

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Peter Brown (PB)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Peter recounts the fourteenth segment of his tule reed boat trip, ending the trip at Lake Mead National Recreation Area, river mile 279

Date of Interview: January 27, 2021, Part 14

Method of Interview: In person at the Lake Mead National Recreation Area

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TM: Today is January 27, 2021. This is Part 13 (actually Part 14) and final Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Peter Brown. My name is Tom Martin. Good evening, Peter. How are you?

PB: Real good, Tom. It's nice to be here on our last day, but then real sad, too.

TM: Yeah. We are at river mile 279 on the Colorado River. We have left Grand Canyon National Park and we are now in Lake Mead National Recreation Area camping on the banks of the Colorado River. The crew has assembled a ring of chairs around a fire. The boats are parked on the water by the shore there, tied to shore, and there's a tule raft down there standing on its end propped up with sticks. Today was your final day on the tule raft on your row through Grand Canyon. What are your thoughts?

PB: Well, first of all, every time I look at that raft and think about just how it performed today—it's still buoyant, it's still structurally sound, it's still moving through the water no problem at all. That's 280 miles of whitewater, being in the water most days. Incredible I think. I really do. I mean, I just cannot believe that we were able to do that. Your inspiration on this was proven correct.

TM: (*laughs*) I didn't know it would work.

PB: Well, yeah, but you had an inclination that ancient man could have—or woman—could have wandered down the river on their tule reed raft.

TM: Yes, and you have proved it could be done...

PB: It could be done.

TM: ...in pretty harsh circumstances in the middle of the winter. Of course, the water is cold with releases from Glen Canyon Dam. That would not be prehistoric. Of course, this time of year the river would be very cold and very low, but in the fall the river would be warmer and lots of sand beaches.

PB: Well, and even in the winter in the past, there would have been so much more variable flow as well. Certainly, as river runners today know, that lower water helps in some cases and lower water makes it harder in some cases.

TM: Right.

PB: But yeah, I think in the past if you had the natural flow, it would have both helped and... It would have made it easier in some cases, but harder in some others. But certainly the water temperature—you

wouldn't have needed a dry suit necessarily most times of year, probably. You wouldn't have needed a PFD, again, because I think the raft provides enough buoyancy that as long as you can hold onto the raft and keep yourself close to that...

TM: Right. So the raft would be a PFD.

PB: The raft would be a PFD.

TM: Right, which is, I think, something I certainly learned watching you work the boat on the river was as long as you could keep with the boat, then you had a stable platform to crawl back up on and carry on.

PB: Yep. And carry on. So otherwise, it's been a blast. It's been a fun way. As I mentioned the last interview, it's just an incredibly intimate way to travel on the water on the Colorado River and to go through the rapids. But even just to float this flatwater the last couple of days has been very fun, just very interesting. Just cruising down the river.

TM: What would you do different next time?

PB: That's a good question. Well, first of all, now I know... It took a few days in there at the beginning—in interviews I think we talked about that—to actually get a technique for riding the raft. I do think it would be interesting to kind of play with the center of gravity a little bit more on the raft. But otherwise, I wouldn't do anything different. It seemed to work really well. Again, to ride the rapids, just straddle it like a horse and keep your feet in the water and hold on. And keep it pointed straight. But even with an 18-foot raft you want to keep it pointing straight at the rapid.

TM: Right. As far as gear, anything you'd do differently if you were going to run a tule raft through Grand Canyon again in the middle of the winter?

PB: No, I don't think so. I mean, we had the seat on it that was pretty nice. That worked out really well. One thing was, the last couple of days I've had the seat blown up a little bit more, just because we've been doing 20-mile days. In the rapids and in the fast water, it helps to be lower on the seat so I've let the air out of the seat most of the days.

TM: For center gravity?

PB: Center of gravity. It is a little more tippy than just being two inches off of the board that we have straddling the three bundles.

TM: Okay.

PB: But no. I think we hit the right combination of equipment. Certainly the construction—your construction of the tule boat—was spot-on, I think.

TM: Was luck.

PB: Well, it's probably not a really complicated system to have to deal with, but yeah.

TM: Right. So it would be a question of cordage. If you were a good weaver, and you weaved a lot of cordage either with grapevine or with agave fibers, or even tule itself, that's fairly tough.

PB: You know, that would be an interesting question is next time if we wanted to do this again, experiment to make it completely natural (*laughs*).

TM: Right. That would be interesting, to see if that could work. Maybe no seat. There'd be no board to sit on.

PB: No.

TM: There'd be no straps holding the board down.

PB: Kneeling on the raft, perhaps, or just sitting flat on the raft would work. Sitting flat would probably be best, just to...

TM: Someone younger or stronger than an old guy like me.

PB: Or 64-year-old like me.

TM: Yeah, to kneel for 280 miles. I don't know. But the buoyancy would still be there.

PB: The buoyancy would still be there. And again, I think that is the most surprising thing to me about the whole thing, is that that thing has remained buoyant. That tule must have a lot of air pockets in it that are pretty waterproof, that do not soak up water that much.

TM: Right. Yeah, like you, I'm amazed at its buoyancy; the fact that you're still a couple inches out of the water, you're not getting wet. In the rapids, okay, you're getting wet, but on the flatwater you're out of the water.

PB: Oh, yeah.

TM: And you've been out of the water the entire trip.

PB: Pretty much.

TM: Except for the rapids.

PB: And you know, here the last couple of days on the flatwater here in the silts, I haven't gotten wet at all except for my feet when I get in and out of the boat. Not even my seat.

TM: Yeah. I just find that amazing.

PB: That's it.

TM: Well, Peter Brown, thank you so very, very much for your willingness to paddle this thing all the way through the Grand Canyon, or attempt it. You succeeded and I congratulate you for that. It's absolutely amazing.

PB: Thank you, Tom. Thank you again for the opportunity, and again, for your inspiration on this and your vision that it would actually work (*PB and TM laugh*).

TM: An attempt, a vision of an attempt.

PB: Okay, an attempt.

TM: And here we are.

PB: Yep.

TM: Alright. Well, with that—hmm? Anything else you want to add?

PB: No, that's it. Thanks.

TM: Okay. This will conclude what is, we think, Part 13 (actually Part 14) Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Peter Brown. Today is January 27th, 2021. We are at river mile 279 on the Colorado River, having just exited Grand Canyon National Park. Peter Brown has paddled a tule reed kayak or raft...

PB: You know, just a side note on that. We were debating that going down the river yesterday, as to what to actually call the thing. I would call it a raft, but I think it's officially a kayak. But I don't know what the definition of a raft versus a kayak is.

TM: Right. Yeah. A tule reed watercraft.

PB: Yes.

TM: Brilliant. And thank you very much.

PB: Thank you, Tom.