

## Pikes Peak River Runners

### AARP's and Pre-AARP's in the Grand Sept 1999



*By Christina King*

1999 has turned into the year of the AARP. My Dad is a proud card-carrying member of [AARP \(American Association of Retired Persons\)](#). Dad joined Pete (husband) and I on several adventure river trips during 1999. The trips included Middle Fork, Middle Fork, and now a Grand Canyon trip. Dad's adventures included one Idaho flip (story above) and one dunking (will come later in this story). Quite a busy summer for someone retired!!!

Let me start at the beginning. From March through June 1999, Pete and I routinely called the Grand Canyon river permits office for cancellations. None existed. The Grand Canyon had overbooked river trips and no cancellations were available. Discouragement soon set in and we began to think we might not get a Grand Canyon permit this year. After returning from our adventures in Idaho and Westwater, we resumed calling again and found out that we had just missed some August dates. Finally in late July, a ranger answered the telephone with magic words. Yes, September 10 was available. I said, "I'll take it". What a relief! The ranger asked me, "How many times did you call the river permits office attempting to get a permit"? I calculated that Pete and I had called the river permits office at least 1000 times! Scary!?



Anyway, we now had our permit and the planning process could begin. I started contacting friends who had expressed interest in joining our Grand Canyon trip and the final group consisted of 12 people, 6 rafts and 1 inflatable kayak. **Bill and Irene Cooke, Gary and Delma Killinger, Ed Tucker (my Dad), Tom Rogers, Keith Fuqua, Jeff Henry, Jack Schneider and Wendy Rombold, and Pete and Christina King** were the final trip participants. Shuttles, deposits, and food planning began and our launch date approached quickly.

Note: The first six participants are AARP members and the last six are in the 30-40 age group (labeled pre-AARP's). A nice mix but it leads to age harassment within the group (which goes both ways).

## Pre Day 1 (Sept 9, 1999) Rigging day



The entire group arrived at Lee's Ferry within a few hours of each other. Jack and Wendy arrived last with lots of new equipment and a new raft in tow! Jack decided he wanted to run a 16-foot raft instead of his 14-foot raft. We were the only private launch setting up for the next day. The commercial outfitters had taken over the entire launch ramp and we only had room to back one vehicle down at a time. When Gary meandered over to the commercial end of the ramp,

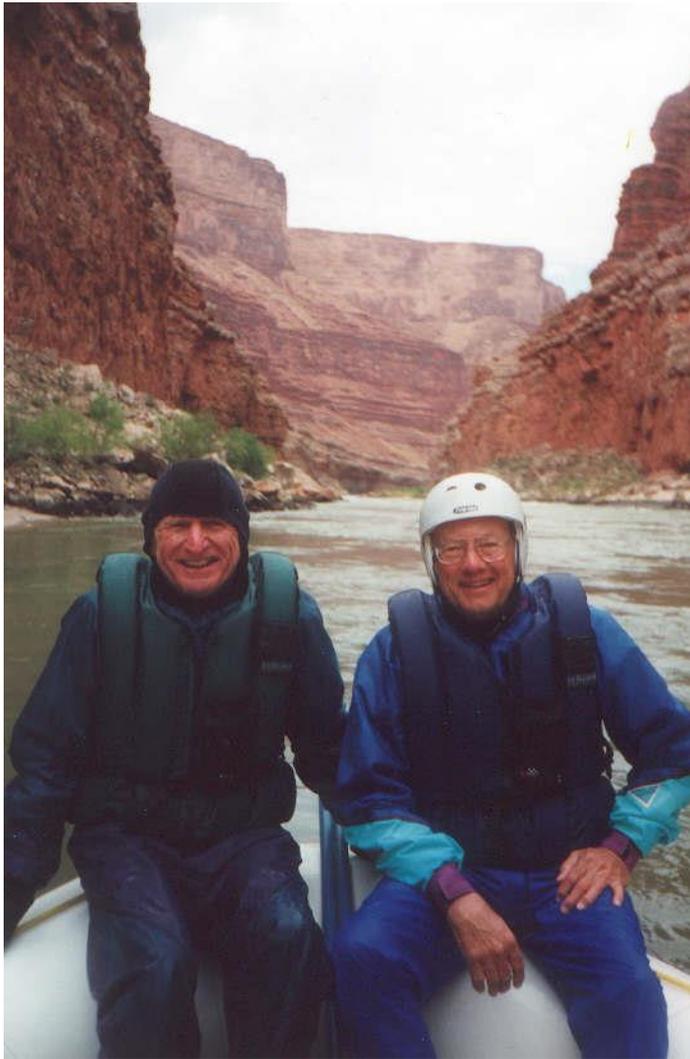
the outfitters were very quick to point out that the "privates rig over there", in the mud hole. We rigged quickly (2 hours) and tied the boats up for the night. Cooking crews consisted of two people paired for the duration of the trip. Each cooking crew was responsible for 2 full days of planning, purchasing, packing, and preparing food for the entire group. This idea worked well, and everyone knew where the food was kept and who had to cook it. I recommend this idea for all trips. We ate dinner together at Marble Canyon Lodge and Jeff slept on the boats to keep an eye on our gear.

