

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Bruce McElya (BM)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Grand Canyon, River

Part 4

Date of Interview: 05/20/2019

Method of Interview: Telephone

Transcriber: Anonymous

Date of Transcription: 02/07/2020

Transcription Reviewers: Nancy Brian, Sue Priest, Tom Martin

Keys: Cataracts, Crystal Rapid, Gaylord Staveley, National Park Service, Tom Workman, Canyoneers boat flip, microdiscectomy, back surgery, John Gray, river pranks, Doug Deutschlander, Chris Peterson, Barbara Law, Jan Balsam, NPS research trip, Mark Law, Chris Walker, view camera, Singer Graflex Speed Graphic camera

TM: Today is Monday, May 20th, 2019. This is Part Four of a Grand Canyon oral history interview with Bruce McElya. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Bruce. How are you today?

BM: Good morning, Tom. Good to hear your voice again.

TM: Oh, it's good to get a chance to chat with you. This is Part Four. And at the end of Part Three, you were telling us about a terrifying event of the slow, roll turnover of a 42 foot long motorized boat in the bottom of the Grand Canyon as it hits a wall kind of sideways and slowly rolls itself over. Did we cover all that adventure? Anything else you want to add to that?

BM: Well, I think we did cover most of it. Let me finish up and then clarify also. The Canyoneers rig is a 40-foot-long boat. It's the largest motor rig on the river, certainly the heaviest. And we had been running Crystal left that year and we went left, and we got sucked into the wall right below the Slate Creek eddy. It's a very dangerous wall. And we rode...we...Marty decided to...you can do two things there. You can either nose into that wall and you'll usually crawl all the way up the thing, there's so much current there. Or you can choose to run from the wall. And either one is a valid tactic. And he had decided to run from it and we almost made it. We just about made it, but we'd just eased up onto the wall and stopped. And when a boat stops on a river, you're in trouble. There's trouble. And so anyway, it moved forward about 10 feet and we thought we were out of there. And then it stopped again. And when it flipped, it was a violent flip. It's...it was...it wasn't an easy roll over. It was...this thing just violently flipped in a microsecond. Boom. Slam. Upside down. And that's when the chaos started. So we, you know, as best we could, we pulled it all back together. We told some people to swim to shore, some people come to the boat, some were getting sucked under the boat. We...the motor rigs up above saw it happen. They immediately came, ran Crystal and helped us out. And we didn't have...we had 20 people, but we didn't count 20. We had 19. And your worst fear is that someone drowned, you can't

find them. And we've figured out real quick who it was. It was Jimmy was missing and we thought, oh my gosh, where is he? You know, everyone's looking around on the river trying to find him, and we couldn't. So there's drain holes on the bottom of each of the cars. And in the motor rig you have to have drain holes. And so I'm going down and I'm looking in these drain holes and yelling through them, and I got to the middle car. And I yelled down there and a guy yelled back. It was Jimmy. He was trapped underneath the boat, you know, in one of the foot wells of the car 'cause that's where the air is. And plus he's near the drain hole so he got air. And he's stuck under there. He doesn't know which way to go, what to do or anything. And so I asked him, I said, are you hurt? And he said, no, I don't think so. And I said, okay, look, tie up all the loose ends of your life jacket and tuck everything in because you're going to swim about 12 feet underwater. You're gonna have to go underwater. And he's freezing cold. He's been under that boat now for 10 or 15 minutes. Hypothermia is the next step. And I was ready to swim underneath and get him risking, of course, I'm risking. Anybody that swims under upside down boat is risking their life. And so I was prepared to do that, to get him if I had to. And I said, okay, can you see my finger? I'm pointing. Can you see where I'm pointing? He goes, yeah, yeah. I said, well, that's the direction you're going to go. That's where you're going to swim and you're going to pop out on the other side. I'll be waiting for you. If you don't pop out in a few seconds, I'm going to swim for you, and he goes, okay. So I saw his feet disappear. And so I went to the other side of the boat and thank God he popped right out, and we drug him up on the top of the upside-down boat. And now the count is good. We got 20. Live people 20. Ugh man, that was the biggest relief of my life. And so anyway, the motor rigs pushed us on downstream. There's a crash beach just below Crystal, river left. And they pushed us over there before we got to lower Tuna Creek. And that's where that's where the...all the rescue happened. The Park came down with their equipment and we helicoptered everybody out and it's just the two of us boatman there wondering what just happened. We fished some frozen weenies out of the...one of the busted-up coolers and that's what we had for dinner was frozen weenies. Water was an issue. We found one canteen of water. We split between us. Next morning, the Park comes down. Choppers in with three Park personnel and that rope puller and a bunch of caving line and some z-drag equipment. They didn't really know what they were going to do. They just brought a bunch of equipment and five gallons of water. We're going to do what we could. So anyway, this little lowly rope puller thing, it's, it's a come along that pulls a rope instead of a cable and this thing re-flipped a 12,000-pound motor rig. It did it. The static caving line, like I might've said, it went from about 14 millimeters down to about eight millimeters. It was stretched so tight. And finally got the boat over. And Shane had launched a boat at four in the morning from Lee's Ferry. He showed up about four that afternoon, and then we proceeded to repair the boat as best we could and drive it on out of the Canyon, which we did a day and a half later. So that's how kinda that one ended up and it shook me pretty good. It did. I didn't know if I really wanted to continue with this. These rigs now have shown me their potential danger and what can happen to most anybody down there that drives these rigs. It just...so I got back and I talked to Gaylord about it and I said, Gaylord,

I'm having second thoughts here. You know, have you been in this before? I mean, this situation where...and he said, yeah, he...they flipped some boats in Lava Falls one day. And he was sucked under and held there for a long time. And I finally got out of it...thought I was going to die down there. And, you know, you just got to keep going. Just...I want you to keep going. We had a bad run here, but you did a real nice job after it happened. We're all proud of how the crew reacted and you just did the best you could. We couldn't have asked any more of you as a boatman working for this company and the passengers feel the same way about it. So I kept going. I didn't run down the river for a few weeks after that. I was just shook, but all of us finally did. We went back down. We didn't quit. We didn't leave it. So anyway, that was the...my second season at Canyoneers. And what I should mention to you.... it's an issue that changed up everything in my life. These motor rigs, especially the Canyoneers rigs, there's no good way to lift things out of those wells. It's hard on your back. And I'm a thin...I'm a small person with thin bones, and that's a death sentence for back trouble. So I started having serious back trouble and the short story is I was having a lot of pain in my legs. So a surgeon said, you just...we just need to do a microdiscectomy here, take the pressure off those lower nerves and you'll be a whole lot better. So I said, yeah, sure, let's do that. I didn't want to do the fusion. And so I woke up from that supposedly simple microdiscectomy with a paralyzed left leg. And I mean, I couldn't put any weight on it. I had feeling sensation, but no muscle control of my leg. And it was...Tom, it was terrifying. I can't walk. What do you mean I can't walk? And I couldn't. So it took two years of intense physical therapy to get my leg back to the point of being able to walk again a year after that surgery. The damage that he caused, I don't know what went wrong in there, but the damage that he caused was major nerve root damage, and it was getting worse, not better. And so another surgeon looked at it and he said, you know, the CT scans are showing that your vertebrae are collapsing down upon themselves because of what he did in there, and you need to get those fused so that the damage doesn't continue. You're going to be paralyzed if you don't stop it. So I went for the fusion and I got a two-level fusion in my back and that did stop the damage. But I was left with very horrible pain from the initial damage and I never got over that. Never did. I went to five different pain clinics over the years trying all these different techniques. The injections they would give me simply made my pain worse, not better. And so I quit on that and they tried every drug known to man to kill the pain, and none of it worked. And I finally said, okay, we're going to try opioids and see if that works for you. And they did, and it was a miracle drug. It worked and it got me out of pain and then I was able to work again and function along with my physical therapy and I got back to the action. But for a long time, for about five years, there was no way I thought I was ever going to run the river again or do anything like that. It just didn't seem over.

