

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Bruce McElya (BM)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Bruce McElya recounts his years as a river guide in the 1980's, conversations with Georgie White, and taking large format cameras on ten solo river trips through Grand Canyon. This is Part Three of a seven-part interview.

Date of Interview: 05/16/2019

Method of Interview: Telephone

Transcriber: Anonymous

Date of Transcription: 02/03/2020

Transcription Reviewers: Nancy Brian, Sue Priest, Parker Brown, Tom Martin

Keys: Canyoners, Gaylord Staveley, Joy Staveley, Crystal Rapid, 1983 High Flow, Tapeats Creek, Deer Creek, Cogswell Butte

TM: Today is Thursday, May 16th, 2019. This is Part 3 Grand Canyon oral history interview with Bruce McElya. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, Bruce. How are you?

BM: Hey. Good morning, Tom. How are you?

TM: Good, thank you. May we have your permission to record this oral history interview over the telephone?

BM: Of course. Sure.

TM: Thank you so much. At the end of Part 2, you had graduated from Lubbock and had packed up and headed out to southern New Mexico to a small mountain town called Ruidoso, to work at a radio station. Can you pick that story up and carry on?

BM: Pick it up there, okay. Yes, I ended up in Ruidoso by accident. It's odd that sometimes small little turns on the trail can make such a big difference in your life. This was one of them and then also Grand Canyon was one of those small turns on the trail. But what happened was I went up there to go snow skiing on a weekend from college. I walked into the radio station there, was just talking to the disc jockey, just being courteous and seeing what was going on. The owner came in and said, "You looking for a job?" I said, "Well, no, not really. I'm just passing through snow skiing." He said, "Well, I need a disc jockey." So I looked at the situation and I thought, boy, this would be a really fun town to live in. Snow skiing, horse racing in the summer, beautiful weather, beautiful country. So I took him up on the offer and I said, I'll be out of school at this time and I'll move out here. So I did that, went to work for the radio station. That didn't last long for one reason or another, we just didn't get along very well.

So I left that and went to work for a fellow that was producing a magazine. It was an advertising magazine for the area. We did everything. The two of us did everything there is to do with the magazine. We shot the photographs, we wrote the stories, we set the type, and we laid out the ads. Everything. So I learned a lot about magazines and did that for a while. That job only lasted a few months until we produced the magazine and there was nothing to do. I'm working with all of the townspeople – all of them; business owners, for their advertisements and they liked the pictures I was shooting. I pretty much learned commercial photography doing that. They would ask me to shoot photographs at their daughter's wedding or come shoot pictures of the little league football team and pretty soon I'm making

money doing that. So that's what I did. I opened a... It was two years after I got to town – I opened a business, a commercial photography business. It was kinda tough. It's a small town. There's not as much work as you'd hope. But I got a lot of convention business because there's a couple of big convention hotels and that helped. Pretty soon I was up and running. The good news about it was I could shut things down and go to Grand Canyon which I just couldn't stay away from. Between...oh... After I came back in 1973, I put in about 1200 miles on the back-country trails in Grand Canyon but I always wondered where those rafts were going and what they were doing. I'd talked to them from time to time.

TM: How big is Ruidoso population-wise at that time?

BM: At that time the population there was probably 7,000 people. But during the summer, the population swelled to about 50,000 people. That was because of the quarter horse racing. It was the quarter horse racing capital of the world. So all of those people came in – the grooms, the horsemen, the owners, the riders, the jockeys, their families. It all amounted to about 55,000 people in town through the summer. So it was a busy place, very busy place in the summer.

TM: And also, I've got a question. You graduated from college with two degrees and you didn't think, okay, well I'm going to start a survey business and stay behind a transit and draw and get into that. You kind of uprooted and took off to see what would happen at the neighboring state to the west. That was a big deal, I think.

BM: Very big deal. Yeah. I looked at the situation. I went to work for a television station. I was a disc jockey in Lubbock for a while and then I moved over to the television side of this one radio station. I liked television. I really enjoyed it. I most enjoyed audio engineering, and that's pretty much what I did. I went from there to doing... I started getting work as a freelance audio engineer for the big networks doing sporting events around the country. When you do that, you hire... They have to have these big video trucks that are moving all over the country and they hire freelance technicians to man these trucks and to get the work done at the venue. Say it's a pro football game or basketball, it could be soccer, any sporting event, and it's all live. It's all done live. It was exciting to me. I loved the work and I didn't want to sit in Dallas all my life doing engineering. That's what I was supposed to do, but I was having way more fun doing this audio engineering. It was exciting. I was traveling around. Started traveling and seeing different parts of the country and meeting new and interesting people. And live television let me tell you; it's an adrenaline rush that deal because there's no do-overs. There are no multiple takes, oh we're going to tape that scene again. You set up and it's live television. You have to get it right the first time and it's a lot of pressure. I enjoyed it. I liked the challenge of that and still do. Once in a while, if I like what's going on and I like the people, I'll still go do audio for sporting events. Not much anymore, but if I like the shoot and I like the people that are going, I'll do it.

TM: Okay. I'm a little confused because the audio engineering, doing the freelance technical work driving around, how did that stop and you drive to Ruidoso? I mean, why give that up to go out to southern New Mexico out near Roswell and try to make a go of it there leaving TV far behind?

BM: Well, I didn't leave television. It doesn't matter where you live. It's the wrong place. If you're doing freelance television, you're not living where the venue is except once in a while. If you lived in Dallas, you would be working sporting events in Dallas when they came along, but for the most part, you're gone from home no matter where you live. I did that at the same time that I had a commercial photography company. I was doing both of those things.

TM: Okay. Got it. And then you mentioned... Now this is 1973?

BM: No, this is after '73. I moved to Ruidoso in about 1976 after I'd finished up college and made the move to Ruidoso.

TM: And then you mentioned hiking in Grand Canyon.

BM: Yes.

