

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Robert Wheeler (RW)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Bob recounts growing up in the East, college, moving west for work, and getting proficient at whitewater canoeing

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TM: Today is Monday, May 28th, 2018. My name is Tom Martin and on the phone is Robert Wheeler, and Robert goes by Bob. Bob took a canoe through Grand Canyon in 1984 and that's the focus of our call today. This is a Grand Canyon oral history. Bob, how old are you?

RW: I am 66 years old.

TM: Okay. Where did you grow up?

RW: I was born and raised in Huntington, Long Island. Not necessarily the middle of whitewater canoeing area but that's where I was brought up.

TM: What were your folks doing out there?

RW: My dad actually ran a plant in New York City that was a dye house and colored clothing. He had taken that over from my grandfather for a number of years. My mom was more of the traditional style mom of that day and age. Was a mom and did a lot of volunteer types of activities. Was very environmentally inclined, also. Was one of the helpers getting the Audubon Society in Huntington, Long Island up and going and was active in a number of different environmental types of things. Then my dad competitioned for dye houses. He was pretty extreme. He actually became a building and grounds superintendent for a school district. He was also a stockbroker for a time period and then he retired at 55. Wouldn't that be lucky.

TM: Yeah yeah, very nice. Did you have brothers and sisters?

RW: I do. I have a sister who's ten years older than I am so she's 76. I've had a few adventures, she's not particularly outdoors adventure oriented but I've taken her on a few trips which has been fun. I have a brother who is quite outdoorsy and is deceased. He actually was murdered with a gun.

TM: I'm sorry. Did you guys camp out as kids? Did your folks like to...? You grew up in New York on Long Island so I'm assuming that camping... I don't know.

RW: Actually, no. We did not do a lot of outdoor activities and probably my love of the outdoors came from Boy Scouts. We had a very active troop and did a lot of outdoor camping and hiking primarily up in the Catskills and in that general area. We also actually did a lot of whitewater canoeing. I have no idea how they got into doing that, but we did over on the Delaware River primarily. So that was my introduction to whitewater canoeing.

TM: How old were you then?

RW: Well, I joined Scouts at about 10½ years old or 11. I guess in that day and age it was 11 years old. I've since been a scoutmaster for a couple different troops for various periods of time. Now it's 10½, I think when I joined Boy Scouts it was 11. I didn't do anything for the first few years. As a matter of fact, my parents didn't actually let me go on the first whitewater canoe trip that we did. I just vaguely remember that, but I did get to go on later ones. So I was probably 13 or 14 by the time I was actually doing some whitewater boating with the Boy Scouts.

TM: Fun. Do you remember who your scoutmaster was then?

RW: Harry Gould is the one that I remember the most and assistant scoutmaster was a guy named Al Long. Al was, I believe, a Marine that had seen pretty heavy action I think. But he was really, I think, instrumental in really bringing outdoor activities and that type of thing to our troop.

TM: So 13 or 14 you're introduced to a canoe on the Delaware. What's the Delaware like as a canoeable river?

RW: It's really a great river for the northeast area. There are a number of good rapids. Well, I remember them now 45-50 years later, may or may not. But there's several that were fairly long. There was some great spots and great camping along the river. I have fond memories, vague fond memories, of our trips in that. It's amazing to me because they were old Grumman style canoes, clanky and not very conducive to whitewater boating but, you know, you throw two boys into a canoe and off we'd go down the Delaware River and had a great time.

TM: This was roughly '64/'65? I'm just trying to put the year into this.

RW: Yeah, in that time period '64/'65 up to... I went to college around '70 so up to then, those 6 years in there.

TM: And this was before the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. What was the state of the Delaware like back then?

RW: There certainly was development along it but there was also beautiful stretches of that river. Again, we'd just camp along the river. Throw our gear in, head on down, canoe down and we all seemed to make it somehow or another. I'd also say we probably learned techniques for canoeing at a Boy Scout camp where we'd have canoes. We used to do swamperees which were really fun where you wouldn't have paddles, but you'd go on out and have teams. How we didn't crushed fingers I don't know. They probably don't even allow it anymore. You'd take three on a side and you go out with two or three people in each canoe and you try to swamp the opposing boats. If they swamped then they were out and had to leave the scene. You'd rock them back and forth and you'd find ways of keeping your boat stable, like you'd combine two canoes or three canoes together so that it was very difficult to tip the canoe. But we used to have a lot of fun. So I think we probably developed some of our paddling skills and our balance skills way back in scout camps, which were like weeklong affairs, maybe two week long affairs. That transferred then I think to just keeping your balance if nothing else. But basic paddles strokes and that type of thing when we'd be out on the river.

TM: Were you wearing life jackets?

RW: Well certainly on the river we wore life jackets and I think we did wear life jackets when we were at the camp. That's a little vague in my memory.

TM: That's pretty good. This is back in the time when a lot of people didn't. So my next question to follow on to that was were you a good swimmer? Where'd you learn to swim?

RW: Well, being in Long island, I had lessons probably at West Neck Beach. There was a number of city waterfronts on the saltwater in Long Island Sound. Occasionally we'd go over to the ocean, Fire Island or Jones Beach, to go swimming out in the ocean. Primarily had lessons in Long Island Sound and really learned swimming skills from that. Then in Boy Scouts we also would have swimming merit badge and various swimming activities that we'd do. I remember they had a one-mile swim and several of us took on doing a five-mile swim, which in that day and age seemed amazing. I was never very fast but I was persistent. I remember I got a five-mile which was five one-mile swim badges put on a kerchief. There was several times and places that I got to have swimming and swimming skills. Also in Boy Scouts, lifesaving merit badge was another important one. I think one of those is required for Eagle Scout, too.

TM: Did you get your Eagle Scout?

RW: I did actually, yes. Right near the end of my... You know after 18 you can't do anything so I finished up before then.

TM: What was your project?

RW: That was sort of as I remember the early stages of projects. Now and having been a scoutmaster it's much more leading groups and leadership and that type of thing. Back in that day and age what I did was the troop was a pretty large troop. I think we had seventy members for most of my time there, which is a really big troop, at least in my experience it has been. As scoutmaster I probably had 20 to 30 scouts, it was a big troop for me as the scoutmaster, but we had about 70. We had all kinds of books and literature that wasn't really well organized so I built bookshelves and organized probably in the good old Dewey decimal system. [laughs] Nobody will remember that. Basically put a library together for the troop.

TM: Nice. Cool. I always try to figure out how people were introduced to the outdoors. Clearly it sounds like, if I could be so bold, it sounds like you really enjoyed swimming.

RW: Yeah, maybe more than swimming was the activity that could lead me to go do and do safely, frankly. That was certainly important because I enjoyed canoeing back then and certainly we had fun river trips for sure.

TM: Did you guys get a canoe then as per your family before you graduated from high school?

