Was that like in front of this wooden frame that had the transom and the motor on it?

JW: That went in the middle boat. So, the middle – the port and starboard boats were 33' and the center boat was 37'. And the engine compartment, food, icebox, spare motor. It was a single unit. You know, today they're mostly made out of aluminum, but hers was wood.

TM: Okay, so let's spend a little time, if you don't mind, and help me envision this. The 33-foot-long ovals, they're very long. They're not super wide. The tubes are about three feet in diameter, maybe?

JW: Yes.

TM: And originally, these surplus 33's and the 37's had a sheet of rubber that ran the full length of the floor of the boat. And so, if you inflated the thing all up and you put it in the water, you could stand on this sheet of water – or sorry, sheet of rubber and be dry. You know, unless it rained or water splashed up over the tubes. Were these still in the boat or had they been removed?

JW: They had been removed. And – but actually, these were brand-new boats.

TM: Okay. These were DIBs?

JW: They were DIBs. I think like the year before, she might have done that. She cut the floor out of those old boats. They were self-bailing boats. And I think she had just bought these DIB boats, 'cause they were really brand-new. Maybe it was the second year for 'em. I can't recall.

TM: Let's talk about the port and starboard 33's. Did she have any kind of frame that dropped in them, or was there just a center tube that kind of looked like a pill? You know, sort of any kind of little capsule pill that you might take for a cold or something?

JW: Yes.

TM: That would nestle down in the inside of the donut or the oval?

JW: Yes.

TM: So, you'd have to tie all that in, and then everybody would kind of sit on top of that and their gear and whatnot would be lashed onto those ovals.

JW: Yeah, they were backrests. You didn't sit. Yeah. It was actually very cushy.

TM: Yeah, yeah. And early days, they were black. I'm assuming this was maybe blue. It was a different – it wasn't as hot.

JW: It was silver.

TM: Silver, okay. And then the center oval, the 37', did that have a center pill tube as well?

JW: Yes, it did.

TM: So, then the cooler, the aluminum box, would that sit behind the pill?

JW: Yes. It was only, maybe six feet, seven feet long?

TM: Yeah, it would be hard to manhandle. You'd have to get a couple bunch of people on it, I suppose, when it was full of ice. Or did you put it in and then load it up? No, it would've been loaded with food already.

JW: Yeah, I think she had a crane.

TM: Okay.

JW: I mean, you know, it was mounted to the roof of the – boy, I don't know if this is right. This is a long time ago.

TM: No, you're doing great. I mean, we're just trying to – I mean, that was only 30 years ago.

JW: 35. [Tom laughs]

TM: Okay. Yeah, in theory, on the stake bed truck, there could've very easily been a little hand winch kind of little crane thing.

JW: Yeah, but everything, you know, was small and manageable. It was pretty feminine, you know. There's no 45-gallon gas tanks. Everything's in the six. Everything's manageable. Nothing heavy. The heaviest things was the metal-insulated – this aluminum-insulated cooler and two motors. Everything else was under 35 pounds. Maybe even less.

TM: So small, bite-sized chunks of stuff.

JW: Yeah. Well-organized and labeled.

TM: Georgie had a name for that triple rig. Do you remember what that name was?

JW: She called it a G-Rig, which G stands for Georgie.

TM: Yep. Well, I had heard names: The Queen Mary, the Elephant Rig.

JW: Gee, yeah. I think I've – yeah.

TM: Do those names ring a bell at all?

JW: Having a read a lot of the Marston Collection, yeah. I think a lot of that came from –

TM: Other river runners.

JW: Yeah. Remember I was telling you about the hierarchy and how sometimes it's like high school?

TM: Well, maybe now is a good time for you to talk about that. Did you experience that there at the three days of rigging?

JW: Yeah, yeah.

TM: What was it all about? What was happening?

JW: Well, you know, there were people Georgie would talk to, and there were people who Georgie would not talk to.

TM: Like who?

JW: Oh, I can't – I didn't even know who these people were. There was definitely *them*. And there was definitely *us*. And, you know, and it just was competitive. And, you know, "Oh, she's new." Or, "Oh," you know. So, you know, I kind of like picked up on that and like the politics. The Lee's Ferry politics. [John laughs] I noticed that right away, and I went, "This is kind of weird." 'Cause, you know, you have to remember that's not the way it works on a private trip down to San Juan, you know. Rangers are nice and held – you know, they didn't have guns. They told you what to expect and what kind of fun things to do and now everything is so militaristic, you know.