TM: Besides your first hike down to the river and back, which you've already talked about, what was your next actual backpack in Grand Canyon?

BM: Well, I went with something familiar. I hiked the Kaibab down and the Bright Angel up a couple of times 'cause I knew I could do that. I knew there was help along the way and people and water. Did that and then I hiked the North Rim trail down to Phantom. Then I started hiking other trails. I would go out and hike around Monument Valley down to Tapeats Creek and Deer Creek, you know, the big ones. I hiked the Hance trail. One time I hiked all the way down to Nankoweap. That's a hard, long hike. I really didn't realize how far that was.

TM: So this was all in '76, '77, '78 ish and you're driving back and forth from Ruidoso? Is that how that's working out?

BM: Yes, yes. I'd drive to Grand Canyon from New Mexico.

TM: Okay. Which would take a day it would seem.

BM: Oh, yeah, or more if I stopped along the way.

TM: Okay. And then hiking in the late 70s, '77/'78, I'm assuming you had maybe an aluminum pack frame. What was your equipment like? What'd you carry?

BM: Well, I still have this thing. When I was up north, when I was working up in Seattle and in Alaska, I wanted to start seeing the country and I only knew how to do it by foot. I didn't know anything about river running or any of that. So I bought an REI cruiser pack back then. It was a solid aluminum frame and ultimately it didn't carry enough stuff so I modified it. I sewed things onto it to make it into a bigger pack. I still have it and I still use it, in fact. That pack – I've repaired it many times both the material and the frame. I had to get the frame rewelded once or twice. I still use it on river trips. I'm so happy to have that thing. It's got a lot of great memories and it still has high function for me. It's the pack that I use when I leave the boat to hike far up into the canyons with my photography equipment. It all fits in there with a little bit of food and water. And if I have to spend the night up in the canyon, I can, if something goes wrong. I still have it and it gets beat up so badly on these river trips. I'm telling you it just keeps going, you know, it just keeps going.

TM: Very cool. Anything else that you could tell me about these early hikes into Deer Creek and Tapeats Creek and Nankoweap? These are off the beaten path hikes. What were you... So Nankoweap and Deer Creek and Tapeats Creek. These are long journeys off the beaten path.

BM: Yes, they are.

TM: Did you see a lot of other people there?

BM: No, I did not. At that time hiking in Grand Canyon, there wasn't much pressure on it. I could get a permit anytime I wanted. I could walk up to the office and get a permit, which I always did. Sometimes I

wandered away from that permit, but I always got one and hardly ever saw people, frankly. As time went on Deer Creek became a hike that a lot of people do. It was a loop hike. From Monument Point I would hike down. One of the most beautiful places in the world is that plateau there. There's a word for what they call it in that area.

TM: Oh, the Esplanade?

BM: Yes. Yeah, the Esplanade. The Esplanade in that area is stunning. It's another world. It is beautiful. It's spectacular stuff and you get to hike through this place. But it's no man's land because there's no water there. It's very hot unless you go in the winter time. But the payoff is you get to the river. You get to Tapeats Creek and that's the payoff. So at that time, I camped right there. As you hike down that last drop down into Deer Creek, there's a little flat spot there with a rock overhang and that's where I camped. They won't let you do that anymore but that's where I stayed and it was a wonderful thing. Then if you hike down... Well let's see, what did I do? I hiked down Deer Creek and then I went up and over around Cogswell's Butte which dropped me down to the river, and then it's just bouldering upstream until you get to Tapeats Creek. So for me that was a loop hike, I guess. I would always do it that way. I would do it as a loop hike.

TM: Today there's a fairly substantial trail that goes from the mouth of Tapeats Creek down to the Deer Creek patio that follows the river for quite a ways downstream from Tapeats Creek. At that time when you made that hike, was there a route there at all or was it just you're just picking your way and there's no path at all?

BM: I couldn't find any trail and Lord knows I looked for one. There was a trail from the bottom of Cogswell's Butte as you approached the river for a little while, then it petered out and there's nothing. At that time it was just bouldering and boy, it'd be an easy thing to twist an ankle and be stuck there and there'd be nobody to come down except there's always boats coming down. You could, I guess, flag down a boat if you got into trouble – would be the thing to do.

TM: Do you remember who was issuing you permits in the permit office? Did you talk with them at all?

BM: I don't have any recollection. I would just go over there and they would say, "Where do you want to hike?" I'd tell them, they'd give me a permit and I'd go away.

TM: Okay. Pretty straightforward.

BM: Yeah, there was names, but I sure don't remember them. There was one backcountry ranger that I would run into at the Monument Point hike. I ran into him two times over about an 8/10 year period. I forgot his name, but he was there for a while and then I believe he went on. I think he was going to be a lawyer or something. I don't remember what his plans were in life, but anyways, a really nice fellow and we would hike together for a while until he had to go somewhere else. Neat guy. I ran into river trips at Tapeats Creek all the time and I ran into river trips at Deer Creek all the time. They were the nicest people, those commercial outfitters. They would always ask me if I needed anything and they would always take my trash for me. If they were having a meal there, I was always invited. It was always a real pleasure to run into the outfitters. They were so nice to me. Once in a while they'd give me a ride. If I were trying to get from what was it? Tapeats is down below Deer, right?

TM: Other way around.

BM: Okay. Okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So anyway, if I were there at the right time, they would give me a ride downriver so that I didn't have to hike that bouldery trail which I thought was very nice. I did that a couple of times. So I got to ride on the raft and go through that real snaky area with all those strong currents.

TM: Yeah, in the Granite Narrows above Deer Creek.