TM: So this was...

BM: I was ready.

TM: This was '83 to '88 roughly? I'm trying to put a timeframe on this.

BM: Oh, let's see. The back problem would have been after my last second year at Canyoners. That would have been probably '84.

TM: Okay.

BM: No, it was actually after the Park. I'd worked a research trip for the Park and then came the back surgeries.

TM: So...'85? Do you think '85 to '90?

BM: Yeah, yeah, that sounds right. That sounds right.

TM: Okay.

BM: And, it was a real struggle, Tom. Most people around me that were having those problems were not as aggressive about it because I have so much to lose. I had Grand Canyon. It was hope. That was my whole life. That was my...that was kind of my *raison d'être* for life was shooting pictures in Grand Canyon. Everything in my life revolved around that. My work, my relationships, my vacations, everything revolved around that. And it was lost. But I got it back, took a long time. And so I had done a number of, let's see, I had done a number of solo trips. The back thing may have come later because I had already done, by then, by the time I had done back surgery, I had already done four or five solo raft trips.

TM: Oh, okay.

BM: So I'll have to put...I'll have to go back and look and get a better timeline for you on that.

TM: Alright.

BM: And to this day, the only way I can survive in life and the medical community says, you can't do this. It doesn't work. But it does work for me. Fortunately is the fact that that I'm able to take small amounts of opiates and they are the only thing that allows me to get out of bed in the morning and not be in a cold sweat from the pain.

TM: Yeah.

BM: And so now I'm thinking, okay, I want to go down the river, but how am I going to do this if I'm taking opiates? That's seems dangerous. And the medical community says, don't do that. Don't, don't do that. And I said, no, no, I've got to do this. So my routine now, as it was back then is, on days where I have big rapids or serious danger, I don't take opiates. And the pain comes rushing back in and I just deal with pain and I...because I need to have the highest level of sensibility that I can possibly have and do the best job that I can in these dangerous areas. And then after I'm through the danger, then I will take pain medication again and get back to a normal kind of a river trip. And that's how I do it. And it seems to work. And I'm still that way today. Every two or three years, I get off of that stuff to see where I am. If my nerves have healed,

have they, have they? So I get away from all of that, and the only thing I might take is aspirin or Tylenol. And at the end of two months, they tell me, the doctors say, well, at the end of two months, that stuff's out of your system, both psychologically and pharmacologically, and you should know where you stand. And at the end of two months, I'm a wreck and know that the nerves have not healed themselves. And the neurologist tell me that, you know, look, you're in the same boat as people who got shot up in a war who have, you know, terrible nerve damage. It doesn't heal really. And we don't have anything in our bag of tricks yet that will cause nerves to heal back the way they were and not be sending signals to your brain. We just don't have it yet. They're working on it, of course. So anyway, I do that just to check. It's a check to see where I am and I'm still damaged. And so I have to keep taking this stuff. It's just a part of my life. They tell me that it won't work. They say that it doesn't work. You can't do that for long periods of time. And yet I have, and it is in fact the only thing that works is small amounts of opiates. And it's not a bet. It isn't a bed of roses at all.

TM: Right.

BM: There's no good thing about it except that it kills pain. So anyway without those, I couldn't run the river and that would make me very sad.

TM: Let's back up a bit to...come back to working for Canyoneers. And this is your second season with Canyoneers. Did you only work two seasons for them?

BM: That's correct.

TM: Okay. There were some other boatmen that were working there. And we've interviewed Shane Murphy.

BM: Yes.

TM: So another boatman named John Gray. Do you remember him? Did you work with him?

BM: I know him well.

TM: Can you tell me a little bit about him?

BM: John Gray was a veterinary student at the time. And pretty smart guy, fairly good river runner, although he damaged boats more than the rest. I know this because I had to repair boats when they came in and he kind of tear them up. Him and Ben Cannon tore up more boats than the rest of them, but he was nice guy and he knew the river and he had interesting stories. But he was known up and down the river by all the commercial boatman as the merry prankster. He lived to prank other people. He was always thinking about it, and he was very sophisticated with it, and he was almost impossible to prank himself because he was the master prankster. He could always see it coming and you could never get the guy. But I had a good time running with him. We got along well. He never pulled a prank on me. I think because he knew I'd

probably knock his teeth out if he did it. The problem with John and his pranking was that when it came to paybacks, like if it gets kicked up a level and somebody pays him back, then he pranks him again. It gets mean with him and I'll just give you a couple of examples. There was a boatman on one of our trips, a new guy, and he was kind of a smart aleck and John's kind of that way anyhow. And him and John did not get along at all. And John was just tired of this guy. And we used to camp on Scorpion Island...was our last night on the trip. Really just dead quiet there at night. And John, what... he got mad at this guy. He went and got the bottle of Ipecac out of the first aid kit, poured it in his beer, and about 15, 20 minutes later, this guy is just up chucking and just violently throwing up sick. And it was really embarrassing because this is going on into the night and you can hear everything. And that's the, you know, that's what he'll do for paybacks. That's...and that's a little on the mean side. That's way on the mean side. And another time we were, were all up at Lava Falls. The whole group of our people were up there, and John and I are up looking at the rapid and letting everyone see Lava Falls from up above and down below out of the corner of my eye, I catch this boatman marching up the trail with a very determined look on his face. He comes marching up to the top of the hill there, plows through all the people, gets right in John's face and says, I know it's you that put that trout in my ammo can, my personal ammo can and I'm going to get you for it, John. I'm going to get ya. And then he turned around and walked off. I went, holy mackerel, John. Did you put a trout in somebody's can? He goes, yeah, yeah, yeah. He was just smiling. And that's, you know, that's John Gray. He can really get tough with some of those pranks that he pulls. So there was a gal at Canyoneers, Verna, and she was the passenger service lady. She was the contact point between the people on the trip and she would give them their ammo can and give them their dry bag and orient them and so forth. And I...and she said, yeah, you guys need to figure out a way to prank John Gray. I think you really need to get him. She wasn't much on...she didn't really liked John that well. And so we thought about it. And so we always shoot a big group picture at Deer Creek with the waterfall in the background and the sun's on your face. It's a good photo op. And so for this picture, John Gray...John has two weaknesses. He wants...he's an ego. He wants to be the center of attention. And also, he's always going after the women on the trip and such. So women and ego are his two weaknesses. So what we did...I got a hold of a motor drive camera, and the group was, you know, the group got there, and I was gonna shoot the pictures. And I had a guy on either side of him and I told them, here's the gag. Here's what we're doing here. I'm going to count to three to shoot the picture. When I get to two...and everybody has their arms around everyone's shoulders, right? They're locked together like that. I said, with your other hand, I want both of you to reach down and rip John's drawers down. And I'm going to shoot a motor drive sequence of it. And they did this and went one, two, and they ripped his drawers down and then motor-drive camera is just going. And he didn't see it coming. He didn't see it. And we got him. And so I gave Verna the first picture of the series which they were just starting to rip his shorts down, and she puts it on the bulletin board where all the passengers come in and they...and so...and they...she says to them, okay, your guide on this trip is John Gray. Here's a picture of John. And

