

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: John Weisheit (JW)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: John recounts the 1990s when he started to work for OARS, founded Colorado Plateau River Guides, met David Brower and founded Living Rivers

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TM: Today is Monday, November 25, 2019. This is a Part 4 Grand Canyon oral history interview with John Weisheit. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning, John. How are you?

JW: I'm fine. How are you, Tom?

TM: I'm very good. Thank you so much for carrying on with this oral history. May we have your permission to record this interview over the phone?

JW: Yes, you do.

TM: Thank you very much. We left off in 1991, I believe. You'd headed to Flagstaff to work for a fella named Mike Walker. Can you tell me a little more about Mike and what he was doing?

JW: Mike was a manager for OARS for many years and there was an order from the Secretary of the Interior to begin an Environment Impact Statement. They had a program called Glen Canyon Environmental Studies which was headed by...

TM: Was that Dave Wegner?

JW: Dave Wegner. I had a brain fart. I just saw him a week ago.

TM: It's lack of coffee, John. It's alright.

JW: I've had plenty. So Suzette and I, we got married in October and we temporarily moved to Golden, Colorado to where her parents lived, where she went to high school. We actually were working part-time there in Denver, not doing anything amazing. Temporary work actually. I heard about they needed boatmen so I just flat-out did a cold call to Mike. He answered the phone and he said, "Yeah, why don't you come on out here Christmas." It was. We launched at Lees Ferry on December 26th, which means we rigged on Christmas Day. We were gonna do a resupply trip for the USGS sediment survey at the cable crossing above National Canyon. That was like a one-month trip as I recall. Well, no, it was two two-week trips. Yeah, we did them back-to-back.

TM: So two resupplies back-to-back?

JW: Yeah. Suzette was hired, too, as a cook. So we went down there to resupply and Suzette went down there to... You know, there was already a cook. They had been stationed there for not too long, but they were already there and Suzette was gonna replace the other cooks.

TM: What was USGS doing at National Canyon?

JW: They were doing sediment studies. If you'll recall, they did these experimental flows. They were quite low. In fact, it got down to 5,000 and less. It was really interesting how they coordinated this. When we launched at Lees Ferry, they gave us 10,000 and they told us, "Get below Hance 'cause we're gonna drop it the five." So we beelined it to Hance to avoid...

TM: In a day?

JW: It took us two days. We were also instructed to pick up some USGS employees at Phantom Ranch. So that's what we did. There were actually three expeditions launching at Lees Ferry on the 26th. One was Scott Davis and another one was Steve Bledsoe. They were doing different things, but we were all launching at the same time. It was really cold. Nobody could get their motor started except for me. Had to go to Hatch to get some starting fluid. Anyway, we finally got our motors going. Let's see... So it was just me and Suzette to Phantom Ranch and then we were gonna pick up, I don't know, a half-dozen scientists and take them down to National, but there was a big storm. We did not actually get them at Phantom Ranch until like two days later because the snow... They considered it unsafe so Suzette and I camped at Cremation for three nights.

TM: Oh, so the trail was closed?

JW: Yeah.

TM: So the trail down to the river from the South Rim was closed due to the snow.

JW: We got rain. We didn't have snow. But it was cold. I mean, I'm wearing a thousand dollars worth of clothing to stay warm. So they finally got down there at noon so I deadheaded. I ran everything cold turkey till we got to below... We finally made dinner below Elves Chasm.

TM: Okay, long day.

JW: Above Blacktail. What is that? Conquistador Aisle or Stephen's Aisle, I can't remember. It was cold and we were supposed to have steak and potatoes and Suzette and I made stew and handed them bowls in their tents 'cause it was cold. Anyway, the next day was nice so I just beelined it down from 119-mile down to National in one day.

TM: So that's 40 miles/35 miles, something like that long day.

JW: Yeah. But, you know, we had 45-pounder propane bottles. We had a lot of food for a lot of people.

TM: Oh, so you were bringing a resupply to National, including food, for the people that were there.

JW: There's a switch-out. So one boat, the next day... Well, we had to move camp. We were camping right by the cable car. It's not really a camp.

TM: No, there's not a lot of room there at all.