BM: Granite Narrows. Yes. Oh man, that was pretty neat. Pretty neat. Those currents are real strong in there and that was throwing their boats all over the place. Anyway, that was part of my hiking days. I really wanted to do that rafting thing, but I had no experience at it. I didn't know anybody really and I didn't really know how to approach that. I knew that it would be a great way to shoot pictures. A great way, cause hiking cameras down into Grand Canyon, man, that's tough. Those trails are so long. It's hard enough just to carry the necessary food and gear just to get down the trail. I figured out that I wasn't going to be able to do a whole lot. I could only carry very small cameras and it's not what I wanted to do. I wanted to shoot pictures from this river trip venue but I really never figured out or thought too much enough about it to do anything until 1981. I thought, I need to try this. I need to see what I can do here.

So I called the Park Service and asked him. I said, "How do I apply for work?" They said, "We'll send you a list of the companies that we license to do river trips, its public information. We'll send you that and it will have the owner of the company and their phone number and their address where their company is located." I said, "Okay, thanks." So they sent me the information. At that time, there were 22 different outfitters, and so I wrote a personal letter to each company's owner. I told them the truth that I really want to run the river but I have no experience but I will do any job that you want if you will hire me. Then I followed up those 22 resumes with a phone call. That took a long time because trying to track these guys down was... It took a while to finally contact them all. For the most part it was, "No, we don't have anything. Thanks. Thanks. Bye." Okay, go to the next one, go to the next one, go to the next one. So nothing. I got no response really. In the meantime, I'm looking at the requirements. Boatmen that run Grand Canyon are required to have a medical certification. I thought, well, maybe if I do that, at least I'll have one more thing toward the job. So instead of doing Red Cross advanced first aid which is the minimum, went ahead and signed up for EMT. That's a higher certification, of course. I thought it can't hurt. I studied for six months to do EMT and one of my instructors was a former guide with Sanderson...

TM: Huh. Who is that?

BM: ...back in the 70s. Oh, let me think. Let me think of his name. Don... What was his name? Don... I'll think of his last name here in a minute. Him and another guy that did maintenance at Lees Ferry had both worked for commercial outfitters so I thought, "Oh gosh, great. You're a source of information. You've worked down there." So I'm pumping him through the whole course about this and that and I'm learning the dictionary of all the words that the outfitter... The river runner dictionary, I'm trying to learn the words. So anyway, I got my EMT ticket and I sent out 22 resumes again in I think 1982. I think those guys got together and said, "Hey, somebody hire this guy so he'll quit bothering us." Then I started making phone calls. I got ahold of a guy named Rob Elliot and he said, "Look, we really appreciate your tenacity here but I can't hire you because you don't have any experience. So here's my recommendation to you. Go get a job on the Green River or some lesser river and get a year or two at that, and then come back and talk to me. Then you'll have a much better chance." I said, "Well, okay, thanks."

So, at any rate, I called all of these guys again on the phone. In the mail I got two job offers to my amazement. One offer was with Hatch River Expeditions and they were based in Vernal, Utah at the

time. The other one was Canyoners and they were in Flagstaff. So I thought, okay, I'm going to follow up on this. I called both of them and I said, "I'm gonna make a trip in the winter time and I'm going to come talk." They said, "Yeah, we need to have a sit down before we can hire you, of course." So the first easiest place to get to was Canyoners in Flagstaff and if that didn't work out I was going to continue driving from Flagstaff to Vernal, Utah and talk to Ted Hatch, who was the guy I needed to talk to. So I went there to Canyoners and I talked to Gaylord and he hired me right there. He said, "Here's the problem that I have. A lot of the people we hire are college students. They can't come early enough to start the season and they can't stay late enough to end the season. If you would agree to come when I open the shop and then stay until I close the shop, I'll hire you." I said, "Sure, I'll do that. I will."

TM: So this is Gaylord Staveley.

BM: Yes, Gaylord Staveley.

TM: What do you remember about that first visit with Gaylord? How did he strike you? Was a short man, tall man, older, younger? What struck you about him?

BM: Well, he's an interesting guy. He's tall. He's about six foot something. Silvery hair – just pure silver hair by that time. Really a very nice guy. He's quiet and understated, but he has a depth of experience in that part of the country that is unbelievable. You kind of have to pull it out of him. He's written a book or two. So of course I read his books and I said, "Yeah Gaylord, I read your book." When I had time or he had time, I'd ask him about stuff now and then. But he was a real interesting guy. He was most eager to teach me how to get things done in the shop because that's what he hired me for. He didn't hire me to run the river. I told him, I said, "Look, I'm not here to necessarily run the river, I just want to get close to it. Whenever you feel like I can maybe go down there and learn the river part of it, that's what I'd like to do. In the meantime, I'll do whatever you say here in the shop. I'm pretty handy with tools. I can work on outboard motors. I can fix things. I can learn to weld if you'll teach me." So that's the way it went. Between myself and Shane Murphy, we pretty much kept those boats running.

TM: So was Shane working for Gaylord when you showed up?

BM: Yes.

TM: Okay. What do you remember about Shane?

BM: I liked the guy. We got along well. I was a hard worker on the river and all the guides always appreciated that. Him and I were friends. I used to go out to his... He had a place way out in the middle of nowhere. His daddy was an author. He always wanted to be but he never really wrote anything worth publishing, I guess. He was kind of a frustrated writer, but he was a good river runner. He knew all the stories. Everyone has different stories and he had great stories down there. He was good with the passengers. I thought he was good with his boatmen as well.

TM: At this point, had Gaylord switched from the regular 36-foot long big rubber motorboats to the giant Canyoners' rig? So that change had been made already?

BM: That change had already... I had never seen the smaller rigs. I only knew the 40-footers. 20 passengers, three crew, that was the trip. Very big boats, really monstrous boats. Hard to drive.

TM: They were launching on Sunday, one exchange trip and one through trip. Is that right? Two trips launching on Sunday? What was that schedule? Do you remember?

BM: They did launch on Sunday. Sunday to Sunday was their schedule. It was a tight schedule, really tight. They would launch on Sunday. They would take out on Sunday at that time from Scorpion Island. Our last night in Grand Canyon was on Scorpion Island.

TM: Right above Pierce Ferry there.