## Day 1 (September 10, 1999) Mile 18

Water flow ramped up to 22,000 cfs in the morning. We had good forecast flows for the trip. We found out after the trip that water releases stayed around 20,000-25,000 with side streams adding another 3000 to 5000 cfs. We ate breakfast together at the Lodge and met the ranger for our pre-launch orientation. A reporter from the LA Times interviewed and photographed our group for a story on motor rigs versus non-motorized rigs in the Grand Canyon. Grand Canyon Expeditions was launching wooden Dories but even they had a motor rig supply boat. The other four companies launching today ran motor rigs.

Badger is our first major rapid at mile 8. We all run the rapid well and stop for lunch below the rapid. The river muddied up at the Paria river canyon and we will not see clear water for the rest of the trip. While eating lunch one of the motor rigs has a motor problem and gets towed through the rapid by another motor rig. We leave them to figure out their motor problem.

Dad and Tom started water fighting in the morning by launching their dipsticks on each other. Pete tried to fool everyone before the trip by saying "the Park Service prohibits water-fighting and dipsticks". Some of our group believed him and some did not. I confessed before the trip, so everyone is well armed. Our water-fighting arsenal is quite intimidating, except for Bill's little "pee" shooter. Next time, Bill should test his guns before bringing it on the river. Pete and I have 4 guns between the two of us. Water-fighting takes on a whole new meaning on this trip.



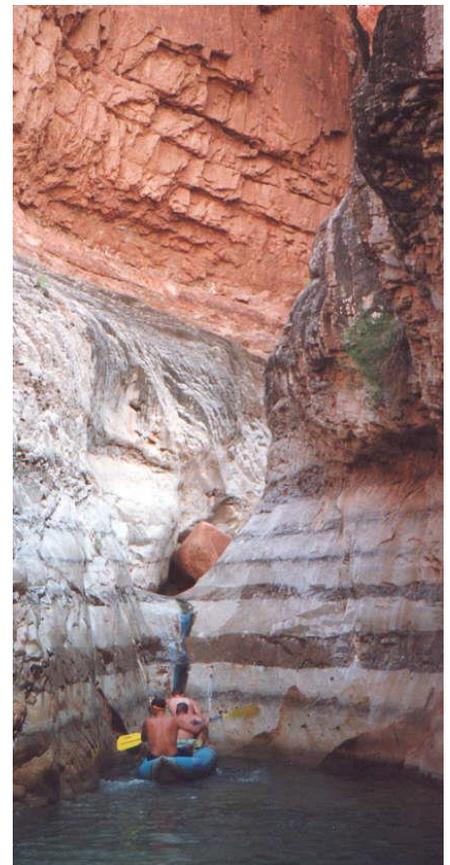
## Day 2 South Canyon

We woke up to cool overcast skies this morning. The river is muddier. Everyone is wearing splash jackets and rain pants. It rained off and on during the day. The Roaring 20's proved most exciting in my boat. I hesitated at 24.5 mile rapid. I could not decide which way to go (right or left at the hole) and succeeded in running the hole dead-center. Not a good idea. It knocked us silly and my AARP's washed out of the raft. I plucked them in quickly, but they were very cold. Fleece jackets were put on and they warmed up again. Jeff swam 25 mile rapid. Indecision can be a boater's worst enemy. Our planned lunch stop at Silver Grotto was appreciated by the swimmers. The AARP whoop call is terribly slow and low today (cold weather and quivering mental conditions prevail).

Pete, Jeff, Bill, and Jack entertained us by trying to climb up the Grotto but the water was too cold and slope too slippery. Bill said he "almost had a heart attack from the cold". (Another AARP saying). Bill, "your AARP gift membership is in the mail".