JW: No. It was raining and the soils were loose and there were rockslides. You could hear them. Finally, a rock about the size of three footballs slammed into camp and missed Suzette's head by like one foot. Hit an ammo can and crushed it. Suzette said, "We're moving." There was no debate. She packed up the kitchen. She started putting... We all put it on boats and went down to National Canyon proper, at the very end of the gravel bar and made a camp there for safety's sake.

TM: Just because it was a bigger area further away from the cliffs?

JW: Yeah. Which me and everybody had to walk to the cable car, but it was safer. Another thing I remember is we needed firewood and that's pretty hard to find in the Grand Canyon. But the summer before there was a huge flash flood through Havasu and Tuckup had just tons and tons of wood on shore. We had one S-rig below the riffle at National and one parked above the riffle so that we could motor up to Tuckup. And, I mean, we would fill an empty S-rig with as much wood as we possibly could. And we burned it all, because they work 24 hours a day. They had shifts. So as I recall, we had to cook two breakfasts, make two lunches, make two dinners, every day for these shifts. By the way, National gets no sun in the wintertime. So we never... We would hike upstream just to get sun. Just to warm up. It was cold. And we're getting kind of stinky, too, so we actually took the time to construct a sweat lodge.

TM: That, of course, would've burned up more wood. Heating up rocks.

JW: Heating up rocks. So it was an epic trip. In the mornings the valves are frozen, the ropes are frozen. Coming down the canyon, my motor compartment was frozen. There was a half-inch to an inch of ice back there. I would throw buckets of sand on it so I could get traction. It was a very cold trip but it was fun. We had a blast. Anyway, so we did that back-to-back and then by now it's...

TM: Just gonna back up a minute. The idea was the dam would go through some various flow regimes, like...

JW: Oh yeah, I can talk about the science, yeah.

TM: ...high-flow, or up-and-down flow. Yeah, talk about the science a little bit.

JW: So yeah, so they had these experimental flows. I mean, it was low. I had to do, for example, Horn Creek at 5,000 and Bedrock and Deubendorf. But that's okay, because Cataract Canyon boatmen know rocks. We got through fine. We didn't have any problems. Those experimental flows were designed specifically for the sediment survey people and the vegetation surveys. They were putting all kinds of instruments out there for various reasons... Groundwater seepage. The result was, you know, what's a flow that's going to... If you ramp down real fast, does that put more sediment into the river? So they would ramp it up, ramp it down, take sediment surveys to see if there was any mobilized sediment. So there were lots of jars. Of course, when they went down, the jars... These are big jars. They're like quart jars. So going down were empty, but when we went to Diamond Creek to end our trip, they're all full.

TM: So a heavy boat.

JW: Heavy boat. Yeah, it was a heavy boat going down and going back. Didn't get lighter, got heavier. They worked at night because it takes a while for the sediment... You know, there's two pulses through the course of the Grand Canyon traverse. So that means they had to work 24 hours when they're out there.

TM: So the dam would turn on during the day and then turn off at night or they would run quite a wide variety of flow regimes, and the people way downstream at National with their empty glass jars would collect the water, and the water had suspended sediment in it from these wacky flow regimes that the dam was doing. So the thought was to correlate the variable flows coming out of the dam to look at energized sand.

JW: Yep. Mobilized, yeah.

TM: Mobilized sand—yeah, mobilized—in the water column and then scoop that out at National, and date it, and store it, and then take it out, and I'm assuming blow all the water out and weigh the suspended sediment. And that way, you could correlate a flow at the dam with sediment transport downstream.

JW: Yes, and there was a chief investigator. His name was John Gray. He was USGS. There were reports. They're on the internet, you can read what he exactly did. I can't remember, 'cause I was busy feeding people, getting wood, doing this and that. They had all kinds of instruments. They would drop things, measure the speed of the river, collect samples. They had all these fish-looking like instruments. Hydrodynamic, kind of like airplanes except for fluids. At night, you can imagine how bundled they were, and headlamps. Oh, batteries! You could imagine how many batteries we went through. And then other trips were coming through, too. They would stop at National to chat and sometimes have lunch, so we always had visitors.

TM: These were other trips involved with the... This is December/January. These were other trips as part of the Environmental Impact Statement studies?