BM: Yes. It was a 10-minute drive over to Pierce. Trucks were there. We'd derig. The buses would take the people away and we would get the boats on the trailer, drive them back to Flagstaff, fix them, re-rig them, put new food on it, and drive that same rig on Sunday. This all happens...the turnaround happens in one day, the whole thing. It drives out of there at about six in the evening or seven in the evening back to Lees Ferry. So that boat goes from Pierce Ferry, it gets re-rigged, fixed, new food, cleaned up, and it's back at Lees Ferry that evening. An amazing turnaround. And it didn't matter if it were a two day-four day split, that's what that was, or a full seven day trip. They all launched on Sunday and came home on Sunday. That's how he worked it.

TM: So the trips actually launched from Lees Ferry on Monday morning, but they needed to be back at Lees that night/Sunday night to pick up the passengers in the morning on Monday. Is that right?

BM: Yeah. Yes. Yeah, that's how it would have to happen. It was either that or we came back on Saturday night and launched on Sunday. I can't remember. I think it might've been that we returned on Saturday night and launched on Sunday. I believe that's correct cause his launches were on Sunday. I was always up at... Well, I should go back to the shop. So I'm working and fixing things and getting pretty good at fixing his motors, which he needs. I can actually straighten props out without having to throw them away. I'm doing pretty good and things are going along fine. I'm a good employee. Everything's good, everything's fine. Something came up, one of the boatman was out of pocket, either sick or had something, and he couldn't find a regular replacement. You know, normally he would be able to call one of the other boatmen that wasn't going down the river at the time, but it just wasn't there. So he said, "Hey Bruce, I need somebody to go down the river. Can you go?" I said, "Absolutely!" So I went on my first river trip with a guy named Chris, a Mormon kid out of Utah. I can't remember his last name. Went down there and just had the time of my life. It was a lot of work, of course. Came back and I got a good report from the other boatmen and he put me on the river. That's what he did.

TM: Let's go back to this. So Chris is driving and you're...the term I believe is swamping. So you're hanging out on the boat and then you pull to camp and you help set up the kitchen and help set up the bathroom. Is that kinda how that was going then?

BM: Yes. Mhm. On the trips where it wasn't split, in other words it was straight through six days, no split up, there were three crew on the boat. If it was a two-day/four-day split, you only had two people on the boat. Two crew on the boat for the first whatever it was, two days, and then the third boatman was the one that hiked the people down the trail from Bright Angel down to the beach. Then you picked up your third boatman at Phantom or Bright Angel, whatever you want to call it, at the boat beach and now you had a full crew at that point. So it was a little harder work actually on the two day-four day split on the top part because there's only two boatmen doing everything instead of three. You get it done. Sometimes you go a little later into the evening because of it, but no one seemed to mind. It was fine.

TM: So you launch on Sunday, you've got Sunday night and Monday night and then Tuesday morning you're at Phantom Ranch, is that right?

BM: Yes. Crazy.

TM: So that's 86/87 miles in two nights, three days.

BM: Right.

TM: Okay. So you're boogying along.

BM: Oh yes.

TM: Okay. And then at Phantom, was it a full exchange? Everybody walked out, new people walked in, or did just a couple people go? How did that work out?

BM: Most of the time on the two-day/four-day split, there were very few people on the two-day part because the real good part of the trip was down below. You got the big rapids, you got Deer Creek, you got Havasu, all the good stuff is down below Phantom. So they sold seats on the two day part of it for cheap because they could never fill the boat up. Never did that happen. It could be anywhere from four to eight people on the boat and then you picked up all those hikers that came down and now you've got 20. Sometimes the two-dayers would walk out and sometimes they would go the whole way, but mostly they were gone. Mostly they were gone.

TM: Did you double camp with the six-day trip? Cause it sounds like you got two trips, they both launch the same day, they both take out the same day. Kind of more or less running on the same schedule, except one stops at Phantom and the other one doesn't.

BM: We were independent trips. Sometimes there was a problem at Phantom or sometimes there was a delay on the six-day trip, so you wouldn't join up. But if you were at the beach at the same time rewatering, you might make a plan to double camp. It was good for the boatmen to do that because now you have six boatman taking care of one beach and man your workload goes way down and you get things done a lot faster. It was good to do that. I liked it, but we didn't do it that often. It was legal.

TM: Were these one boat trips or two boat trips? Or did it depend?

BM: Sometimes we would run a two boat trip that was all the way, six days, all the way, no split. Sometimes he would do that. I never really figured out that schedule, but yes, sometimes we stayed together for the whole trip.

TM: Okay. But most of the time it was just one boat on the six day or one boat 2-4 to Phantom.

BM: That's right. Yeah, that's the way that worked. There was no rhyme or reason to it really. It's just sometimes there were two Canyoneer boats together and we'd camp. Then sometimes we'd split up. We'd camp together for a night or two and then we would say, "Ah, well, we've already done this. We're going to go do that instead." It was up to the trip leaders, really. And they allowed it back then. They allowed the camping of what would that be...20, 40, 46 people on a camp. One time we came around a corner and there were eight Hatch boats on a beach. River-left, I can't remember it. It's a huge beach. There were eight, eight boats there! I went, "Oh my God. Are you kidding?" What an impact. I asked Mark Law about that. He said, "Well, yeah, it was a special deal. We gave 'em special permission to do it." It was some politicians were on a trip or something. I don't remember. But I hope they don't still do that.

TM: Okay. So this was in '82/'83. Now at that time, the water got kind of high there in '83. How did that work out?