they're going, oh my goodness. And so when they got on his boat, they said, did you know about that picture of them ripping your drawers down? It's on the bulletin board. So a couple of weeks later, John comes marching into the passenger service center there, and he rips the picture off the bulletin board. And Verna says to John, she says, well, John, if you take that one, I'm going to have to put the next one up there which is a little more revealing, of course. And so he is just fuming mad and he puts the picture back on the bulletin board, and that's where that one sat. And we had a gag going amongst the other commercial boatman. I guess everyone knows John and it's been pranked by him before. And we took up a collection of \$35 for every boatman. We collected this money going up and down the river, and it was a very sophisticated gag knowing that he goes after the women on the trip. You know, he's always kinda getting close to the girls and such. And so the truck driver, one of the truck drivers, you know, it's a three and a half, four hour drive to Lee's Ferry and we talk about whatever. And a truck driver said, thought about this gag thing and John Gray and he came up with an idea. And the idea was...was to have a transvestite, you know, guy that looks like a girl on the river and let John, you know, take her off into the bushes. And when he reaches down into her...his...her pants, he will be in for the biggest surprise of his life. And we thought, oh man, perfect. Perfect. Yea. And if I was doing it right, I could actually have a photograph of the actual incident. That was our plan and we collected \$750 from the other boatman. 750 bucks. That was enough to buy the four-day split trip. And one of my friends lived out in Los Angeles and she said, yeah, I know the perfect transvestite for this. And, and I said, we'll talk to her...him. And she did. And the person agreed to it to go down the river. That sounded like a lot of fun and... but we had to guarantee her protection that she wouldn't get hurt, that John wouldn't hit her or something like that. We said, yeah, we're going to watch this real close and we're going to make sure nothing happens to you. Don't worry about that. And so we had this whole gag put together. And we couldn't quite schedule it for the end of the season, so we agreed that we were going to do it again at the beginning of the next season. And I didn't return for the third season. So all of that money was refunded to all the other boatman and they were disappointed. They knew the gag. They've liked it and they donated, but it just didn't quite happen. But anyway, that's the prank business on the river. And it gets sophisticated from time to time. Oh, we pulled it. We pulled a good one on Hatch one night. Chris...Chris Peterson, the big lanky Mormon guy was working for us. He is one of the best guides down there, really. He was a great driver. Best driver... boat driver I've ever seen. So we're...it's a quiet area and we're parked across the street from a two boat Hatch trip. So we gathered some tools up and some cushions and we've...and when it got dark, we floated quietly across the river and we took the props off their motors and then swam back to the other side. Okay. So we get up in the morning and we make...made sure that we waited long enough...longer than Hatch to get going, and Hatch goes out, they're loaded, they're ready to go. It's about seven thirty and eight in the morning and they start their motors, kind of pushed off. They put it in gear and nothing happens. They frantically pulled their boats back to shore, pull their motors out of the water, and there's no props. And Pete and Chris and I are standing on the beach. Each one of

us is holding up one of their props. And we pranked him pretty good on that. Nothing bad happened. They had spare props, of course. So they put their spares on and they motored across the river and picked up their other props and it was all in fun. No one got mad at each other. And that's the way practical joking should be, in my opinion. It shouldn't ever be mean or damaging or anything like that. And sometimes...but with John, it can get that way. When it comes to paybacks, John Gray, he...his are mean. It's just payback. His pranks are kind of mean. But anyway, I used to have an okay trip with John. He was pretty good. He let me tell most of the stories just 'cause I guess I told the stories well. He had a few I didn't know. And I had good trips with him. Got down the river just fine with him and had okay trips. He's...you know, he's a qualified boatman. That's the John Gray story from my point of view. You might have a different perspective.

TM: Okay. And then...so after your second season, you decided to stop working for Canyoners. And what...was there a precipitating event for that or it was just like, well, okay, well, I've done this enough. Let's do something else.

BM: That was most of it. I had done that and I was already having back trouble and I knew it was just gonna get worse. And at any rate, I had met...like I had mentioned before. Of my four true loves in life, three of them I met in Grand Canyon and Holly Hottan was one of them. And she was an archeologist up there at the University of Michigan or something. And I was doing that back and forth thing. And I'd met her on a Canyon trip. And she was very young. She was 18 years my junior. And it just doesn't really make sense, but we were together for a while, a good while. And she ended up getting work with the National Park Service. She went to work for Jan Balsom as an archeologist. And so I ended up living in the women's dormitory there at the old medical wing. And... because that's where Holly was living, and I got a job working for the Park so that I could be with her or near her more often. She had gone to the trouble to get a job.

TM: I'm gonna jump in right here and say, can you describe the quarters there? The clinic was a hospital. It had overnight rooms for 10 people or so, maybe a little less. And those rooms eventually were converted into living quarters in the Park.

BM: That's correct.

TM: Was a long hallway with rooms on either side of it and then a kitchen and a shared bath down at the end of the hallway. Can you...is that right? Is that how you remember it? And what else do you remember about the clinic dorms?

