

Coffee at Crystal

Lowell Braxton & Pete Winn, 1990



This is not the wrap described in this story (it was too dark to take a picture). The motor boat mentioned in the story flipped in the hole above Crystal's Rock Island and was hung up upside down, so the black bottom of the boat was hard to see in early dawn.

When you start off from Lees Ferry for a sixteen day river trip through the Grand Canyon, it's extremely important that you pack enough coffee. *Mutiny on the Bounty* would be tame compared to the problems you'd have if you ran short. You'd think a bunch of old river guides on a private trip, who, all told, have over three hundred trips under their belts would know this and plan accordingly, but we didn't. It's so hard to admit this that each of us blames someone else. If we were all correct, it would be the fault of someone who wasn't on the trip, but then this wouldn't be a true story.

The trip started off on a perfect note. It was mid-June, the first scorcher was the fourth day out. The river was so high that we could row up into the stunning blue water of the Little Colorado to land. There was another private river trip there, a bunch of yuppies from Oregon. Scotty parked his ragged twenty year old raft next to one of their fancy self-bailers, the kind of boat with a special beer can holder built into the frame next to the rowing seat that would keep your beer from spilling even you flipped. We took a picture of Scott sitting on his garbage scow in his faded, mismatched river garb, next to one of the Oregonians perched on his padded rowing seat wearing color-coded Patagonia quick-dry shorts with a special belt that held his high-teach quick release sheath knife. We called the picture "Twenty Years of Experience Meets Five Years of Money."

The trip was going really well. We had good runs in the rapids, the food was great and we all got along, a small miracle on a private trip. We'd just run Unkar, Nevills, Hance, Sockdolager and Grapevine and planned to camp at Cremation. Unfortunately a single boat motor rig beat us to the main camp, but the guide let us camp below because we had an exchange the next day at Phantom. It wasn't until breakfast when one unusually intelligent coffee drinker realized we a coffee problem. Uh-Oh!

The next morning several of us went to the store at Phantom Ranch to buy coffee. We struck out.

The lack of cooperation on the coffee issue was a nasty surprise. What happened to capitalism? We had old US greenbacks, we knew they had coffee. Maybe we were supposed to bribe them. Our next hope was the Havasupai Indians, seventy miles downstream. Things didn't look so good.

While our group was up at Phantom, the motor trip we had shared camp with landed and sent its entire group of passengers off on the trail up to the South Rim. It was one of those total interchanges that boatmen learn to hate. Just when the group is beginning to gel, they leave and you have to start all over. The first group gets a gentle introduction to the Canyon because the big rapids are spaced out and the biggest ones are the day before you reach Phantom. The group hiking in has just walked five thousand feet down eight miles of steep, hot, dusty trail, probably following an incontinent mule train. They're all losing toenails from fashionable uncomfortable hiking boots purchased the week before in downtown Chicago or from an L.L. Bean catalog, and they're desperate for several Tylenol with codeine and a cold beer to wash them down. Their first day is full of big, big rapids: Horn Creek, Granite, Hermit and maybe Crystal. One cold douche after another - no chance to ease into the Canyon. It's really tough on the guides. It's really tough on everyone.

While waiting for our group to return, Pete was sitting on the beach commiserating about total interchanges with the motor boatman over a cold one. They played the old game of one-upmanship, telling stories about their previous experiences with total interchanges. Both admitted to occasionally giving the new group the ride of their life by purposefully taking the more challenging runs in the rapids rather than cheating them. This particular day the river was really high and they discussed whether that would be a good idea. Crystal at high water is pretty nasty - lots of flips for small oar boats and bad swims through the Rock Pile. Our boats looked so small compared to the motor rig (Cindy's raft was less than fourteen feet long, the motor rig was thirty-eight feet) that Pete began to worry. He was especially concerned about the boat he was rowing, a seventeen foot aluminum kettle drum sometimes called a dory.

We floated down to Pipe Creek where Cindy and a couple of others left to hike to the Rim. Lowell joined us as an extra guide. From Lee's to Phantom, Cindy had been teaching her sister Melinda to row her little boat, and Melinda had done so well she wanted to run the big ones below Phantom. So Lowell joined Pete on the kettle drum and off we went. The river was still rising, so the waves were huge. They were so big in Granite that Pete flipped the dory, giving Lowell an award-nasal enema. Hermit was the usual gas, big roller coaster waves that went on forever. We were really jazzed, but at Mile 98, Crystal was the next and biggest one and the thought of flipping at Crystal was pretty sobering. So, we stopped at Mile 96 (Schist Camp) for a beer and strategy session.

