

Transcription: Grand Canyon Oral History

Interviewee: Winslow Burleson (WB)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Solo II Part 1 river trip, prior to put-in

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Method of Interview: In person, enroute to Lees Ferry

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Keys: River Trip, Kayaking, Gliding

TM: Today is Sunday. It's December 17th, 2017. This is a Grand Canyon oral history. Today we are interviewing Winslow Burleson. On the interview today are Hazel Clark and my name is Tom Martin. We are driving on Highway 89 to Lees Ferry. We're doing that because Winslow is going to launch on a Grand Canyon river trip tomorrow by himself. The watercraft he is taking is a small inflatable kayak. The last time Winslow and I talked was back in January of 2016 when he had completed a 21-day river trip, again, just by himself and with his small inflatable kayak. So, Winslow, it has been almost two years since your last trip and we've last spoke. Could you pick up the narrative back in January of 2016? What was re-entry like for you, away from the Canyon, away from the river and back to New York City?

WB: Yeah. Thank you, Tom. I think it was just pretty amazing to come off of the twenty-one days. Have one last morning on the river. Know that I was going to meet up with you around one or two o'clock. Just savor that morning getting out of the camp and getting everything together and paddle down. There you were, get a couple of take-out photos and big smiles, accomplishment. Get back on...do the check out. It was Diamond Creek, so we were on the Native American lands and the checkout ranger. There had been a lot of flooding. The whole road was under a lot of construction, so they were re-doing some of the take-out road.

I think as we got back to cellular connectivity, that was the first onslaught. Couple, maybe a thousand emails [laughing] downloaded to the cell phone. First calls to my girlfriend and friends and family. So that was the hours. And then the whole de-rigging and cleaning and refreshing, coming into...even just a hot water sink was a tremendous experience. Just looking at yourself in a full-panel mural mirror at a way-station is kind of a shock in some stance. And you're thinking about this, you're thinking about how you haven't seen yourself for that period of time. You haven't seen anybody for that last period of time. The last ten days on the river I didn't see anybody. I saw a couple aircraft, helicopters and airplanes. That was pretty amazing. Got myself to the hotel and...

One of the things you reminded me to do was document the end of the trip as much as I had been documenting *the* trip. So I took a lot of photos in the airport, you and me, and on through landing in JFK, in one of the biggest cities. Well, maybe not one of the biggest cities, but one of the top 200 biggest cities in the world. 10 million people. Just getting back into it. I think professionally one of the challenges was, I had just finished a grant going in and there was a lot of expectation that I would be connected and be able to... There were a couple small fires in various ways, that I hadn't connected to people. There was a grant coming up and there was some concern that I was maybe not going to be able to submit the grant or provide the information that was needed. You know, so there were different levels of preparation and expectation. So, you know, in terms of going from the calm individuality of thinking about how you and your thoughts are working, thrown right back into the environment where it's other peoples' thoughts that are impacting you moment to moment, which is something that I think I probably

spend too much time on and I'm trying to understand how to spend less time on. But it's a constant factor when there are other people around and, you know, those thoughts have an impact. You feel guilty or you feel like you have to step up and make something right or do something well as opposed to doing something for yourself. So I think that was a big piece of it.

On the other side of things, just having that major accomplishment. Knowing that I had endeavored in something that was near the edge of my ability and succeeded. That gave a very expansive opportunity to think about what next? What are the opportunities that I wanna take on? Do I wanna take my small sailboat offshore? One of the big things I thought about at the end of the trip, the last six/seven days was human space travel, particularly to Mars. So I spent a couple months and hours and hours engaging in thinking about what our currently technologies to get to Mars are. How expeditions to Mars would play out with this new kind of motivation and perspective of what I had just experienced in the Canyon. How isolating it would be and how much support you would need to put in place, when it would be possible, what are the timeframes and the logistics and the launch windows? So, that was something that was captivating. Eventually that dissipated a bit and I got back into my everyday professional life. That's a big part of the next step. How do I recharge two years later and explore what this next trip is going to be about.

TM: So, in June of 2016 you'd been off the river for five or six months, June/July. Did that journey, that you'd taken that prior winter, did it give you energy, did you think about it, or were you just back in your normal world/normal routine or were you carrying something with you?