BM: Yes. It was...yes, it was a medical clinic and it had been set up medically. And they transformed each of those hospital rooms into dormitory rooms. And that's where the women were living. And they...and there's a back door at the end of the wing and you could access the wing that way, or you could come in through the other way is you had to go through the clinic and then go to the dorm room. So the women liked going out the back-door and... but the problem was the back door wasn't working and

anybody through the night could walk in that back door. That made the women very nervous. So they put a chain and a lock around those two doors. It's a double door thing with the handle business. And so I...it was making them nervous. So I said, well, let me see if I can fix that. And I did. I fixed it to where the door would lock behind itself and you couldn't get in unless you had a key. And they did. All the women had a key and they were so happy to be able to access the wing from the back door now. And I would fix the sinks for them. I would fix their own doors. Any little thing that was going wrong. If I could, I would fix it for them. And the problem was, is they were putting in requests to maintenance and they wouldn't come. Or if they did, it was three weeks or a month later, you know, and the women were tired of it. And so I fixed everything for them and so they protected me. They were happy for me to be there. I was the only guy on the wing and we had to work out an arrangement for the shower. And I had a specific time frame when they wanted me to go to the shower. And then I didn't go down there ever outside of that time. And that's the way we worked that out. And it was perfectly acceptable. And everyone was happy with the arrangement except one gal, she thought it was inappropriate. She was law enforcement. She went over to Barbara Law who was handling housing at the time, and Barbara calls me into her office. She says, Bruce, you can't live in the women's dorm. That's inappropriate. You can't do that. And I said, well, they don't mind. And Holly's my girlfriend and I just thought it was okay. I don't want to upset anyone here. She said, it's just not right. I understand that. And I've talked to the other women over there. Jan Balsom was pretty much head of the wing and she didn't want me gone. So anyway, Barbara says, you've got to rent your own place. And so she had this hole in the wall closet dorm room thing that most of the boatmen were living in. It was the minimum quarters and it was 80 bucks a month. So I said, okay, Barbara, well, rent me that while I'm working for the Park. Rent me that... and then can I still stay with my girlfriend? And she says, I don't think you should. I said, okay, fine. And it was one of those, don't ask, don't tell things from then on. So I rented the place that took the heat off of Barbara because I had a place that I was actually renting and then I never stayed there. Not one night did I stay in that thing. I just stayed over there in the women's dorm and it was fine. Everybody was happy about that and I kept everything fixed for them. And we played board games and you know, it was...something like that could go wrong. But it didn't, it went right. And everyone was happy except for the one gal. And she never...if she complained again, Barbara Law didn't do anything further about it 'cause I never heard anything more. But they were a wonderful bunch of women. A lot of them were archeologists and I think all of the Park archeologists were living on that wing. And they had a big...the Bureau of Reclamation offered a huge sum of...it was called mitigation money and this mitigation money was made available to the National Park Service by Bureau of Reclamation. And their whole theory is study it to death so that we don't have to change anything as long as there's a study being done, we don't have to change anything about the dam. That was the theory. So they were throwing a lot of money out there for research just trying to keep it going so that no changes were necessary. So anyway, they got this archeology money and that's the...I went down on one Park trip...one archeology Park trip, and

that was it. And then my girlfriend Holly was involved in a serious car accident. Her and another archeologist had driven to I think Reno for a conference and they got a horrible car wreck, like almost killed them both. Terribly injured, both of them. And so I left everything and then went up to Michigan where she was in a hospital and that's a whole another story. But she...I'm not sure if she went back to the Park again. I think she did. No, no, she didn't go back to Grand Canyon, but she did come back to where I was living in New Mexico and got work there and just so we could be together. Anyway, that relationship did finally fall apart because she was just too young for me. It just was never going to work out. So anyway, that's the women's dorm deal. And that is the research trip thing for the Park Service. I didn't work for them very long.

TM: Were you hired on as a boatman then?

BM: I was hired as a boatman-slash-chef and none of the other Park boatmen would do the job even though it paid a little more. None of them agreed to do it. They wouldn't do it. You know, Doug Deutschlander was working there. He knew better that they all knew better that they weren't gonna...they weren't doing that. And so finally they hired me, and I really didn't have much row experience. But I... you know, I knew how to cook for 40 people on a two boat Canyoneer trip. So they hired me as chef/boatman and I took the job and man, it was the hardest work I've ever done on the river. It was just me and I had to, you know, corral that boat and get it down the river safely, and then go ahead to camp. And I had...by myself, I had to set up the whole kitchen cook thing. And I would have an assistant for a little while during dinner. And then it was...I tore everything down the next morning while they left, after they left and...it was a lot of work. It was more than I expected. And I did it for one trip and that was it. That was all I was doing for that.

TM: So was... you mentioned Barbara Law. Her husband Mark. Was Mark working as the head river ranger at the time? Or where was he in this?

BM: He hired me to run the river trip. Him and Marc O'Neil were in their shop and it was I believe Mark Law was a step above O'Neil. And so Mark hired me for the Park trips. And there was to be three or four of those things. And I just did one and left. And the reason Mark wanted to hire...was desperately looking for somebody that would do both cook and row was because they only had to pay one person.

When I left, they could not find a replacement to do that. So they had to hire a chef and a boatman at twice the wages which is what they were trying to avoid. But they ended up having to do it anyway, at least for awhile. Uh, ...

TM: Was this about 1990 or...I'm trying to think of it...or was this late '80s?

BM: The last of the Park thing, that would have been about 1990. My first solo trip down there was 1992.

TM: Okay.

BM: That was a winter, winterish trip. November 4th launch.

TM: So, were you then back at Ruidoso, New Mexico in the interim between the one trip working for the Park and this solo trip that you did in your... first solo in 1992?

BM: Yes. I went back to New Mexico and continued with the commercial photography and conspiring to run the river. Much transpired between 1990 and 1992, I acquired a cataraft. I knew I was trying to figure out how to shoot pictures down there and I thought the solo raft trip was the way to do it because the commercial thing didn't work for me. And working for research, I couldn't shoot any pictures on those trips either. I was so busy. And I couldn't do any work on a public trip because they're generally disorganized compared to a commercial company. And it was...there's no way I could really shoot pictures from that venue either. So I thought, well, I'll...this solo trip might be the thing that works for me. And so I looked at the boats and I thought, God, these 18-foot Domars, if I get stuck overnight on a beach, man, I'll never get that thing off. It's too big. It's too heavy. So I looked at a cataraft and a fellow named Chris Walker had designed a four tube, 16-foot-long cataraft, and I liked the looks of it. And it was open down the middle which meant you could take a rock down through the middle of it if you were good, you wouldn't get stuck. And I like the look of them. They were fairly lightweight, but a rigging nightmare, what those things are. So I bought one. I bought a used one that he had and a frame he had for it. And I built some of my own frame stuff and started acquiring, gathering up the equipment in order to make this thing work. And the main compartments for it were 35-gallon plastic barrels which were used. They were international shipping containers, completely, utterly waterproof, pretty tough. And I thought, yeah, these things are great. So I bought four of them and rigged everything up where I could put those four containers on the boat. And it's an odd-looking affair.

TM: So they have a screw lid on them, is that right? Like a...

BM: No, they have a cam-over rubber seal...

TM: Oh my.

BM: ...and once you...and cam-over strap goes all the way around it. It joins the lid. The lid has a shelf around it...and then the lid has a shelf around it. So the cam-over strap is just a big circuit or a piece of plastic. It wraps around both of those at the same time. And when you cam it over and pull it down, it stretches and pulls those two lips together and presses the rubber seal down upon the top of the barrel. And I mean, it is an absolutely watertight forever. Nothing leaks at all.

TM: So how would you hook a round barrel onto a raft frame and expect it to be there if the boat were to flip or do any other odd or end kind of things?

