

Randy's Rock

Pete Winn, 1976



Sketch by Joe Sample, from an article written by Jim Hayes in the Springfield News Sun, 1977.

“Look, we've known each other for almost ten years!” exclaimed Rob in exasperation. “Let's quit playing games. The truck is almost loaded and ready to go. Where's the third boat?”

“Rob, I'm telling you the truth. Randy left his boat at mile 127. We didn't hide it just upstream so we could tell the other guides how we pulled your leg!” I don't he believed me until we left the beach at the Diamond Creek take-out. It was hard for me to believe, too. A twenty-two foot long by nine-foot wide snout boat with three-foot diameter tubes and eight air chambers just couldn't sink. Its heavy steel frame just couldn't turn into a pretzel in a few minutes.

But it really happened once upon a time, and for a few days it was a real nightmare. Fortunately, we didn't loose anyone. We never guessed that the entire Grand Canyon river guide community would come to call it “Randy's Rock,” or that the rock would later be given that official name in Lorenzo's mile by mile river map.

I was my last commercial trip in the Canyon. It was early June, 1976, and I had planned to be in Moab, Utah, for a high-water Cataract trip. I had worked on and off for the American River Touring Association (ARTA) since 1967. I was ARTA's area manager for their Canyonlands operation that year, hoping to solve some logistical problems for the company. Louise, the lead guide scheduled for the fateful Grand trip, got sick and couldn't make it. My first Cat trip had been canceled so I was available and took her position.

It was a small trip, just seventeen passengers (we usually have twenty-four on four snout boats). We had three oar-powered snout boats (22'x9'x3') plus a ten-foot paddleboat to liven up the easy stretches. We weren't supposed to run any big rapids in it. Marilyn, a good friend of Louise's and the wife of one of best friends, was the third guide. I hadn't run the Canyon with either Marilyn or Randy, but I'd met them in the warehouse and guide parties.

Randy was about five years younger than Marilyn and I, we called him “the Kid.” We didn't question his ability to row; we'd started we just kids, too. Moley hiked in at Phantom to be the assistant guide. We took turns captaining the paddleboat when it was safe to run the rapids. It was a twelve-day trip to Diamond, and it started off really well. Everyone liked Marilyn, especially a couple of young bucks. One of the young bucks, Josh, was a wild man, marginally controllable, but

still likable. Walt was an older passenger with just one arm, so his wife helped him hold on in the rapids. Hal was making a movie about rafting in the Grand Canyon. He'd been on a couple of motor trips before and thought he knew everything.

We encouraged our passengers to switch boats every day. On the fourth day, everyone waited on shore to see which boat Hal got on, then rushed to the other boats. Hal chose my boat that morning, - it was a big mistake. After a few hours with me, he learned to keep his mouth shut. Every time he'd open it I'd throw a bucket of frigid river water on him. After a while he was too cold to talk.

The nightmare began after lunch on the seventh day. We'd had lunch at Blacktail Canyon and Randy's boat was the first to leave. Marilyn and I stopped to gather some firewood and were a mile or so behind him. It was a hot, lazy afternoon and everyone was in the mood for a nap.

Marilyn and I first saw people waving at us from the right bank above the riffle at Mile 127. Then we realized someone was standing on the huge block of Tapeats Sandstone that had fallen out the cliff on the left side of the riffle. Finally we noticed the almost completely submerged raft plastered on the block.

Randy had been nodding off while reading as one of his passengers rowed. The collision of his raft with the rock gave new meaning to the "rude awakening." By the time Marilyn and I landed above the riffle, Randy and his passengers had already done a head count, and other than being cold and scared, everyone was OK. A couple had swum to the left bank below the riffle.

We had two immediate problems to deal with. First, how were we going to get Jim, the guy on the rock, to shore. He had the presence of mind to climb onto the rock as the boat wrapped. He was terrified, however, and not about to be convinced to jump in the river and swim to shore. Second, since only the upper part of one snout was above water, we couldn't see a way to get the raft off the rock. The rock was undercut, and the current was slowly pushing the raft farther under. The boat had one-third of the food we needed for the rest of the trip plus camping gear for six people - we just had to get it back.

I was the only one on the crew who had been down the narrow channel on the left side of the block, so I knew it was about fifteen feet wide. A friend and I had kayaked the Canyon in January 1975 and ran to the left, hoping it wasn't too narrow. The block had split in two when it fell into the river, so there was a climbable crack about halfway along the left side. I was pretty sure it would be possible to get to the broken block from the nearby cliff. So Marilyn gave me a ride to the eddy behind the it and I jumped in and swam to a crack in the cliff. I managed to climb up to a ledge about twenty feet above the river and shinnied along until I was adjacent to the big crack in the block.

I couldn't stand on the ledge, but I was able to push myself far enough across the narrow channel so I landed in water next to the crack. Jim helped me climb onto the block. It was really spooky out there, watching the huge snout tube slowly disappear into the foamy water. The six straps holding the top snout were just barely visible. I talked Jim into holding my feet while I reached into the foam and cut them. Suddenly, the snout floated free and took off down the riffle. I had hoped the other snout, with the frame and one-third of our food would come free, but the river still had lesson to teach us. Jim pulled me back and when we went over to the right edge of the boulder to watch snout float away, I quickly pulled him into the riffle with me. We reached shore about 200 yards downstream, where Marilyn and half the passengers were waiting. Jim was too happy to be pissed at me.

We had no choice but to load up on the two remaining boats and look for the first camp we could

find. We found one about one-half mile downstream behind a big eddy on the left. The first order of business was to inventory food and camping gear. We were short six sleeping bags, but managed to scrounge enough blankets and sheets for everyone. We were short two days worth of food, resulting in a group discussion about whether or not to shorten or even abort the trip. The river was high and we expected it to drop significantly by morning. Everyone agreed to postpone any decision until morning, hoping the half raft would come loose and we could salvage the food and gear.