Dad and Tom developed an AARP call that sounds like a whooping crane. The tone and tempo of the AARP call change with river, weather, physical and mental conditions. We scouted House Rock rapid, and everyone commented on the big waves. Half of the group has not run the Grand Canyon before, so this is their first look at Grand Canyon size waves. We ran House Rock rapid on the right to avoid the big waves and holes. We camped at Mile 18 and managed to stay up to 8 pm. Our 8 pm deadline became difficult to maintain as the trip progressed. In September, it gets dark by 7 pm. Dinners are planned early so we can eat and clean up the dishes before it gets dark. It appears that our group has a "drug problem". Both the AARP's and pre-AARP's are already popping Ibuprofen on Day 1. Some AARP's even remembered their "day of the week" pill boxes and are filling them ahead of time with Ibuprofen.

We went to bed with clear skies and during the night thunderstorms crept up on us. Flashlights, tarps, and tents were flying around during the night. This will also become a trend as our unstable weather pattern continues throughout our 15-day river trip.





We floated downriver to camp at South Canyon. While waiting for the spitting rain to stop we hiked up the cliff to the Anasazi ruins. We found some pottery shards at the ruins and left them (as they lay) for others to enjoy. Jack and Wendy hiked to Stanton's cave and said it was big. The views at South Canyon are beautiful. (Vasey's Paradise shoots from the wall, Stanton's cave, upriver cliff views). During dinner, the river became redder with sediment. We tried to stay up for the nocturnal ringtail cats, which are common at this camp, but we are too tired. Gary ends up seeing one during the night. AARP tracks appeared all over Pete's boat the next morning. Apparently, AARP tracks (shaped and textured like TEVA sandals) appear on Pete's boat whenever Dad and Tom are cooking the next morning. AARP tracks become a chronic problem during the entire trip. Do they have a pill for that? Our group is forming a strong bond. Everyone is working well together and pitches in at every opportunity. Rigging, camp, and duty routines are being developed and we work together with team precision.

### Day 3 Nankoweep

We float down to Vasey's for pictures. Redwall Cavern is just below Vasey's and we stop to explore and play a game of football. Redwall Cavern is filled with soft fine textured sand. We floated to Nautiloid Canyon and Bill won a bottle of "Grapes of Raft" wine for spying the first nautiloid. Nautiloids are large fossils outlined in the limestone canyon floor. Lunch was at the Marble Canyon damsite (thank goodness they did not build a dam).



Found Bert Loper's wooden wrecked boat at Mile 41.5 and hiked up Bert's canyon. Bert's canyon had a nice stream and small waterfall. President Harding rapid was changed by a rockslide last winter and the run is left of the large midstream boulder. The right-side run is blocked by rock debris and constricting waves.

We camped at Nankoweep. Bill brought a Walkman radio and was able to get KOA at night. KC Chiefs lost to Chicago. Jack and Pete were stunned.

#### Day 4 Upper Unkar

Most of the group hiked up to the Nankoweep Anasazi granary ruins in the morning. The hike is a steep trail up to ruins along the canyon wall. Spectacular views! Kwagunt rapid was straightforward, and we stopped at the Little Colorado (L.C.) river for lunch. L.C. was very muddy and added lots of debris (trash, sediment, and logs) to the river.



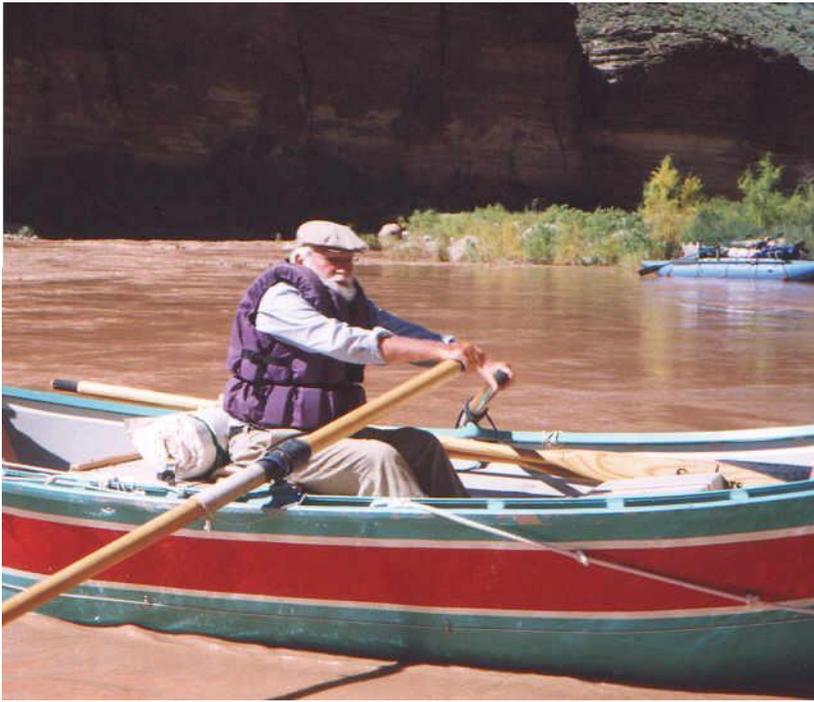
Dipstick stealing is rampant (Jeff unsuccessfully tried to steal Dad's dipstick at L.C.). We had one of our best-ever water fights on the river. We began fighting each other then proceeded to attack two motor rigs. After the motor rig boatmen told their passengers, "You have buckets, defend yourselves" they fought back and even boarded Pete's boat. Our spectacular water fight lasted from mile 64 to 72. Yes, that is right, 8 miles of water-fighting!