WB: Yeah, I just spoke about how I was thinking about new/different things that I'd wanted to do or maybe hadn't done for a while. Started looking into some rock climbing. Didn't get very far with that. But I did do a gliding pilot training in August and I got through by October to solo landing. So, I got most of the private pilot experience from August to October up in Vermont at Sugarbush Airport Soaring School. Spent probably ten days up there camping one time and five days another time. So that's the kind of experience where I had done my first pilot training as a teenager for an hour here or an hour there, but never put it all together over the years. Finally decided, hey, this is something I've been wanting to do, I should do it. You know, took it up to that stage. So I think that and a little more artwork that I was doing, some drawing and painting. You know, those are the kinds of things that I think shifted a bit. Another one was just on the day-to-day. I'd been reading some philosophy in the Canyon. Reading about the well-being of animals and our food culture. Factory farms and how eating animals that perhaps had better lives/animals that have been hunted, as opposed to raised in a factory farm, would be less of a lifetime poor experience for the animals. So since then I've been eating as a pescatarian which arguably has a significant environmental impact both beneficially 'cause of the reduction of the land animals but maybe detrimentally 'cause of the impact on the sea. So I'm still sort of at that threshold of understanding where I want to be on that. You know, that's something that has impacted day-to-day and wellbeing and health in terms of what I've been eating for the last two years.

TM: So I'm curious, did you find a similarity in flying a glider and in Grand Canyon running rapids or sort of... In a way, when I think of flying a glider, you're there by yourself, thousands of feet over the planet with an incredible view in front of you and you're all alone. Is there a...?

WB: Yeah, I think there is a similarity in terms of mindset and the fortitude, the mental focus, the preparation. I'm going into a rapid, I'm going to do Lava, I want it to go this way. I'm going to get in this glider, I gotta ensure the checkout, you know, get all the signals. At the start of the glider, you're still surrounded by the ground crew and you still have the tow pilot in front of you so there's still a connection. As you get through the tow, you're at the top of the rapid. You release the tow hook and now you're on your own. I think another poignant ... This is a great thing you're pointing this out. On my

first solo, I was coming around, I was a little higher than the standard, maybe three hundred feet higher and I said, 'Oh maybe I should just do a little circle here.' And I said, 'Nope, I'm going to just keep doing exactly what I was going to do, the pattern not the circle.' So there was this important moment of inhibition which I think is an important element of solo experience. Being able to inhibit impulse that may be dangerous or counterproductive in terms of your safety. You know, there's a balance of when am I going to go do this and when am I not. So the first time on a solo glider trip is probably not the time to take an extra circle. You might lose four or five hundred feet, that angle might be a little higher. Instead of being three hundred feet high you may be three hundred feet low, that can make a big difference as you enter the pattern. Same thing with solo at Lava. You can decide, 'Am I going to go on the far left, am I going to go down the right where I did in the summer and maybe more familiar.' In the end, you're elated by the experience. I think that's the positive side of the correlation.

Another piece of it is that after a number of rapids and after a number of large waves on the Canyon throughout the trip, there was a sensation of, 'Okay, it's another big wave. This is an experience, but there's another ten days of this. It's just another big wave.' It's not the same adrenalin as the first set of waves. Its borderline on lackadaisical or are you getting a little overly confident. That's the edge. The same is true for me in the glider where I was up, we were in the mountain wave, which is a standing wave, similar to the hydraulics on the Canyon, and you're just able to surf the airflow coming off the top of the ridge. But you can stay there for – god – 20/30 minutes. You can go up and down a thousand or two thousand or five thousand feet. On some level it feels a lot like just driving, or sitting still. I mean it's amazing to see the world and be there and know that this is all happening, but it's also kind of just like driving on some level. So you get this kind of 'what's the next thing I want to do.' In the case of the gliding, I moved away from the wave and tried to do something else I hadn't done before. Go along the ridge or come down, do a couple heavy skids/slides. That introduced a new level of challenge and excitement to it. So I think as you're looking, or as I look for the level of challenge, there's that comparison between most of the activities I do. I do them, they're exciting and challenging and I grow. And then, you know, as I do them again, they provide something different. Not the same challenge and excitement, but in the case of this next trip, maybe more reflection. I can't discount huge challenge and excitement. Things could be very different and there could be a lot of danger or new circumstances. But in terms of that next wave, it's quite possible that some of those waves will be very familiar and I'll have to deal with that kind of challenge with the experience.

TM: So one of the things that I think of when I think of gliding and I think of solo journeys through Grand Canyon on the river is inspiration. Inspiring landscapes, either seeing them from on high or being in them looking up, do you get a sense of that inspiration in doing these two activities or do they not do that for you at all?

