

Pre-publication Book Excerpt

Grand Old Man of the Colorado

Most Grand Canyon boaters know about Bert Loper's final, fatal river trip in 1949. Many have seen the remains of his boat disintegrating on the talus at Mile 41. But few know much about his first Grand Canyon run in 1939. It was a trip he'd been wanting to make for more than three decades (quit sobbing about the waiting list!), and when he finally made it, he made it in style. He was the second man to run every rapid, and the fifth to run Lava Falls, with Don Harris, hot on his tail becoming the sixth. Their trip was the first to run all their boats through every rapid, and they tied George Flavell for being the quickest trip through the Canyon. And they did it in home-made wooden boats.

Not bad for a seventy-year-old man. Quite remarkable for a man who'd spent five months in the hospital that winter with his shoulder out of commission. As this excerpt from Loper's new biography opens, Loper and Don Harris are making the final formulations for their trip. At this point in his life, Loper had rowed for a living as a prospector and freighter, he had rowed for pay as a commercial boatman and a science boatman, he'd rowed for film. Altogether he had been boating, on and off, for some forty-six years. Now was beginning a decade of doing exactly what he wanted to do. He was among the first you might actually call a Grand Canyon private boater.

Brad Dimock

In early March Loper checked himself out of the hospital. "I was just going along without any change," he wrote Blake, "so I thought I could doctor myself at home.... My shoulder is not well by a long ways, but it is a lot better than it was." During his convalescence, he had secured a job for the coming summer. On and off for twenty-five years now, Loper had engaged in government science support work—now he had lined up a position taking geologist Charlie Hunt through Glen Canyon. Although Hunt would have preferred an open rowboat for the trip, Loper was able to convince his friend, Hugh Miser, Hunt's boss, to let him build a new Grand Canyon whitewater boat for the job.

Don Harris had not made up his mind. Loper had: Grand Canyon. He wrote Blake, asking if he wanted to go, saying "there is no one I would rather go with as much as I would you.... I may make the trip alone for it is now or never and I know of no other way I could celebrate my 70th birthday any better."

Loper wrote to the Harbor Lumber Company, who in 1934 had developed Super Harbord, the first marine-grade plywood. Nevills had used it for his boats. Loper asked for prices. On March 27 Loper wrote Miser, saying, "My arm is not well but it is so much better that I would not hesitate to start on a boating trip right now."

Meanwhile Harris, Gibson and Klevin tried to decide what

trip to do. "For heaven sakes just speak up if you would rather go thru the big canyon with Bert," wrote Gibson in April: Speaking of the Big Canyon, won't the water be higher than all hell down there around the middle of June? I suppose Bert has forgotten more about the conditions of the river than I will ever know, but the way I heard it, was that the water ran pretty high there at that time.... I don't know, I am just askin, and if you want to go I for one am game. At least we will be in for some WILD riden."

Charlie Hunt wrote Loper in April, confirming an early June launch and offering a paycheck of three hundred dollars for boat and boatman. Loper, safely out of the hospital's clutches, ordered plywood and began building his boat. It looked much like Old Betsy—a crude Galloway-style boat. Just what became of Old Betsy Loper never said—most likely the beating it took on the Salmon had proven lethal. He did, however, still have the oars Julius Stone had sent him.

On May 7 Gibson pushed Harris for an answer, "Is everything okay to go down the Green? ... Gosh, Don, we don't want to let our own enthusiasm run away with us and high pressure you into doing something you don't want to do." In the end, Harris opted wholeheartedly for Grand Canyon. Gibson and Klevin followed suit.

Loper finished his boat in late May. Since Hunt wanted Loper for overland work prior to the river trip, Bert, Rachel and their grand-nephew Blaine Busenbark, headed for the Colorado to deliver the boat. Twenty miles from the river they got bogged down in the sands of North Wash. Loper was able to get Arth

The Very Hard Way: Bert Loper and the Colorado River, by Brad Dimock, on March 7, 2006 at 7 pm at Cline Library, Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona The author will kick off a month long book tour with a presentation and book signing. You can order the book by mail from Fretwater Press at www.fretwater.com

Chaffin, then operating Hite Ferry, to come up and gather the boat, while the Lopers retreated to Salt Lake.

Charlie Hunt and his assistant Ralph Miller left Salt Lake City with Loper on June 5, 1939. As with Herbert Gregory and Hugh Miser, Loper was once again allying himself with giants of Western geology. And once again making lifelong friends. Traveling through Green River, Hanksville, and Notom, they spent five days getting to the river, Loper “loafing” while Hunt and Miller geologized. They spent another four days investigating the Hite area while Loper tinkered with his boat.

