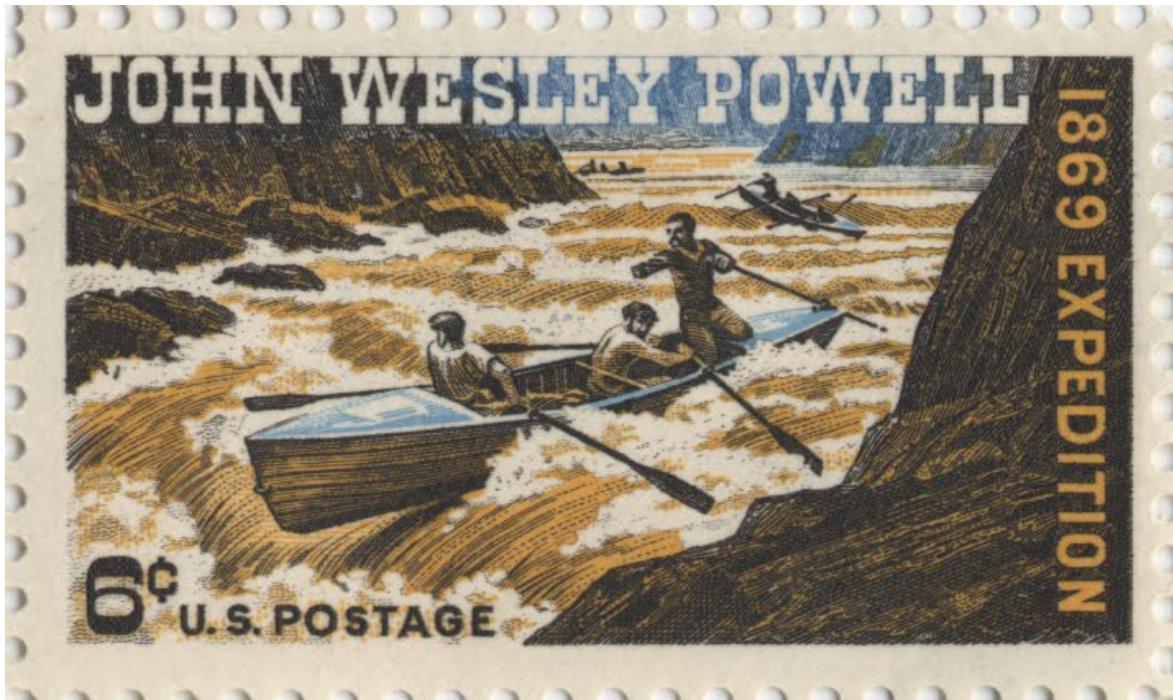


## The Powell Centennial - August, 1969

by Pete Winn



I'd been a river guide for three years. I was young and cocky, a Bronze River God before they coined the phrase. Nothing could humble me. I was running the Grand for the first time, not to "experience" the Canyon and not just to "beat" the river, but to be able to tell everyone else that I had. It was really a terrible attitude, but there was no way you could tell me that.

In 1967-68, I'd worked for the American River Touring Association (ARTA, now called AZRA in Arizona) on the Middle and Main forks of the Salmon and the Selway in Idaho, the Rogue in Oregon, and the Stanislaus and South Fork of the American in California. By 1969 I was running my own river touring business on these rivers plus the Yampa and Green in Utah with my brother, Dave, and three friends, Loren, Ron and Duncan, as partners.

We decided to add the Grand to our schedule for 1970. We figured we'd better do a reconnaissance run, so in mid August of 1969, five of us (Loren couldn't make it but another friend, Dick, was able to join us) drove up to the South Rim, got a permit and headed for Lee's Ferry. It was that easy back in those days.

We drove to Page for groceries. Being "mountain river" guides, we'd never seen a monolith like Glen Canyon Dam, so we took the opportunity to go on the self guided "follow the footprint" tour. It wasn't until then that we realized who John Wesley Powell was, and the significance of August 27, 1869 and Separation Canyon.

In 1969, the dam was only six years old. The Canyon was more than a million times older than the dam. Even so, the dam was impressive. Almost a century ago, Powell had helped create the Bureau of Reclamation, the government agency that was responsible for damming the river that made him famous. The Bureau built the dam, then named the reservoir after him.

When we returned to Lees Ferry we began loading our fifteen foot army surplus "ten man" rafts with twelve days of food and gear. An older guide, Jack Currey (founder of Western River Expeditions), had just finished rigging his 37' motorized "J" rig. He looked down on us with our little boats and said "You're gonna die!" We figured he didn't know that we were also "Bronze River Gods". By the time we finished rigging, we'd forgotten the century old rumors about Powell and Separation Canyon.

Back in the sixties, Grand Canyon Dories and Mexican Hat Expeditions were the only oar powered companies in the Canyon, and they only ran a trip or two a year. Georgie White, Hatch, Western, ARTA, and a few other companies ran large motorized rigs, and even they only ran a few trips each year.

Consequently, the only other river party that we saw in 12 days was Georgie, at Elves Chasm. We'd heard about her leopard skin bathing suit and preference for Coors, so it wasn't hard to pick her out. She had a couple of LA firemen along as guides, rowing three ten man rafts lashed together. She ran the motor rig, which consisted of three 33' bridge pontoons strapped together. It looked ten times bigger than our little rafts.

Georgie asked about our run in Crystal. When Powell had run the river 100 years ago, Crystal was the first of a series of small rapids he named "the jewels" (followed by Agate, Sapphire, Turquoise, Ruby and Serpentine). Crystal Creek had flash flooded just three years ago (December 1966), choking the river with huge boulders, and the rapid was getting quite a reputation. We'd heard it was as challenging as Lava Falls, but twice as long.