RW: No, never had a canoe. The troop would always just rent canoes near the Delaware River when we'd do that or scout camp had the canoes, so we never owned a canoe. This is may be jumping ahead a little bit, but when I first got a canoe most of my time had been hiking. When I was in college I played some sports and that type of thing. I was pretty active in that. I'd go up to the White Mountains a lot up in New Hampshire and do various hikes. Got into some winter camping, cross-country skiing and sort of was more focused on those types of activities. It was probably about 1974 or so, about when I was graduating from college—I went to University of New Hampshire in Durham, New Hampshire—I was with a group of friends going to go do a trip. We were going to do hiking but my knees were a little creaky even back then probably from playing sports and thought maybe we should do something different. Let's go do a canoe trip on the Connecticut River. Looked at renting a canoe. I even remember this price for some reason, the Mad River Royal X, basically it's a sort of style of canoe that Mad River was making, Old Town made them, too. Decided to buy one for \$450 because that was almost as cheap as renting something or I just thought well that makes more sense. So I bought a canoe instead and had a number of different couples that went on that trip. That's where my first ownership of a canoe was. That canoe was called an Explorer canoe and that actually ended up being the canoe that I took down

the Grand Canyon the first time. I think it was about a 16½ foot canoe, fairly long and pretty big volume canoe.

TM: Do you still have that boat?

RW: You know, I ultimately gave it to a friend of mine who I did a lot of rafting with who was into canoeing. He has since given it to his son-in-law and through various repairs it still exists but it's down in Paonia, Colorado at this point in time.

TM: I'm just gonna make a note of that. It would be interesting to find out where that boat is. What did you graduate in college in?

RW: Civil engineering. I graduated in 1974 from University of New Hampshire in civil engineering. Probably more of a focus on environmental engineering, but in that day and age they didn't really have that as totally separate, at least at UNH, bachelor's degree. So I was in civil and then I was a little confused what I wanted to go do from there. Sort of did the interview route, had a couple of job offers, but decided to go on and get my masters at UNH. I got a teaching assistantship at the university so I stayed on one more year and got my master's degree. Actually, I did all my coursework the first year and then I got a job and started working. Eventually got through my master's thesis and got my master's in civil engineering in 1977.

TM: Okay. So let's go back to the Connecticut River that spurred you into buying the Royal X. How did that trip go?

RW: Oh, it was a great trip. I think we had, I think it was three couples. We went way far up in New Hampshire. There's like four lakes which are sort of the start of the Connecticut River. I think we did some lake canoeing up on those lakes. But, we checked out the river also and in some spots there was some whitewater. In that one spot I remember looking at that trying to decide should we do this or not? I think we did not end up doing that stretch, but we did go further down on the Connecticut. I won't remember right now the exact stretch we did, but it was pretty far north along the New Hampshire-Vermont border. It was a multi-day type of trip. It's pretty vague but we did have a great time. It was a fun group and we enjoyed that trip.

TM: Fun. So, did that then spear you off forward to do more canoeing?

RW: Yeah, a little bit. One thing I might interject cause I just was remembering this... Here's where we were really, really stupid and young earlier. When I was at University of New Hampshire, this wasn't a canoe, but I remember... I'm going to forget the little river, but it was just south of Durham, New Hampshire, and had this one little whitewater stretch that was pretty gnarly. Had some rocks in it and that type of thing. For some reason myself and two other guys decided that we could raft this little stretch of whitewater. Talk about lessons learned. [laughs] We actually would take turns, two of us in this little raft at a time. We had fortunately made the decision to get life jackets on. I remember this because there was still snow on the bank. What led us to do this? I don't know, but anyway it did. We'd come down and we did a couple successful runs. Then we came down, I was in the raft this time with my friend, and we came down and I remember we were coming into a wave and a rock. We did exactly the opposite of what you should do when you are whitewater boating, and especially in a canoe. We leaned away from the obstacle and it just brought us right on up and flipped us over into this river and we had no wetsuits or anything like that, of course. Boy, that water was cold. But fortunately we had our life jackets on. I think it was an instrumental lesson for me on being safe in boating because, one, I held onto the raft which allowed me to keep myself buoyed up, and we had a life jacket. We kind of came down on the flat area down below this rapid and managed to swim our way to the bank. We're freezing cold

of course, ran up and ran to one of the people's house actually still lived at home and got hot baths going. [laughs] We all hopped in the hot bath to warm up. We were safe but, you know, a lesson learned there that this can be serious and you want to really end up being careful.

Back on the canoeing, we enjoyed that trip so much that we did do some trips and actually went back to the Delaware River and did a couple trips on the Delaware, multi-day trips. I remember one in particular where it was just pouring rain the whole trip. I remember coming down and we had a big tarp. We set this big tarp up and big tarp underneath. We were on an island in the middle of the river, just camping there, we'd come down to that spot. We were fine and dry enough and warm enough. I remember playing cards and we used Mystic Mints were worth five and graham crackers or something were worth one chip, essentially. We were betting with our money. You got to eat the money. If you had enough Mystic Mints you could start eating you money. Anyway, we had a great trip on that.

There was some additional trips I did when I lived in the east, but not as much as when I actually ended up moving out west. One other experience I just mentioned that was important in my makeup and the outdoors etc., my mom, I mentioned that she was really quite an environmentalist, she knew about a group called Student Conservation Association. She really encouraged me to apply for that and I did. That was the summer of '69. They had a high school program and I came out to Olympic National Park. We hiked in the Elwha River valley about 15 miles or so into the Hayes River Station. We basically built another ranger cabin as a group. That was just such a fundamental great experience for me in the outdoors and in the environmental areas. So, I didn't want to bypass that because and that was when I was still just in high school.

TM: Yeah, was it your first trip west?

RW: We had done the National Lampoon family vacation station wagon trip out west when I was about ten. We basically did the whole south route. We looked at the Grand Canyon from the rim. My mom when I was 10 would only let me get within about maybe 30 feet to the rim and that was close enough. [laughs] We went through there and my dad was the one that it wasn't so much the trip, as it was where you got to each time. So we would drive 500 miles, look at something, drive 500 miles, look at something and that type of thing. We sort of kid around in the family about that. We basically went all the way around the United States. Down to the LA area where his brother, my uncle, lived and then back up the coast here at San Francisco, on up to Seattle. We went to Victoria and then across the northern United States and back to Michigan. My grandparents had a cottage on a lake called Lake Charlevoix which is a lake that was connected to Lake Michigan on the Lower Peninsula but high up on the lower peninsula of Michigan. That was just a great... They had quite a few acres, beautiful, beautiful spot. Nice older style house right on the water so that was pretty cool. So anyway, we raced back to there and spent a couple weeks there and then came back to Huntington. So I had been out west when I was about 10.

TM: This trip then '69 was your second time out. Was that right?

RW: Yeah, that would have been my second time out and it was just on my own as a 17/18 year old.

TM: Cool. Okay. So you've got your Master's degree, it's what 1966?

RW: No, I graduated in 1974.

TM: I am sorry, yes '76.

RW: In '77 actually is when I actually got my Master's cause it took me a few years because I was working and trying to do my Master's thesis at the same time.

TM: Okay. How did you end up going west?