TM: There's another question I realized I wanted to ask you, but I forgot about, so I'm gonna go back and ask you about that. Georgie had two types of craft. She had the big rig, and she had thrill boats, at least in the '50s. Now, the trouble with the thrill craft was they were three ten-mans tied together with oars on the port and starboard. Ten-man – it's like a big scow. What that meant was that the big rig had to go basically at oar speed. And eventually, the river concessionaires realized that that was burning up too many user days and they need to go faster. By 1985, did Georgie still have the thrill craft? Or was she just running two motor rigs?

JW: She was just running – there were no thrill boats. That doesn't mean that particular year, they weren't on the schedule. She – there was a turning point there, you know. This was post-1983. She broke her arm in '83 or '84. She actually had to let somebody else run her boat, you know, which was her domain, you know, sharing the motor.

TM: It was her motor. I mean, it was her space, her turf.

JW: But she was starting to relinquish that. She would – Bob Setterberg was – there were only a few boatmen from LA Fire Department that she trusted. One was Bob Setterberg, and the other was Brownie, who actually had a great time. I thought Georgie's boatmen are not naturals, by any means. Brownie was. Brownie could tell you about geology. He had a narrative. He was fun to listen to.

TM: What was Brownie's full name, do you remember? [Don Brown]

JW: No, I don't. Big, bushy mustache. Just a delightful person. Yeah, really liked him.

TM: Okay. And this is gonna be a twelve-day or ten-day trip to the lake?

JW: Yeah, with helicopter. Was it ten? No, I think –

TM: Or faster? Eight, maybe?

JW: They were fast. I think they were nine days to Pearce. And with helicopter exchange at Whitmore. Or across the river from Whitmore.

TM: Yep. Alright, so three days in hot sun to rig these boats and tie them all together, and you're beginning to learn that there's an in group and a new group. [John laughs] And how did that first trip go?

JW: Well, I was delighted. And, you know, I had a – God, I don't even remember if I had a camera. I had a diary. I was just enthralled. I just like felt really privileged to even be there. I felt weird that I didn't have to pay for it, and that I was getting all the beer I could ever want.

TM: Oh, wow. Okay. And Teresa was on that trip as well?

JW: No, but she was enthralled with Teresa. After my trip was over with, she invited Teresa to go on the next one. And so, I stayed – when I was on the river, Teresa, you know, did work. And I did the same, so we – you know, I don't think – now that I think about it, I don't think Teresa and I ever did a trip together. It was –

TM: With Georgie?

JW: Yeah, I would do one. Then, she would do one. And then I would do one, and she would do – I only did four.

TM: Okay. Just that summer of 1985, or did you work for her other summers?

JW: '86, too. Yeah, '85 and '86.

TM: Alright. During that time, did you ever get a chance to sit down with Georgie and get her to talk about the old days and what she was thinking about life before and after the dam?

JW: Yeah, I did. She didn't like the dam. She enjoyed her Glen Canyon trips. She was more adventurous, you know. She was going, doing different rivers. And then she became a homebody. You know, Grand Canyon only. You know, you have to realize she didn't have staff. It was just her and her sister. That was staff. Everybody else was just invited to join the trip and, you know, the firemen were on paid vacations, and they had first aid. So, I mean, she really wasn't a legitimate company. She was a hobbyist. And she ran very unique and different trips.

TM: How so?

JW: Well, they were her way. You know, you learn about Georgie, you learn about different places and different canyons, but you don't really learn – she didn't go on all the hikes. We did the hikes with the other crew, you know. And the other crews, they not really trained in natural or human history. I mean, they're not deep, interpretative trips. So, you know, it's kind of like a – a trip with Georgie was a glorified private trip.

TM: Okay, interesting. You know, I'd heard from someone else. We talked, and they had done a couple Georgie trips, and this was in the '80s. And they mentioned that actually there wasn't a lot of hiking, and Georgie kind of wanted people to stay close to the boat and on the beach and not wander off. And I think there's, you know, there's a good reason you don't wander off. You don't know where you're going, but – was that correct? Was that your impression on the trips you were on?