JW: Okay, so we launched on December 26th. We were trip #191.

TM: Of the study?

JW: Yeah. That's 191 trips for the year 1991 and each one is like \$25,000. My paychecks came, they said Bureau of Reclamation. I got checks from the Bureau of Reclamation. Suzette and I were building our house then and we put all that money into the house. So we call our house the "House that Reclamation built."

TM: Nice. How many people were there at National, twenty?

JW: There were two boats. It was me and Lars Niemi. I bet you, between staff and USGS, there were 16 people total? Something like that.

TM: That's a lot of people to be there for such a long time. When did that whole camp break down and move out, do you remember?

JW: Sometime in February we actually packed up and left. It was in February. It was nice then. The lower canyon in February is wonderful. The marigolds were coming out. There actually were warm sunny days. It was amazing how February can be so lovely.

TM: There were other trips that were coming by as the dam worked on these various flow regimes. It was five days or seven days per regime and then they would drop the river to 5,000 and hold it there for a couple days while four survey teams, each team surveying beaches in different sections of the Grand Canyon...

JW: Oh, that's right. There was...

TM: ...zipped into place and did their surveys, and then boogied out to see what was happening with the sand on the beaches. So all those people would've come by as well on their schedules.

JW: Yes, 'cause there was a team at the Little Colorado River, too. You're right. All the gauges had this going on.

TM: Was there a team at Phantom doing the same thing?

JW: Well, if there was, they were probably supported by the staff at Phantom Ranch and didn't need boats.

TM: Right. So you wouldn't of known what was going on, if they were doing that.

JW: I don't remember. Yeah, I'm sure it was different logistics.

TM: Just an awful lot of work going on there. Did you get a chance to talk to John Gray, the USGS scientist at the time, about his thoughts on what was happening? Were you aware of what they were finding as they were finding it?

JW: Well, yeah. John was a wonderful scientist, a good naturalist and interpreter of science. There's no question that sand is being mobilized through the Grand Canyon. It's in a deficit. It's kind of like watching the federal budget balloon in the other direction. Of course, all they had to really do was interview the old-timers. But, you know, they needed data. They needed rates. What I got out of it is it's not fixable and that the day is coming when Grand Canyon river trips are gonna be totally supported by cots. You know, that sand is being evacuated away. It'll be gone. There's no question about it. All the things they're doing are not working. It's a Band-Aid. It's a gaping wound that just gets bigger.

TM: Yeah, when the Glen Canyon Dam was built, the primary purpose was sediment retention.

JW: That's true.

TM: So to try to operate a sediment-deprived system below the dam for sediment retention is kind of an oxymoron, in a way. It's curious.

JW: Yeah, because it means the reservoirs fill up with sediment, then they can no longer provide water storage, and they can no longer provide flood control. Pretty soon you have a useless dam. And you also have a safety problem. You know, I think about that. If Glen Canyon Dam fails, it's gonna scour 300 feet of material. We're probably gonna have the biggest, nicest beaches we've ever seen when it's done and over with, but it's going to severely impact the Colorado River margins, 'cause big floods they rose 35/40 feet historically. But a column of water that's 300 feet tall takes out a lot of stuff. It changes the... It's just a bad idea. They should have never built that damn thing. They're gonna be sorry. They're gonna take it down for us, Tom. They really will. They're finally gonna realize how silly it is. Especially when it goes empty and stays empty.

TM: Well, yeah. It seems like there's two interesting risks. One is the reservoir going empty and being unable to generate power. The other risk is that it gets knocked out by a Frankenstorm. So these two extremes—drought and heavy flood.

JW: Yes, the Frankenstein... The other spectrum of hydrology is massive floods. So next year, I go down with Vic Baker, et al. and we're gonna look at slackwater deposits that are probably... These are the remnants of sediment from large floods. You know, we have 700,000 cubic feet per second. That's our estimate. We'll confirm that by next year.

TM: That's a lot of water.

JW: Like the atmospheric river of 1862. That's a dam buster.

TM: It's not just the 300-foot high column of water, but it's what happens to the water plumbing system below there. Hoover Dam and Parker and Laguna and all the way to the Sea of Cortez.

