

# High Country News

For people who care about the West

## The Secret Lives of River Guides

by Brad Dimock

On the last weekend of March, the Southwest's snowbanks were disappearing. Desert streams surged with runoff. The male common flickers did their springtime antics, pecking frantically on steel chimney caps to impress the girls. And the region's boatmen emerged from hibernation.

I loaded my van and drove north from Flagstaff, Ariz., across the Painted Desert. In Colorado, boatmen wound down out of the San Juan Mountains and drove southwest. Some drove south from metro Salt Lake City, speeding out from under the latest inversion layer. Others came from California, Oregon, New Mexico -- even Hawaii. We all converged near Marble Canyon, Ariz., at the Hatch River Expeditions' red sheet-metal warehouse at the base of the Vermilion Cliffs.

We camped in our vehicles, or in tents scattered over the warehouse's 11 acres, and greeted each other with enthusiastic hugs and back-thumping, laughing and hollering and hooting. The occasion? It was our annual Guides Training Seminar, which aims to educate Grand Canyon boatmen about the workplace. It was also a springtime ritual: We were renewing acquaintances and rejoining the flow of the Colorado River.

Eventually, about 250 people showed up. Saturday morning, there was a line at the coffee pot and breakfast on outdoor tables, as the high-desert weather began to vacillate between sunny warmth and icy gusts that raised the parking lot's dust. A great deal of shouting, arm-waving and whistling called us into the warehouse. Between the wall shelves that held rafts and other river gear, we settled in chairs set up on the concrete floor.

The seminar unfolded with a series of presentations by experts and notorious canyon old-timers. Scientists talked about recent findings, such as the "sedimentology of sand bars" and "humpback chub translocations," and wandered off on various scientific tangents, sharing fun facts from canyon studies: The Grand Canyon has some of the same sort of ripple structures found on Mars! That might explain a few things. ...

**Generations of guides** have held the seminar every spring since the mid-1970s. It was originally called the Boatman's Training Seminar, but that title fell victim to political correctness. Some years, we've gathered in an old army tent on the gorge's rim. (The tent blew down twice.) The reasons for the seminar have also evolved.

The Grand Canyon river industry coalesced in the late 1960s and early '70s, propelled by rapid growth in rafting, the Park Service's decision to limit traffic, and the development of guiding as an actual business for outfitters -- an actual job for boatmen. Back then, there were 21 river companies; most of us knew few or no boatmen from other companies, and we tended to think of "those guys" as a pack of knotheads. We

were all still learning our trade. Equipment was crude; the runs through the rapids had not yet been deciphered. The early seminars helped the different clans mingle. We realized we were all in the same boat, so to speak: We all had "The River" in common.

Over the years, seven companies were gobbled up by the other 14. These days, the whole thing is more professional, though the term "boatman" is still preferred by most female as well as male guides. A small nonprofit -- Grand Canyon River Guides Inc. -- coordinates the seminar with support from the National Park Service, outfitters, a few other sponsors and ourselves.

Emily Perry, president of Grand Canyon River Guides, gave the welcoming talk. Her granddad printed the first waterproof river guides back in 1969, and her dad, O.C. Dale, stumbled into guiding. She and her sister, Ann-Marie, run big motor rigs for the Grand Canyon Expeditions Co. Both are married to boatmen.

Mike McGinnis, the park ranger in charge of the river district, updated us on changes in regulations and river terrain. On Lake Mead, for instance, where low water levels have stranded the river far from its former channel, the resulting rapid/waterfall has brought chaos and years of haggling. McGinnis explained the protocols for using a new road across the former lakebed to a takeout point above the new falls.

I wandered outside to look at old boats -- the theme of this seminar. Grand Canyon National Park has a magnificent collection of original and historic craft that plied the canyon's whitewater over the last century. Beginning about six years ago, the Park Service and nonprofit groups ramped up efforts to preserve the old boats and create a display venue. The newly formed Grand Canyon River Heritage Coalition wants to establish a River Heritage Museum at South Rim. It will have to include at least one cataract boat -- the wide-bottomed, wooden craft designed by river pioneer Norman Nevills in the 1930s. Two of them were on display at the seminar, including the Sandra, built by Nevills himself in the 1940s. Roy Webb, a University of Utah archivist, river historian and author, gave a rundown of the boat's history.

Both of Nevills' daughters were also at the seminar. And three grandsons. And a great-grandson. And Bob Rigg, who first rowed for Nevills on the Green River in 1949. In 1951, with his brother, Jim, Bob Rigg rowed through the Grand Canyon in just two and a half days -- a record that stood for nearly 30 years. In his vintage pith helmet and aviator glasses, Rigg talked about how the Sandra is now restored and back in service for annual runs with the old Nevills company. A few feet away, another pioneer, Gaylord Staveley -- Nevills' son-in-law -- was talking about the other cataract boat, dubbed the Camscott, an aluminum version that he built. Jokes and jabs flew, along with more adventure tales.

There was also a special session for rowers: the "Low Back Care and Injury Prevention/Stretching Clinic."

Some tales involved Curtis "Whale" Hansen, the former boatman whose suicide in 1995 jarred us into finding a way to reach out to each other during -- and before -- times of need. The Whale Foundation was conceived in 1996, and for over a decade has offered mental health services to river runners. Each year at the seminar, it holds a health fair with free medical screening and advice. The foundation also has a mental-health hotline and provides scholarships and services such as career counseling. We're trying to recognize our weaknesses and take better care of ourselves and each other.

