

Pikes Peak River Runners

Dancing with the Devil on the Salt River April 1998



By Christina King

Photo Credits: Christina King

Trip Participants: Pete & Christina King, Lori McCuskey, Mark Wisehart, Bill Cooke, Rob & Cathy, Bob & Lisa. I forgot to note some last names in my journal.

Late February 1998 we got an email from a favorite boating friend in Tempe, Arizona asking us if we wanted to join his Salt trip. We jumped at the opportunity and said YES!!!! Dick asked Bill Cooke to join our group also. Dick and Bill had met last spring on a high water (7.5 feet) run on the Middle Fork of the Salmon in Idaho. A strong bond had been formed and Bill is still talking about that experience. Dick retired as a manager from the Salt River Project several years ago and has run it dozens of times before and after the dynamiting of Quartzite Falls. At the last minute, the Sunday before the trip, Dick called to inform us that he had to transfer the permit to a friend because his wife was having heart problems.

I wished Dick's wife well and told him not to worry. Mark, the new permit holder, called and said that he would take care of everything and the trip was underway again. I asked Mark if I could invite an old friend of mine, Lori, from Phoenix. In one day, Lori committed to go with us. I like that spontaneity. The only hitch was that Mark, and his friends would not arrive until Wednesday night and wanted to meet us 10 miles downriver on the dirt road (with the shuttle drivers). They did not want to run the day trip. I said no problem. Big mistake. Not a good idea to split a group especially when Mark was bringing the permit, shuttle drivers, and the food for 3 days! The trip started out ominous. Pete and I had to dig our trailer out of the snow in our driveway. Since the October 1997 blizzard, we had not seen our driveway. Most early season river trips start with poor weather and this trip was no exception. After loading up the trailer Tuesday night we went to bed dreaming of the warm weather we expected in Arizona. Wednesday began with relatively warm weather when we left Woodland Park and the temperature skyrocketed to 85°F in Albuquerque. The headwinds were strong against the old Dodge Ram (115,000 miles and climbing) and we could not even reach the speed limit. Neither could the other vehicles on the Interstate. We enjoyed the warm temperatures and anticipated our Show Low, Arizona arrival. Show Low is a beautiful little town in the White Mountains of Arizona about 40 miles from the put-in of the Salt River. I recommend you stay in Show Low if you have the opportunity. Show Low has lots of inexpensive motels nestled in the pine trees of the forest. The actual put-in is on the Apache Indian reservation and has absolutely no charm. Avoid camping at the put-in at all costs.

We got to Show Low around 6 PM and stayed at a motel. Visions of warm weather were dancing in our heads. The wind blew in a major front. Reality hit at 6 am. A cold rain was beating down as we left Show Low for the put-in. It gets worse, it started snowing on the plateau and it was accumulating. We arrived at the put-in to see Bill standing under a leaky Indian shade shelter at the put-in. The rain was pelting down. Lori had not arrived. The storeowner at the put-in said the river was running around 4000 CFS and the dirt road was impassable 4 miles down. If the rain continued Mark would not reach us. We had no way to communicate with Mark to see if he was still coming. The store had no telephone service. Bill, Pete, and I drove up and out of the canyon to use the cell phone. Ten miles away we got cell service. We called and left messages with everyone

we could think of and after two plateau trips, many hours apart, we reached Dick. Dick assured us that Mark would come yet, he told us not to launch. We could not depend on the road. We had to launch together. Lori and I gossiped and caught up on news. Pete and Bill pestered us and told bad jokes as we passed the day under the shelter. During a one-hour break from the rain we unloaded and rigged the boats. We do not rig our boats that fast, so we finished rigging in the rain. Whoopee! At least the snow remained on the rim of the canyon but the cold penetrated us, nonetheless. We snuck over to the commercial put-in and backed our trailer up to the river. The private put-in sucks. Beware, the commercial put-in is owned by the local companies and they do not appreciate private boaters using it when they need it. We took a chance because the commercial traffic was non-existent.