We camped at a lovely little campsite called Upper Unkar. We explored a quiet hidden canyon behind camp.

## Day 5 Grapevine

Once again, we went to sleep on our boats and awoke during the night to thunderstorms and significant rain. Keith complained about the groover (toilet) smell emanating from his boat. We rented groovers from Canyon REO that have vent valves. Guess Keith's groover vented during the night. The morning continued with rain, thunder, and lightning. We rowed down river to explore the Anasazi ruins at Unkar Delta.

We arrived just in time to see Martin Litton run Unkar rapid in a wooden dory. Martin is a legendary boatman in the Grand Canyon. Martin Litton Dorries was one of the first environmentally conscious commercial river runners in the Grand Canyon. The dories were named after rivers

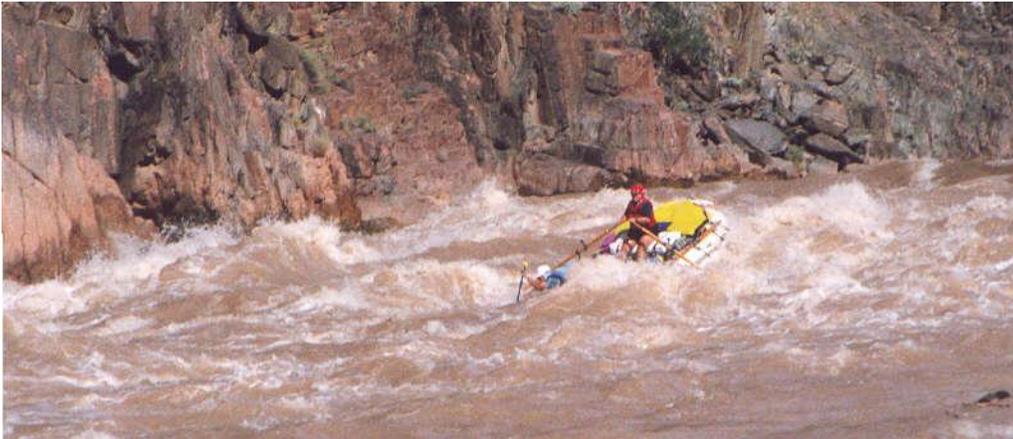


that were dammed. Martin is running the Grand at 82 years old (definitely an AARP) to beat his old record of 80 years old. Martin ran the big waves and holes on the left side of Unkar. We were not as brave, so we avoided the holes and ran the right side of the rapid. We camped at Grapevine after running Hance and Sockdolager rapids. We ran Hance on the left and avoided the hole on the right in Sockdolager. A friendly ringtail cat visited our camp after dinner. The ringtail cat chewed on my drybox ethafoam (in my boat) during the night. I guess that was his dessert.

## Day 6 Schist

We negotiated Grapevine rapid and pulled into Clear Creek to hike to the falls. After the hike, we floated down to Phantom Ranch and filled our empty water jugs. Phantom Ranch is the only place where we have contact with the rest of the world. It is a major Grand Canyon hiking trailway. We walked up to the ranch and mailed postcards, bought lemonade, and checked the boatmen's mail. The mail is packed in and out via mule. We mailed our postcards and placed them in the saddlebags with stamps that say, "Mailed by mule". My mother and sister had mailed us small Care packages filled with candy, stamps, Chapstick, and lotion. It was fun to find our surprises.

The rapid fireworks begin after we leave Phantom Ranch. Horn Creek, Granite and Hermit rapids are some of the heavy hitting rapids of our trip. We scout all the rapids except for Hermit. Horn Creek is easy because we have high flows. We sneak Horn Creek on the left.