Hal's only concern was that his spare camera batteries and most of his film were on the wrecked boat, and the trip would be a waste if he didn't get them back. Needless to say, this attitude didn't sit well with the folks who'd lost everything they had brought with them. One of them, Wildman Josh, decided to express his feelings by dumping a bucket of cold river water on Hal. This caused Hal to attack Josh with his Buck knife. We'd have had a murder on our hands for sure if Moley hadn't tackled Hal just in time. At that moment I know exactly what the saying "You could cut the tension with a knife" really meant.

That night the river dropped as predicted. Marilyn, Randy, Moley and I had taken turns sitting up all night, watching to see if the raft would come loose. Just as dawn broke, I woke to one of Josh's Tarzan calls and a big splash. Marilyn was already untying her boat when Josh came along, straddling the other snout, with frame still attached. We got our boat back!

Or so we thought. The frame hung deep in the water by two straps. As we began to de-rig it, taking turns swimming down into the cold water, became apparent that the frame was not salvageable. It was twisted and broken beyond hope – a pretzel. We managed to cut the food boxes loose, but there weren't any personal gear bags left. The river had claimed them.

We couldn't get the frame near enough to shore to drag it out of the water – it kept catching on boulders. Finally a motor rig passed by and the guide volunteered to drag the frame out to deep water and drop it. Randy asked if he could join the motor trip for the day to help look for gear bags that might have floated into an eddy. So far the group had accepted the wreck as an accident and had not ostracized him. I agreed that it was a good idea, and he took off with them. We had plans to meet him at Deer Creek Falls.

We left both snout tubes deflated and rolled up in the rocks above the high water line. I later arranged for a motor rig to pick them up. We loaded up on the remaining two rafts plus paddleboat and headed downriver. The boats were heavy but manageable. Between Camp and Deer Creek we found three gear bags. The first was in the eddy on the left of Bedrock. I rowed into the eddy with just Moley on board and got it, making an old favorite run of mine down the narrow shoot between Bedrock and the left bank. Next we found one in the eddy next to the camp below Deubendorf. We had to stop there anyway because Walt had dislocated his good shoulder and we had to reset it. Now he couldn't hold on by himself at all. The third bag was in Helicopter Eddy, a couple of mile above Deer Creek. We hauled the paddle raft up to the eddy and paddled out to pick it up.

When we got to Deer Creek, we found that Randy had hiked up Tapeats Creek to Thunder River and across Surprise Valley and down to the mouth of Deer Creek. It was the same hike our trip had planned to do until the wreck. People were furious with him, especially Hal, whose camera gear was still missing (and eventually never found). The group started to unravel again, so I told Randy to camp with another trip that night if he valued his life.

It's funny how word travels along the river. Sometime it seems like it actually travels upstream. Every river party we encountered seemed to know about our disaster, and many offered us food and gear, especially the motor trips. I was really impressed with the community spirit. It definitely

helped convince me that we could end the trip on a good note. Unfortunately, I couldn't convince anyone to take Hal.

We had arranged with several river parties that we could be camping the next night at Ledges. We desperately needed a long relaxing day at Havasu to get back on track. All the other camps between Upset and Havasu were spoken for. Unfortunately, while we were hiking Matkatimba Canyon another party passed up and set up an early camp at Ledges. We were forced to go on. Knowing the Last Chance camp was taken, we had no choice but to camp on the steep ledges at Sinyala.

It's really not a camp at high water, and, in keeping with our luck, the river rose about fifteen feet that night. We had to scramble to move our kitchen and several passengers to safety. We were lucky we didn't lose any rafts. To make matters worse, Hal lost some of his gear and went into another murderous rage. It took three of us to subdue him. It was a bad night.

Fortunately, Havasu was great, in spite of the crowds. Our disaster had made us the center of attention and somehow sharing our experience with so many strangers seemed to help put the bad days behind us. The rest of the trip went quite well, except for Wildman Josh's swim in Lava.

We'd come to rely on our little paddle boat to relieve the crowding on the snout boats, but had decided not to let anyone take it through Lava. It would flip for sure, and I didn't want to take anymore risks than necessary. Unfortunately, earlier in the trip I had told Josh that I had taken the paddleboat through Lava before and it wasn't a bad swim. After all, the rapid only lasts about 20 seconds, and even in cold water most people can hold their breath that long.

Since we planned to use the paddleboat after Lava, we decided that I would run first and catch the eddy below the rapid on the right, with Marilyn towing the paddle raft. At the top of the rapid she would let it go. Moley was assigned to hold Josh to make sure he didn't make a jump for the paddle raft, and to let go of him when the rafts were separated by a good 20 feet. Either I or Marilyn would catch the raft.

Everything went as planned, except that Josh immediately jumped in the river as soon as Moley let go of him and started swimming for the paddleraft. He went underwater before getting to it. He must not have gotten a good breath, because he looked miserable when he swam up the mid-eddy rock I was standing on, holding my bowline. I was secretly proud of him, but felt it was necessary to step on his fingers as he tried to climb on the rock. The river had humbled him, now it was my turn. My passengers applauded me, and Josh was a good boy after that.

Hal eventually sued ARTA for his trip fare and lost gear. I told the management not to give him a free trip – pay him cash! Everyone else left Diamond with mostly good feelings about the trip, and even about Randy. He was just a “Kid,” after all. I too am glad I was on the trip, but thankful I've never been on another one like it.

I've always wondered what would have happened if Louise had been able to make the trip...