

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Peter Brown (PB)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Peter recounts the ninth segment of his tule reed boat trip, travelling from Bass camp to Stone Creek

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Method of Interview: In person at Stone Creek

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TM: Today is Tuesday—at least we think it's Tuesday—January 12th, 2021. This is a Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Peter Brown. My name is Tom Martin. Good evening, Peter. How are you?

PB: Real good, Tom. Thanks.

TM: Great. We are at Stone Creek in Grand Canyon National Park, along the banks of the Colorado River. Stone Creek is at river mile 132, approximately. And the last time we talked, which might have been Part 7 (actually Part 8), we were at Bass camp, at about 108 mile. Between the last time we talked and today, you've been paddling the tule reed boat and you ran Hakatai Rapid and Walthenberg Rapid, and you ran a number of riffles and small rapids. And today...

PB: Fossil today. Started with Fossil.

TM: Yeah, we started with... Well, you ran Fossil, and we camped right below Fossil on the left (camped at the foot of Forster). So today you ran...

PB: No, no, we camped at Forster.

TM: We camped at Forster and we ran Fossil this morning, early, and then we ran Specter and Bedrock and Dubendorf. And so in the last two days, what have you learned new about the tule? How's it been handling? What's happening?

PB: It's still been doing just wonderful. Nothing much new to report. I did have one swim today in the Wannabe Randy's Rock riffle, where it runs up against the side of Tapeats. I thought I had it, and then there was a huge surge that just came along and pushed me right up against the rock, knocked me off the boat. So meanwhile I'm trying to... I actually was pushing. I was between the rock and the boat, and I'm pushing off with my feet to try and keep the boat off of the rock. Finally got it off; got far enough down where the current was taking me away from the rock at a certain point.

TM: Was the boat right side up or upside down?

PB: It was right side up. Boat never flipped today. And had some great runs. Bedrock was actually incredibly easy, just bouncing along in the right-hand rocks. Everybody today had a wonderful time at Bedrock.

TM: So you just clunked along the right-hand shore there in the little tule raft?

PB: Pretty much.

TM: Okay. At Bedrock. At Specter, you ran right at Specter. That's a little bigger water.

PB: Yeah, Specter was a lot of fun. Stayed on, had a good time. Same with Dubendorf. I did sort of the right-hand tongue, main tongue, the usual. I don't think I got right as far as I meant to and hit a couple of the bigger waves down at the bottom, but certainly didn't hit, I don't think, any of the big holes that are down at the bottom of Dubendorf.

TM: So you were quite a ways right. Good.

PB: Yeah, I think I was pretty well right, because then it was very easy pull in back to camp here at Stone Creek.

TM: And every day, at the end of the day when we get to camp, the little boat gets pulled out of the water and stood up on its end.

PB: Yeah. So Tom, you've expressed it's been showing quite a curve in it. I think we've mentioned this before, but there's a dip in the middle where the seat is, where I'm sitting, and both ends... I mean, the front end has always been.... We've had a bit of a kayak front on the front but the rear of the bundles are sticking out of the water more than the middle. So what we've been doing now is trying to keep it as straight as possible when we stand it up out of the water and try and keep that bend to a minimum.

TM: Okay. Do you notice it sinking?

PB: Not really. One of the things is, I keep expecting on slack water to have to really row a lot harder. I don't think I've had that. It seems to be able to keep up with the boats/with the rafts just fine. It goes through the water pretty well. Both of us are thinking that eventually saturation point is going to be reached with this and that might be the end of it, but we're almost halfway through the canyon and it's still quite buoyant.

TM: So I've been watching in the last couple days the freeboard you have from where you're sitting to where the waterline is on the side of boat. And it looks like it's kind of...

PB: Gone down.

TM: Well, it's kind of equalized; it's kind of stabilized a little bit. It looks like you're at the same place. It's not like you are continually sinking. Because you only have a couple inches left now for the water to start washing up on the main deck, on the top of the three bundles of tule.

PB: Seat.

TM: And it looks like it's been that way for the last couple days.

PB: Well, I definitely think... We haul it out of the water every night, and it is a chore to get that thing out of the water and stood upright. And then in the morning, quite often, I can get that back into the water by myself so I think it loses a lot of water overnight.

TM: Okay. And it's been freezing at night, so at one point that bundle starts freezing...

PB: That's a good question, whether that's going to start breaking down that cellular structure in there and really compromising the buoyancy.

TM: So today, one of the tule kind of got bent up and almost ripped off; just a four-inch section at the very end. I grabbed it and tore it off. I split it open and the innermost fibers still looked to be very intact. The outer wrapping looked very dark.

PB: Saturated.

TM: Saturated, almost like coming apart. But the inner bundles looked really good. That was just that one tule reed; it wasn't like the whole thing. I was really surprised to see how well it looked inside.

PB: Yeah. And I've seen that too. I've cut off a couple of just little pieces when they get sticking out and such, just to decrease the drag. Yeah, it seems like they're still... Well, there's good structure still, cell structure, in those. It's a fascinating little plant in terms of how much airspace must be in those.

TM: Yeah, no kidding. Really, really amazing. So when you started this journey at Lees Ferry, did you think the boat was going to get this far?

PB: Oh, of course. I knew it was going to get this far, Tom. What are you talking about? *(TM laughs)* It's going to get to the very end of the trip. We're almost halfway now.

TM: I'm beginning to think you may be right, because we've passed the halfway mark for the rapid part of this river trip.

PB: Yep.

TM: And there's not very many large rapids left. Upset, and Lava, and 217, and 205, and 209. I mean, the big rapids are kind of behind us now. There's some big ones ahead, but not many.

PB: Yeah. I do think that that is... Half of the boat is out of the water almost all of the day. It's only when we've been going over some of the rougher rapids that then the top gets wetted. So if we can keep the top as dry as possible, I think, and with the flatter water and less splashy rapids, it might do that. That's going to maintain the buoyancy. Again, that's going to be the... The bundles seem to be holding up extremely well. Certainly they're getting a little ragged, but nothing structurally damaging so far.

TM: Well, it's funny, because some of the outer tule have broken, or they've been abraded away.

PB: With my feet.

TM: And underneath them, the tule underneath looks great. So it's like scuffing on the outer tule, but the inside core is really good.

PB: Yeah. If I can keep it from banging into Tapeats walls, it probably will do...

TM: Yeah. Save the boat.

PB: Yeah.

TM: Okay. Well, do you have anything else to add to this...

PB: No. Except boy, it sure is a blast to drive. I am certain I am the only person who goes up and smells my boat every morning.

TM: (*laughs*) And enjoys it.

PB: It smells good.

TM: Yeah. Well, you've done an amazing job getting that boat here to Stone Creek along the Colorado River in Grand Canyon National Park. This will conclude Part 8 (actually Part 9), maybe, oral history with Peter Brown. Today is the 12th of January, 2021. My name is Tom Martin and Pete, thank you very much.

PB: Certainly, Tom. Thank you.