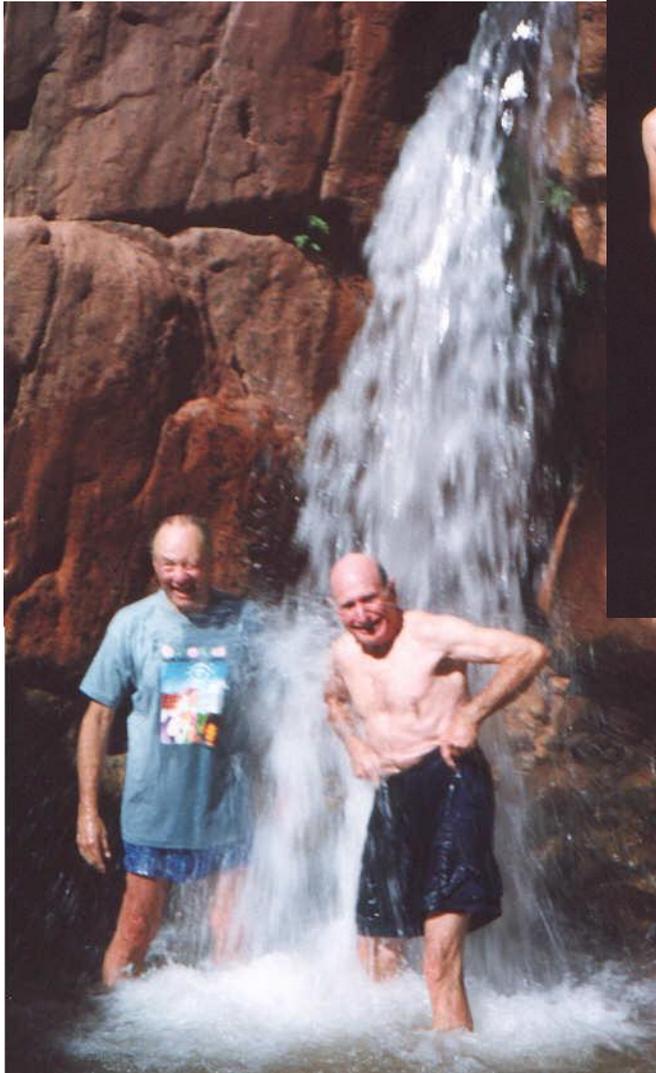
Granite looks difficult and big. The big waves are all on the right wall and everything is funneled that way. No matter which way we enter the rapid we get pushed to the right. Last year I was knocked out of my boat by the big hydraulic waves in Granite. This year Granite looks harder. We all run slightly differently but each make it through okay. Some of us even ran the rapid backwards and still did okay.

Hermit is the last rapid of the day. It will prove to be the most difficult. Hermit has about 5 LARGE waves with each wave becoming progressively bigger than the next. It has been estimated that the last wave (the biggest) is approximately 18 feet high. That presents a dilemma when your boat is only 14 feet high. For the last 10 years I have always run the heart of Hermit and all has turned out well. This year was no different, but I was

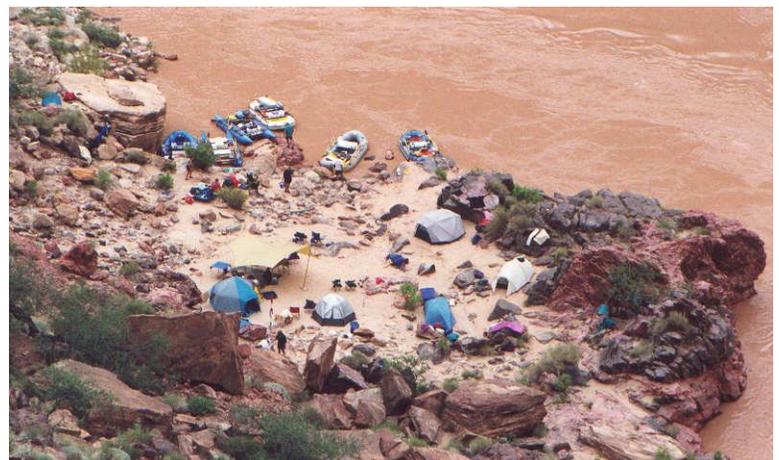
knocked sideways on the last wave. I never truly even climbed to the top. Luckily, we stayed upright but the raft felt very tippy. (I am considering sneaking it next year, 10 years is enough excitement.) Pete and Keith saw what Hermit did to me and they pulled out of the wave train in time. Jack followed my run and dropped down the middle. Jack's new 16-foot raft flipped in the last wave. Jack and Wendy were okay. They did not lose any gear, and everything stayed dry. We camped at Schist and regrouped. What a pill-popping Ibuprofen day!