RW: Well, I basically had a job with the Southern Rockingham regional planning commission. We were doing what then was known as a 208 Water Quality Plan through the Clean Water Act. We were a small group. We had some soil scientists. I was the “engineer” and had been hired by them to work on this water quality plan for the southern Rockingham, New Hampshire area on how they should deal with wastewater issues and water issues in that area. But it was a time-limited position and I knew in three years that I'd be done. I was in a relationship at that point in time and she and I had made the decision we're going to travel in Europe for a while, which we did when I got done with that position. We did about a month long bike trip in Scotland as part of that and a little bit in Norway and a little bit in Holland. Sort of travelled around and did different things in a number of different areas. Then we moved forward and we kind of decided we were going to go to the west and give it a go. She was definitely a New England person and it was sort of hard for her to move away from New England, I think, but she decided to do that. So we looked around. I remember we came back from Europe, we got back in time for the December holidays, and ended up in North Carolina where my folks had moved to. They were down in this prime location for whitewater boating but I didn't particularly know that at that point in time. So we were down there and I had applied to a few jobs including one with the state of Wyoming and one with the state of Idaho. All of a sudden lo and behold I got this job offer, both of them, and decided I'd take the Idaho job which was in Pocatello, Idaho. I got thinking that's the right thing to go do. So we did that and she was going to be able to get her master's degree in speech therapy at Idaho State University in Pocatello and I would be working for the state of Idaho in the then Division of Environment dealing with water/wastewater projects and systems throughout southeastern Idaho, actually all the way from Salmon, Idaho and the Salmon River, Shahilla all the way south down to the Bear River and Bear Lake and all of those areas.

TM: Wow and the Snake as well in there?

RW: The Snake is there for sure, yep, and that'll be part of my story for sure [laughs] because that was fundamental of me waking up. I might as well say that now. So we did move. We had a great trip out. Went through Arches and all kinds of different areas, then driven out from North Carolina. End up in Pocatello and I start working and everything. Started doing some canoe trips on mostly like the Yellowstone, a little bit calmer rivers that weren't particularly huge. The Madison River. I was doing a lot of tandem canoeing at that point in time. So, this lady and myself we would be doing mostly tandem trips including one on the River of No Return/the Salmon across the state, but that comes a little bit later. So we're doing these more calm river trips. We were along the Snake River and that stretch that's called the Lunch Counter stretch which is just in Wyoming almost into Idaho. I picked up a hitchhiker and started talking with this guy and he said he'd just canoed the stretch of the river. I said, “What, you can canoe that? You really can?” “Oh, yeah, it's fine.” So, “Oh really.” So we went ahead and tried it and you know what? We could do it and pretty much tandem canoeing. So here we were tandem canoeing the Snake River through Lunch Counter with some really great fun rapids in there. That sort of got us really going on whitewater boating. That actually led us to saying, gee, maybe we could do the Salmon River all the way from Corn Creek all the way down to down near Riggins. I've forgotten where you take out. Maybe we could do that as a tandem canoe. That sounded like a pretty interesting thing to go do, so that led to that trip which has several stories associated with it if you want to hear those.

TM: I do, because I'm thinking wait a minute now, Corn Creek is this on the Middle Fork or the Main?

RW: This is the Main. After the Middle Fork comes into the Salmon, you go just a little bit downstream of that and there's a put-in there where you can do the Main all the way down to Riggins.

TM: Ok, Corn Creek, that's the put-in for the Main, right.

RW: Yeah, yep. So, on that trip, one, we had no clue you had to have a permit at all. I had bought a really inexpensive, cheap and not very durable Udisco raft. We had another couple that was interested in this with us. Somebody I had done a bunch of hikes with and some winter trips with hiking, etc. back east. He and I actually were roommates in college for a time period. He and his girlfriend said, "Yeah, we're up for doing this, let's do this." So we got together and decided to do this. We built a frame for this Udisco. It was just made out of two by fours with drill holes for what the oarlocks would... It's gonna sound really stupid, but you know, you learn a lot from interesting experiences. We basically decided we could go ahead and do this. Now, one thing I might mention ahead of that, Pocatello, Idaho the city, had a really great outdoor program. One of those programs included a whitewater boating/rafting class that you'd go up and do portions of the Salmon River up on the upper stretches of the Salmon River. I took that and it was basically a small group. It was great, great instructors. I won't remember their name, or the leaders. Some of the instructors weren't much more experienced than I was. And I remember basically rafting then and learning to raft. Because I had done enough canoeing in whitewater, I kind of knew how to do this so I got to actually participate quite a bit in that trip. I learned a heck of a lot including one rapid that I came down—I think it's about the only time in a raft that I've actually gotten flipped out of the raft when I was at the oars—came down and hit this huge wave and rolled out of the raft. Came right back up holding on to the raft and got back in. But it was another good lesson in when you hit big waves what you need to do in a raft, but also all the time I was learning how to deal with it in a canoe.

I also took a kayak class and learned to roll. We did that Lunch Counter stretch again. So I kind of got some experiences in reading rivers, etc. But what I found in a kayak is, one, I wasn't great just sitting in a kayak. It always felt a little claustrophobic to me. To me a canoe seemed like such a better deal because you could have freedom, you could sit in the seat, you could move around, you could kneel when you're going through rapids. It just seemed like I had better control. So kayaking didn't end up being my vessel of choice on whitewater rivers. It was really the canoe in those early stages. So that's really what kind of I think moved me along towards more of the whitewater canoeing side of stuff. Before we had done the River of No Return/Salmon, we'd also been doing a lot of canoeing on the upper reaches of the Salmon River up near Redfish Lake and up above Redfish Lake. Redfish is sort of a side basin off the Salmon. We did that a lot. We had a lot of fun. Including I remember one time coming down up there and here came an otter upstream having a merry time. All of sudden it came up and it suddenly noticed us. It came up out of the water and just stopped and looked at us and then it just disappeared. We had some great fun experiences and that led us to saying, "Oh sure, we can go ahead and canoe the main stem of the Salmon all the way down."

TM: With a Udisco with two by four frame and a little hole drilled for an oarlock. Okay.

RW: It was pretty funny.

TM: And no permit. How did that work out?

RW: Well, the permit worked out. The guy and myself took off like at 6:00 and drove all night to get up there so we'd be first in line the next day to try to get a permit. We got up there and the two women had done the shopping. By the way, we had Dinty Moore stew in cans I think every night and Riunite wine. To this day, I can't drink Riunite wine anymore because we had a bottle for every night, I guess it was of Riunite wine. Anyway, we learned a lot about how to do food on rivers, too, since then. So we got up there and sure enough there was a permit that was open so we were going to be able to go on the river. We had the four of us. My friend the guy rafting with his dog, and his lady friend, and then myself,

and then there was Greta in the canoe. Later on, what I used was Styrofoam. The southeastern canoers did these saddles and they had airbags that they'd blow up everything like that. But in that day and age for me, I used Styrofoam. I'd get these big blocks of Styrofoam, I'd put them in. I'd put the thwarts across the Styrofoam, that would hold the Styrofoam in and then I'd dig/sort of gouge out knee holes for me so I could really get my knees into and underneath and be really stable. Then I had an angled thwart across that I put my butt up against and lean against so I could really be braced in there. If I ever flipped...

TM: Hey Bob, sorry, I'm gonna jump in and back up a minute because I knew this was gonna come but I know that people who listen to this interview might not necessarily understand this, that a canoe is basically a very large container and you can put things in it like people and gear. But for whitewater canoeing you start trading out that space for stuff that floats. Am I correct in assuming that what you decided was let's fill the canoe up with styrofoam since it floats and we will wedge ourselves in here so we will have a whitewater canoe that will not fill up with water because it's full of us or Styrofoam?

RW: Correct.

TM: Okay. And you mentioned there are other types of flotation devices to put in canoes such as air bladders, there's just some different ways of doing that.

RW: You got it exactly, yes that is correct.

TM: Okay.