BM: Well, that's intelligent thinking on your part and I had to solve that problem. And I did. I actually made my own straps. I got a special...I got a sewing machine for heavy duty sailing application and were sewing my own straps. And what I ended up

with was two straps per barrel. And it's shaped like a... it's not a flat sided barrel. You know, it's conical. It's fat in the middle and a little bit skinnier at each end. And so the middle of it...at the end of it was the, you know, the cam-over strap a pair with a lip. Well, that was enough that if I put a strap around that, it couldn't really get away. It couldn't come out of there unless the whole barrel flipped 180 degrees, and then it could pull itself out. And so the other strap went to the middle of the barrel. And these are...what do you call those straps? It's a two-piece strap and each piece goes on the frame member.

TM: A hoopie? A hoopie strap. So it's got little loops on...

BM: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

TM:...on one end and then the other end will be a regular strap end. And on one strap on the other, the other end, we'll have a cam buckle on it. Okay.

BM: So whatever you call those straps. The loop straps, I put that down the middle of the barrel and the loop strap can't really move. Once you tighten it, it's locked in. It can't really move. And so I tried everything to yank that barrel. I tried to move it and pry it with an oar and everything 'cause I know it's going to be a violent thing when it's in whitewater upside down. And I tried everything I could, and I couldn't get them to come out of there. They wouldn't move very far. They were nestled down in between the bars of the frame. They rested on the bars of the frame and once you pulled that strap, it's now pressing that thing hard into the steel, and it can't come out. The only...if you break the strap and you could break a strap and then you would probably lose a barrel. The good news is that it's a giant floating barrel in the water, and you should find it.

TM: Right.

BM: Hopefully you'll find that thing.

TM: Yeah.

BM: And so I built all this stuff and I thought, you know, I don't have any experience in whitewater rowing to speak of except that one Park trip, and I'm not comfortable. So I started running smaller rivers in New Mexico. Ran in Taos Box and ran the Arkansas River up in Colorado and the Rio Grande River. And I got pretty good. You know, I got to where I understood what was going on and how to row the boat. And Chris Walker told me there's something about these catarafts that you should know. He said they don't spin very well because the cataraft tubes are like keels in the water. Once they're going in a direction they don't really want to stop and turn, and you're basically trying to plow the tubes through the water, whereas a big bathtub boat, like a big Domar, has a flat bottom on it. And it wants to spin on its middle axis. It wants to and it's easy. So you rig it to where you are rowing a Domar or a big normal raft in the middle of the boat. Your oar pins should be pretty much in the middle of the boat and you can spin it easily from that advantage point, but not so with a cataraft because

you're trying to spin the front one way and spin the back the other way. And those tubes are just jamming up in the water. And it doesn't spin easily, nor does it spin very quickly. He said the best place to be with your oars is in the front of the boat. That way you're only forcing the tubes on one end to go somewhere and you don't care about the back end. You don't. He says, if you get the front end straight, the backend is going to follow anyway. It doesn't matter. Don't worry about it. And he was absolutely correct. So while I'm learning on these, you know, the Taos Box, the Arkansas River, all of those, I learned I... you know, I had to try it. I rode the boat from the middle and I rode the boat from the front to find out. And he was correct. He was correct. Cataracts are best rowed from the front of the boat. You control the nose, you control the boat, and that's what works. So I've run that boat right up front and let me tell you, it's a wild ride when you get water flows like you have in Grand Canyon. It's a wild, wet ride up there on the front of the boat. But it's also, you know, pretty exciting except when it crosses the line and gets, you know, hurtful and it can do that. You can get hit so hard up front there that little...it'll knock the wind right out of you. And it's not a pleasant feeling to get hit that hard. And it will rip the oars out of your hands too. And you can't hold on. You've got to let go or they'll rip them out of your shoulder sockets. So you've gotta be aware of that. You can't hold on to the last minute because you might get hurt trying to do that.

TM: So you've got four, 35-gallon buckets and you've got those kind of placed on the four corners of the boat on the tubes there. What did you have down between the tubes in the frame there? You got to have a seat up front for your oars. Were you sitting on a box or some sort of container or a cooler? And then what about the space behind you?

BM: I will send you a photograph that will tell you.

TM: Well, describe it for the folks here that are going to be reading this.

BM: Sure. Sure. Everything...most of the gear is rigged behind me.

TM: Okay.

BM: I have a seat that's...that attaches to a welded plate and I sit in the middle, of course. And it's just water. It's open, wide open between me, so I can't drop anything. And it doesn't fall onto the floor of the boat. It's just gone. So you have to be very careful because things fall off of that cat and it's gone. And behind me are...the main thing are the four big barrels. That's probably 60% of it. And then I rig two coolers. You know, there's a cooler right behind me and it's sideways. It's not front to back. And the cooler kind of goes sideways against the tubes. And then there's another cooler in the back of the boat. And there are a couple of smaller dry boxes. These are aluminum boxes with seals that are supposed to be dry. They're not really...they're pretty dry. And let's see, what else is on there?

TM: Then for your solid waste...'cause this was in the time when you had to pack out your excrement. I'm assuming you had one rocket box for that. That would have had to go somewhere.

BM: Yes. Well, you always have to pack it out. Early in the '70s people were burying it on the beach and it just made a horrible mess. The outfitters knew that that couldn't go on. People...the beaches were starting to smell so bad. It was just not fun. So they quit doing that. And I used a standard 70-millimeter rocket box. Is that what they call those?

The...you know, the big rocket box and it's way more than what I need for a trip. But it's handy. It's convenient, big enough. And I used to take that dang thing off the boat. It's heavy and it requires de-rigging and rigging. And I ran into a research guy who's turned into a pretty good friend. We'd run into each other all the time. And I was complaining about that and he said, well, why are you taking it off your boat? Just leave it on there and use it. I went, ah. Well, that's a pretty good idea. And I rigged it so that I could, you know, put my toilet seat on top of it. And I never had to take it off. Never. And I don't, still. I never take that off the boat. And it's just me, so I don't need to hide, you know, the port-a-potty off in the bushes somewhere. I don't need to do that. I just need to, you know, leave it on the boat. And that saved me a lot of time and backache pulling that thing off and on. So that's what I do.

TM: How was it...and I'm also gonna just double check...your vision here for doing these continued trips in Grand Canyon after working commercially and after trying a little stint with the Park Service there, you're thinking here, I want to take photographs, but I don't want to go with any other people because, you know, I get wrapped up in all kinds of other agendas with that. Was that your thinking? 'Cause I'm thinking not even with one other person along for safety. How was it that you decided to go by yourself?