**Several Native American** tribes, including the Hualapai, Hopi, Navajo, Zuni, Havasupai and Paiute,

have deep connections to the Grand Canyon. Tribal representatives were on hand to prepare a Native Foods Celebration for lunch. We feasted on roast agave, parched Hopi corn, mutton stew, piki bread and other traditional delicacies. For many years, the guides and the tribes have worked on improving communication. With more Native guides on the river, and more tribal elders coming down the river as part of research projects, the cultural barriers are falling.

Drake Havatone of the Hualapai explained how the agave was roasted. First, they built a large fire in a deep pit, placing stones atop the coals in a ceremonial way. Then they placed dozens of agave hearts on the stones, with huge slabs of barrel cactus to maintain a high moisture level. They buried the hot pile for a day and then unearthed it. The agave was tasty -- kind of artichokey, with sweet and bitter strains. We had often pointed out prehistoric agave-roasting pits while guiding tourists. Finally we were eating from such a pit.

Ruby Chimerica, a Hopi, prepared parched corn in a clay pot over a small fire. The white corn was two years old; the blue corn, five. Why so old, I asked? Because you need to make sure the crops produce each year. If you eat it all and the crops fail, the line dies. Some strains need more insurance than others. Instead of oil, Ruby cooked the kernels in hot sand, which distributes the heat just as well. She sifted the cracked corn out with a sieve. On top she sprinkled ceremonial salt from the canyon and from Zuni. Delicious. Far meatier and more charismatic than American popcorn, much better for body and soul.

**Back in the warehouse**, we listened to more tales of old boats and boatmen. Fifty years ago, a team of Americans and New Zealanders ran the first jetboats down the river, turned around, and fought their way back up through the Grand Canyon. The jetboats had engine-powered pumps that drew and expelled water but no propellers, so they worked in shallow water. Two of that crew were at the seminar. Phil Smith, who came up with the audacious idea when he was in his 20s, described the planning and the downrun, wherein they stashed enormous amounts of gasoline. "When you're young," he explained, "you're not inhibited by experience." He recounted how, when the jetboat expedition reached the monster rapid of Lava Falls, leader Bill Austin was arguing with his copilot, Dock Marston, about where to enter it -- on the left or the right? Neither. They dropped off the ledge, flew through the air and came down hard. The impact broke one of Austin's legs, and he and Smith left the expedition by helicopter the next morning.

Buzz Belknap grew up motorboating on Lake Mead and was just 16 when he was offered a pilot's job on the jetboaters' historic upriver run. With an impish grin, he recalled that on his way to the warehouse to prepare for that launch, he crashed the family car. The crowd roared. He's spent the last several decades as a graphic artist in Honolulu. His illustrated river guide (the one Emily Perry's granddad printed in 1969) has gone through countless revisions and remains the industry standard. "They said the trip would take a month to plan, a month to prepare, and a month to unwind from," Belknap said. "But winding down has taken a lifetime." He stood beside the jetboat he drove up the river 50 years ago. He beamed. We gawked.

**This is the stuff** we came for: The common threads -- love of "The River," community, the boatmen's bond. Looking out over the crowd, I saw a lot of gray hair. There were people who first came down the river in the '50s and '60s, here to reclaim a part of their soul that never came home. There were dozens of us who came in the '70s for a summer job and got captured by this world.

In 1983, huge floods threatened to burst the Glen Canyon Dam just upriver, and nearly 100,000 cubic feet per second raged through the canyon. For the next several years, flows as high as 50,000 cfs were not

uncommon. It was wild. Those of us who rode that high water discovered how deeply dependent we are on each other. If we weren't fishing some other outfits out of the river, they were rescuing us. Our community grew even tighter during those years. As we matured and grew increasingly professional, the experience became more predictable, more secure, more comfortable -- a mixed blessing. The changes drove me from the business in the late 1990s, but my retirement didn't last long. The canyon -- the community -- pulled me back.

As the last Saturday talks drew to a close, beer kegs were tapped. Kirk Burnett, a world-class banjo man and none too bad a boatman, assembled a band of two other wizards to get the dance floor throbbing. Clusters of bellowing boatmen told increasingly loud stories and passed around bottles of Old Bushmills. Outdoors around a juniper fire, a smaller group with a few guitarists and singers carried on. The temperature plummeted; the stars grew crisp. One by one, two by two, we drifted off to our camp sites.

Sunday, we had more talks on topics such as river-trip "dental emergencies" and the threats from uranium mining. Two dozen of the luckiest guides and speakers were getting ready to head downriver for a special two-week extension of the seminar -- the best way to learn. During a seminar river trip a few years ago, I stood around an Ancestral Puebloan ruin with Hopis Lyle Balenquah and Beep Jenkins. They spoke not of dry archaeological facts and theories, but of corn, what it means to the Hopi, how central it is to their people. It forever changed the way I look at ruins.

Within a few weeks, most of us would be rigging rowboats or motor rigs or paddle rafts for regular river trips. We'd be meeting the tourists -- most of them perfect strangers -- and taking them down the river through the Grand Canyon. And every year, we will have more to share.

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