WB: I think absolutely. I think they're temporally quite different 'cause in the Canyon I feel the inspiration for me was often [thinking] evolving. Looking at the changing of the light across half an hour to an hour. Looking at the coming up around a curve. It was kind of over ten, fifteen, twenty minutes to full days. I think in the gliding, the experiences, some of the flights are as short as 7 minutes/10 minutes. Longer flights are twenty to forty minutes. The longest flight was maybe an hour and a half or something. On the longer flight in the glider there's a level of remoteness in the glider, in the sense that you are up above, sometimes high enough that you are not seeing... You're seeing features and you're exploring things but you don't want to be down close to the earth. Because that's a point of contact [laughs] and if you're in the wrong place, you don't want that contact to occur catastrophically. So there's a bit more detachment being further away. You are in the air, but you're further away on some sense from 'feet on the ground' and in this world of the Canyon. You're up above, floating and a little more separated.

TM: Yeah. Disconnected is the term I was thinking of.

WB: Yeah.

TM: At what point did you say to yourself, 'I need to get back in the permit system and try to get another permit to go through Grand Canyon again.'

WB: I think it was... Trying to recall. I think it was just natural. I just got the email and I just signed up for the next permit season. Then was amazingly fortunate to get another trip. So, it was less about a reflection of 'I need to do this', as much as kind of the procedural, I got the email...reactive. The corollary question is how do I decide to do what I want to do with the trip? Do I do a solo, do I do a group trip? In both of these cases, part of the way I go about life is that I put a lot on my plate and I get busy. So, to some extent the lack of planning early enough to get groups or plan for other people has been something that led me to be able to totally control, as much as I could about the trip, as a solo leader.

Certainly the first trip I learned... I'd gone on a group trip about six months earlier to learn how to...learn the environment and learn the opportunity. During that trip I learned about the potential to do the solo trips and that it might be feasible. Then as I had a few months to decide what kind of trip I wanted to do, I chose to do it solo. This trip, again, I got busy enough with a lot of different...with life, let's just put it that way, and it came down to the solo. It was almost by default knowing that I really enjoyed the first trip and that it was a great default and that it was a very desirable default. But it was in part due to not thinking about alternatives to the solo. Once I knew that I could do it, I was thinking that that would be a great way to take another reset. Come out here, have another three weeks where you're not connected. Connected with the environment, but disconnected from the electronic ethosphere, if you will. All the minutia and constant barrage of addiction to email or news or just the everyday cycle – this is what has to happen. Having an opportunity to go back to the Canyon, and think about...

One of the big things for me this trip is around creativity and expanding. So, the first trip I brought a lot of books on philosophy and that was in part the experience with the moral aspects of food and some other elements of well-being. With this trip I want to explore elements of music, music theory and poetry. So, I hope to be a little more generative, little more expressive in terms of writing or thinking about sound and words. I have a set of watercolors. I did one watercolor the first trip on day one. Didn't do any more. Stacy Egan was on my group trip the former summer and has done some amazing watercolors. I think it would be fun to think about doing some more this trip. Combining it with some of the poetry, exploring the color, the sound, the words, some of those spaces.

TM: Did you get any pushback from your... You're a university professor, did you get any pushback from people saying, 'What do you mean you're going to be totally disconnected?' I guess I want to explore this connectivity issue. The Grand Canyon affords us a multi-week journey to disconnect. No phones, no email, no computer, no Twitter, no news. Just a disconnect. Why are you looking forward to that?

WB: Well, one of the early experiences... I had a chance to go in '89 on a family commercial trip in the Canyon and it was during Tiananmen Square. So, that was one of the events of disconnection. You know, coming back out of the Canyon and seeing that experience retrospectively. You never know what's going to be happening globally or personally when you're away. We were just talking at breakfast if I wanted to stop at Phantom Ranch to check the message board to see if somebody needed to contact me. I'm thinking of maybe passing Phantom without stopping this trip.

The first trip I had my phone. The first day or two there was still one bar. I spent a lot of time *not* starting my trip because I could stay in this region with one bar and potentially get a text out. And then at

Phantom, I spent half a day or so. Some people were getting some text signals on the trail. I connected with you, Tom, and you said, 'Hey there's a Facebook page up and they're all rooting for you.' So that gave an inspiration, but at the same time it was an overhead. It was a lot of burden. One more comment about that is, at the end of the trip for some reason I discovered that I could read all my old emails on my phone, which is an obvious understanding, but fortunately I didn't know that until the end because I hadn't really turned on the phone much. I'd been using my waterproof camera and things for pictures. That was another detriment, detrimental experience to the last day or two of the trip because I was starting to... I guess one of the reasons I turned on the phone was because I'd run out of some of my books and I was starting to read some of the Kindle books. But then I flipped over to the email. That was a whole 'nother, similar to what I was saying earlier about what do other people think and what are the agendas that you are pursuing and having challenges with as opposed to the detachment.