BM: My first trip down there was 83,000 cubic feet per second. It was a mill race through Grand Canyon. My first run with the company of Lava Falls, the water was 83 and rising. The shelf at Lava Falls wasn't a shelf anymore. It was this great big, grand, glassy, green wave. It was spectacular. We drove right over the top of that thing because that was the best way to run the rapid at that point. The tail waves down below were just monstrous. They didn't quit. They were so big. You know that cheese grater rock on the right-hand side – there's another wave or two after that rock and it's over. Not then, not that day. The waves were monstrous for a hundred yards down below there, maybe further. It was unbelievable. I thought that was normal, you know, I didn't know any difference. And other places, most of the rapids were gone. Badger and Soap Creek were just kind of riffles, little bit of bumps to it. Hance was a monster. Crystal was just stupidly dangerous. It scared everyone to look at it. It was horrible. It was horrible. We did the spin run around it. This guy was good. He knew how to spin that boat around at Crystal. We missed the big wave and all the trash.

TM: So how did you do that? Would he actually turn the boat 180 degrees around so he's motoring upstream and kind of move off...

BM: Well, what he did, he used momentum to move that boat out of the way of Crystal. So he's got a ferry angle coming into the tongue of it. If you go into the tongue, you're going into that monster hole. That's how it is. So he gets into the V-waves on either side of the tongue on the right hand, the V going in. He starts over on the left and he starts moving right and times it so that he has maximum speed. He breaks that wave, that V-wave going in, and before he gets to the hole he just cranks it around and the tail end just spins fast and spins all the way around backwards. Now the tail is kind of...now we're backwards. The momentum of that moves the boat well off to the right of the wave.

He immediately pulls the motor out of the water because we're in shallow water over there on the side. He knew what to do. So he spun it around and we're out of danger. He pulls the motor up/jackassed the motor up, and then he would kind of tilt it whenever he'd see a rock and we drifted on down and got back into deep water. You gotta make a decision again pretty quick about which way you're going to go from Big Red. So when he got deep water he put the motor back in and starts motoring back against the current and we pulled into the beach right below the rapid. That's how good he is. We stopped and everybody was fine. Everything was good. We watched another boat or two come through and then turned around and ran the right side which at that time...

TM: I was just thinking to describe this rapid a little bit. There's a fairly large and terrifying water feature, a hole, at the top so your run is off to the right side of that hole, a turnaround run and then back down. A jackass is a tool to lift the engine up out of the water so if there's a rock and you're going backwards, you don't crush the engine on that rock. The jackass worked with a big bar. You'd pull that bar up and it would lift this hinge arrangement, pick the whole engine up. And then Big Red is a rock on an island below the rapid and you had to go to the right or to the left around that rock island. Is that right explaining all that?

BM: Well, that's correct. I didn't explain that to you, but yes, that's part of the danger of Crystal is the rock island down below and Big Red is the rock that's right at the top of that rock bar and you gotta go one side or the other of it. The jackass actually doesn't lift the motor out of the water. It lifts it about three inches higher, is all that it does. It's a big, big bar that you have to use. A lever, a long lever. It's just a big long bar that's right there at the hands of the boatman and he can lift that motor at any time. What you do if you think you're in danger you lift it up, you get your three or four inches, and then if you're still in danger... I mean, your prop is still in the water. You can maneuver the boat even though you have it jackassed up. And if it's even worse than that while you're holding it up, then you just grab

the motor and tilt it and you get it out of there. You physically tilt it and get it away from that rock is what you do. It's all part of the process. Learning how to use that/when to use that, that's part of the finesse of running one of those motor rigs.

TM: These were two-stroke motors were they fairly quiet or fairly loud? What was that like?

BM: Fairly loud. They're outboard engines, they're two-stroke. Ours were Mariners. 30-horse is what we used because one person could carry a 30-horse, theoretically. 40-horse was the limit, that was the legal limit, but no one wanted to lift a 40-horse. They were too heavy, except for Ben. Big Ben could lift them but the rest of us couldn't lift those things without help. But you could lift 30-horse and that's what we used. And boy, I'll tell you, it's hard to move a Canyoneer boat, as long as they are, with a 30-horse motor. You had to make your decisions well ahead of time.

TM: Hm. Okay. Alright. So this is 1983. And then what happened?

BM: Well, I fell in love with rafting. I did my work and did as good as I could so they'd asked me back, you know, the guides would ask me back. So I got back and Chris told Gaylord that I'd done a good job so Gaylord put me on the river knowing that I was going to stay after it was over to help repair all of the gear and to tear it down and to put it to sleep for the winter. I ended up doing five or seven trips that first year, one a week. I was busy all the way. I didn't have a week off, I just kept going.

TM: What was your pay at the time? Do you remember?

BM: Yeah. Yeah, as the third man I was started out at \$75 a trip. Then if you're the second man up, you get \$85 a trip and if you're a trip leader, you get...that varied. It could be anywhere from like \$95 to \$125 a day is about what it was running.

TM: And then that would be plus tips at the end of the trip?

BM: Yes. And sometimes we got big tips. You know, the other thing was, as I got going down there, I'm making friends with the passengers and treating them really well and so we're getting these big tips. It seemed like anytime I was on a trip, we were getting big tips. The boatmen were going, "Well, you can send Bruce down because his trips always get big tips." So there was that going on at the company. "Take Bruce. Tips are bigger." So anyway...

TM: Why weren't the other trips tips as good? Were they not interfacing with the passengers?

BM: Yes, they were, but I don't know the difference. I don't know why my trips were getting bigger tips. I don't have an explanation for it.

TM: I mean, do you think you're just a good people person? That certainly could make a difference.

BM: I do. I spend time with them and maybe the other boatmen don't spend as much time. I don't know. I just enjoyed the customers. I enjoyed the people coming down there. They're from all over the world and they have interesting stories themselves. You know, it's not just us boatmen. Yeah, we live and work down there and we know the ropes and everything, but these people have stories. They have interesting stories, too. Let me tell you one.