RW: In those early stages we thought we didn't necessarily need the flotation. What we'd do is do a whole spray skirt over the canoe and that would probably just be the cats meow and would work fine. So we basically put together this thing with holes for us to go in with; if you want to look at it sort of like a waistband thing. It didn't work at all. We'd come down through a rapid, we'd hit the first wave, the wave would come up over the bow, drop into where the material was and just sink it down to the bottom of the boat and stretch it and then we'd be full of water. So essentially that first trip down the River of No Return we had no flotation at all and just a big open boat, as you say, that was just a bucket waiting to take in water as you hit whitewater.

TM: And on that Main Salmon trip/River of No Return you didn't have any Styrofoam in that boat. It is you, camping gear, your partner at the time, and this concept of a skirt? Like a two person skirt? [laughs] You get in, I'll get in, we'll have to climb in the boat together and then hook the thing all around.

RW: Yeah. It was not a very convenient setup by any means and totally non effective, too. And then we had a raft that had oarlocks that fit in these holes. It took us one or two times but he'd pull on the oars, the oar would come up, the oarlock itself would slide down the oar till it got to the throat right where the blade is and then it would drop into the water and disappear forever. Fortunately we brought extra oarlocks. Finally we were bungee cording those up together and trying to keep them in the boat. So this was very primitive technology that we used in those early stages both for the canoe and for the raft.

TM: Wow. What fun. Yeah, there's a sinking feeling when you pull on the oar, the oarlock pops out of its little hole that it's in, and you look at it and it slides right down the oar shaft, the oar shaft is getting smaller and smaller, and eventually the oarlock lets go of the oar and drops to Davey Jones there on the bottom of the river. You only do that once or twice before you figure out oh, we need to change that.

RW: Exactly, and that is a sinking feeling when you see that and then... You know Curt got very good at basically one oaring down through the rapids of the Salmon River. [TM laughs]

TM: I was gonna say gotta tie the oar to the two by four frame so it can't pop out and take the lot with it.

RW: That's what we did. We used bungee cords and sort of wrapped the oarlock and everything and did the best we could at holding it together. It was a very organic trip. We got the permit, we start off and the first rapid I think that happened with the oarlock and we said, "Oh that's fascinating." [TM laughs] But we survived in the canoe. The only time we actually, and I won't even say we tipped over, is there was one big rapid, I will forgot the name of it but it was pretty far down the river. We took in so much water that we essentially were just level with the river. We finally just kind of gave up because we were level with the river and clearly we were swamped. We just sort of hopped out, swam our boat to the side and emptied out, and we were fine to go. So we actually never per se tipped over, we swamped over. But we made it all the way down the river to the end point. It was just a fantastic trip. We were naive but we had done enough and had enough knowledge. It wasn't at a time where the river was just terrorizing folks in terms of its flow. I don't remember what the flow was but it wasn't at its high peak or even close to that.

TM: Do you remember the time of year?

RW: Well I bet you it was like an August trip, something like that. I think it was sort of mid-summer to mid-late summer.

TM: So low water. Nice, yeah.

RW: Lower water, yeah. We learned so much from that. [laughs] I actually started moving more towards solo canoeing in the long term from that and didn't do as much tandem canoeing. Even though that was such a big boat, I started doing that. I think the first time I actually really solo canoed was on the Boise River through a whitewater stretch. Again, I won't remember exactly where that is, but it was up above the city of Boise in some whitewater up above and kind of got the feel for that. "Oh my gosh, I can actually canoe alone pretty decently." One thing that might be interesting is the Boy Scout technique was what was known as the J-stroke. I always tended to paddle, even though I am right handed, I tended to paddle on the left side of the canoe. That's where I always felt comfortable. You'd kind of come straight down along the canoe and then you'd flare it out and sort of rudder in a sort of strong rudder type of position. You'd actually turn the blade towards you on the upper side and then blade it out. Then you'd feather up forward, meaning you'd keep your paddle parallel with the water, less wind resistance, and then you'd put it in again and just pull and do that. Well, somehow or another I was watching a movie that had a, and I will have no idea who this person was, but it was a C1er. The C1 is different than a canoe, or at least I consider it to be. It's like a kayak, the C1, that covered looks like a kayak, but they're kneeling in there and they have a paddle on one side. It's not like a kayak where you have paddles on both sides. I actually watched very closely this video and what I saw is that when the person put the paddle in at the front, they'd actually put it in a little way from the boat and they'd come down and pull the boat towards the paddle a little bit, bend down along the boat, and then they'd flip the paddle the other way and sort of rudder that way. So it was kind of like what I call a C-stroke in my parlance. Oh my gosh, that was such a great stroke because obviously as you're just pulling back on one side, and since I'm on the left side paddling, it pushes your bow to the right. So how do you pull that bow back? Well you can rudder it back to the left or if you do a little bit of this C-stroke you'd pull the boat to the left a little bit as you start off your stroke and pull the bow to the left...you'd do your power down along your canoe and then you do a sort of rudder at the end that pulls the bow back to the left. I can paddle for hours on my left side and never stop. Just paddling and paddling with that stroke and head straight down the river.

TM: So, let's put a timestamp on this. This is roughly 1979-ish, 1980?

RW: Yeah, would have been in that time period. Yep, for sure.

TM: And the Boise River, is this also on the Snake or is it a side tributary of the Snake?

RW: Well, it eventually goes to the Snake, if I remember correctly, downstream of Boise someplace. I'm not sure exactly sure exactly where it comes in. But, yeah. That's probably where I first solo canoed and that really got me going that way. Eventually the partner I was with and I split up so single canoeing made a lot of sense at that point in time if I was gonna be out there canoeing.

TM: So your partner and you split up, that makes sense to then go solo. Let's talk a minute about the terminology C1 versus OC1. Can you go through those for me?

RW: Sure. At least how I understand it, a C1 it's like a kayak. It's fully enclosed, you're in there with a spray skirt on that's tied around you. But instead of like with a kayak where you're sitting and you have a double bladed paddle where you're paddling on both sides of the kayak, a C1 would be you're kneeling and you paddle just on one side. You can flip back and forth and over, do a crossbow and that type of thing, which is just where you go across your boat and basically you can do some strokes on the opposite side from where you might normally be paddling. It's basically very similar to a kayak. You certainly can roll a C1. Whereas an OC1, which is an open canoe with one person and it, is truly a canoe, the traditional canoe you think of. Is very open. You might have flotation in it, as a matter of fact it's wise to have flotation in it, but you basically are able to sit on the seat. What I would do is I would turn my boat around. I would face the stern which would put me just in back of midship on the canoe. Ultimately I'd put all that Styrofoam in there and a big block and in the front and a little bit in back of me. So I had a lot of flotation in there but it still had the tipiness of a canoe. You were able to be sitting at times but in any whitewater I'd kneel down and I put my knees up in the Styrofoam holes that I developed for my knees and I'd be really braced in there.

TM: Sorry, I'm gonna jump in. This is still in your 16 foot Mad River?

RW: Yeah.

TM: Okay.

RW: It's called an Explorer and it's a big boat. Now, canoe technology has changed so much. Maybe I'm getting estranged or off base, but when I started canoeing it was all Grumman canoes. They had a little tiny keel on them. They really weren't designed for whitewater boating. They were more for lakes or calm rivers and that type of thing. The Mad River is what I really focused on. There was other boats, Old Town, etc., and they came out with this ABS or Royal X foam which is basically two vinyl layers with sort of a foam mixture in the middle that made the boat very flexible. They used to brag that you could take your canoe, wrap it around a rock, pull it off the rock, it's be all bent, replace the gunnels, the wood strips in our case around the canoe itself, and you'd be able to actually return the boat back how it was because it had a memory of how it was supposed to be, and you could paddle off again. Fortunately, I never did that, even though I did have a friend that did that which is a story here for a little bit later.

