

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Peter Brown (PB)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Peter recounts the first segment of his tule reed boat trip, travelling from Lees Ferry beach to Six Mile Camp

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Method of Interview: In person at Six Mile Camp

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TM: Today is December 30th—it's Wednesday—2020. We are at Six Mile Camp on the Colorado River in Grand Canyon National Park, sitting on a historic dory named the *GEM*. Peter Brown is sitting here. My name is Tom Martin. It's just sunset. The sun is going up the cliffsides there. Good evening, Peter. How are you?

PB: Pretty good, Tom. How are you?

TM: Good.

PB: Good evening.

TM: Pete, today you had a chance to paddle a tule reed boat from the Lees Ferry beach to here at Six-Mile. It took you through a riffle called the Paria Riffle. And it took you through Cathedral Wash rapid—not a big rapid. Can you tell me what it was like to paddle that boat?

PB: Well, first of all, Tom, I have to say that it was all your idea to try this thing out, that you had this idea that because of the fact that there were tule reed kayaks historically on the river, paddled by indigenous folks at various and sundry times—but there's lots of records of them. So the idea was to see if this would be possible here on the Grand Canyon on a rafting trip. So you and Hazel put it together—your wife Hazel Clark—built it all. We did a little bit of modification at the ramp.

TM: Pete, can you describe for me what the boat looks like?

PB: It's three bundles of tule reeds. Tules are native. They're about six to eight inches—eight/nine inches in diameter.

TM: The bundles.

PB: The bundles. There's three of them. They've been wrapped together. Tule's a native reed that has pretty good properties in terms of being buoyant, so that's why it got used historically. Bundled together, in this case, not with native string but with nylon string that we had. Then the bundles are bundled to each other. And then to give it a little bit of extra rigidity, the other thing that we did was pound some dowls through it, three-quarter inch wooden hardwood dowels.

TM: And historically, the First Nations peoples would use willow trunks and pound those horizontally through the bundles from the right side to the left side of the bundle pile.

PB: And that gives a lot of rigidity to the boat. I was really quite impressed with how well... First of all, it tracked well. It was easy to row. It was quick, it was very responsive, and it was fairly stable. Now I do have to admit, going through the Paria Riffle there was a lateral that came at me. I hit one good lateral, took it on straight. It got there, but then that one kind of knocked me over a little bit and before I could correct there was another lateral that came along and whacked me.

Another modification that we've done is actually put a couple of knee-braces, like on a kayak, in it. I slipped out of those, unfortunately before I could catch myself... Probably somebody with more kayak experience could actually have caught that roll. But over I went. So I went into the water. The boat flipped over. I spent probably, I don't know, 30 seconds/a minute in the water—not that much, 30 seconds or so—and then I flipped it back over and was able to climb back on top and self-rescue; get back going down the river. So no problems at all.

Cathedral washed then was the second set of rapids that we hit. That one actually was—there's some fairly big waves in that one. What I learned on that—and I think that was just by pure accident—is I just went ahead and got my legs out of the knee-straps and put my feet down in the water and I was able to balance a lot better that way.

TM: What can you tell me about the strength of the boat? Do you think it's going to survive another three days, or five days, or seven days of this?

PB: I think it's actually very strong. One problem I did have is, my weight is kind of making little indentation in the middle bundle where I'm sitting. I'm not sure if that's going to be a problem or not. It didn't seem to lose any buoyancy today. We pulled it out of the water. One thing I would worry about is it's going to get waterlogged. So whether that's going to happen 3 days or 30 days, no idea. We'll find out.

TM: What modifications would you make to avoid that middle dimple where you're sitting there? How much do you weigh?

PB: About 170.

TM: Okay, 170 pounds. And so that's the weight of your trunk—your butt and your chest and your arms and your head. And your legs are of course sitting in front of you.

PB: Legs are off in front. Yeah, maybe we could try a piece of board that would even out the weight, both horizontally and a little bit more laterally, on the bundle. Because it just seems to be just the indentation right where my butt is.

TM: Okay. So what's it like to paddle?

PB: Oh, yeah!

TM: You mentioned you figured out at Cathedral Wash to wrap your legs around it, and that gave you lateral stability from being hit right and left.

PB: No, went through Cathedral Wash just fine. Then the other thing about it is, I was actually more worried... Knowing Grand Canyon, there's a lot of flat water and I was kind of worried that it was going

to be a slug to handle. However, it did really well on the flat water. It moves fast, it tracks really well, it's buoyant. It's doing well.

TM: Great. Well, thank you very much for this brief oral history (*PB laughs*) and we'll do this again tomorrow (*PB and TM laugh*).

PB: I was going to say, let's try maybe two or three days from now. Well, I don't know, after Badger tomorrow. Let's see how it does in Badger.

TM: Badger and Soap tomorrow.

PB: Yep.

TM: House Rock tomorrow.

PB: I'm not sure I'm going to go down the tongue in Badger anymore. I might try more of a left-hand sneak around the...

TM: Conservative lines are good.

PB: Yeah.

TM: No problem with that. Think conservatively, and let's see where you end up tomorrow.

PB: Sounds good.

TM: Cool. Thanks, Peter.

PB: Sure thing, Tom. Thank you again for...

TM: Well, this will conclude Part 1 (*PB laughs*) of a Grand Canyon tule boat oral history here. Today is, again, December 30th, 2020. We are at Six Mile Camp and Peter Brown, thank you very much.

PB: You're welcome.