BM: That was it. I was unable to shoot photographs with any other kind of trip. I couldn't do it with commercial outfitting. I couldn't do it with research and I couldn't do it with, you know, non-commercial river trips either. And... but don't get me wrong, I've had some great fun times and met great people on these trips. I've also met some very evil people. There's just been some unbelievable, bad times on the non-commercial trips. Just hard to imagine things could go that wrong. But they can and I've had a few incidents like that. And so I thought, well, you know...the only thing left here is a solo trip. What are my chances? You know, I can't make a mistake because it could be life ending. There's no one to help. You take that for granted on a multi-person trip. You think, well, five people, not all five of them are going to be incapacitated at any one rapid or whatever, and there will always be somebody to help save the others. Well, not on a solo trip. It's all self rescue. It's all survival. You have to take care of everything perfect. You can't make a mistake, you can't twist your ankle in a side canyon because there may be no one for days to come rescue you or help you get out of there. So these are things that weigh on your mind. You have to be

much more conservative in your thinking. And I hadn't done it, so I didn't know what to think. I mean, I read about Buzz Holmstrom, but there's not a lot of technical data out there about, you know, what does it mean to run solo raft trip down there? I mean, the details, it wasn't out there that I knew of. So I had to work it all out as best I could. And Sue Cherry was working at the River Subdistrict at that time. And she got a cancellation for me. It was a November 4th launch. Not a great time, but it's all I could get. And I went out there and....oh, who's the guy that was checkout ranger at the time that I have so much respect for?

TM: Tom Workman?

BM: Yeah, it was Tom. Tom was there. He was a little startled. He said, where's your manifest? I said, well, it's just me because you're running solo. I said, yeah. He said, man, that's dangerous. Man, that's dangerous, Bruce. Not many people do that and they get in trouble down there and sometimes people die. We get asked...sometimes we have to chopper them out man. You sure? Yeah, Tom, I want to try this. So well, okay, we gotta let ya, we have to, I mean, we have to let you. I said, well good 'cause I'm here. And so when I took off from the beach, it was...there was no one...they were only running one trip every three days at that time. And I knew that if I got into trouble, it could be at least three days.

TM: Well, it was...

BM: It could be more.

TM: It was worse than that. So back in the early '90s the river runners... the do it yourself river runners were under the 1980s management plan which in the winter had a certain number of permits allowed and many more user days. So they were sitting on user days and the permits tended to be scheduled around the fall and the spring and none in the winter. So at that time you could do a 30-day winter trip and see no one. So you're...there could be no one else there come along behind you for weeks in December, January. November was...yeah, you might see somebody, but after a while you wouldn't for a long time. I'm like, hmm, okay.

BM: It's true. I didn't see anyone the whole time I was rigging. There's no one there. It's just me and the trout fisherman and... but I take off. I'm going, I'm going, and I didn't have the proper gear as far as cold weather gear.

TM: Well, let's stop right there and talk about that for a minute cause you've got this boat set up so that you're sitting in the front and a small, four foot high wave is going to just rake through your boat. You're riding on top of it, no doubt, but if there's a hole or whatnot, it's gonna come right looking for you. What were you wearing?

BM: Well, I didn't know what to have. I got a farmer john dry suit and I had a pair of wool pants and a wool sweater and then I had rain gear. And that's what I had. And every time I would go through a wave...and these catarafts don't go up and over. They go up and through the wave at the top. They plow the front of the boat, plows through

the wave at the top, they punch through it, and they don't really go over it so much. So yeah. Yeah. I got slammed in the front of the boat and each time the water would rush into my collar, into my neck area, and just surge down through all the rest of the clothing. So after the first wave, I'm wet. But the wool would...all the wool and the wet suit kept me from losing all of my body heat. But I'll tell ya, it was not comfortable. And so, you know, I get into camp and it's cold at night. And so I wring out all the everything and I sleep on top of the wet suit, hoping that it will dry out. And I hang the other clothes up in there and I, you know, burn the heater in there with the windows open.

TM: So you had a tent then?

BM: Yes. Uh-huh.

TM: Okay. Was it like a big kind of...I mean, what kind of tent were you using?

BM: It was a REI dome tent.

TM: Okay.

BM: It was kind of a three-person tent so it had some room in it. And... yeah, it worked okay for a few years. Grand Canyon is hard on equipment. So that one finally wore out.

TM: What were you using as a heater?

BM: I had a little Coleman one burner stove heater.

TM: Okay.

BM: And that's a dangerous thing, you know now you are talking asphyxia.

TM: Yup.

BM: So what I did to, you know, to keep some...and I had a fan, I knew I was...there's going to be heat in there. I needed a fan to keep it circulated to get it down low. I was just going out the top. So I had a little, little box fan that ran on batteries that worked great. And then I would open the corner...bottom corner of the tent. And the cold air...that's where the cold air came in. And that's where I let...kept my head and my face so that I wasn't breathing carbon monoxide which would, you know, it's a silent killer. You just don't wake up and it's over. And that scared me. And people told me, don't do that. Don't do that. Don't do that. And I thought, man, I can't stand it. I've got gotta warm up, at least a few minutes. I've gotta warm up. So that's the way I did it. And it would...and if I ran that heater...that burner for a few hours, man, if I could write in my journals, I could, you know, organize my clothes so that they would kind of dry and then I could sleep. What I would do is I would put my head down there as long as I could feel cold air on my face. I figured I was okay. And I would sleep that way for an hour and then I would wake up, turn the heater off. And then shut the tent

up. I mean, it still ventilates you know, it's a tent. It has ventilation. And then go to sleep in the cold. I'd wake up in the morning, turn that heater on, warm up a little bit, put on some clothes, turn it off, go cook breakfast, be on my way. It was a cold, wet 30 days. Actually, it was a 30 day...I did 30 days to Diamond and I did 10 days below.

TM: Nice.

BM: 40-day trip.

TM: So on that first trip, what things did you learn that would alter all the rest of your subsequent trips?

BM: Don't take chances.

TM: Okay. How so?

BM: Well, there's different runs of different rapids at different water flows. And there's about five rapids down there where they can flip any boat in any flow. And so what I learned was to run the rapids that could hurt me. I tried to run them as early in the day as possible so that if I had a problem...days are short. Eleven hours, eleven and a half hours. Days are short. And so I would try and run the really tough rapids early in the morning. And I hadn't...I didn't do that on the first trip. And I got to thinking, wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. I've been sitting here at Lava Falls, it's three o'clock, if I flipped, the sun goes down at five or six and it's like, I'm not going to have time to deal with that. And so I did...so I changed that up. I always run the big ones. I plan it to run them in the morning. And I also figured out that with that much time, 30 days, every day can be a layover. And so I don't have to, you know, load unload, set up the kitchen, tear down the kitchen. And boy, I can really have a nice time that second day. And so on subsequent trips, I would try and plan it to do layovers as often as possible. And that worked out nicely for my peace of mind and the photography because I had so much more time to do anything that I wanted to because I'm not loading and unloading. So layovers are good, but they don't give you enough days anymore in the winter to do that. It's a shame really. And I have not put the pencil to it, but my gut feeling is that with the new permit system where they've abbreviated, you know, the time they cut it from 18 to 16, they cut the shoulder trips down, the winter trips down and what I...my gut feeling about that change is this, I don't think a winter trip, even with more, you know, giving you more days to do it. I think you end up with less time to enjoy the river than a summer trip where the days are long because number one, the days are shorter. Number two is it takes 15 minutes probably to get into your cold weather gear and another 15 to get out of it. So there's a loss of 30 minutes every day there on a 20-day trip. That's 10 hours out of your trip that you can't get back. You can't capture those hours. And so I'm just wondering, you know, if these winter trips actually give you as much time to enjoy Grand Canyon as a summer trip. I think maybe, possibly they do not, but I don't know. I have not put the pencil to how many hours a day that average on a summer trip compared to the extended day river trip. If it's the same amount of time to enjoy things, I don't know.