I was going in an Explorer which was a pretty long, big volume boat. Then they started coming out with real boats that were really focused on whitewater. So my first trip down the Grand Canyon was with this Explorer big volume boat. The next time, I went down in what was called an ME. That was about a 13-14 foot long boat and it was shaped like a banana. It was pretty... You know, looked like a banana. You could really turn on a dime with those boats very easily but they were much more tippy. The type of ME that Mad River did had a pretty what I'll call sharp design to it, meaning it was pretty cutting. It wasn't

bowed out at the bow or the stern. I found those boats to be very, very tippy even though I could be successful in learning how to do that. Right around that time or a little later I think Dagger came out with a variety that had a very rounded bow and stern, very broad in the front. Basically the concept on those boats was the further you'd be to tipping over, the more flotation you tended to get and it would tend to buoy you back up. Whereas the ME if you were going to flip you're going to flip in a hurry.

TM: Okay. Much more tippy. Yeah, that's the question about boat design. Do you want to actually row that boat almost on its side, still have enough buoyancy to be able to do that. So long as you don't overtop the gunnel of the boat, the top corner there where the water could actually get in the boat.

RW: Right, right. You know one thing I'd say is here I was out west. There was very, very, very few canoers out west in the 70s and 80s. We could probably talk more about who I saw and who I experienced.

TM: Yeah, lets.

RW: The eastern boaters, the southeastern boaters, I think, really picked the sport up and were certainly a level above me in terms of their abilities and capabilities. They were going off waterfalls, they had abilities to roll their boats even though it was a canoe which is quite a feat. I never actually developed that skill. Basically, if I was going over, I'd go over. I'd do everything I could to hang on to my paddle. I'd do everything I could to hang on to the boat and do a self-rescue, get back into the boat or get out to the side of the river, and get out and empty your boat of the water that you would have because there's no way you could prevent all water from being in there. You would like oftentimes get pretty heavy and unwieldy with water that you've got in the boat. But I could self-rescue pretty decently and would often do that if I did tip over. So when I was in Idaho, I'm trying to remember, there was a friend of mine that he would canoe. There was just a few canoers, but very, very few. I ultimately moved to Colorado. When I first moved there—I moved to Colorado about 1980—I think my first season on the river was going to be '81. I met one guy who used to work for the Forest Service. I'm not going to remember his name, great guy though. Eventually ended up in Libby with the Forest Service after about a year of us paddling together. He and I would go out solo canoeing, each of us in our own canoes doing rivers. Probably the biggest, wildest thing we did was we were over in the Salida Valley where the Arkansas River is. We were sort of looking around what to do and what we could go paddle and not paddle. We were at...a guy that does not wetsuits but dry suits, Stohlquist was his name. We were at his shop and talking with him and he made a few suggestions. He then mentioned to us Royal Gorge. And this was before runoff was coming down so it wasn't going to be super high. We thought, "Royal Gorge, well that sounds okay." So, we headed on downriver and the two of us did Royal Gorge with nobody around it all. I don't think we saw anybody on that. I don't know how familiar you are or your listeners are to Royal Gorge.

TM: They're not. So fill us in. Help us out a little bit.

RW: It's a pretty wild stretch of the Arkansas River and pretty amazing stretch of river. First off, you're in a canyon that's pretty sheer wall. I think it's one of the highest bridges in the world or United States above Royal Gorge. They have a tramway that comes down to the river that takes tourists down. It's actually dark in there when you're in there. You don't see the sun and it just is dark and foreboding, etc. It's pretty continuous whitewater, which in a canoe it's nice to have drop pool, drop pool because if you fill up with water you can bail out, you can sort of rest in the pool down below and then you hop on, go down the next rapid and you're in another pool down below. It's a little more difficult when you have pretty big whitewater almost continuously and not very much of a pool. So we came down, we knew there was three big rapids and it's just the two of us. I don't remember the names of these rapids but the first rapid I remember coming down. My friend decided not to run it. There's a railroad track along

there, so he ran his canoe down along that railroad track and was hopping in down below. Again, maybe stupid, but I came down and thought I could do this rapid. You started on the right side of the rapid. There was a lot of rocks, you had to get over to the far left side, and then you had to get all the way back over to the right side again where there was like this finger of rock that came out, and then a little slot you had to hit, and then there was a rock in the bank on the right side. I remember coming down there and it was a matter of inches that I managed to get my canoe around that rock that was on the bank. Had I hit that, I probably would have gone perpendicular to the river, gone off over that fin and tipped over for sure. But I managed to get down in the slot, got down through that. So we continued, went to the next big rapid. I think we both did that one as to get down. Then there's the third one which is right where the tramway comes down and the bridge is up above you. We came down that and I remember the water forced me down near the bottom of the rapid right over to the left side and jammed my bow up on that bank right there. I was sort of isolated because I was in deeper water where I was, but my bow was there and I was pretty tippy. But I managed to get off. These tourists are just looking at us like we were aliens in this river. I would mention, by this time safety-wise I almost always, even if the water is fairly warm, will use a wetsuit because it gives you better flotation. I try to use the best life jacket I can find and I always started and always would wear a helmet when I was doing any whitewater canoeing. Sometimes because you might actually hit your boat if you did tip over, sometimes your paddle might hit you by mistake, and your head might hit a rock, too. Who knew. So we'd get pretty outfitted. Wetsuit booties that were sturdy and good to walk on rocks with. I would scout rapids where you could and definitely paid a lot more attention. But, here we were two of us going down. That was my first experience with Royal Gorge and that was probably one of the more difficult river stretches I ever did do.

TM: Yeah, and this is 1982. Do you have a date on that run?

RW: Oh, it was probably May of...could have been '81, maybe '82. Memorial Day weekend, actually. The day that we're talking right now back in '81.

TM: Okay. Water would have been cold? This is runoff now so you would just on the up-run of the runoff. So wetsuit is a good idea.

RW: Yeah, 100% and again, I would almost always wear a wetsuit when I was canoeing.

TM: And again, just thinking about canoeing through the Royal Gorge, it wasn't necessarily very popular back then. I mean again, the Royal Gorge has a long history of river running through it that goes back quite a ways. But just thinking about getting a canoe through the Royal Gorge is a bit of a feat, so that's pretty good.

RW: It was and I think afterwards we said, "Whoa, we managed to get through that somehow or another and survived that." The advantage is there's a railroad track so if anything happens at least you can walk out somehow or another along the railroad track. But definitely was exciting. That was the one guy I kind of canoed with that year. Then he was moving and he said, "Hey, there's this guy named Dick Shaw. He is from the Southeast, he used to canoe back there. He's out this direction and he canoes." The other wild thing and this will relate to the first Grand Canyon trip, is there was a Kansas Canoe Club.

TM: Hang on, a canvas canoe club?

RW: Kansas canoe club from Kansas.

TM: I was thinking canvas, C-A-N-V-A-S. Not Kansas, K-A-N-S-A-S.

