

## ICEBERGS IN CAT

by Pete Winn

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Disclaimer: This story is as true as any twenty year old river story can be.

Scenery: Mother Nature

Lights: God

Director: Fate

### Scene 1 - Christmas Eve at the Slide

Whhooshhhh!!! At first, John thought a beaver had attacked his Yampa. It was one of the first models, only two main chambers, and suddenly one of them was acting like a hotcake. Or maybe coldcake is a better word. A sharp piece of ice rotating on an eddy fence had cut a liquor bottle sized hole in it. To fend off hypothermia, John rowed like the devil and made it to shore just as his oarlock settled into the river. Some of you may remember John Thomas, he was a Westwater guide and ranger in the 70's, then a Grand Canyon river ranger. His name is on an old oar blade in the ranger station at Westwater. Now he's a dad, married to Jen Lawton, also Westwater guide and old Grand Canyon river ranger, living in Salt Lake.

When's the last time you read the directions on a can of barge? It says "Use at room temperature." What if room temperature is 20 F? One thing I know about river guides, they're innovative. First we did what we always do, which was ignore the directions and just put the stuff on, which of course didn't work - we couldn't get the brush into the glue. So we put the glue into a double boiler and put a gas lantern up next to the bottle of Southern Comfort that was stuck in the hole so the water would drain out. When everything was warmed up, we drank the Southern Comfort and hoped the patch would hold. We didn't have a chance to think about what our families and friends were doing that evening until we got the tube to hold air.

I can't even remember what we had for dinner. I do remember it's the only trip I've ever packed food for where we put the meat and other stuff we wanted to stay frozen into uninsulated metal boxes, and put the stuff we didn't want to freeze into insulated boxes without ice. We didn't need to bring any ice, it was everywhere. The eddies were completely frozen over, and the river was slush in the morning. Sounds awful, but it was great, as long as it was your turn to row so you could warm up. When the sun was shining, it was like a perpetual sunset.

We'd originally planned to spend three days hiking in the Needles and three in the Maze. In the winter, there's water everywhere out there, so you don't need to carry a gallon a day (of course, you've got to carry twenty-five pounds of extra clothes, etc.). After the

ice bite experience, we decided to blow off the Needles hike, figuring we'd need three extra days in Cat to patch the rafts. We had enough fuel, glue and booze to get through safely, we just needed the time. Little did we know how badly we'd need it.

## Scene II - The Maze, Three Days Later

At the Confluence, the Green was also choked with ice, so it took a long time to row down to Spanish Bottom. It was Beth's turn, and she had a lot of trouble getting her oars into the water. They had a tendency to bounce off the ice, and if you rowed too hard, you just added an ice anchor under the raft. If you've lived in Moab or flown Redtail Aviation you might know Beth Roy (formerly Coker), another parent (busy, aren't we). Fortunately, she had a bottle of Bristol Cream Sherry, so it was easy to be patient.

The lack of open water sufficient for rowing raised another issue - Lake Powell. Could it melt all of these icebergs? What if it couldn't? We had topo maps of Cat, but nothing for the lake. We didn't know how we'd escape from Cat if the lake was frozen.

We'd brought along a copy of the Monkey Wrench Gang, first published the year before, and found Hayduke's last stand (this was long before the sequel, Hayduke Lives). What an incredible place. We did a loop within a loop, the big loop taking three days. We went from Spanish Bottom up to the Dolls House, then out over the top of Tibbet Arch (I think, see disclaimer), to Lizard Rock, then over to Beehive Arch and upper Jasper, then back to Spanish Bottom from the north. At Lizard Rock, we did a little loop, down into one finger of the Maze, near Hayduke's last stand (those mice have got prime real estate!) and out another finger, it's as easy to get lost as the name suggests.

There were eight of us, four men and four women. We forgot about the river ice and how sharp it was. Instead, bizarre ice worms in the pot holes and spectacular hoar frost crystals took over. George Ruffner, a biologist from the Museum of Northern Arizona, owned and rowed the second raft. He, Gwen Waring and I had planned the trip over Thanksgiving during one of those three foot snowstorms Flagstaff is famous for. Both of them are now parents. Gwen and her husband, Larry Stevens, own Red Lake Publishing, which is the source of [There's This River](#) by Christa Sadler, a collection of Grand Canyon river stories.