JW: Well, it'll probably go into the Salton Sink, actually.

TM: Yes, okay.

JW: And then some of the prime agriculture is gonna be under a hundred feet of water.

TM: How long did you work for Mike Walker on the Environmental Impact Studies?

JW: Well, I worked in the winter of '91, '92, and '93. I think I did a total of 12 trips.

TM: And how did you and Suzette decide to build a house in Moab?

JW: Remember, Moab used to be a nice place to be poor. In 1984, the Reagan administration cancelled the Truman executive order of stockpiling rare and precious metals. For the Moab area, that meant uranium and vanadium. So we had this big, huge mining boom. Then the subsidy went away and the companies bankrupted and people moved away. You could buy a three-bedroom, two-bathroom house in Moab for less than \$30,000. Some were even selling at less than that. So river guides, all of a sudden, could afford homes. So Suzette and I bought property. We were gonna build our own house. We bought a half-acre lot for \$8,000. If we were to do that today, I'd be spending \$150,000-\$200,000. So we were very lucky. We built our house. We built a basement for \$11,000 and then we spent another \$45,000 to finish it. It took us three years. I had a trip log. In those three years, I was on the river an average of 280 days a year. Not spending any money, 'cause I'm on the river. So both me and Suzette, all our paychecks were going in the bank. So that's how we paid for our house. We just socked it away.

TM: But only 12 trips in Grand Canyon, where else were you boating? Was this back in Cataract Canyon again in the summer?

JW: Yes. I was working seven months a year in Moab and probably three months a year in Grand Canyon. No, two months a year in Grand Canyon. I probably only had 90 off-days that whole time.

TM: And just saving up your money and... Did you contract out for the house or did you guys build it yourself?

JW: Well, we contracted the concrete.

TM: Okay. Contracted the basement, sure.

JW: The rest we did. Yeah, we did everything.

TM: So in between river trips, you'd pound nails, and put down roofing, and hang windows, and go from there.

JW: Stretch wire and put in some plumbing, and drains, and vents, and roof, and yeah, drywall.

TM: Had you been thinking at this time about river conservation and looking into that or was that gonna come a little later?

JW: No, it was actually kind of happening. There were a series of events in the 90s. First of all, I got sober. Second of all, I decided to be more socially engaged to control my anger and resentment for the way things run in the world. One of my friends asked me if I wanted to be on the board of the Dan O'Laurie Museum because they knew I was an amateur historian and a writer. I was actually president of the museum here in Moab for three years and I did the *Canyon Legacy*. I did like four or five issues of the *Canyon Legacy*.

TM: Who was Dan O'Laurie?

JW: He was part of the uranium businessmen. Prominent leader in Moab. It's now called the Moab Museum. So yeah, that was fun because to make the magazine, I had to call writers and get out Adobe PageMaker and craft these 36-page journals. Edit, research... You know, it was fun. What it did was it prepared me for the founding of Colorado Plateau River Guides.

TM: So this was being a board on the museum that was '92 or '93?

JW: Yeah. Yeah, there were Park Service people on the board, archaeologists, businessmen, ranchers. It was a diverse group. It was fun. I got to know a lot of the old-timers.

TM: Nice. When did you meet Owen?

JW: That happened in like 1996.

TM: Okay, so we're not quite there yet.

JW: Brower introduced the two of us, quite frankly.

TM: How did you meet David Brower?

JW: Richard Ingebretsen started a group called the Glen Canyon Institute and he was searching for board members. At the time, I was in Salt Lake City doing research at the Marriott Library, specifically about the riverbed case as I recall. In those days, I had to photocopy everything so I spent the whole day... I stayed with my friend, Bob Stevens, my case manager. Get on the bus, go to the Marriott, stay there all day, take the bus back to Bob's. Photocopying cause nothing was online in those days. I bought microfiche from the Utah Historical Society Archives—or maybe it was the SHPO office, I can't remember—about the riverbed case. It was all on microfiche and I had like 10,000 pages of documents and I pressed the button 10,000 times.

TM: Kind of like we do today with our digital cameras.

JW: Yeah, I did that yesterday, by the way. Yeah, I take a lot of photos of stuff.

