

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Peter Brown (PB)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Peter recounts the second segment of his tule reed boat trip, travelling from Six Mile Camp to North Canyon

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Method of Interview: In person at North Canyon

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TM: Today is December 31st. It's New Year's Eve. We are camped at North Canyon on the Colorado River in Grand Canyon. There's a bunch of us huddled around a fire here trying to stay warm. I'm sitting next to Pete Brown. My name is Tom Martin. Today was the second day that Pete paddled a tule raft through the Grand Canyon. Today he went from Six Mile Camp to North Canyon, about 17 miles, I guess, if we do the math. Maybe I'm not quite right. So Pete, how was your day today?

PB: Quite fun and interesting and wet. We scouted Badger Rapid, and Badger was no problem at all. I followed another raft going down. He hit the line perfectly, and I hit the line just fine on that as well. Then we hit Soap...

TM: So hang on a second. So you're sitting on these three bundles of tule, and you're paddling into Badger. Were you following another rafts line, or could you see the big hump in the middle you needed to go left of?

PB: I could see that pretty well, even though I was pretty low. In fact, that's the one thing I would like to say about the tule raft. Having only ever rowed in a big raft before, I'll tell you, the kayak style—I can see where these kayakers love it, because you're so much more intimate with the river. You're right there on the water, it's gurgling just right there next to the boat. And particularly on the tule raft, what I've discovered for going through the rapids, is actually just to straddle it, put my feet in the water, and then I've got a really good ability to balance that way on it.

TM: So is it stable? Would you call it a stable boat?

PB: I'd call it a very stable boat. The problem, of course, is getting it sideways. So in Soap I did get it sideways right at the very tail end and slid off the seat, but didn't fall off the boat because I still had one leg—my right leg—hooked over the other side. If it gets sideways to any of the waves... If it hits the waves straight on, it either goes right over them or it... I mean, it's even better than something like a paddleboard because it's got flex. So it sort of just snakes right over the rapid, the waves.

TM: So below Soap Creek Rapid, you go into what's called the Supai Gorge and there's lots of swirlies in there, kind of hydraulics, lots of tight eddies. How did you do in there?

PB: Well, I did hit... There was one little riffle we went through, and there's kind of a move to the right at the very end. I didn't make that so I did hit a huge eddy that I could not get out of. So I just followed it back around, ran the riffle again, and then was able to make the cut the next time.

TM: Cool. Okay.

PB: It did seem like the boat was getting a little bit waterlogged towards the end. It seemed like it was higher in the water when we first started in the morning. It was much easier to push through the water it seemed like then, unless maybe it was just I was tired. But by the end of the afternoon, it seemed like it was more sluggish. Again, that might have been me, a combination of me, but I do think the... And this is, I think, going to be the key element for it going down the river. It's incredibly strong, I think, and flexible so I don't think it's going to fall apart. The only problem I think we're going to have with it is going to be waterlogging.

TM: Okay. And then we got to House Rock Rapid, which we scouted. What did you do at House Rock?

PB: Yeah, House Rock was a whole 'nother story in terms of rapids. We scouted it. I had the line I was going to go. I followed the other boat—Craig's boat, again. Thought I had it pretty well. Got through probably the first two-thirds of the rapid okay. The problem with that boat is that it is incredibly difficult to try and move anywhere. So I was trying to pull right; it just was not going right. So I ended up, I think, and I'm not sure, I don't know exactly where I was, in the big holes down at the bottom. I got through one big wave, it felt like I was going down in about a 20-foot deep hole, and then coming out it flipped the boat and flipped me off. Then through the last of the tail waves there, I was pretty much swimming; but I held onto the boat, held on the paddle, was able to right the boat, able to climb back on top and finish the rapid on top.

TM: Okay. Very good. And then paddled from there down to North Canyon.

PB: I have videos of both Badger and House Rock, so hopefully I'll be able to see what I did. And then we paddled on down to North Canyon.

TM: Alright. So at this point, you've been looking at some possible alterations to the boat. What kind of alterations are you thinking about?

PB: Well, the big one is, the fat old butt is making an indentation in the middle of the three bundles of tules. So the idea that we've come up with is to go ahead and put a board on there which somebody found in our driftwood pile. So we'll tie that down pretty well, tie the seat onto that and in that way the weight will be spread out at least over the three bundles. Now of course the next thing is, it might just squish the three bundles down instead of just the one. So not sure what to do at that point. Put somebody lighter on the boat, probably.

TM: (*laughs*) Well, we'll find out. Alright, well, thank you very much for your recollections of today's journey with the tule reed boat. It's New Year' Eve, so Happy New Year to you.

PB: Happy New Year to you, Tom.

TM: That will conclude Part 2 of a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Peter Brown. Today is December 31st, 2020. We are at North Canyon Camp. Thank you so very much, Pete.

PB: Thank you, Tom.