JW: Yeah, we didn't do any loop hikes, you know. Elves Chasm was a typical stop. Deer Creek, you know, I think we went up to the top and back down. Never went up to Nankoweap Ruins.

TM: Really? Okay.

JW: I think I remember going to Saddle Canyon once. Of course, we would stop at Redwall Cavern. Didn't stop at Sand, but blew by. She never scouted, didn't really have to. You know in '85, there were – there was high water. We had 50,000. You know, Hance was significant. Crystal was significant. Lava was kind of washed-out. It was kind of nice to see. I haven't seen Grand Canyon that high since. So that was cool, you know.

TM: Right. It's interesting 'cause, like you say, Georgie didn't scout. And she was also known for sort of just going down the meat of everything with this giant boat.

JW: Yes, she did. She – at Hance, Crystal, and Lava, she would set up and then pull the motor, lock it, you know. And then she would, with her helmet on, which is a construction helmet – and she would just, you know, tuck down inside her motor compartment and just ride it, you know. Yeah, if the boat went sideways, it went sideways. If it went backwards, it went backwards. So, you know, it was very stable. I never felt like this thing would ever pancake. We of course discussed it. Like, you know, “Is this safe?” You know, but, you know, by the time, you know, you realize it’s not really a dangerous boat, I don’t think. But I know she’s had problems in ’83. But a lot of people did.

TM: Right. There are some films of the ’50s into the ’60s that show some pancaking happening with the big rig, just like in Lava. I wonder if she’d learned eventually to rig that boat differently so it wouldn’t make what was well-known by then as a “Georgie Sandwich.”

JW: Yeah, you know, there – I know Holl – you know, triple rigs still happen. I know Holladay has ropes underneath the triple rig to prevent that. But I never saw Georgie do that. There were no belly straps underneath the boat.

TM: Okay. Yeah, and I didn’t realize that that term, “Georgie Sandwich,” had started in the early – by the mid-50s, that word was out there. So, it was happening and –

JW: You know, the boat died with her, you know? Nobody – there’s Ken Sleight triple rig, Holladay triple rigged and – you know, I think the Green River company that we rented our boats from triple rigged. But now only Holladay does. They’re the only ones left.

TM: Nobody’s running triple rig in Grand Canyon. When Georgie passed, that was it.

JW: Yeah, that was the end of that, you know. And Ken Sleight hasn’t been down there since the early ’80s. So, there you go.

TM: Did Teresa keep working with Georgie after that ’86 summer?

JW: Yeah, she did. Don’t know how many times.

TM: Was that about the time –

JW: Oh wait, no. I – well yeah, I think that’s true. I lost favor with Georgie because – it’s in the Richard Westwood book. I started inviting some of her clients on Salt River trips. And I didn’t realize I had done a no-no. So, there’s another awakening for me, Tom. I – like – I can’t be friends with Georgie’s clients. She thought, you know, she thought I was gonna like charge these people or something. And, you know, I’m like – I was on her territory, and I got on her shitlist.

TM: Wow, okay. What was that like?

JW: It was fine with me. I was ready to go. [John laughs] This is not what I want to do.

TM: It's interesting 'cause earlier this year I interviewed someone who also came to the Grand Canyon scene and found it the same way. Didn't use the "caste" word, but found it very much: you were either the in-crowd or you were not. And as an outsider, it was very much –

JW: It's bullshit, is what it is.

TM: Well, what it did for them was it steered them off to other rivers, and they did really amazing work there, and it sounds very familiar what's happening with you. Interesting, okay.

JW: Well, here's what I think. This is what I mean by it's bullshit. It's not about the place anymore. It's about people and boats and the business. It's not about the place. And that's what disturbs me. The protectionism. They're protecting their company, their jobs, their position. You know, it's not – it's corporate. It's like, you know, the sharks of Wall Street, in a way. Not quite as intense, but, you know, it's – maybe I'm just sensitive to that stuff, I don't know. I just didn't like it.

TM: It's interesting looking at this historically. It's a land of river guides. Even in the '50s, in the early '50s, that term was being kicked around. And it's a land of big egos. And so, I was thinking about how that might fit in with what you're thinking about.