But I'm going to do that one of these days, get down and calculate it. See what I come up with. What it feels like. There's not as much just, you know, doing it, but...

TM: What did you learn about photography on that trip? On that first trip?

BM: Well, ...

TM: This is 1992.

BM: It's real challenging is what it is.

TM: How?

BM: Well, I'm taking a view camera downstream and a view camera is a tedious thing. You don't just pull it out of your box and shoot a picture and put it back. You have to, you know, you take all the gear out, you have to take a tripod out in several cases of equipment. One of them, you know, you have the camera and then you have a different box which has the four by five sheets film holders because you only shoot one sheet at a time. And then you have the light measuring, light meters, and you have the filters and all of the gear that goes with a view camera. It's a process and it's also heavy. And so I wasn't quite prepared for how much work I was going to have to do to get those cameras into position to shoot a picture. I didn't realize how heavy that it was going to be, but it is. And it was..., just a lot of work. And that wasn't helping my back either. So I...and I carried...at first, I only carried the view camera. That was my only option, but I was missing things, missing great things. Underway in the current, there's some real beauty and you...and so I learned on the first few trips, I would see this thing of beauty and I would note it on my map, actually, your map now. I would note it so that I could be ready to shoot a picture, but I had to have the cameras to do that.

TM: You mean, while you were underway on the water, you would see an image from the river and be unable to do anything about it because...

BM: Exactly.

TM: ...you need to...

BM: Yes.

TM: ...set...

BM: Exactly.

TM: ...up a whole bunch of stuff and by then the boat was heading down the steam. Huh. Okay.

BM: Oh, yes. You have to be...boy, you really have to be ready ahead of time to catch these things. A lot of them.

TM: So why didn't you think that just bring a simple 35-millimeter, single lens reflex handheld camera that you could pull out of a little waterproof bag and snap that photo?

BM: Yeah. Yeah.

TM: I mean, was there...

BM: Well...

TM: Yeah. Can you talk about that a little bit?

BM: Yes. I'm a stubborn purist.

TM: Okay.

BM: That was my problem. I didn't...I'm not shooting 35 millimeter down there. I'm a view camera guy. And I just...I have it. I have 35 millimeter. I just didn't carry it. I didn't know. I'd have to dedicate another pelican dry box, didn't know where I was going to put it. I didn't know what I was gonna do with it. And I thought, nah, I'm not doing that. So what I actually did and still do today is I carry a 35-millimeter digital camera that I use occasionally because it can do things this other one can't. But I now have instead of the field of view camera that you're familiar with, the big bellows and the tripod all of that, I now have a different four by five camera and it is called a Singer Graflex Speed Graphic. And this camera is the press camera of old. And this is what all of the news photographers used before 35 millimeter was developed.

TM: Right. It got a big boxy thing with maybe a flash bulb on it.

BM: Right. That's it.

TM: You didn't need the sort of the dark room cloth to look on.

BM: No.

TM: Okay.

BM: No. They had a focus...they had actually three different focusing systems on these cameras. And you can use either one or of the three. And so I was...I rigged it. I rigged the speed graphic in a pelican case that I had access to. And so I now was able to pull the speed graphic out of the box. And within...it takes 20 seconds to get this thing going and ready to shoot a picture, pull the slide from the moment you take it out of the box to pulling the slide and shooting a picture is 20 seconds. So I have notes on my map that around this corner is this place that I like. And so I get the camera out ahead of that and if I'm in ripples or white water, now I have to worry about getting splashed, but I stand up and get on the boat where I can just be dry. And the thing comes by, have one chance, shoot one frame, put the dark slide back in and go on about my business. Now with the digital camera, I can shoot, you know, many,

many pictures of one scene while I'm going down. But that doesn't usually do it for me because the view camera shoots a four by five inch, black and white negative of such a resolution that no known 35-millimeter digital camera can match. They can't do it. Still to this day, they can't match the resolution of that film. And that's why I shoot it. So I still shoot it. And there's a beauty to a black and white negative that cannot be mimicked electronically. They do try, they get fairly close, but a good...anybody that does this, anyone that shoots in black and white, and it's just second nature for them. They've done it all their lives. They've been in the dark room. They know how to make prints. When they look at a black and white photograph, can be the same subject taken with the speed graphic, in other words, a four by five piece of sheet film and you take the same picture with a digital camera and you do the best you can to make those two images look exactly alike as close as you can get and anyone that does this will immediately pick out the camera that shot, you know, the print that was shot with film versus the print that was shot with digital.

TM: Interesting.

BM: It's a small thing, but if you do it enough, you can easily spot a black and white print that came from analog film. It's just has a certain analog beauty to it. Not necessarily a beauty, a nature to it that...and I consider it beautiful. But its nature is different than digital. And I still prefer it to this day. And I will continue shooting sheet film.

TM: Yeah, it sounds like there's a huge quality difference.

BM: Well, yes, there is. And I could shoot a bigger, handheld camera. I could shoot a medium format, you know, a Mamiya or any of the others that shoot roll film, and I've done that. And yes, they produce a better, four times greater image than the 35 millimeter. And they make better prints and they are analog, black and white film, but they still don't come up to the quality of that four by five. And so I'm like, well, why am I shooting this roll film when in fact I get a better picture still with the view camera...with the speed graphic? So that's what I shoot down there. And it's a pretty odd-looking affair. I got to admit, they're a funny looking camera there, you know.

TM: Where did you find yours? Where'd you get it?

BM: I found mine from an engineer that used to work for the Singer Graflex Corporation. He used to make those cameras and he made a living in retirement of restoring these things because he loved them. And there were people that wanted them mostly to put on a cabinet to look at, you know to put on a shelf 'cause they're beautiful things to look at. And so he was restoring these. And I found out about the guy and I said, hey, I don't want it to be pretty necessarily. I want it to have high function and so I want you to wait until you get one in that has really good...really good function. But I don't care if it, you know, isn't perfect to look at. And he goes, okay, that's...yeah, I can do that for you.

TM: Nice.

BM: About three or four months later, he called me and he said, hey man, I got a speed graphic in here. I think you're going to like it. I said, well, if you like it, I like it. Set up for me and send it to me and it costs me \$275 after he restored it. And so it was fairly inexpensive as a camera goes. There was no demand for them, so they weren't worth much. And he went on to explain these cameras. I didn't know this, but the old Crown Graphics, you know the press cameras, they're black.

TM: Right.

BM: They have the leather wrapped around it. Well, what that leather is wrapped around is the finest Honduran mahogany in the world.