We cooked a nice steak dinner under our little shelter and proceeded to go to bed around 9 PM. We had bet all night that Mark would not show, so we climbed into our truck shells and fell asleep. Guess who showed during our deep REM sleep at 10 PM? MARK! He pounded on our back door and said the shuttle drivers would be ready to go in 30 minutes. We had not set up a tent. I just kept asking him if he was kidding. We threw everything out of the back of the truck and under the shelter and told Bill to do the same. Bill just about said no but reconsidered. We cozied up with Lori under the leaky shelter (I will not forget to mention the wind gusts that blew the rain in also). We were four peas in a pod rolled up against each other. We kept laughing and talking about how Mark (a stranger) told us to pay a couple of 17-year-old (strangers) \$50 to drive our vehicles away in the middle of the night in the middle of a rainstorm. Finally, the day dawned, cold and rain again. Our 4-day river had turned into a 3-day river trip and 1-day Indian reservation camping experience. In the morning I found a little angry scorpion under my sleeping bag after I got up from a long rainy night under our shelter. I let him scurry away. He was just trying to cozy up with the rest of us and keep warm. Live and let live. Lori was having doubts about the experience so far but chose to continue. What choice did she have? No car, no telephone. The only way to civilization was down river. We met the rest of the group that morning. Mark and friends were City of Phoenix employees. Mark ran a cataraft. Mark's cataraft soothed Bill's feelings over. Rob was running a new boat as a rookie boatman. Cathy was his passenger. Bob ran the other raft with Lisa in his boat. Pete and I filled out the group with our two rafts and Lori riding with me. Our running formation was **Mark, Rob (following Mark's every move, sort of), Christina (me), Bill, Pete, and Bob. There are nine of us total.**

The river is totally different than my first low water trip last spring. It was 1200 CFS then and very shallow. The flow was 4000-5000 CFS for our whole trip. Everything is different. Maytag chute is still a right-side run. Rob crashes over all sorts of holes and waves. He gets lucky and survives Reforma rapid. The hole in Overboard is a sure flip. We all run left of the Overboard hole.

We have begun to see the saguaro cactus that make this river canyon unique. The saguaro trees are tall cactus with long needles and a few branches. The saguaros can be 30 feet tall with the first branches appearing when they are 80 years old. We see a forest of saguaro trees with numerous arms. What a sight!

Ledges rapid is a long rapid with many technical decisions. Holes require you to maneuver the boat during the rapid. The key to the rapid is to enter center left and work your way right quickly. As we enter Ledges rapid, Rob loses his orientation and does not know where to go. He hits several holes



sideways and almost flips the boat. Rob ends up sort of lucky, but he falls out. The boat crashes down right side up and Cathy helped him back in the boat after the rapid. Dive number 1 for Rob. He loses his glasses and hat but is okay. He puts on his spare glasses; he has no spare hat. Rob tells us at the end of the trip his glasses

are two prescriptions old, and he felt like Mr. Magoo).



Dive number 2 for Rob occurs at Rat Trap rapid. Rob got catapulted out of his boat again, but it did not flip. White Rock rapid was the final rapid for Rob and Cathy that day.



Rob flipped the boat at the tail end of the rapid in a no name hole. Rob never knew what hit him. He had danced with the devil. We had blown our rescue whistles numerous times that day. At this point all we wanted to do was camp and we picked the first camp on the left at the beginning of Gleason Flat. Our camp had a nice sandy beach with a rock cliff for wind protection. We had a great Mexican dinner with a delicious cheesecake

for dessert. Guess what? It rained some more. We talked about the day's adventures and ignored the weather. Pete teased Lori that she would have to ride in Rob's boat because Rob needed more weight in his boat. Lori blanched at the thought of riding in Rob's boat and said no way. Cathy, Rob's passenger, was a great sport about the swims and stayed by her captain.