They launched on the afternoon of June 15, making four miles downriver. The plan was for Loper to deliver Hunt and Miller to Lee’s Ferry around July 5 and rendezvous with Harris, Gibson, and Klevin.

On June 18, they stopped at Red Canyon, where “We visited the old workings that I used to work and then returned to the old cabin and the utter desolation of the place made me feel rather blue.” At Tickaboo, someone had burned Cass Hite’s cabin to the ground. Loper’s shoulder was working fine, but “my knee is causing me lots of pain and it is with difficulty that I walk at all.”

While camped at Smith Fork on June 24, Dave Rust and another gentleman stopped in on a trip of their own. They camped together that night. Loper typed. Or tried to. “It seems like every time that I get this old typewriter out to do some work the wind starts to blow so hard I have to quit ...”

At Hall Creek they ran into Arth Chaffin chugging upriver in one of his cobbled-together floating contraptions, looking like a cross between a garbage scow and a Model-T. He gave them a ride.

On June 26 Harris, Gibson, and Klevin launched at North Wash and began pursuit. With no geologists along they had plenty of time to visit side canyons, Hole-in-the-Rock, and make the hike to Rainbow Bridge. On July 2 Harris wrote: “Toward dark the wind receded some and how relieved we were. To our great surprise we heard a husky ‘Ship Ahoy’ from the R. bank at mile 24H. We found this to be Bert Loper’s Party and camped with them tonite.” While Loper and Harris’s new team introduced themselves, Hunt cooked dinner.

The next morning Harris and company rowed on to Lee’s Ferry. Loper, Hunt, and Miller spent another day and a half doing geology, arriving at the Ferry on July 4. Hunt and Miller, their work done, left with Charlie Hanks. It was a bittersweet finale to Loper’s career as a government boatman—upon reaching seventy years of age, he would no longer be eligible for the job. But as one door closed, another was opening. Loper was embarking on a decade of pure pleasure trips.

For the next two days Loper, Harris, Gibson, and Klevin wrote letters and made final preparations. At 10:30 on the

morning of July 6, they pushed off into Grand Canyon.

“I will say here and now that if it had not been for Mr. Harris I would not have made the trip.... I had been planning this trip long before Don was born but there seemed to be a jinx that would head me off at Lee’s Ferry every time that I tried to go through, and all he knew of me was what he had heard, and I knew nothing of him, but in the laying of plans for the trip he would brook no interference and it was always we ARE GOING THROUGH.”

In February 1908, as stories of Russell and Monett’s success scorched Loper, he had written, “I surely expect to show the world that I have the nerve to finish the trip.” Now, finally,

after three decades and three foiled attempts, Loper was rowing downstream from Lee’s Ferry. In four miles they passed beneath Navajo Bridge, which had bypassed Lee’s Ferry in 1928. With sheer limestone cliffs rising five hundred feet on either side, they were committed. Recalled Harris:

“We stopped at the first big rapid, which is Badger Creek, and pulled into shore and walked down to take a look. Make an inspection on it. I said to Bert, ‘You think we can run it?’ He says, ‘Sure we can run it! It’s just a matter of how we’re going to run it!’ Picked out a course. And [Bert] says: ‘From then on Don Harris never asked ‘Can we run it?’ he just asked, ‘How’re we going to run it?’”

The next rapid was the ill-famed Soap Creek, known as the last rapid in Grand Canyon to be successfully run. The

first attempt was in 1911 when Ellsworth Kolb washed out of his own boat. He climbed back aboard and rowed ashore. Making a second attempt, he flipped his brother’s boat, while Emery cranked the moving picture camera. Blake and Lint wanted to run it in 1923, but Kolb forbade it. In 1927, Clyde Eddy vowed to portage Soap Creek. But he got mixed up and portaged Badger Creek Rapid, believing it to be Soap Creek. Riding with boatman Parley Galloway, Eddy then bounded through Soap Creek not knowing where he was. He figured it out later, his chest swelling with pride. Most subsequent trips elected to run it. When Loper and Harris pulled over to scout, Harris asked how they were going to run it.

Soap Creek, wrote Bert, “was much worse so [Don] seemed very dubious about running it but I told him it was made to order, and I will always believe that the foundation for the successful completion of the trip was laid right there.” Certainty, believed Loper, trumped doubt and fear.