JW: Yeah, yeah. That's – yeah, and the older they are, the more they had. You know, like, you know, I – here's why I know. When I came to Moab, I didn't – it was there, but it wasn't pervasive. It didn't reek. And, you know, that's when I went, "Oh, it can be different in other places." You know, so this is definitely a cultural thing.

TM: Okay. You mean "unique to Grand Canyon" thing?

JW: Yeah, yeah. It's like, you know, that's just the way it is.

TM: Interesting. Do you have any idea where that may be coming from? Or let me rephrase that. When did – did you find a similarity between Grand Canyon and Dinosaur that you didn't find in Canyonlands and Desolation?

JW: Well, that's an interesting way of putting this. So, like a lot of that hierarchy is not around anymore because river guides don't last very long anymore. You know, they move on after five or six years. When I showed up, you know, I was being trained by people who had been river guides for 15 years, 20 years. You know, they were career guides. They died as river guides. So, that dynamic isn't around anymore. In fact, the younger guides don't even really care about those older guides or anything, you know. The river guides –

The other thing that is different between the Grand Canyon and the Upper Basin is we have snowmelts, and we have driftwood, and we have low water, and we have medium water, and we have high water, and we have bugs, which is great 'cause it means your ecosystem is working. And so – and we're also – we're a lot more friendlier. We like help each other out, and, you know, "Is my car in the way? I'll move it." You know, there's still some grumpy old badass boatmen that still act like, "This is my boat ramp. This is my boat. This is my trip." There are some – that is not – that is here, too, but most of the time, we just like – maybe because we're a smaller town and we see each other at the post office. I don't know.

TM: Yeah, there's a – you know, interesting.

JW: So, you know, and, you know – but they're crusty up here. They're gnarly. You know, they're not anymore, but when I started – like I said, I didn't know anything about anything. And I was eager to learn, and they picked up on that right away. And they gave me so much information. I was on information overload. They gave me so much good advice, you know, that I now know was true and tested in sincerity. And they gave it to me for free, and I just want to share this with the younger guides, but they don't care. Some of them do. Some of them actually call me up and buy me lunch and, you know, "Tell me about the old days." But that's, you know, that doesn't really happen anymore.

TM: I'm gonna jump in here and say we've been at this an hour and 20 minutes. Once again, our chariot is turning into a pumpkin, and maybe this 1985-1986 time period is a good time to wrap this interview up and – because it sounds like here, you're gonna head to Moab in '86-'87, is that –

JW: Yes, I am.

TM: Okay. So –

JW: And I'm gonna get sober. [John laughs]

TM: Okay, alright. So that might be – I want that story. [Tom laughs]

JW: Yeah, and by the way, you know, what's cool is – I gotta talk about this is – when I did my first Cat trip, the last rapid was Big Drop 3.

TM: Okay. So, the reservoir's really up.

JW: And the concrete boat ramp is completely underwater. I mean, the boat ramp in 1986 was ten feet long.

TM: This is at height, you mean?

JW: Yeah, because the rest of it was underwater.

TM: Oh, because of the high water, the management of the dam, and that whole deal. Okay.

JW: There's no place to park, the trash – you could throw your trash from the boat into the trash can.

TM: Okay, wait, wait, wait. I want – I got a zillion questions for you now. Stop, stop, stop. [Tom laughs] I kind of want to go, "Well, with that, thank you very much. We'll wrap up this interview with—" No, I – there's a whole vista of things to talk about in front of us. Looking back at what we just discussed, is there anything else you want to grab and put into that before we head off into some amazing new topics of discussion here?

JW: Well, yeah. So, the '90s turned out to be the glory years. And that was the peak. It's gone. It may – I mean, the amount of trips we were doing were off the charts. That money we were making for river guides was amazing. And, you know, companies have sold. Management has changed. It's just a different place. It's decline and decay.

TM: Well, hold that thought. I want to capture and explore all of that. But I think at this time, maybe let's just wrap up part 2, and we'll head in that direction in part 3.

JW: Okay.

TM: Alright.

JW: We have been talking for an hour and a half?

TM: Well, actually an hour and twenty-two minutes and three seconds. So, there you go, with the little timer on the machine here. So today is Thursday, November 21, 2019. This concludes part 2 Grand Canyon Oral History interview with John Weisheit. My name is Tom Martin, and John, thank you so very much.

JW: You're welcome.