RW: No the state of Kansas, Kansas Canoe Club. They would come out every summer for a number of years out to the Arkansas River and do Browns Canyon. They wouldn't tend to do Royal Gorge but they would primarily focus on Browns Canyon and that area. There would be 10 of them or so and they were very interesting. Some were older, some were younger, but it was a really nice mix and we would always look forward to joining up with them. So those were some of the few canoers. Then I started finding other folks, too, that would canoe. But it was a pretty small group, still. Dick Shaw was a canoer, then Mike and Pat Jones who I still stay in touch with to this day, they live actually near Salida, they were canoers. Barb and...I'm going to forget their names. But, Barb for sure. Bill, but I don't remember the last name offhand. She actually used to work at Great Sand Dunes National Park and they ended up being canoers. A guy named Brian Parsons, he would do kayaking more than canoeing but he'd sometimes do canoeing. Then there was a few other people around that were canoeing. So we started running into people and started hanging with them a lot more in the 80s. And I had moved to Boulder, I was working as coordinator treatment operations and ultimately utilities director for the City of Boulder, Colorado. In the summer we'd pretty much go every weekend over to the Arkansas River or the Blue River or any number of rivers and basically go whitewater canoeing. For me, largely with Dick Shaw, he and I would tend to do more of the adventuresome rivers. We did Royal Gorge a number of times. I did the Numbers, which is up above Browns canyon, which is quite a famous kayaking spot but not as famous for canoes. That was probably one of the harder stretches of river to do. That and the Rio Grande Box.

TM: How did the Numbers compare to the Royal Gorge section?

RW: Oh, I'd say there was some real similarities. The river is a little bit different. It probably was a little bigger down below, obviously. It was tough. That was a tough stretch of rapids in there. There's basically six rapids and you basically count them off as you came through them. The one I remember in particular I think was number five which there was a bridge across right above that. The river came down, you had to curl around to the right and then you were hitting some pretty big waves and avoiding rocks and getting through that. Never did that at a super high flow. But, you know, we did that. I think we did that a couple of times through that. Then we'd do what was called Frog Run down below that which was easier but a little more wild in the sense that hardly anybody ever did that back in that day and age. So you'd be out there on your own including a dam that we'd portage. I remember there was a house on the bank there and as we were portaging... Colorado has a law that the land underneath the river is owned by the property owners on the side. So in theory you can't even touch the bottom of the river. We portaged this dam and I remember that at that house these guys came out with some rifles [laughs] as we were portaging the rapid. So we didn't spend a lot of time dallying around there. We took off. Property ownership and river access was a big issue in Colorado back in the 80s. Then there was the Milk Run and then Browns Canyon and then there was Lower Browns. Another thing I did numerous times was the FIBArk race, which was First in Boating on the Arkansas, which is a 26 mile downriver race through rapids. Quite the adventuresome thing. They'd have frogmen and women that were below each rapid. They'd see us coming down in a canoe and oh my gosh, you'd see them just go, "Oh my gosh, we better get ready for this. They're probably gonna be tipping over." That was very exciting trips. There'd be two or three, maybe, boaters that might be boating it. I actually have a cup right here that says "First FIBArk downriver open canoe one-man," they weren't into appropriate language in terms of one person, but, "Congratulations." It was somebody that made these things with a dragon on the side of the cup.

TM: What year was this?

RW: Well this would have been in the 80s. I probably ran it five or six times. It always was Father's Day. They'd always crank the river up so you'd go ahead and do that stretch of river in this FIBArk race which was always fun.

TM: So you're thinking that you guys were the first, would be, open canoe ones on the FIBArk race. Is that right?

RW: I'd heard that there were some way long ago and then they didn't have them for a long, long time and then they started. Yeah, I think we started doing it. So, we were doing it. And I remember...

TM: I'm gonna jump in. The FIBArk, this First in Boating on the Arkansas, started in the 1950s, in the early 1950s. So back in the 50s, there were people in canoes and of course kayaks. Walter Kirschbaum, is one of the... Roger Paris. There were a number of very strong kayakers back then but there were some canoe people as well. I don't know the history at all.

RW: Right. Well, when I was going down in the 80s, there'd be just two or three of us that might be doing it. Dick Shaw and myself. Dick was who I canoed a lot with. He went on the Grand Canyon with me and canoed. We did Westwater together. We did the Middle Fork of the Salmon. I say together, I mean he was on the trip in his canoe and I was in my canoe. We did a lot of boating together Dick and myself. I think one year he won, one year I won. One year, there was a guy that was canoeing it that had like a Kevlar canoe which is very sleek and cut through the water very readily. He actually had a little electronic or battery powered bailer in his canoe. [both laugh] So we would come down and I used to kid Dick Shaw, it was I think called Little Cottonwood which is a pretty big rapid and there'd usually be a lot of people there. The one year I came down, that I lost to Dick, was I didn't have a lot of flotation and I wasn't really tightly positioned in the boat. I have no idea why but it just was not one of my years. I came down and I filled up with water on the first wave. The crowd was screaming and I remember leaning back a little bit and putting my paddle up in the air across and started cheering back at the crowd. I had so much water in the back that I actually bobbed straight up and down the river for... I pushed forward. I didn't tip over. I managed to get to the side. But one time Dick came down there, he tipped over, the frog people came out and grabbed his boat, pulled him and his boat into shore, emptied it for him. He just sort of stood on the bank as they emptied it for him and he hopped back in the boat and went on down. Meanwhile, I was off there by myself, even if I didn't tip over, full of water though and tipping my boat over by myself, emptying its water and hopping back in.

TM: Oh my gosh. That's not fair.

RW: It wasn't fair at all but Dick and I had a really fun time. The other fun thing that happened... I had a fairly small raft and my other good friend Steve Krest... You were saying earlier, I would canoe but you couldn't always carry your gear because if you're doing some big whitewater river, like Royal Gorge or FIBArk race or anything like that, you wouldn't carry gear particularly. So I bought a raft and my friend Steve Krest, who worked at the City of Boulder also on traffic side, he became adept at rafting. He and I really put that first Grand Canyon trip together in '84. So, he would take my little raft. They started doing raft portions. Normally the canoe/kayak group would start off at 1:00 in the afternoon and go 26 miles downriver so you get down whenever, you know in 2-2½ hours, something like that. Then they started a raft race. Well he was in this little tiny raft of mine. It was a little better frame but it still was a wood frame. Oarlocks, though, were positioned in so they'd stay in. He came down and he actually got the Sportsmanship Award that year, again it was sometime in the 80s, because somebody got into some trouble and he stopped and helped that person out. Grabbed them together safely and then was off down the river. He got the Sportsmanship Award for him stopping to help out and help somebody in the raft.

TM: Nice. Let's back up a minute here. You and your friend Dick you mentioned Westwater. Westwater is a section on the Colorado River between Grand Junction and Moab.

RW: Correct.

TM: It's a pretty short section, about 14 miles, a very tight canyon not very deep, maybe 300 feet deep or so. When was the first time you got a canoe through Westwater?

RW: Well, so there's more to the story than that.

TM: Please.

RW: I think I'd done Westwater about twice. It was probably the mid-80s.

TM: Well, let's back up to your first time through Westwater.