We had the captain of the aircraft carrier the USS Enterprise. He's on the flag track to admiral. He came down on the river trip with us and he brought us all an official hat from the USS Enterprise. It said that and it said VIP on it. This was the hat that they gave to the press. Whenever the press was on the ship

doing a story, they gave him a VIP hat so that everybody'd know who they were. He gave us this hat and we're having a great time and we got stuck one day. This was a Shane trip, me and Shane were on this trip. Shane got stuck on a sandbar overnight. We got up in the morning and the boat isn't floating and it's like, ah, god. So we got as much gear off the boat as we could and we got everybody up early to start pushing and pushing cause Shane did not want the other commercial boatmen to see that we had gotten stuck. That's embarrassing. So, by seven o'clock in the morning we're floating again and then we went back to breakfast. We go down the river a ways after getting unstuck and I said to the captain, the skipper of the Enterprise, I said, "So what would happen if the Enterprise were grounded?" He got this serious look on his face all of a sudden and he says, "Well, court martial to start and it would be a career ending event." And listen to this, six months later I read in the newspaper that the USS Enterprise had grounded in Puget Sound near the submarine base at Bremerton. I always wondered if it was that guy. Was it that skipper of the boat that came down with us? And if it was true, his career was over.

So stories like that, if you talk to passengers you find out interesting things. Another one was this fella Mike. He was 80 years old. He moved around like he was 60 and he was down there with his new bride of 75 and they were on this river trip. Mike seemed not to be very concerned at all with this whitewater. He had no fear of it so I asked him one day, I said, "Hey, Mike, have you done this before? Have you done whitewater?" He goes, "No, but I'm no stranger to adventure." I said, "Yeah, like what?" He said, "Well, I was on the two Admiral Byrd expeditions up to Antarctica."

So I thought, there's no story we've got that can compare to that. So instead of us telling stories around the campfire at night, we had Mike tell us stories about Antarctica. The one that stuck with me was the admiral had his right-hand man was a hard driving, hard drinking guy. Whenever he had a problem, he would come into the admiral's office and sit down with his bottle of whiskey and pour himself a shot and douse a quick one and then tell the admiral his problem. Well, he came in one day, and he stored his bottle of alcohol right there at the door, well I guess he forgot and the alcohol was exposed to the minus 80 degree temperatures. Was that cold. He poured himself a shot of liquor and sucked it right down and then he fell over dead on the admiral's desk right there. Just dead right there. What happened was that minus 80 degree alcohol, it hit his throat and esophagus and froze it and he suffocated right there in front of the admiral. I thought, oh my gosh that's a hell of a story there, Mike. His stories were way, way far better than ours I thought and there was a million of those stories. That was a big deal. That whole Antarctica thing was a pretty big deal. So that's the kind of people that you're going to get. And if you don't talk to him, you're never gonna know.

TM: Right. Right.

BM: You'll never know.

TM: So where did you stay in Flagstaff for that spring, summer and fall?

BM: Well, Gaylord had a house that him and Joy had lived in out in Doney Park. It's kind of a horse area and not far. It's about five miles out of Flagstaff heading down the road for Lees Ferry, whatever highway that is. Most of the boatmen lived there. She'd charge us \$50/\$60 a month and give us a bedroom there, had a bunch of bedrooms in it, and that's where I'd live.

TM: Okay. So that was a nice deal for them because they would pay you money and then they'd get the money back for room and board, for room anyway.

BM: Yes, uh-huh. It was a good deal for everybody. We really liked it. It was cheap and really nice and quiet out there. It was a great place. I liked it.

TM: Nice.

BM: I liked it. Some of the boatmen had campers, like on the back of their pickup. Gaylord would let them set those up back in the yard somewhere where you couldn't be seen because I don't believe the zoning restrictions would allow that. But he let them do it anyway and that worked out real good for them. They had their camper or whatever and they could just bring it to Canyoneers to work for the summer and they wouldn't have to pay rent. It was a good deal. Good deal for them. But anyway, Canyoneers was a great place to work. I just have the highest regard for Gaylord Staveley. He's a standup guy. He always does what he says. He's pretty quiet. If you want anything from him, you have to ask. We flipped a boat in Crystal one year. It was a harrowing event. We were so lucky that we didn't have any drownings on that. I was pretty shook. Everybody was pretty shook.

TM: How did that happen and when was that? What was the story there?

BM: Well, let's see. Marty was driving. Doesn't matter, it could have been me. We were running left that year at Crystal. I don't know why people just decided to run it left. So we ran it left and he was a little too far left. There is that wall on the left and you need to get away from that. You need to either hit it nose first and it'll send you right up the side of it real violently, but it'll suck the tail around and then you'll be off of it. But if you hit it sideways, it's going to pin you.

TM: It will just roll you over, wouldn't it? I mean, just basically act as a ramp and flip you over?

BM: It did. We ended up there sideways. Marty tried to run from it. He had a choice. He could either nose into it or run from it, and he decided to run from it. We just barely edged up onto it, the boat stopped and then it went forward about 10 feet. We thought we were out of there. The boat stopped again and then boom. In a microsecond, that boat is upside down.

TM: Wow. And this is a big boat. It's the biggest boat on the river.

BM: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. So now we've got 23 people in the water and the rapid's really not over yet. So people were looking at me and, "What do I do? What do I do?" And man, "Get over here, get to the boat if you can." Then we came down below the rock bar, finally washed down. We could hear the boat scraping on the rocks as we went toward Big Red. If there was anybody under there, they would've gotten cut in half immediately. Anyway, we got down below there in calm water. The other motor rigs up top had seen what happened so they didn't scout, they immediately ran down to their boat. The boat eddied out down below. Some people I told them to swim to shore because that was closer and some people I had them come to the boat. It was real tight. When the boat stopped, sort of, at Big Red there, there was a real heavy lady that was hanging onto a strap. Her and I and her husband were hanging onto a strap on the outside, on the left side of the boat, Big Red's on the right side of us. The boat slowed down and the current grabbed her and started pulling her under and she wouldn't have made it. To stop her, I grabbed her life jacket. Her husband is horrified and I told him, "You grab her life jacket." So the two of us held onto her and holding ourselves so that we don't get sucked under. And anyway, we kept her from going under. Her head was just barely still above the water and then it let us go. When it lets you go, then you're not fighting current anymore. Then there was somebody on top of the upside down boat now and we said, "Help us get her up." We got her up on top first cause she was in the most danger. Then we got her husband up and then we got me up and then a few others and the boat eddied out. The other motor rigs came down and pushed us into an eddy on the left and that's where we ended up.