TM: And this was '94? I mean, what interested you about the riverbed case? Why were you looking into that?

JW: 'Cause it's the largest oral history on the Colorado River.

TM: Indeed it is.

JW: It was a Supreme Court case, *USA vs. Utah*. It was about who owns the riverbed so they interviewed everybody who was alive. I mean, Frederick Dellenbaugh, Kolb brothers, Bert Loper. E.C. LaRue. They interviewed everybody. It's a gold mine.

TM: Harry McDonald, Edwards. It just went on and on, yeah.

JW: But I would also go to like Utah Historical Society. That's where the Aleson archive is and Charles Kelly and all those... So yeah, I was learning a lot about the Colorado River, especially Upper Basin because, compared to the Grand Canyon, the Upper Basin is relatively a historical void. 'Cause I always feel like Grand Canyon authors just keep doing the same thing. There's really nothing new happening. That's why I'm proud of you doing the Marston thing. Why wasn't that done 50 years ago?

TM: Yeah, curious. What did researching these oral histories from the 20s I believe that riverbed case was. Is that right?

JW: Yes.

TM: They're talking about the river and their experiences on it. What did that teach you that you didn't already know?

JW: It was all new information. You know, I started getting off my boat. I was actually walking. Sometimes I'd let Suzette row and I would just walk the roads along the river, especially in Labyrinth Canyon. So I'm finding all the inscriptions from all these... Lots of people went down the Green Rivers, even during the Depression. So there's a lot of people who went down there who we don't know anything about. Once James Knipmeyer and I spent a week scouring river bottoms looking for inscriptions and we were never disappointed. We found old steamboat camps. We know where they liked to stop and get driftwood to put in the boilers. That's usually where we found the inscriptions. To this day, I just... A few years ago, I surmised that perhaps this would have an inscription, and it did. A lot of times, when you go down the river you're just there to enjoy the river but I'm actually working. So I have found a lot of stuff. I keep a lot of it to myself, but when I have something archaeologically important I usually notify the Park Service. Burials are not fun to find, but they're out there.

TM: So going through the riverbed case sort of helped you understand the river before Reclamation, before the upstream dams and the downstream dams, by learning what the people who were on the water then, the steamboat people... Gosh, Wiemer, Yoki, I mean, just a whole bunch of people that were there doing that kind of stuff. Did that help you start to understand a little bit more about the river without a lot of water diversion?

JW: Yes. You know, the sandbar situation below Green River in Moab is part of the navigation of the criteria for the case. This was no different than *Arizona v. California*. They had a special master; they met in various parts of the country: Denver, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Santa Fe... You know, it's a big deal. It includes the San Juan River, too. It involves USGS people, steamboat captains, gold miners, oil prospectors. You name it, they're... It's fascinating history. Placer miners.

TM: So Richard invited you to go ahead and join Glen Canyon Institute, is that right?

JW: Yeah. Eleanor Inskip, who lives here in Moab, and I, and Richard met at the Spaghetti Company. And, anyway, we said yes. I think we were the first board members. There might've been somebody before us, but... Eventually Brower would show up, like, maybe two years later. That was what changed a lot. Brower changed my entire focus and direction. And I'm glad about that. He offered me an invitation and I accepted it.

TM: Before we get to Dave, you mentioned the Colorado Plateau River Guides. Did you start that organization before you met Brower?

JW: Yes.

TM: About what time was that? When did you start that?

JW: That came from Tim Thomas, who was a river guide for Colorado Outward Bound, and Sheri Griffith. He lives in Durango now. He said, "You know, we ought to start a river guides association," and I agreed. At the time, the president of Grand Canyon River Guides was... By the way, I was one of the first members when Kenton Grua started Grand Canyon River Guides. It was in Mike Walker's warehouse. I actually was there the day they had their first—it might have been the second—meeting, and, you know, that's when I wrote my first check. But by 1993, the president is Brad Dimock. So I called Brad, and I said, "Hey, we'd like to start an organization up here in the Upper Basin." So the two of us, then, worked with Jane and Ken Sleight and we had a meeting. There were, like, like 50 people there. Park Service people, state park people, outfitters, river guides, river activists. It was a very interesting meeting. Anyway, we got about a thousand dollars in donations right then and there. Suzette was elected president and I was elected secretary. Suzette and I started immediately writing the journal of the Colorado Plateau River Guides, which is called *The Confluence*. I think we got it out in February. So we were in and out with a product within two or three months. We were pretty serious about it.