### Day 7 Garnet

We started off early this morning. We are all anxious about Crystal rapid. Water level makes the scout easy, and we all run right. Some of us got closer to the left than other's but overall, we had good runs. The rapids below Crystal are called the Gems (Ruby, Sapphire, etc.) and are great fun. The weather is cloudy and cold again.



We stopped for lunch and a hike at Shinumo Creek falls. We decide to camp early at Lower Garnet in the hopes that tomorrow's weather will allow us to enjoy swimming under the Elves Chasm waterfall.



## Day 8 Lower Bedrock

I am glad we camped early. The morning dawns clear and sunny. We swim and jump off the ledges at Elves Chasm waterfall. We visit Blacktail Canyon and see Martin Litton again. I asked if I could take a picture and he said, " yes, if you only leave footprints". Always the environmentalist.



Blacktail had an unusual number of deep pools of water. The canyon back-wall had a deep pool that you could swim in. Blacktail is a deep slot canyon that has beautiful rock ledges going skyward. Southwest boaters have been talking about this year's aggressive monsoon season and we are experiencing stormy and unstable weather on our trip. The Phantom Ranch ranger said that normal rainfall in the Grand is 2 inches/year. This year's rainfall has already been recorded at 9 inches and counting. I have noticed that the canyon vegetation is greener than normal. Numerous side canyons appear to have flash-flooded recently.

Forster rapid was filled with big waves. Pete, Bill, and Jack had wild rides. Pete even said he was knocked off his seat and let go of the oars. Fossil Canyon was a lunch and fossil hunting site. I noticed that the AARP's love shade. Spector rapid had enormous waves on the right so we ran left. We watched a motor rig run the right side of Spector and it really pushed the big boat around. High water made Bedrock rapid an easier run on the right. Bill got stuck in an eddy for a while but eventually popped out.

## Day 9 Lower Tapeats

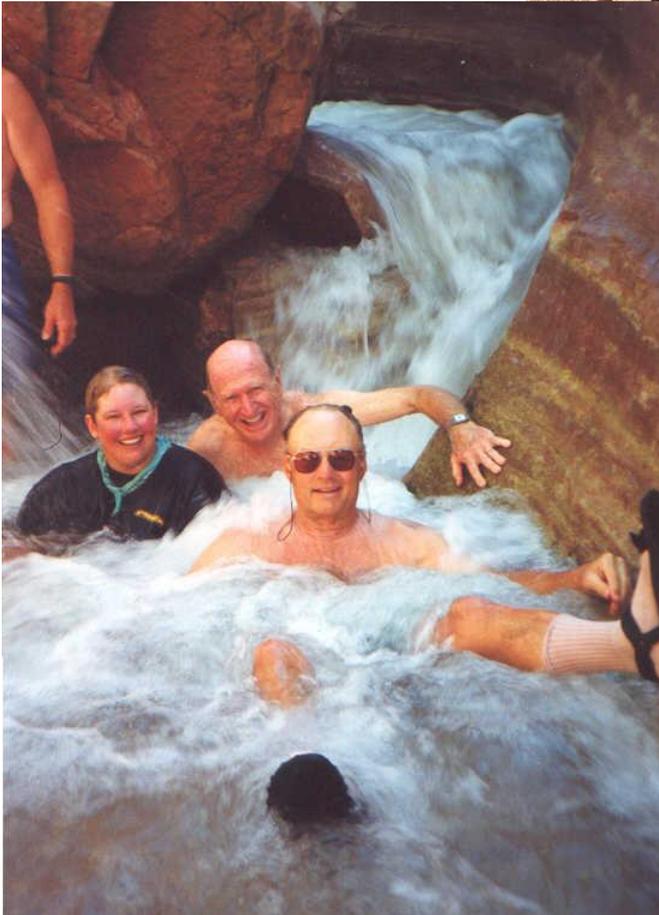
Today is a hiking day. We started the day early to send the hikers off to Tapeats Creek (Thunder River). Thunder river is a large spring that thunders out of the canyon wall. Those of us that did not hike Thunder river stopped at Stone Creek after running Dubendorf rapid.