That night, eighteen miles into the trip, Loper mused:

“Nothing serious so far and even Soap Creek Rapid which has a rather noted reputation, there is nothing so far that has Cataract

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tied—I notice that the most of those [boatmen] that have made Grand Canyon, they seem to discredit Cataract, but if the rapids below are much worse than Gypsum or Dark Canyon Rapids, in Cataract Canyon, then we will be in for some hard work.

“There sure is a thrill in running rough water and I hope that the sense of elation never leaves me, but there is so much more to a trip of this kind than the rapids, for the wonders of the majestic walls—the grandeur and stupendousness of the mighty chasms through which the Colo wends its way is sure an awe inspiring sight and I would sure feel sorry for the one who fails to appreciate it.”

Gibson’s fears of high water had proved needless. The river peaked in late May at around 50,000 cfs. By the time they launched it had dropped to a meager 10,000 cfs—low water for a wooden boat—and it continued to drop all trip. In fact, it is good they went as early as they did—by August 3 it had dropped to 3,500.



Don Harris and Bert scouting

The next day at mile 24.5 Bill Gibson was swept from Harris’s deck by a side-curling wave. He grabbed the safety rope as he slid off, and climbed back aboard. Not far beyond, Harris dropped over a pour-over and filled his cockpit to the gunwales. For ten miles beginning at mile 20, the rapids come fast and thick. Although Harris was a quick study, the learning curve was steep. Exiting the “roaring twenties,” they paused nearly an hour at the verdant waterfall Powell named Vasey’s Paradise, then pushed off for camp.

Klevin took to the kitchen work splendidly. Gibson strove to get the best pictures possible. But something about him was a little off. Loper later wrote of it, but was infuriatingly vague as to the problem or its cause:

“There were times I that I did not know just how to take him until Chet told me something and then I looked at it in another light. There were times that he seemed morose but after I learned then I knew better and it also brought home to me the fact that we are oft times prone to pass snap judgment and I will say that I have never seen anyone that performed his duties more thorough or complete.”

At noon on the third day they lunched at the confluence of the Little Colorado River. It was at this point that Powell said Marble Canyon ended and Grand Canyon began. (By modern usage, Marble Canyon is considered a subset of Grand Canyon.) The men were making terrific time. They ran rapids of increasing difficulty all day and camped at the head of one of the worst in the canyon, Hance Rapid—a long rocky channel, especially tough at low water.

“It was the worst looking one I had seen on the trip to date,” journaled Harris:

“Rocks were scattered everywhere in the channel. Bert ran thru first and hit a big rock right at the head of the rapid. No serious harm was done except that this bump threw him off his course and he went way over to the R. Side in a mess of rocks and pours—came thru some of the way prow downstream and hit a couple more rocks. “Take it from me I was plenty nervous about going back to my boat and trying to run it after I had seen what Bert did. Regardless, I went back and shoved off. Luck & God’s blessings were with me. I was able to keep in the channel I had chosen and come thru in fine shape without hitting one rock. However, to do this took every ounce of strength I could put into pulling the oars on 2 or 3 different maneuvers to prevent hitting rocks.”

Below Hance the Colorado enters the Granite Gorge, with ominous black schist cliffs rising steeply over a thousand feet on either side. The rapids run bank to bank, often making a portage impossible. Since Powell first described it, the Granite Gorge has

given boatmen heebie-jeebies and no end of boating problems. Not Loper and Harris. They ran Sockdolager without a problem. In Grapevine Loper hit a few rocks but without damage. They landed at Bright Angel Creek at 2 p.m. on their fourth day. That's fast, especially for such low water.

Loper was pleased and awed. "I have read so much about it all that it seems as though I had been here before." He noted that the Colorado through Grand Canyon, with a paltry drop of about seven feet per mile—far gentler than many easier rivers—had such huge rapids. "The solution to that is that about 99% of the fall happens in the rapids and not between—The hazard of a rapid is not always in the amount of fall but how it falls."

He also saw how rapids that were jagged, rocky, and difficult at one stage of river flow, might wash out entirely at a higher flow, and that every trip encounters a different river. "I find it is sure a silly thing to criticize another for it is seldom that we know the stage of water he was on."