The second day began with Eye of the Needle (not significant at this level). Black Rock rapid was the only rapid we scouted on the trip. I would rate Black Rock rapid a Class 3 with straight forward run down the right chute. The scout was an ankle-strainer. Lower Corral rapid was long and like a pinball. Rob ran without trouble and so did the rest of us except Bob. Bob was running sweep in the last boat and we could only see the boat directly in front and behind us. Suddenly, we heard a rescue whistle behind us, and we all pulled over. After a few seconds we saw Bob's boat come floating around the bend upside down.



Rob and Lisa were engaged in Swim and dive number 1. Bob later explained that he had fallen out, but the boat did not flip until it hit a few holes further downstream. Lisa did not know how to row. Lori pulled a hypothermic Lisa in our boat, so we stopped to get dry warm clothes, flip the boat, and warm up some hot chocolate. Once again, we continued the trip. The canyon walls are now straight up with no option of walking along the river.



Quartzite Falls was next. Talk about a high stress situation. Quartzite has a steep horizon line making it difficult to see the run until the last minute. We did not scout because we were sure the scout eddy would be non-existent. Sure enough, there was no scout eddy on the right. Each of us ran Quartzite Falls center left with no trouble. I remembered from last year the narrowness of the entry and even shipped my left oar so I would not hit the wall. The lower portion of Quartzite Falls was dynamited several years ago and until that time was considered unrunnable because of a lower shelf that flipped all boats and re-circulated boaters until they drowned.

Quartzite Falls has changed significantly from the death trap it used to be. Before lower Quartzite Falls was dynamited, boaters lined or portaged the rapid on the cliffs beside the river.



The only major rapid remaining was Corkscrew rapid. Corkscrew is only several hundred yards below Quartzite Falls at the end of a long eddy. We did not consider scouting the rapid and there was no obvious scout accessible. Corkscrew was a long rapid with huge holes scattered throughout the run! A river runner needed some experienced river reading ability and you still had to hit some big stuff. It knocked me to the side of my seat. Guess what? Rob was right in front of me and danced with the devil again. He flipped in the very first hole (to be avoided) on the right side. He never stood a chance. Swim number 2. Rob and Cathy swam the entire rapid. We captured his floating ammo can with his insulin first. Lucky find (he did have a spare supply). Lori, who had rescued Lisa earlier in the day, now hauled in Rob's boat. It was another bad day for Rob and Bob. As we flip Rob's boat back over and regroup (only one bent Carlisle) another group pulled into our eddy. A brand new cataraft had hit a rock and tore a hole in a cat tube as well as his brand-new aluminum dry box. Ouch! Sounded like a big hit to me.

We camped on a nice sandy beach a few miles down and everyone relaxed. No more significant rapids are left on this river. Thank goodness! Bill declared our river group has officially been named the Salt River Swim and Dive team. Rob and Cathy are the 1500-meter swimmers. Bob and Lisa are the 800-meter swimmers. The trip tally turned out to be 3 flips and 3 dives. On a scale of 1 to 10, I would rate this trip a 9. No change in the weather if anything it is getting worse. More rain and high wind storms all night.

The last day was an easy day. I taught Lori how to row and read the river. We got to the take-out at noon. The take-out has an excellent concrete ramp with room to back down two trucks with trailers (side by side). We had the ramp to ourselves. It was still cold and raining, no kidding. We find out that the cold weather has set 50-year record lows in the Phoenix area. Boy, we sure were lucky to get the high water. What a fun river. Lori wants to go next year. We drove into Globe and ate at a traditional greasy lunch stop called El Rey's. It was nice to be warm again. By the way, we spent another night in Show Low on the way home and snow followed us home to Woodland Park. We had another 8 inches of snow on the driveway. Try backing up the trailer in that! We unhitched the trailer and let it sit for a week waiting for the snow to melt. By hook or by crook, we will be back on the Salt next year!