Stone Creek has been scoured out by a major flash flood that occurred in July this summer. Absolutely no vegetation exists in the side canyon anymore. It looks like a wall of water and rock scoured the canyon clean. We spoke to a motor rig boatman and he confirmed our ideas about the river flows. The river is higher than the forecast flows. L.C. and other tributaries are contributing significant flows. We float to Tapeats and rest in the shade for the rest of our group to finish hiking. The hikers return and we float a short distance to camp on a sandy beach. The Thunder river hike took our group 5 hours round trip. The evening entertainment consisted of each of us playing combs covered with wax paper (sounded like kazoo's). It does not take much to entertain us at this point. Remember, we only must stay up until 8 pm.

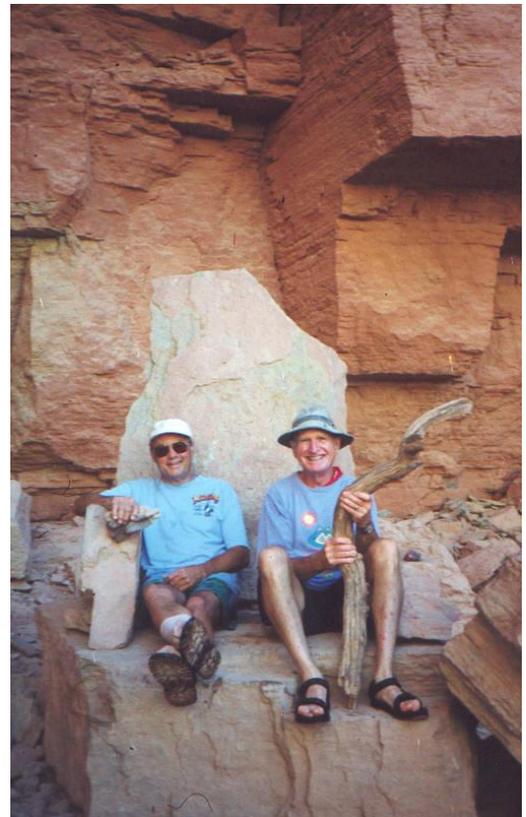
## Day 10 Football beach

Another stormy night. We awake to clear skies. We start early and float to Christmas Tree cave. This cave is full of bat guano and a small stalagmite shaped like a Christmas Tree hides in the back of the cave (thus the name). Bats in the cave make squeaking noises and jostle for space in the cave crevices.

We continue downriver to Deer Creek Falls. We swam underneath the falls, hiked to the Jacuzzi pool, continued to the Deer Creek spring and the Throne room.



The Throne room is near the spring and is filled with rock art and thrones made of large propped up rocks. We filled up our empty water jugs with Deer Creek water and treated with them with chlorine. We did not end up using any of this water during the trip but gathered it for emergency supplies.



We camped at Football beach. Our camp was appropriately named because it is NFL Sunday, and it has a large sandy beach. After dinner we tuned into KOA again and found out that KC beat Denver. Jack and Pete are elated. Dad and Bill (Bronco fans) are noticeably quiet. Before dinner, a rubber snake made its first appearance underneath my chair. Bill got a lot of use out of that snake. Jack and Wendy both got a snake trick played on them also. Jack reacted the most!

## Day 11 Tuckup

We floated to Matkatamiba Canyon in the morning. The eddy is small, so we all tied off to each other and climbed up the creek bed through a sinuous canyon. We sat down in the creek and plugged it to make a butt dam (easily entertained...).



A bighorn ram posed for our cameras on the opposite wall. Adventure Outdoors pulled into Matkat and chastised us for clogging the eddy then proceeded to tell us that they deserved Ledges (our planned campsite for the evening). The trip leader had a poor attitude and was a real jerk. We did the right thing and gave up Ledges, but his attitude made me irritated. We decided to travel on to Havasu creek and hike. First, we had to run Upset rapid. Pete and I ran first and pulled hard to the right to avoid the big waves and holes on the left. We were the only ones to run right. I had a feeling that we might have trouble at this rapid. Intuition proved correct, everyone got swept left. Keith came close to flipping and Jack did flip. Jack and Wendy

were okay, and we continued down to Havasu. The blue-green waters of Havasu creek were beautiful, and everyone wandered off to quietly contemplate the views. Jack and Wendy returned all smiles. It turns out that Jack proposed marriage to Wendy in Havasu. They filled us in on the story that night at dinner. After relaxing at Havasu, we pushed down the camp at Tuckup. We ran 28 miles that day. We were all tired. Pete still insists that the proposal occurred underneath the boat at Upset (under duress). The rest of us believed the Havasu story.