We got on a helicopter. The word got out. Everybody got on their radios and a chopper came. We had five medicals. The worst was a laceration. A young boy had a long laceration on the back of his leg. That was the worst of it. We treated him and treated the others. We had some concussions and broken bones and lacerations. So the park took the medicals out one at a time. Once the medicals were out, then they were transferring two or three people out at a time. By the end of the afternoon... And the trip leader broke his wrist, so he had to go. So it was just me and the other boatman on this beach with this upside down whale wondering what in the hell just happened here? What have we done? Oh my God. And it just kind of started sinking in, man. It was like, huh man, we're gonna...this is trouble. This is terrible. So anyway, we fished some food off the boat and found a couple of... We got a couple of dry bags off the boat. Everything was wet, but at least we found... We knew there'd be a sleeping bag in each one. Didn't matter, it was sopping wet.

So anyway, we just stayed the night. We cooked weenies. We found some weenies and a couple things. Water was the biggest problem. Well, next morning just about first light, here comes the park in a helicopter and they're there to re-flip this boat. And at the same time, Shane launched an empty Canyoneer at Lees Ferry the next morning. He drove all the way to Crystal and got there at about three in the afternoon with everything, you know, supplies, fuel, extra motors, anything that Gaylord thought we might need for this flip. The park had no idea. No one had any idea how to re-flip that boat. They brought down a gadget called a rope puller. This is basically a come along, same idea, except that instead of pulling a 10-foot cable through it, it pulls a rope through it as long as the rope is. It'll just keep pulling it for as long as you have rope. That's what they brought along with a few hundred feet of static caving line.

TM: Just one rope puller?

BM: That's right, to re-flip a 12,000 pound rig. We didn't know if it was going to work, nobody did. They didn't know. So we start cranking on it and it gets to be hard, hard work. We take turns pulling that thing one hard click at a time. The caving line went from about 14 millimeters, it was stretched so tight that it went down to 6 or 7 millimeters. It was like scary. This thing if it snaps, it's going to take somebody's head off. I stopped and I said, "Hey, wait, this is dangerous. Don't you think?" They said, "Yeah, it is but what else can we do?" I said, "Well, let's tie some life jackets and some cushions and stuff onto that rope so that if it snaps maybe we'll just get hit in the face with a life jacket instead of a rope." They said, "Yeah, okay." So as we're lifting it, all this stuff drifted out from under the boat and we had plenty of it. So we tied lifejackets on the whole run so if it did snap the life jackets would slow it down. Anyway, the thing finally... We cranked on that rope for six hours. Finally got it up level and we just pulled it over onto the beach and it slammed down. We looked at the damage and it was unbelievable. It just tore that rig to pieces. It wrecked it. The outrigger tubes were toast. They were so full of rips that they were not fixable so we had to drive it out of there without the outrigger tubes. We salvaged what we could.

TM: How did you get the boat off the beach back in the water?

BM: How did we do that? Well, but the tide was coming and going. I think the tide came up. I think we had tide help. Refloated it when the tide came up. This was in the day of really big tide swings, real big tide swings. I remember this thing called holiday low water in Grand Canyon. They would turn it down to 3,500 cubic feet per second. Well, that's nothing. That's no water. Trying to get a Canyoneer rig through Hance at 3,500 was just absurd. And they would do that at 3,500 cubic feet per second. My recollection is the water ran from... And you had weekend low water as well. It would run from like 4,500 up to 35,000. 4,500 to 35,000 in one day. And that's a big jump, man.

TM: So would they crank it up that much in the morning and then turn it down that much at night? It was just like this giant swing?

BM: Yes. And it was fast. They ramped it up and down. It went from 4,500 to 35,000 in an hour or maybe two. The Canyoneer trip was designed to catch high water on certain parts of the trip to get them through stretches of whitewater that the Canyoneer boats couldn't do if it were low water. The whole Canyoneer schedule was built around the flow regime. Boy you didn't want to get your boat caught in the low water part. That'd be bad. That'd be bad. Georgie was the same way. Her boats were even bigger. She couldn't run that low water, there's no way. There was no way.

TM: So Georgie's boats weren't as long, but they were definitely wider cause she had three rafts tied together. Three what, 32-foot donuts tied together side by side.

BM: The G-rigs. I ran into her one day. I was camped down below Diamond.

TM: Hey Bruce, before we go to Georgie stories, which I definitely want to capture, let's finish off... This boat has just been turned right side up there at Crystal.

BM: Oh, the flip, I'm sorry. I got distracted.

TM: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And then what happened? You gotta get that boat out of there. You've got to get a motor on it and run it out.

BM: Well, we drove the two boats together. Shane drove an empty Canyoneer rig down and I was driving the torn up boat.

TM: What about Marty? Oh, so he flew out cause he broke his hand?

BM: He flew out. Yea, he broke a wrist. He had to go out. Actually, the boat drives pretty good without the outrigger tubes on it and you have no passengers. Most of the gear had been ripped off of it, so it was pretty lightweight.

TM: Were you finding gear downriver as you cruised along? Say, "Oops, there's one of our bags there" and grab it?

BM: Yes. Yes, the canyon is littered with stuff. Life jackets and cushions mostly. But parts. It broke up the superstructure and ripped off the two big coolers up there. So there's food floating, pieces of Gott cooler, things like that. We'd pick up as much as we can find, of course. We'd drive and drive and we got out of there. I think it took us two days to get out of there. Yeah, about that. Then the trucks were there to pick us up, haul us back. You know what – that rig was a total loss. All of the cars, all of the gear, the rigging. The inner tube was salvaged, the outrigger tubes were thrown away, and all of the cars and the rigging had to be thrown away.