The next morning, July 10, they rose at 6 a.m. for the hike to South Rim, and reached the top

before noon, Loper in the lead. So much for the bad knee. Although neither Kolb brother was there, Emery Kolb's daughter Edith showed the movie and had Loper give a short talk afterward. Loper even signed some of Ellsworth's books for tourists. Edith made a long distance call to Los Angeles where Emery was in the hospital. Ellsworth was there visiting, so Loper got to talk to both. They hiked back to the river that same day, reaching the beach in the dark. That night Gibson woke up screaming, dreaming he was drifting into Lava Falls on his air mattress.

With the water dropping, they were off early on the morning of July 11. The rapids below Bright Angel are an all-star line up including many of the biggest rapids in Grand Canyon: Horn Creek, Granite Falls, Hermit. They ran them without incident. But Crystal, which only later became a major rapid in a 1966 flash flood, still managed to be the big problem. Harris had not yet learned to see a pour-over from upstream, and slid directly into another. "The prow dropped down as the stern started out," wrote Harris, "and we settled back into this terrible place about half sidewise. In this position enough of the boat was facing the water above to push us on out. However, in the mishap Bill was washed off twice, hanging on to his rope each

time and climbing back on." They made it another four miles and four rapids before camping.

The next day they finished the rapids of the Upper Granite Gorge, but not without problems. Loper wrote:

"In walking down along one of the rapids I slipped on a slick granite boulder and hurt my leg quite severely and I also hurt my bad knee but all in all I am doing fine.... I struck a couple of rocks and came near turning over about 3 times so when I made camp I took the boat out of the river and examined the bottom and everything is O.K. and with a lame shoulder and a bum knee we call it a day."

That same day they had come across the old Ross

Wheeler—the boat Loper had built in 1914 and Russell had tried unsuccessfully to run through Grand Canyon. "I found that boat tied up above high water where Russell went to pieces and I think I could, with a little work, make another trip with that same boat."

Another day put them through the rapids of the Middle Granite Gorge



Loper and the crew check out the abandoned Ross Wheeler

without problems. They lunched at Deer Creek Falls, where a sidestream pours out of a high cliff to the river, and continued nine more miles. They camped below Kanab Creek, where Powell had ended his 1872 expedition.

The next morning they scouted Upset Rapid, named in 1923 when Emery Kolb flipped there. They picked out a bouncy run down the left side of the rapid and ran it. Seven miles later they pulled into a crevice in the left wall and lunched where Havasu Creek pours its blue-green waters into the Colorado. "I must have taken on too much Rye Krisp or something because I was in rather a bad way the balance of the day." They camped that night at Stairway Canyon, just a few hundred yards above a minor rapid named Gateway. Loper described the next morning:

"We got a fine start and the first rapid was Gate-way canyon rapid which was so unimportant that we never stopped to look it over but as we dropped in I told Chet that we were going to miss a picture and as we dove down—nearly straight and came up likewise we were caught by a side twister and went up-side down. But we climbed on the overturned boat and caught hold of the edge and gave a pull and she righted beautifully and all oars was in place but

we lost our bucket and the grate that we had for to cook on but other-wise every thing was fine. And while I have been doing this—off and on—for more than fifty years that is my first capsizes so I should not feel bad and it makes me feel a little proud of the old boat. But while Don was following me he never knew—until I told him—that I had been up-side-down.

Harris made a small note on the edge of his own journal: “As we started on from Gateway Rapid Bert yelled back to it, ‘Kiss my ass.’”

An hour later they were on shore, scouting Lava Falls. As far as they knew it had only been run once, by Buzz Holmstrom the year before. (Later research concluded that Flavell probably ran it in 1896, Glen and Bessie Hyde ran it in their sweep scow in 1928, and Bob Francy ran it later that fall on his search for the Hydies—but Loper and Harris had no way of knowing this.) “After looking it over from both sides we decided that we could run it,” stated Loper, “and did so.” As it turned out, that was a good year to run Lava Falls. Less than two months later a gigantic debris flow thundered down Prospect Canyon, choking the rapid into a steeper and more difficult cataract.

“Although I had my first up-set of my whole career,” journaled Loper that evening, “after running lava falls I feel very well satisfied—so ends the day—”

By the latter half of the trip—as so often happens with a

good teacher and a great pupil—Harris was having better runs than Loper. “I learned more about the tricks of the river and studying the currents and things from Bert Loper than I did from anybody else,” recalled Harris. “Norm knew the river well and was a good oarsman, but he hadn’t the experience in white-water that Bert had.... He had a knack with oars that I’ve seldom seen equalled.”