TM: Oh my gosh.

BM: I didn't know this. They're made from the best mahogany money could buy back then. And they sent a boat from New York down to Honduras. This boat would sail for months. It would go down there and sit in Honduras while some wood guy picked, you know, cherry picked the best Honduran mahogany money could buy. And then they would fill the boat up. When the boat was full, they would steam back to New York City, unload it, cut it into quarter inch sheets, sticker it, and it sat out on the open covered to keep the sun off of it. They aged this wood for two years before they ever put it in a camera. And I went, you've gotta be kidding me? He goes, no, no one knows that. No one knows how well built these things are. I went, well, gosh, I guess now I do. So I have a much higher appreciation for these than I used to. When he told me the story of how well they're built, and he said, you can't build them this good anymore because there's no mahogany in the world that is of that quality anymore.

TM: How would you...

BM: I thought about that.

TM: Yeah. How would you deal with the film? I mean, can you still get film packs for these cameras? And then do you have to do your own developing? Is that a given?

BM: Yes, absolutely. You do your own developing. Yes, the choices of film in the last ten years have been cut down to one third of what it used to be. Maybe one quarter of what it used to be. I used to have a choice of three different companies and these company... or four, and these companies all had five to ten different films available. Four by five sheet films. Now, Kodak's out. They're out of the business, have been for years. There's a company in Hungary and there is a company in England and one in France that still make sheet film. And they only make it in like maybe two or three different varieties. Film speeds mainly. And that's it. The choices have gone down...way down from what they were, but that's okay because there's still a film that will do what I need it to do. It's not...I'm fine, but the day may come, I hope not. It could come when sheet film is no longer available. And that would change my

thing up very dramatically. I don't know what I would do. I don't know. I haven't even thought about it. I'll deal with it if I have to but I'm not going to waste mental energy on worrying about it now. If it hits me, I'll correct that... right now I still have sheet film and that speed graphic is an amazing camera. It shoots wonderful pictures. It's rugged. It's tough. It'll take...it can get rained on, you know, things can happen to it and it'll survive. Nothing really electronic to break down in it. And it can be taken apart and fixed. There's parts for it everywhere. And I just love that camera.

TM: Nice.

BM: It's feels right. And the pictures it takes are wonderful. And I just...I love that camera.

TM: And you have to use a light meter with that, is that correct?

BM: Yes, absolutely.

TM: So you get the camera out, you know, around this corner, you're going to want the shot, whatever it is, you look at the light meter and go, okay, then I need to adjust, is that F stop then or your speed or both, and then shoot the picture. Is that...so it's a multi-tool kind of process here, is that right?

BM: Yes, it is. And it can bog you down real quick if you're not experienced. I know from being in Grand Canyon at various times of the year, I have a pretty good idea of what the light readings are going to be in various places.

TM: Okay.

BM: I know that in the shade around the corner here, it's going to be X and out in the sun it's going to be X, and on a cloudy, overcast day out in the open, it's going to be this. And I have an idea of it. And if I don't have opportunity to use the light meter, if it's happening that fast. I just take my best guess you know, and shoot it. And if I have the opportunity, the film holders have two sheets of film each, right? So if I have the opportunity, I shoot one and I turn it around and I shoot the other sheet. So now I have two sheets of film and I mark it. I have notes that I take for every photograph I take and I put the exposure and everything down about it that I can. But when I get home I look at that in a dark room and I think, hmm, okay, well let me develop it this way. And if it doesn't work, it's just a total failure for some reason. I still have one more chance. If I shot two frames, I still have a chance at that negative to change, you know, the dark room procedure for it. Maybe it was way over exposed. Maybe it was way under exposed.

TM: I see.

BM: And I can do things that allow me to salvage it. And it's never as good as if you'd done it right to start. But I have saved some good images and I love those pictures. And they were...they weren't shot right, but I pulled it off because I had two frames.

TM: Right. Nice. Well, once again, we've been yick yaking here now about...well closing up to an hour and a half here.

BM: Are you kidding me? Oh man. I'm having so much fun with this. It just doesn't seem like it.

TM: Another interview draws to a close. So I think what I'd like to do next time is we'll talk more about sort of the river and things that happened on the river on that first trip. But I wanted to really cover the camera work today. Is there anything about the camera that you want to mention right now before we wrap up today's Part Four?

BM: Only to say that I've tried pretty much every camera system from 35 millimeter to roll film cameras to large format view cameras and it was an evolution because I had to try everything in order to figure if it's going to work for my purposes. And it took me a long time to get to the speed graphic. I always held those in disdain. I thought, no, these are simple tools. These are old. These were used by, you know, press guys in the old days. It just doesn't apply to me and I never...I just passed over the idea. Never...I never thought it would work for me, but in the end, it is the best camera for me. And it took me a while. It took me four or five river trips to really...and that's a part that's being stubborn. I'm wanting things to work for me. And I'm forcing it. I'm trying to make something happen and maybe it isn't. It isn't always happening. And it took me a long time to get over the stubbornness of it and understand that there's yet one more option. And so I finally climbed down off of my stubborn ladder and looked at the speed graphic, and I thought, well, it's only \$275. I'll try it. And I got it. And I love it. I wouldn't...it's the last camera I would ever get rid of. This old speed graphic. So that's about it. It was an evolution of equipment, learning what works and what does not work. And I finally got it down to what I think works now. And I don't really...there's nothing more for me to improve or to...there's nothing more for me to try. You know, I've got equipment that will do as much of what I wanted to do as there is. There's nothing out there that can enhance my capabilities in Grand Canyon. So that's a good thing. I don't really think about, you know, changing up equipment or, you know, advancing to the next step. It doesn't matter what the industry does anymore because I'm using something that's 70 years old and it isn't changing.

TM: Right.

BM: It cannot change.

TM: Some things are...

BM: So anyway.

TM: Yeah, they work well. Hm.

BM: Well, I think we're getting to the good part here. The, you know, the going down the river during these solo trips. This is the fun stuff, man. And boy, I'll tell ya,

there...the one big thing that I learned immediately about the solo raft trip and there was no way for you to know this until you do it, but the river and the Canyon are very much more welcoming to a solo raft trip. The environment...and that has to do with, with you, not just the Canyon. You see things and do things that you would never expect. Never expect. And that is the great beauty of a solo raft trip. And I've just loved that part of it. It's way more than the photography. Why I do that, I can try and explain to you, but I think it doesn't have to do with photography. It has to do with the adventure. And man, is it ever the greatest adventure on Planet Earth. It's really something.

TM: Nice. Well, on that note, sort of the teaser for Part Five.

BM: Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

TM: Let's, let's wrap up. This is Part Four Grand Canyon oral history with Bruce McElya. And my name is Tom Martin. And Bruce, thank you so very much.

BM: Tom, thank you. And thanks for your patience. I appreciate it. I'm having so much fun, you know, reliving some of this. It's been a real joy, so thanks again.

TM: Well, good. Thank you. Hang on for a minute.