The river had stopped rising but refused to drop. While we were watching it, a helicopter flew over, real low. Then another one, another and another. They just kept coming. After his flip in Granite, Pete was pretty nervous about Crystal - he'd had problems there before - and was a good victim for Scotty and Allen's irreverent humor. He got so nervous and irritated that he just had to do something, so after seeing a piece of driftwood that looked like a bazooka. After propping it up, he began to shoot down helicopters. He wasn't a very good shot, which distracted Scott and Allen from their teasing him about Crystal.

After what seemed like forty helicopter flights, we decided that the motor rig and all of the Oregonians ahead of us must have wrapped their boats on one of the big rocks in the Rock Island. Since we couldn't do anything about it from where we were, we decided to tell stories about flipping boats where everyone had good swims.

Oar boats flip much more frequently than motor rigs, but they're so much smaller that catching and righting them is usually not a problem. After picking up the swimmers, flotsam and jetsam and

righting to boat, everyone stands around drinking beer and retells the story a dozen or maybe fifty times. Motor rigs don't flip very often and when they do it's almost always at high water. As far as we know none of the famous motor rig flips had ended up evacuating anyone. After derigging the flipped rig (often having to swim under it), righting the boat and re-rigging it, they all managed to finish the trip, a little worse for wear but basically happy. But it appeared something worse had happened at Crystal that afternoon.

We finally decided to camp at Schist and made plans to run Crystal at lower water before breakfast the next morning. So, after dinner we loaded all of the commissary gear on the boats and sat down with a bottle of Jose Cuervo's fermented cactus. It was a half gallon, meant to last several days, but the tension was so great that we finished it that evening. After the bottle had made a few rounds of the entire group, it ended up being passed between Lowell and Pete. Dara was between them, so for each hit they got, she got two.

Allen took it upon himself to wake us up before it got even remotely light. His idea of an effective alarm clock was to stuff a tamarisk branch up everyone's noses – it even worked on Dara, although we had to pour her onto his boat. We could just barely distinguish between the river and the beach when Scotty and Allen shoved off. Scotty's last words were something about the river beginning to rise – fast! Pete was still on the verge of panicking and wasn't far behind them. Will tactfully waited for Melinda, who was taking a little longer at the Unit that morning. There was just enough whitecap on the waves in Boucher to see them. There were surprisingly big – the river hadn't dropped much overnight. Brrr.

When Allen and Scotty landed on the beach above Crystal, there were ten oar rafts parked there: the Oregonians and another private party which we later called the Tie-dyes. With the exception of one guy on the Unit listing to his Walkman (must not have been a coffee drinker), everyone was still asleep. The tromping of our group woke up a few of them, who were immediately grouchy. “Those pricks must know something that we don't!” one of them yelled as we ran up the hill to scout the rapid.

It was just getting light enough to see the rapid. Out on the Rock Island, in the middle of the river near the end of the rapid, a dark, elongated mass was beginning to take shape. It was the motor rig, hung up on the rocks, upside down. We quickly found out what all of the helicopters were about, and with the exception of a couple injuries, everyone was OK and on the South Rim. They probably had the ride of their lives.

Before Pete, Melinda and Will could catch their breaths, Scotty and Allen ran back to their boats and shoved off, no passengers. If they were conspiring to panic Pete, it was beginning to work and Melinda began to think she should also panic. Dara's sister Terry was trying to Dara up the hill to watch their run. “Patience sister, I'm barfing as fast as I can!” gulped Dara. Fortunately, both Scotty and Allen made the right cheat run look easy. Will, Melinda and Pete each took one passenger and tried to match their run. Will succeeded, but the top wave through Pete and Melinda to far towards the middle that they had to make a major decision quickly: left or right of the pile of rubber. It would be a big mistake to hit it. Both made it to the left, but it was spooky floating past that soggy hulk in the early dawn light.

Now here's the punch line. Pete pulled into the first eddy on the right below the wrecked raft and found, floating in the calm water, an unopened three pound can of coffee, just the right amount, just the right flavor. Yes, coffee floats. And now we didn't have to make the twenty-mile hike up to Supai Village to get coffee.

Scotty had found a boot floating in the eddy with the coffee. Down the river near Tapeats, we heard

that one of the Oregonians, Dave (the only one we relate to because he had a mustache and an old boat), had found another boot floating in the river below Crystal, a perfect match for Scotty's find. Dave and Scotty began negotiating for each other's boot. Scotty was willing to trade just about anything, including someone else's wife (but not including our new-found coffee) to get both boots. Then, someone else's wife demanded to know if the boots fit him. They didn't, so while sipping a cup of the coffee we rescued from Crystal, Scotty gave Dave the boot. That was the last we saw of Dave. It was obvious the river gave us the best deal!