TM: And, of course, the work that you'd done for the museum—as you said, working with Adobe PageMaker—sets you up to very easily start doing the journal for the Colorado Plateau River Guides?

JW: Yeah, something like that, I think. Actually, now that I think about it, I think I'm getting my dates wrong. We can correct this later on, but I think actually it was the other way around. My work for Colorado Plateau River Guides would create *Canyon Legacy's* later on. We can fix that. In those days, it was pretty much cut and paste. The printer would take a picture. That's how it was done back then. It wasn't done with computers.

TM: Okay, so two organizations. Suddenly, one is Glen Canyon Institute...

JW: Yeah, like '94-'95.

TM: So Colorado Plateau River Guides was a couple years before then?

JW: '93-'94. And my museum stint was, like, '91 to '93. I'm also on the board of Canyonlands Field Institute.

TM: Okay. At the same time?

JW: Yeah. I started out as public education. A lot of environmental education. That meeting Colorado Plateau River Guides kind of changed me because... River guides were different then. They *did* want to take dams down. They *did* want wilderness. Of course, the outfitters didn't. They wanted wild and

scenic. You know, and they also...some of them wanted to unionize. Oh man, did that create fear with the outfitters. So anyway, you could say I kind of bit off more than I could chew, but I did it anyway.

TM: How so?

JW: I don't know, I just immersed myself into controversy. Started forming opinions for myself. Didn't care if people thought I was radical or out of line. I just don't care about stuff like that. You know, I don't like being accommodated. I want a very changed river because it's been changed. We need restoration and I decided I'm just gonna make this my passion cause nobody else is really serious about doing it. They talk about it. There's a lot of talk. Kind of reminds me of that joke, "How do you know that a river guide is lying?" No, wait. How does that go? I forget how...

TM: You were pretty close.

JW: Yeah, you know, I've heard a lot of lecture from river guides. Very rarely are they informative. Mostly about jokes and people laugh.

TM: Well, you know, in their defense, their job is to cater to clientele, some of which aren't interested in the flora, and the fauna, and ecology, and the river history. They're interested in jokes. They want to be entertained.

JW: You know, I understand that but I do not agree with it.

TM: Well, I agree. But there's a perspective that says, "We're entertainers and we need to hire entertainers because our clients need to be entertained."

JW: No, I went out of my way to make natural history fun. I really did. Even if I didn't feel confident about my lecture I'd do it anyway because I said to myself the only way you're gonna get better is if you just do it, mistakes or not. I had these moments of, "Well, that was really bad. How could I change that?" And then with two or three years of doing that you could come up with a bomber...

TM: Yeah, interp.

JW: ...interp that everybody's interested in. And here's what's interesting is is after a while, the jokes aren't important anymore. I started getting more attention which made the other river guides somewhat envious. Then I had to deal with that. But, oh well.

TM: When did you first meet Dave Brower? Did Richard Ingebretsen, did he go out and contact Dave just based on Brower's prior work in river conservation and dam issues? Just kind of wondering how that connection all happened. Or did Eleanor Inskip do that?

JW: Well, Eleanor was the first executive director of Canyonlands Natural History Association and I was just a river guide. And, you know, the two of us aren't dynamic environmental leaders. At least not back then. We're newbies. We know what we want. We don't know how to do it. Well, Brower knows how to do it.

TM: So Brower knew how to environmental campaigns.

JW: Yes, he did. I think Brower actually reached out to Glen Canyon Institute. You're gonna have to interview Richard to find out for sure. What I remember is that Brower and Martin Litton ended up

coming to the Glen Canyon Institute meeting at the University of Utah. And that's the meeting that changed my life.

TM: When was that?