RW: So the first time... I mentioned earlier about the knee problems. I was going to need to get some arthroscopic knee surgery to remove some cartilage and that was going to be in a few weeks. So I was in my raft that I'd bought. This time, it was an Achilles 16½ or so foot raft. So I was in that. Dick Shaw was canoeing. There was two other canoers Bill and Barb, I mentioned their names, they were going down with us. They were in their canoes. Then we had a cataraft that Pat Jones was rowing and I was rowing this Achilles and Dick was in his canoe. So we came down, camped up above the sort of miracle mile of rapids, Skull and there's a few others in there, then you come out on flatwater basically and you row out to the takeout. We came down, we got to Skull and went and scouted it. Pat asked me, "How are you going to do this in the raft?" I said, "I'm going to actually come down backwards. I'm going to hit that side curl wave. I'll use that to spin me around. I'll be just to the left of the Skull pourover and I'll be fine. I think that's how I'm going to do it." She said, "Ok, that sounds good". Meanwhile Dick... I've forgotten the order, but anyway, so I come through. I'm fine, I'm down below. Dick Shaw had gone down Skull and then he went in what's called the Room of Doom which is this huge eddy area that's enclosed by walls, you're probably familiar with it.

TM: Yes.

RW: He got into there perfectly and he put his blade above him on the rock and his boat tipped down and he pulled his shoulder out and fortunately it came right back in. This is one of the few times ever that we had any sort of serious, super serious injury or anything going on. But that's not the full story. So he does that, he manages to get out of Room of Doom, get over to where we are on the left bank, the Room of Doom's on the right bank. He gets over the left bank comes up says, "Hey, I just dislocated my shoulder. It came back in, but I don't think I can paddle anymore. So I'm probably done." But he had his canoe. Meanwhile, we're down there and here comes Pat Jones down with somebody in her raft. She flips over in her raft and somehow gets over to the bank on our side but up above us. We're dealing with Dick. Somehow we get her boat out. So then we're all there talking about stuff. Well, she doesn't come down, we go back up. She dislocated her shoulder. We had two dislocated shoulders within five minutes of each other midway down Westwater trying to figure out oh, this is serious. We couldn't touch her at that point in time because she'd fallen in the river, everything had filled up, there's no way we were gonna have any chance of trying to loosen her shoulder up and get it back into place. So basically, I gave them my raft, her husband Mike and Pat, and said, "You guys go." Turned out it didn't matter because you come down on the lake and we caught up to them fine. Dick's not able to do much because of his shoulder so I'm gonna take his canoe. Somebody else was taking the one raft that Pat wasn't going to be rowing anymore. One thing is, canoes are very specific to each person. So here I'm trying to get into Dick Shaw's boat. I can hardly bend my knee. I get in, he had the Styrofoam stuff just like I did. I get in and the bow is on the bank and I'm in the water and I say, "Okay, I'm ready." They let me go. I flipped immediately. [laughs]

TM: Wow

RW: With my bow on the bank and I'm in the water going, "Well that's not a good start." Anyway, finally got it together, get down the next series of rapids and don't tip over or anything like that. Then we get on out. They take off immediately, Pat and Mike, head off to the Grand Junction hospital and they got her shoulder back in. Amazing to me she's never had a shoulder problem.

TM: Oh good.

RW: How that ever happened I don't know, but it was really fortunate that she didn't. I think what happened is that her oar... She probably had her arm fully extended with the oar and all of a sudden the oar hit something and yanked and that just pulled her shoulder out. The only other serious injury that I ever remember was on the Middle Fork trip, which I canoed. I didn't talk much about the Middle Fork or another main stem of the Salmon that I canoed. I had a guy that was there and he was walking and he fell. He sliced his shin to the bone with a big patch of flesh. We did everything we needed to to kind of get him set up. He was a veterinarian, so you know, but we had some stuff, I think even some antibiotics, along with us so he made it okay. But it could have been touch and go, could have been a much more serious... We managed to get him all the way down the river and he healed fine. Those are the only serious injuries I ever remember people having on our river trips. But that one was pretty traumatic and involved canoes.

TM: Yeah, when it happens all at once that's tough and Westwater is a tough section. So your first time in Westwater you rafted it to Skull and then canoed out from there. Then did you come back and run it again in a canoe?

RW: I did. Yeah, we had a great trip down the next time. It was a lot of fun and no mishaps or any big problems or anything. I don't remember anything extraordinary about it. In a canoe it was a fun river.

TM: Yeah and what year was that?

RW: Well, I bet you it was in the '85 to '87/'88 timeframe.

TM: So after your Grand Canyon trip?

RW: Maybe, I'd have to...was it '83? I'm not gonna remember.

TM: Okay. The other thing...I'm kind of backing up again. So you are working utilities for Boulder, for the City of Boulder in Boulder County. There's a number of pretty interesting rivers not too far away, from the Arkansas to the south, to the Poudre to the north, and of course Westwater then to the west. Did you get up and run the Poudre did you run any other...?

RW: I ran it later. I think I was in a raft at that point in time when I ran the Poudre. We did, though... A guy named Gary Lacey. I don't if you have ever heard of him but he was quite a character, still is. He used to do the FIBArk race and would always win it. He was the type of guy... They had a, I don't know, some sort of a multi segment race in Denver and he would do everything himself. He was running and biking and canoeing or kayaking and all that sort of thing.

TM: Ironman kind of thing.

RW: He would just go on his own. He'd beat all the group teams basically. [laughs] He was quite a character and we did a lot of trips. He and I organized a lot of trips for city staff. We did the Crystal, we did Roaring Fork, that was more in rafts because we'd take people from the city that were employed with the city that wanted to go on trips. We did do a trip on the Rio Grande. I'd say Royal Gorge, the Numbers, the lower Arkansas through one rapid it was called Three Rocks where I happened to tip over my canoe right above the big huge rock, and then the Rio Grande Box were probably the hardest rivers I

ever did. Not that the Grand Canyon wasn't hard. It was hard in maybe a different way. I never had a feeling... Well, I might have felt that I could have died. But on some of those rivers that I was talking about you always had this feeling that, oh my gosh, I'm on the edge of my skill ability and I'm doing it but if something happened I could have some real problems here.

Anyway, Gary Lacey and another guy and myself they were in kayaks and I was in my canoe and we came down the Rio Grande Box. There's Powerline rapid which is sort of like the Zoom Flume on the Arkansas through Browns Canyon but much shorter distance. So you come down through that, I got through that fine. I was coming down and those guys had stopped in an eddy and I couldn't stop because we had about a, my remembrance was a mile long, at least half mile long, stretch of just hole after hole. Just big whitewater on the Rio Grande. I remember going by them and saying, "Well, we'll see you down there." I made it through and I hit a number of holes. But, you know, what I learned a lot in canoeing was about bracing and how you would brace, strong braces, high braces or low braces, and anticipate things. Anticipation in canoeing is such an important thing. Anticipating what's going to happen in front of you and then bracing for that or being ready for that or paddling for that. But the Rio Grande Box is quite a thrill to go through that in my canoe.

TM: Yeah. When I think of big-water rivers where there's rapid after rapid after rapid after rapid, you know the Numbers, Royal Gorge, Westwater, the Box, the Rio Grande. Gore canyon comes to mind as well. When did you get up into Gore?

RW: I actually never did Gore. Partly because I thought it's beyond my ability. There was a guy in Boulder who ran an outdoor whitewater outfit.

TM: Was that Landis Arnold?

RW: No.

TM: No. Okay, that's not his name.

RW: I'm not going to remember his name offhand. His eventual wife, actually, worked at the city and I knew her pretty well. I'm just forgetting his name. I saw videos of him having done Gore and Gore was really substantial.