The river was high and really muddy, and with the long flat stretches between rapids it was an almost unpleasant contrast to the clear mountain streams that we were accustomed to. The Little Colorado was flooding, dumping massive amounts of red mud into the river. Dave, Dick and I had been taking turns rowing and it was Dave's turn to row Crystal. You'd think he'd have been the one to go for a swim, but the river picked me.

Back then, at high water the upper hole in Crystal was a giant rooster tail, and the wave mostly broke downstream. The big problem was a 10' lateral wave on the left, off the downstream cliff of Slate Creek, which fed into the rooster tail and could easily cause a "corkscrew" flip. Dave got carried too far left, turned to hit the lateral straight on, and the wave blew me right over his head. He ended up hanging on to the oar handle off the side of the raft, while Dick held the oar blade which had creamed him as Dave fell off.

I was wearing a kayaking life jacket, which didn't float me to the surface nearly fast enough, to say the least. I really learned to hate having red mud in my sinuses after that. Four years later, at extremely low water, I had the pleasure of being able to swim out to the rock that made the

rooster tail, have lunch and take a nap. It's amazing how small that rock is compared to the wave. That day, my kayaking jacket worked just fine. I felt a lot better about Crystal after that.

I had the opportunity to swim Crystal one more time, in 1982. I tried to catch the Slate Creek eddy in a kayak at high water, but the boiling eddy fence was impossible to cross. I ended up going backwards into the upper hole, which by then had changed and often broke upstream. Again my kayaking jacket was marginally useful. This time, my helmet came out first, without me, causing a bit of panic among the onlookers. Fortunately, the water was green so I didn't have to suffer through another bout of muddy sinuses. In 2001, I took my family on a private trip and my son, Travis, who's a competitive rodeo kayaker, ran upper Crystal five times. He caught the Slate Creek eddy twice, and surfed in the big hole until he washed out. Times have changed!

Early in our 1969 trip, we had decided to pick our runs based on the consequences of making a mistake. After scouting Bedrock Rapids, we decided to run left. We were afraid that if we tried to run right and didn't make it, we'd get stuck or flip on the bedrock island. Instead, we got stuck in the tight eddy on the left. It's a difficult eddy to row out of, even with a small boat. It took a long time to get out of it and down through the narrow shoot. We later learned to run ARTA's 22' snout boats (giant oar-powered catarafts) down the left side without getting stuck in the eddy. I've probably run left in Bedrock as many times as I've run right.

In 1971 I took my parents and a bunch of friends on a private trip through the Canyon. I tried to run right at Bedrock, flipped on the island, and swam the left side with my mother, my brother Chris and my girlfriend. It was my first flip. It's still my mother's favorite story.

We also ran left of the hole in the center of Upset, figuring we'd be less likely to flip on the left than if we tried to go right and missed the cut. Since then, I've run almost 60 trips in the Canyon, several in a kayak and in all kinds of rafts, and I've always run left in Upset. It's a surprisingly easy run.

Back in 1969, there were very few regulations. We collected firewood, built cooking fires on the sand, and buried our trash and human waste. It wasn't until a couple of years later, when the number of trips began to skyrocket, that the regulations began to multiply. The regulations today may be a burden, but the Canyon is much cleaner now than it was then. In '72-73, several of the outfitters ran cleanup trips. Shane Murphy's award winning postcard picture of an overloaded paddle raft in Crystal at high, muddy water was taken on one of these trips - I was the captain on this kamikaze run.

By the time we reached Lava we were beginning to wonder just how important our highly perfected rowing skills really were. Did it matter if we could put our boat within a foot of where we wanted it? The river and canyon seemed so much more powerful than the mountain streams we knew so well. The Canyon had made good progress towards humbling us. I had come to tell everyone that I had conquered the Grand, but was beginning to realize that it was more a case of the river "letting me pass." It's too powerful to "beat." All of us began to understand that there was far more to the Grand Canyon than the rapids. This harsh desert with its throbbing muddy heart was really beginning to grow on me.

At Lava, it was my turn to row, and we decided to run down the middle, just right of the ledge hole. We lined up on a boil that would sometimes appear (we called it the "imaginary bubble lineup"). Both boats ended up in the big hole at the bottom right, but were too swamped to flip. I swear those old army surplus boats were part submarine. We got awfully tired of bailing them. In later years, I had the opportunity to swim Lava several times, both by accident and intentionally. I never could give up my kayak jacket, so I had a bad swim or two, but each time the river let me go. I still can't help but feel the sense of control that is so important for us to feel is nothing but an illusion.

It happens to all of us, the shock of encountering the other world as we reach our takeout. Only for our trip, the shock was temporary. We had planned to take out at Diamond Creek, but a big flood had wiped out the road. We weren't about to row sixty miles across Lake Mead to South Cove (there wasn't a boat ramp at Pierce's Ferry back then), so we decided to hike to Peach Springs to arrange for a motor boat to tow us.

About two miles up, we came across three geologists sitting next to an army surplus jeep which was lying on its side, with river gear scattered in the creek bed. They represented the Powell Society and were trying to get their rafting gear to the river to make a very important deadline but Mother Nature had stymied them. Fortunately, we had boats, and they had plenty of food and beer. Unfortunately, we had to carry it two miles back to the boats.

There was no way on earth that I could have predicted that I would spend August 27, 1969 at the mouth of Separation Canyon with a group of U.S. Geological Survey geologists, sticking special issue postage stamps celebrating the Powell Centennial onto thousands of pre-addressed envelopes with beer wetted tongues. John Wesley Powell had helped create the USGS, and had been its second director. It was a fitting end to our trip.