## Scene III - New Year's Eve at Odin's Temple

It's a good thing there was a lot of firewood at Waterhole Canyon. We were numb. Numb with cold, numb with fear. We'd nearly lost a loaded boat with four us on it where the river flowed under the ice at the head of the lake. And we thought Cat was going to be the big problem. Fortunately, the rapids broke up the icebergs, so we didn't get any holes in the rafts, just lots of slush. I didn't fall in and die of hypothermia, or this would be a Paul Bunyan tale (see the Disclaimer). We built a fire that was eight feet long and two feet wide so we could all stand around it, and drank Black Russians. It makes me shiver just to remember this scene.

Beth was rowing the lead raft below the Big Drops (flow was about 8,000 cfs) when the ice began to build up on the river banks. At first, only a foot or so, building to five or six feet. We were looking for a place to pull over for lunch when we came to the ice dam at the head of Lake Powell. We signaled John to pull over, and Beth had no choice but to crash into a six foot wall of ice on river right. George and Gwen found handholds, and I climbed the ice bank with a stern line looking for a tie down. I nearly fell into a crevice almost immediately before George pulled me back. It went down into the river, brrrr. With some help, I managed to get to the boulders above the ice, a bad spot to camp. We finally found a few flat spots about 100 feet up the talus slope. Hauling our gear up there really warmed us up.

The river flowing into Lake Powell was frozen over, big time. Huge bergs which had formed after the rapids were being whipped like cream. If we hadn't stopped we'd have become fossils for sure. The ice was thick, at least ten feet, full of crevices, covered with snow, and it went as far as we could see. No escape that way. So John and Mike and I trudged off a mile or so downstream to the first side canyon, Waterhole, looking for a way out. After several failures, we found a fifty foot crack and managed to climb up high enough to see that a route to the rim was feasible. As we headed back to the boats, it started to snow.

The next morning, the ice on the lake had advanced upstream so far that George's raft was stuck in it. Getting the raft out of the ice was an engineering feat. Then we had to haul both rafts one hundred feet up the talus slope so we could deflate and stash them. When we opened the valves, no air came out. We had to breathe on the valves until the ice seal broke so we could deflate them. Bizarre! It took us almost all day to stash everything. We even pissed on the rolled up rafts (at least the guys did) so the rats wouldn't use them for nesting material (good thing we had some biologists along). Then we hiked to Odin's Temple for an eight foot long fire and a less than enthusiastic New Year's party.

Early on January 1, 1976, Mike and I again climbed the crack, but this time all the hand and foot holds were covered with snow. Frozen fingers are no fun at all. Climbing was so much more difficult than it had been the previous day that we decided to just drag the other folks up, using the raft bow and stern lines tied together. When Nancy reached the top, her heartwarming smile was gone for the first time. Her smile had been a barometer of the trip spirit, and it was no obvious that she thought we were in trouble. We spent that night on sloping, snow covered ledges, tied together so we'd act as anchors for each other. Brrrr again.

It took another day to climb to the rim and the jeep trail from the Maze area to Hite. It was still over forty miles, or three days, to Hite. It was space walking. Everyone was in their own space, enjoying the scenery as best they could while nursing numb feet. Nancy practiced smiling again, while Beth, Gwen and Laurie, all musicians, played symphonies in their heads. Mike mourned his frozen camera, John and George wondered if the piss would keep the rats away from their rafts, and I wondered how

many friends I was going to lose.

#### Epilogue - Odin's Temple, Three Months Later

After the ice melted, we drove back to the head of Waterhole Canyon and climbed down to the rafts. The piss worked, the rafts held air. We put them in the water and rowed to Hite. There was evidence on the river bank that the ice had gotten to be twenty feet thick. It's a good thing we found a way out of Cat or we'd have become icebergs ourselves. It was the kind of adventure that makes for an unbelievable river story. Of course, it's best told in July, when you're dying for some ice.