They bucked wind and grouched for the next two days. “It seems we all have had a siege of the belly ache and I can’t understand why rye crisp and to-mato juice should do that to us.” Finally they entered the Lower Granite Gorge. On July 17, Loper rowed into 231-Mile Rapid and got clobbered. “The boat came near capsizing,” wrote Harris:

“...and during the tilt Chet was tipped overboard. When the boat come out from under the wave Chet was trying to get back on. Seeing his difficulty he gave up and went on all the way thru the rapid staying from 30 to 50 feet ahead of the boat all the time. Bert picked him up below as if nothing had happened.”

Five miles later they hit the slack water of upper Lake Mead. They stopped at the mouth of Separation Canyon to look for Dr. Frazier’s 1934 plaque—the one he planned to replace in 1939—to no avail. Here three of Powell’s men left in



End of the trip-July 1939 Lake Mead. L-R: Chet Kelvin, Bert Loper, Bill Gibson, and Don Harris

1869, hiking out to their death at the hands of ... maybe Shivwits Indians, maybe Mormons, maybe exposure. Loper and Harris rowed another three miles on the slow, placid lake-water and camped.

They had done it. Loper, in his seventieth year, had finally made it through Grand Canyon. He had shown the world, and had a damned fine time doing it.

For the next two days they rowed the calm water that had recently inundated the final forty miles of Grand Canyon. Loper: "I am too nervous to let Chet row so I do all of that." Harris: "Chet swears to hell he'll never eat RYE KRISP again this side of eternity." Loper: "After watching Chet do a little rowing I became rather wormy so I took the oars."

On the evening of July 19 they rowed out of the Grand Wash Cliffs, where Grand Canyon and the Colorado Plateau formally end, and into the Basin-and-Range country of the Mojave Desert. They rowed a few more miles to the small, remote marina at Pierce's Ferry and camped. They had arranged for a tour boat to pull them in the next day, so declared their trip officially over. Although they never stated any goals, they had tied George Flavell's 1896 record for fastest trip through Grand Canyon, and were the first trip to have run all their boats through every rapid. In the seventy years since Powell's first voyage, theirs was the sixteenth trip to complete Grand Canyon.

"It was then that I expressed—to the boys—my appreciation of the most wonderful trip but their kind consideration shown me for I always tried to remember that I was the old man of the expedition and the only [time] that I was reminded of the difference was their kindness to me and I will say that I was waited on more on this trip than about all the rest of my life.... [T]here was never a cross or harsh word spoken and me being the leader of the trip I often wonder if there ever was a leader that had the whole hearted support that I had.

"... and to think of the many years that I have wended my lonely way along some part of the Colorado water shed and with my blankets unrolled on some sand bar with the starry canopy of heaven over me have I dreamed not only of making this trip but of making it as we did make it with every one of those ferocious rapids conquered, and to think I had to wait until I had rounded out my three score and ten before the dream came true, so after my little talk of appreciation to them we made our beddown on lake mead for the last time."

Harris was equally enthusiastic, writing, "We all felt the trip was indeed a great success and beyond all doubt the most enjoyed of any ever taken on the Colorado River, regardless of who made the trip or when it was taken." Gibson's movie of the expedition shows them throughout the trip having fun—good, solid fun—and perhaps this was the first trip where people really did.

The following afternoon the launch arrived from Boulder City. Tying the rowboats single file behind, they motored the four hours across Lake Mead to Boulder Dam. There Loper ran

into Frank Dodge, now a retired boatman, and spent the night on the Dodge's houseboat. After a day or two of royal treatment—by the tour company, Dodge, and others—Klevin and Gibson left for California and Loper and Harris returned to Salt Lake City. Of the trip finale, Don Harris recalled:

"[W]hen we were being towed across Lake Mead after running the Grand successfully, Bert got to thinking. He says: 'This has been a wonderful trip; ideal. There has never been any friction or contention. And the age of you three young fellows combined about equals my age. That's an old man with three young fellows and there hasn't been any friction. So let's plan to go when I'm eighty, ten years hence.

"I said, 'Oh, that sounds agreeable to me,' not even imagining that he might still be alive ten years later."

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(Editors notes: Bert's papers and photographs are now in the Special Collections Department, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah - GCPBA thanks Brad Dimock for sharing with us this chapter from his new book and look forward to reading the completed volume. Brad is the author of *Sunk Without A Sound*, the story of the ill fated honeymoon voyage of Glenn and Bessie Hyde and co-author of *The Doing of the Thing, the Brief, Brilliant Whitewater Career of Buzz Holmstrom*)

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