(I think that Jack realized that Wendy is a keeper because she kept her composure and got back into his boat after two flips.)

## Day 12 Whitmore

I wandered up Tuckup canyon in the morning. I looked for rattlesnakes but did not find any. Snakes are common at this camp. Last year, we had several snakes spotted here and one even crawled into a tent. As we floated to National Canyon, we were all thinking of the biggest rapid on the trip yet to be run, Lava Falls! A peregrine falcon flew by with something big in its talons. We found an unblemished duck head (torn off the body) laying on a rock in National canyon and figured that the peregrine got the duck body. Our group was quiet and subdued. Was this a good or bad omen?

Vulcan's Anvil, a lava core neck remnant, sticks up in the middle of the river a mile above Lava Falls rapid. We touched it for good luck and floated down to scout the rapid. After (too) much time deliberating and discussing, all the boatmen wanted to run far left (next to the shore) except for me. I decided to run the tongue left of the ledge hole. Dad asked me to look at the rapid from a different angle to make sure I had looked at all the options. He did not like that we were running the rapid differently than everyone else. The AARP's overheard Irene and Delma talking about crotch straps and immediately asked me if I had any. Dad and Tom did not even know what crotch straps were, but they sure wanted some! (By the way, they are straps used for children or smaller people whose lifejackets might possibly slip off over their heads in the rapids.) Dad later told me that he told Tom to, "Get ready to swim, and don't forget to point your feet downstream". I am glad he did not tell me that. In the end, we ran Lava Falls fine. The waves were big, but we just funneled down the left side without hitting anything too big. I guess a headless duck means good luck!

Camp was at Whitmore just below the Anasazi pictographs.

## Day 13 Mile 202

Clouds and rainy weather again that lasted all day. We camped at Mile 202 and huddled together under the tarp for dinner. We managed to stay in tents for at least 12 hours. Plenty of AARP and pre-AARP napping occurred.

## Day 14 Mile 221

We had to pack up the tents wet this morning, yuck. Pumpkin Springs was underwater. We stopped at Three Springs canyon to view more pictographs and have lunch. We ran the last significant rapid at Mile 217 and floated to camp at Mile 221. We watched a condor soar in the thermal winds across from camp. The condor never flapped its large wings but instead floated on them. Dinner was wonderful and we celebrated the end of a perfect trip with champagne chilled on the last of our ice. It is almost time to bring the trip to a close. In some ways the time passed quickly, in other ways it seems like we could go on forever in our river routine. Alas, we are low on food, high on groover supply, and almost out of Ibuprofen. Guess we must go home. The group dynamics proved to be excellent, and we genuinely enjoyed each other's company.



## **Day 15 Diamond Creek September 24**

The AARPs were up before the crack of dawn (they do that a lot). Our routine is coming to an end. We need to be ready at the Diamond Creek takeout for our shuttler, Canyon REO. The road looks awful when we arrive. The Hualapai say that this year has been unbelievably bad for the road. Thank goodness, Canyon REO is pulling us out with their vans and trailers. Canyon REO shows up at 920 am and we are ready to go at 1030 am. We have one delay: a flat tire on the trailer. We change the tire and begin the journey out of the canyon. The road is the worst we have ever seen it. By the time we make it to Peach Springs, we have another flat tire on the same trailer. Yes, the road was that rough! We decide to air up the best of the leakers (tires, not the AARP's) and make it to Seligman for a traditional burger/shake lunch at Delgadillo's on old Route 66. We played the rubber snake prank on both shuttle drivers and Delgadillo (the trickster) himself. Delgadillo is known for his pranks and tricks on unsuspecting customers, so we feel justified. The snake prank is getting old, but it REALLY does not take much to entertain us at this point. We make it to Flagstaff around 3 pm and find motels to clean up. We agree to meet for dinner and almost fall asleep on our plates. It has been a long day.

### **The End**

We all make it home tired and sandy. After cleaning up, we decide that maybe what we thought was suntan was really dirt. Most of us slept a lot on Sunday and went back to work (pre-AARP; reality) on Monday. AARP's are always on holiday but someone must keep working to ensure that those retirement checks show up in the mail.

The Grand Canyon experience is difficult to capture in words. The colors, sun, shadows, rapids, canyons, sky, water, cactus, hikes, waterfalls, quietness, loudness, depth, height, cliffs, birds, .... Once you have experienced the Grand Canyon, you are hooked for life. I cannot wait to go back next year!