JW: I'm gonna say it was 1996. What I did is was I walked up to Brower. I was mad at him, actually. I have since learned that I was completely wrong, but that's okay 'cause I wouldn't have asked the question that changed my life forever. I told him how disappointed I was that he lost the fight for Glen Canyon Dam. Instead of defending himself, he said to me, "That's right, John. Now what are *you* gonna do about it?" He turned it around and he put it right back in my lap where it really truly belonged. I said to myself, "He's right. I don't have the right to do this." I'm glad I asked the question, though, 'cause I wouldn't have had this reflection. I went, "He's right." He said, "You can do a better job than I ever could, John, 'cause you're a river guide. You have standing. When you go to a meeting, they're gonna know that you're speaking from the heart and that you're authentic." He says, "I think the river guides can do a better job than I ever could." I took that to heart. I agreed with him. I said, "Well, what do I do?" And he said... We had these long conversations on the phone, Tom. I never took notes. I should've. It probably wasn't necessary 'cause I remember everything. You know, I just kind of like went, "Yeah, I'm gonna do this." At the time he was getting old and feeble and he was in wheelchairs and I was carting him around and taking him to airports. So I got a lot of one-on-one time with him. A lot of it. More than I needed, but enough to go, "Yep, this is how you get a campaign going."

That's how I met Owen. Because of David's influence, now we're being introduced to, like, the John Muir Sierran's, which is a left-liberal friends of the Sierra Club. A lot of these people are board members on the Sierra Club. There was a big, huge fight in the Sierra Club about this you might recall. There were hearings. Jim Hanson is chair of the Natural Resources Committee and is having debates in congressional-level committees to discuss the removal of Glen Canyon Dam. It was pretty hot and heavy back then. But we were having meetings at International Rivers Network, at Brower's insistence, in Berkeley. That's how I met Owen 'cause Owen was the executive director of the International Rivers Network. Owen told me that every Sunday, Brower would make waffles and bacon for breakfast and anybody and everybody was welcome to come. Owen would go to those waffle-and-bacon breakfasts for years.

TM: Isn't that interesting, because Marston did the same thing. Waffles for breakfast on Sunday.

JW: Who did that?

TM: Marston.

JW: Oh, really? So it's a Berkeley thing?

TM: You got to wonder.

JW: Anyway, so that's when I met Anne Brower and some of the children. Of course, they were full-grown adults. So yeah, changed me forever.

TM: How so?

JW: Well, it was like my recovery from alcoholism, I had a constructive way to deal with my anger. And now I had some guidance, you know, a mentor. If he can do it, so can I. He gave me the greatest... He just showered out great advice like "Don't be afraid of your mistakes. In fact, you'll be surprised how your mistakes actually will be beneficial down the road." Stuff like that. "Be fearless. Don't be afraid to

make a mistake.” You know, caution is not how you drive a campaign. It’s how you run a business, not a campaign. I think that that’s probably why NGOs fail, is they’re not running campaigns. They’re running a business.

TM: What else do you remember about David?

JW: There was one profound thing he told me. It was almost a prophecy. This is like 1997 and he was upset with all the river... I think he said something like, “There’s 300 river groups in this country and none of them work together. We’re just spinning wheels.” He made it very clear that the responsibility is ours not presidents, congress, courts. He put all the heavy weight on the conservation movement. But he said, “Someday, it’s gonna change.” He says, “I don’t know what it is. But there’s something gonna happen in the future where all the river groups...” He was specific about river groups, not the forest groups, not the ocean groups. But the river community would... I still don’t know what it is, but every day I think about this. What’s it gonna be? It’s going to emerge. I don’t know what it is, David didn’t know what it is, but it’s gonna emerge and when it does I need... I’m kind of like the guy in the lighthouse looking for the emergence of this prophecy. I have my theories about what it might be. I think my best theory is when these reservoirs go empty people are gonna go, “Oh, shit now what do we do?” Or, contrarily, this big atmospheric river comes and takes all the dams away.

TM: Right. So without a giant flood and without a drought, our demand for water has exceeded the supply and that’s a third factor. Not just drought, no water to fill the reservoir, and not just a giant flood to knock it out, but even with normal snowpack, whatever normal is, if our demand for the water in the system passes that supply now we have a whole other problem to look at.