TM: It's sort of on the top of all these.

RW: Yeah, yeah. I agree. For me I just decided that that was probably not something that I'd do. One thing I didn't talk as much about, it was probably in the early 80s that I twice went down the Middle Fork of the Salmon. Actually once was probably in the late 70s and then once was in the earlier to mid-80s down the Middle Fork of the Salmon. Once, I think it was 2.5 on the gauge and once was at 5.5 or so. So pretty high flow at one time and low flow at the other. I actually never tipped over coming down the Middle Fork of the Salmon.

TM: So for the people that won't know, the 2.5 feet is a nice comfortable level of water on a river that has some flatwater but then a lot of continuous rock work for mile after a mile. 5.5 feet is terrifying at that level. If you end up in the water, the swim is long and uncomfortable.

RW: I say that's very accurate.

TM: That's very good to get through. Just trying to assess your skill level by the late 70s/early 80s was tops, was very good.

RW: Yeah, that's probably where I really got most proficient and comfortable in the boat. Again, that was a sign making it through the Middle Fork of the Salmon without tipping over at all at both those flows, you know, for me was quite an accomplishment.

TM: Was that tandem or was that solo, both those trips?

RW: That was solo. Both of those were solo.

TM: Alright. Then one other place I wanted to ask you about was Cataract Canyon. Again, people think of Grand Canyon and think, "Oh, my gosh." Most of the river sections you've been talking about are much more difficult than Grand Canyon as far as technicality, as far as the potential to have a bad swim that then doesn't end just keeps going. Cataract Canyon is one more place where certainly at flows above 20- to 25,000 cubic feet per second, it's terrorizing again through the Big Drops. Did you get in there at all?

RW: I never had a chance to, never had a permit for that. Partly because the Grand Canyon is so enticing. I've been down the Grand Canyon six times, four times in a raft and two times in a canoe. But Dick Shaw actually has done Cataract Canyon. My friend did manage to canoe that stretch himself, but I have not actually had that chance to do that.

TM: Okay. Bob looking at the time here and we have been happily yik-yaking away not quite an hour and a half. What I'd like to do is wrap this interview up and come back then for Grand Canyon.

RW: That sounds great.

TM: If that sounds alright.

RW: That's really fine. Hopefully this has been helpful.

TM: Absolutely. To just say, oh we're gonna talk today with a guy that took a canoe through Grand Canyon, it doesn't make sense unless you can educate us to all of this, which is wow, you really became incredibly proficient in whitewater canoeing which is a really unique skill and this is how you did it. Very fascinating to get this story. Is there anything else in this...? Because I'm thinking certainly by the late 70s/early 80s the mystique of the Grand Canyon would have been on your radar screen. Is that correct?

RW: Oh, a hundred percent, yeah. It was just a goal that I'd had for quite a while and it was certainly on my mind that that would just be. I remember reading an article about the bubble line on Lava and just following a little line of bubbles to manage to hit the right spot on Lava. So for sure it was something that was there and was something I was very interested in. And for me I had a raft and Steve would take the raft for me and I could take my canoe.

TM: So before we head out there for Grand Canyon and as I mentioned we'll do another interview, anything else that played a part in your boating? It's kind of stupid question, because I mean, you've already told me hey we were doing the Arkansas, Westwater, clearly you had the skill set. Any other river sections that you did which were helpful?

RW: One thing that was kind of amusing. [laughs] As I said, I probably really started whitewater canoeing the most when I was out west on the Snake River through Lunch Counter. Lunch Counter had two rapids, Kahuna and Lunch Counter itself. What I found is in my canoe you could surf waves. So you have these kayakers would go out there and surf these waves and I thought well, hell I can do that.

TM: Wow.

RW: So I'd come down and Lunch Counter... I remember at the right water levels I could go out there, I could sit in that wave train facing upstream, put my paddle on my boat and just sit there and stay in the wave train in the middle of the river.

TM: Without putting your paddle in the water?

RW: Yeah, I wouldn't even need to. The boat would just sit right in there and just stay there. So that was really exciting and fun to be able to do. I think it struck some awe among kayakers. I wouldn't overly hog the time. But then Kahuna had a different water level. Kahuna was much more difficult because you would basically get into it and then it would suck you in and then it was pretty violent. It would shake you around. Occasionally you'd tip over but not a big deal. One time I had my dog Barley, who's this great mixed breed. I don't know what the mix was, but she was just a sweet dog. Barley was in the bow of the boat. I got through Kahuna, turned around and back-eddied, got back up back into the wave train and flipped. You know, no big deal. I come down, but I'm looking around for my dog Barley and start to yell for her. I get down over to the side on river left, get out and my boat's there. I'm looking around, I can't find my dog anyplace. I'm going, "Oh my gosh, where's Barley? What happened? There's no way." There's somebody on the other side of the river pointing for me to flip my canoe over. I flip my canoe over and she had been inside the canoe but when we flipped the water took her and moved her right into an airspace in the boat itself. She came out of that shaking her tail and just so happy [laughs] to be out from underneath or in the boat itself. I had some other experiences with her. I was tandem canoeing once down that stretch with somebody and we tipped over. I remember Barley coming up and she wanted on top of that upside down canoe and was basically pawing at me and using her nails. I was like, "Okay Barley, calm down." [laughs] But we worked it out. She was a great river dog and we had a lot of fun on rivers. I'm not sure she'd say that as much.

TM: [TM laughs] Well hopefully she lived to happy old age and can sit around the fire and think about wetter days.

RW: She did. One other thing, this was later after I had done some Grand Canyon stuff but might be interesting. I don't want anybody else to go there but...it's a great trip but its calm water and that was Bowron Lake. I have twin boys, one has Down Syndrome, and my sister, who I had mentioned earlier, and a person who had been a babysitter for us and my nephew and a friend of his went up to Bowron Lakes which is up in BC. It's a provincial park and it's essentially a rhombus. You start off and you portage about two miles and you go on a lake. You canoe across the lake and then you come to another portage, go across another lake, then you do another portage and then you're on a lake for I think its 32 miles. Whole thing is about 72 miles, a very tiny bit of river and whitewater.

TM: So this is in Canada?

RW: This is up in Canada. You do this whole circuit route. My boys were about six or seven years old and we did this trip and it poured rain the whole time. [laughs] Like really poured rain. We had three clothes bags. These are dry clothes. These are wet clothes that you probably can wear and these are clothes we will probably just throw out when we get done with the trip. We would come in and the two young men, my nephew and his friend, we'd set up these three big blue tarps, blue tarp camping. Then we'd put tarps underneath and then we'd set the tents up on that. My sister or the babysitter would change the boys into dry clothes and then we would basically have dinner and go to sleep and get up the next morning and off we'd go again in the rain on this trip. That was canoeing. But it was just one of those memorable trips that was just a really fun, fun trip that we really had a good time with. So that's probably it for stories. I might think of something else by next time but those are the major things.

TM: Well, you know what that reminds me is it's not all about the whitewater. Sometimes it's simply with friends and with family in pouring rain and having a good time.

RW: Yes.

TM: That sounds like a big part of this as well.

RW: It is for sure.

TM: Very fun. Okay, well let's call it good here. This is gonna be then the end of Part 1 Grand Canyon oral history interview with Bob Wheeler. My name is Tom Martin. Today is Monday, May 28th, 2018 and this is going to conclude Part 1.