So this trip I don't plan to have the phone with me. I have the beacon and I'm going to rely on that all the way to the end. So possibly no Phantom, no phone, just wanna get rid of some of those elements that were still tethering me, still connecting me to the areas that I wanted to have a respite from. To really have down time, personal time. I think even on another level, this is something that even as a solo individual in the Canyon, the river has the ability to bring anybody at any time. So, while you are solo, there's two parts to that: one, you know that if you wait a few days there'll be somebody and two, at any moment there might be something. So even though you're alone for those last ten days, there's a parameter of not knowing how long you will be alone. It could've been one day, until then it had never been more than three days. So why not continue to see people three days? So that's a piece of the connection and disconnection.

TM: We had talked. Some months ago you'd mentioned that you had this trip and you were going. I was very excited for you. I asked you where you were going to take out. Were you going to take out at Diamond Creek, 226 miles from Lees Ferry or were you going to go all the way though the Grand Canyon to its geographical end at the Grand Wash Cliffs and boat into the Basin and Range, the Western Basin and Range, and take out at Pearce Ferry. You've decided to go to Pearce. Can you tell me a little bit about that? How that came together.

WB: Yeah. I think a lot of it's inspired by you and your belief in that amazing experience. I'm excited about seeing the way the Canyon will transition from being closed to broad open. I guess at this point, and I don't know because I haven't looked at it a lot, I imagine being kind of in and of the planet at the beginning, in terms of within the earth, you know, just the top surface but maybe half a mile down or quarter mile down and then coming out and resting on top of it and floating off...kind of launching in some way into, I don't know, if you think about the gliders, starting to be at the ground level and ready for takeoff. I think that will be something. I started to see a bit of that at the end of my first trip. It does open up a little. To hear you describe the rest of it, I imagine that it's...

I don't know, I took a Chinese history course in middle school and we talked about the Yang, the Yellow River, and some of the rivers in China, that they actually had done so much engineering around them that they got off/above the land around them. So there were these huge flooding events and other events. But you think of rivers that have been geo-engineered and I have that notion of being up on top of the plateau on some level. And certainly with respect to starting in the Canyon, that will be there. Probably not right on top but that's the kind of imagination that I hold around that space.

In terms of actual practical elements, I think I'd done it one way the first time. I did realize that there was a number of layover days and that adding the fifty miles and cutting one day was quite doable over the course of the longer trip, 21-day trip, and that seemed like a great opportunity to have a new experience.

TM: Nice. What else, what have I not asked you that you're thinking, 'gee we should talk about this before I head out for my second solo trip through Grand Canyon?'

WB: I don't think there's any specific thing. I think the thing that I was a little concerned about going into the first trip was that at the end of the summer trip, I had spent about a half a day alone in a canyon. It was very hot and it was just trying to find enough shade and coolness at the end of a summer August trip. But, there was a lot of rumination and thinking about what it was going to be like to reenter and whether I was comfortable being alone. So as I went into the solo trip, there was an element of concern that a lot of the trip might be like that. Because I'd just experienced that six months earlier. But I think the context shifted quite a bit, in the sense of being solo and being in charge of my trip, I didn't experience any of that from the summer. I think a lot of that had to do with being in the group context and not having enough control of my time and activity. Knowing that I was just trying to stay cool but also that people expected me back at 4:30 to start making dinner. Again that crops up that external expectation, you know, even in this group/in this experience, when the group is around you there's co-dependence and changes your perception of what you want to be doing. And so, I think a big part as I enter *this* experience, is that element of self-exploration. What is it that I want to be doing here in the Canyon and how do I carry that with me forward? As I launch out through the plateau and onward, what are the things that I want to be doing after this trip? So thinking about that opportunity is a big part *for me* about what this trip is going to be about.

[talking in background]

TM: I'll ask Hazel. Do you have any questions for him Hazel? No? Well with that, we certainly wish you all the best in your next 21-day adventure and we will hopefully get a chance next year, in 2018, to have a little chat at the end of your trip and hear all about it.

WB: I want to thank you Tom and you Hazel for making this all possible. Both trips, the inspiration, all the motivation in terms of saying this is doable, and some of the logistical support. It's been very helpful and transforming.

TM: Well, we'll see if you still think that way in another three weeks here. [laughing] This is going to conclude then this part, I can't remember the number. Part IV, I'm not sure. Anyway, today is December 17th, 2017. This has been a Grand Canyon oral interview with Winslow Burleson and Hazel Clark. My name is Tom Martin and thank you very much.