JW: Yeah, which makes me realize who my new mentor is. I’m 65. It’s kind of like, “Why does a 65-year-old person need a mentor?” I’ve been working with Vic Baker since 2005 on this paleoflood hydrology. I’ve done river trips with this guy. I have a lot of downtime with this guy and I find out he used to be the president of the Geological Society of America, which is not an easy position to get. And I’m finding out how incredibly intelligent Vic is. He’s a true PhD. He’s very philosophical. He looks into the future and he analyzes the hearts and minds of anything and everything. So he’s become my second mentor. He says these astounding things. They’re such good truisms, you just can’t help but latch on to them and glue them or stick them on your lapel.

TM: Like what?

JW: Well, I asked him about climate change. He gave the best answer I’ve ever heard in my life. He goes, “John, we’ve never adapted to climate change. What makes you think we’re going to do it in the future?” And he’s right. That’s what Donald Worster’s book is about is the failure of adapting to climate, hydrologically speaking, since the dawn of civilization. We just don’t adapt to climate. And if we did, then we wouldn’t have empty reservoirs. If we did, we wouldn’t have to worry about dams failing. If we did, we wouldn’t have to worry about reservoirs filling up with sediment. We’re trained not to adapt to climate. It’s something we should’ve done centuries ago. If we had, we wouldn’t be in the mess we’re at today. What complicates it is now there... This hints at another great thing Vic told me was, “In the meantime, what we’ve done is put a lot of big things in all the wrong places.”

TM: As in cities in deserts and things?

JW: Yep. Dams, skyscrapers in earthquake faults, houses in forests. We have a planning and zoning problem more than a climate. We could adapt to climate change. It’s our planning and zoning that prevents us from doing it. When I told you I could build a house for \$55,000... I’m in a floodplain. I wish I

had thought about this. I'm in the 500-year floodplain. Okay, so if I got serious about it, you know, like, oh my god, I'm gonna sell my house and then put the risk on somebody else? I can't move this house. I could walk away from it at a huge loss. To build a Moab now you need \$300,000. So everything's gonna be more expensive. Vic told me... I said, "What our future?" and he says, "Oh, that's easy. Relocating, removing, remodeling." The Rs. Pick and choose your R. You know, that's our future. He said, "We're not going to Mars. We're not leaving the solar system. We're gonna be spending money like you've never..."

TM: Certainly looking at climate change and as Vic's talking about, building in the wrong places. Our cities on coasts. Los Angeles, New York City, and, and, and... Not to mention earthquake faults, and dams on rivers, etc. So there's been a lot of infrastructural development that is now going to be relocated, removed, and remodeled. Yeah, that's very good. The three Rs.

JW: Yeah, so anyway, I can't help but feel it's all eminent. Maybe I'll miss it 'cause I only probably got 20 years left. But my young employees are gonna have to deal with it. So I think about them. In a way, Brower put me in charge of my own life, and I do that, too. I tell young people first of all, I apologize for what baby boomers didn't do. Then I tell them look, it's kind of up to you and I'm not gonna stand in your way. I'll help you. And that resonates with them 'cause it's authentic. They already know that. So it's nice when a baby boomer admits...

TM: Yeah. That there's a lot of work yet to do certainly can resonate with that. Okay, so you met Brower, you met Owen Lammers. You two started Living Rivers, is that right?

JW: Well, and Brower. The three of us met, or talked on the phone, I can't remember and we decided it was a good idea to start a new organization in Moab 'cause it's right next to the Colorado River. A river community.

TM: When did you do that?

JW: It was in 1999.

TM: Okay, in Moab in 1999.

JW: He left International Rivers Network. They gave him a severance check of \$20,000, I think, and we rented an ice-cream store. We had a waffle-and-bacon party on January 1, 2000, the day after Y2K. That was our first meeting. Ken Sleight was there. We consider that the beginning of our organization.

TM: Okay, I'll tell you what. We've been yik-yakking a little over an hour and maybe January 21st, 2000 is a good time to start Part 5.

JW: Okay. I think you're right.

TM: Alright, very good. Well, with that, this will conclude Part 4 Grand Canyon oral history interview with John Weisheit. Today is Monday, November 25th, 2019. My name is Tom Martin. John, thank you so very much.

JW: You're very welcome.