TM: I'm sorry. The cars?

BM: Yeah. The way most of the motor rigs work is they have these cars. I call them that; they're frame members, but they have a floor in them and sides and handlebars and seats. Each car has four rows of seats. Then you use a crane or whatever and you drop these cars down in between the tubes. The inner tube is open down the middle. So you drop those cars down in between the tubes and lash the cars down to the tube. Then you put another car in and then you join the two cars. Actually, Canyoneer had three cars. You would join the cars with a pivot pin on each side. So at each point of contact, there's a

pivot pin on each side of the car left to right. What that allowed it to do is the cars could pivot at that point.

TM: Right. So the whole thing was kind of articulating up and down a little bit, but it was pinned so you couldn't get your fingers in there, which was good.

BM: You could. You could. We built as much safety into that as we could to keep people... We said, "You cannot sit here. You cannot lay anything down here at the pivot points." We had them covered as best we could, but you couldn't cover them completely. For the most part it worked, no one ever had a problem. But one day this one guy, he just wouldn't follow instructions. He wouldn't do much of anything we told him on the whole trip, in fact. He had his own mind about what he was going to do and no one was going to tell him what to do. So he was sitting there and we went over, it wasn't even a big rapid, we went over something and the boat does its little caterpillar thing up and down over the wave. He had his hand in there and it took off a finger. So now we have to pull over. We found the severed finger and put it on ice, hoping maybe they could put it back on or something. Got him choppered out of there. We heard later that they were not able to reattach his finger. It was too jagged of a cut or something and they couldn't reattach it. So yeah, things like that happen. I think any motor rig company is going to have stories like that. It's just that way. Georgie, unfortunately, had more of those stories than most of the rest of us, bless her heart. You know, those rigs are not terribly safe. They're safe as you can make them, but still it's a big river and they are whitewater rafts. You can get hurt down there. I don't care what kind of boat you have. I always admired those two guys that jumped in the river, those two insurance guys from California, surfer fellows, and floated down the river. They don't even have a boat and they were getting beat up. Their own boxes would beat them up from time to time. It doesn't matter what you have, you can have an incident down there. It's just the nature of the trip. It's high adventure. It's also dangerous. There's nothing you can do. There's nothing you can do to remove all of the danger and that's part of the lure.

TM: Well, we've been yik-yakking this for about an hour and 20 minutes here. I wonder if this is a good place to wrap this Part 3 up. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about this particular boat flip and its recovery and aftermath?

BM: Well, I learned to have a greater respect for the other boatmen on the river. When there's an incident like this, everyone comes together and does the best that they can. All of the other commercial boatmen were right there at the ready. Anything we needed they were there to help us. And they did, too. I can't say enough about the commercial boatmen on the river in Grand Canyon. They will help you. They're not selfish at all. They're out there to help. We're all in the same boat together as it were and you have to help each other out down there. Everyone does, whether you're a commercial boatman or a noncommercial boatman. It's a big place. Things can and do go wrong and it doesn't matter what hat you wear. When there's a need, boatmen come together and get the job done.

Oh, the Canyon flip, it finished up. We ruined the boat. It was part of the business. I thought maybe we were gonna get fired or something, I didn't know. When I got back... Joy and I don't generally get along, that's Gaylord's wife. She's all business. She came to me as soon as I got off the river from the flip. She came to me and she says, "Bruce, Bruce, you've saved her life. You saved that woman's life. You're a hero. They think you're a hero. We think you're a hero." That set me back. I wasn't ready for any title like that. I just did my job. That's it. I did what I thought was right. I was trying to save my own life. I was trying to save theirs. And we did. We didn't lose a soul. Normally, often, when motor rigs flip, somebody dies and that's it. That's how it is. That was my fear. That was my worst fear and it didn't happen for us. We were so lucky. Everything worked out for us and we didn't have any deaths. Anyway, they didn't fire

us. We kept on working and people corresponded with us after that trip. The passengers said they thought we just did a great job about taking care of business after the incident. They were glad that we were on their trip and things like that. It was a bad time, but there were some lessons to learn. That's what I take home with me is the good things that I learned about boating from the incident and what to do in the future if something like that happens. What to do better or different. You know, it's just a learning experience and that was a good one.

TM: Yeah. I'm really impressed that one little rope puller could tug that boat over. That's pretty good.

BM: Well, as it turns out, that thing, I looked at that and I went, "Oh my gosh, what a great tool." I purchased one to use on these solo raft trips because I cannot by myself re-flip the boat. However, with that rope puller I know that I can. I think one year I sent that thing out to you to use.

TM: You did and we were very grateful for it.

BM: Yeah. Hopefully you didn't have to use it.

TM: We didn't, but it rode with us and we were glad to know that if we needed it, it was there. We ran it on the outside of the boat so that if the boat was over, we could get to it. It was pretty simple.

BM: Good. Good. Its peace of mind is what that and other gear... Those are just little things that you have for peace of mind. The whole thing down there, a lot of it is confidence. If something goes wrong and you lose your confidence, you're not going to get it back and things are going to keep going wrong for you. When you can have little things like that it keeps your confidence higher and that is so important on a river trip.

TM: Yes. Yeah. Okay. Well, let's call it good here for...

BM: Oh, okay.

TM: Does that sound...anything else for Part 3 here?

BM: No, I just want to remember so that we can kind of start here next time.

TM: Yeah. We'll talk about it in a minute.

BM: Okay.

TM: I think we'll go ahead and conclude. This is end of Part 3 Grand Canyon oral history with Bruce McElya. My name is Tom Martin. Today is Thursday, May 16, 2019. Bruce, thank you very much.

BM: Tom, thank you. Had a good time.