



YMCA members enjoy the placid water of the upper Colorado River in Glen Canyon in July 1953.

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# GLEN CANYON: A TRIP TO REMEMBER

Story and Photographs by Willis Peterson

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** In May 1953, Willis Peterson had his first piece published in *Arizona Highways* — as a freelance contributor. Two months later, his bosses at *The Arizona Republic*, where he worked as a photographer, sent him north for a story about Glen Canyon. The paper, however, never used any of his photographs. Sixty-six years later, Mr. Peterson sent me a letter. “I have about 70 to 80 Kodachrome slides that I took of Glen Canyon before the dam was built,” he said. “I would like to donate them to *Arizona Highways*.” Like a grizzly during the salmon run, I jumped at the chance, figuring it would make an interesting portfolio. Just photographs. A few months later, though, I received a manuscript to go with the slides he'd sent. It was a beautifully written story, one I presumed he'd composed in 1953. But it was new. A fresh piece written from memory, along with the field notes he'd kept from his trip. Think about that for a second. This is a story written a few months ago by a man who would have turned 97 on August 2 (see *Editor's Letter*, page 2), making him not only the oldest contributor in the history of *Arizona Highways*, but also the longest-tenured writer in the history of the magazine. Almost seven decades after Editor Raymond Carlson introduced Mr. Peterson to our readers, it's my distinct pleasure to do the same, to a new generation of readers. What you're about to read is something very special. Enjoy.

“I’VE BEEN MARRIED FOR ONLY A MONTH AND A HALF when *The Arizona Republic* decides to send me down the Colorado River to cover Senator Barry Goldwater’s annual “YMCA Boys Club River Adventure” through Glen Canyon. It’s July 12, 1953, but news editors have been mulling over the merits of staffing the Y trip for some time. There’s an ongoing nationwide controversy about whether to build a huge dam on that stretch of the Colorado. What the senator has to say about it, and what he thinks, will make a great story.

Ordinarily, I’d jump at the chance for a two-week float trip that runs the length of Glen Canyon. But being just married? *No. No way.* Roberta and I are just getting to know each other and settling into our small, converted-garage apartment on Almeria Road in Central Phoenix.

For Roberta, this summer is her chance at freedom. She’s just earned her primary teaching degree, and she’s a new bride. It seems like bliss for both of us. But now, I must go. To be sent down the river. Literally.

I’m processing all of that when, at the last minute, like a stay of execution, Senator Goldwater says he cannot make the trip. He has new commitments in Washington. My trip is put on hold. However, Ray Day, the YMCA’s director of special events, is heavily promoting the trip, and the newspaper’s editors decide that pictures of the canyon could have value later, should the *Republic* take sides regarding construction of the proposed dam — to be built



within three years. So, I remain, as one of the boat leaders. We will meet at Hite, Utah, for the 154-mile Glen Canyon float trip to Lees Ferry, Arizona.

**P**ARTING IS DIFFICULT. For both of us. A new husband, a new wife ... what could be worse? Roberta is sad, putting on a good face while driving me to the Phoenix Y. “Yes, I know you are a newspaperman,” she says, “and you will have assignments I won’t like, but you must do what you have to do.”

One of the YMCA officials takes me to Prescott. There, I meet up with 17 wildly exuberant guys, sleepless from a night of frolic and pillow-tossing. Early in the morning, a bobtailed truck rolls up to our group. It’s loaded with three five-man rafts, one 10-man raft, 10 oars, 24 bedrolls, personal luggage, and enough canned and dried food for two weeks, plus odds and ends. All of which makes the truck’s bed a tight fit. I meet Lew Griffith of the Phoenix Y. Somewhat taciturn, he’s the leader of the group. And he’s not fond of the press. The jovial Harold Stapley, of the San Diego Y, is his assistant, and Jim Devine is the all-around fixer. Dr. Barker, whose mantra is “Good humor is good medicine,” arrives late and hunkers down with Harold in the back of the truck, among the boys. Lew, Jim and I ride in the cab. An all-day effort puts us near Hanksville, Utah, for the night.

The next morning, splitting off from the main highway, our road has good intentions but soon turns into a rock-strewn, rutted trace, which turns into a streambed. The truck groans as we slog through a narrow, one-track-wide defile known as Water Pocket Fold. One of the back duals goes flat.

We crawl to a wider spot for repair, where we find a gas truck stranded with a bent tie rod. We help to straighten it, only to find a disabled oil truck farther on. I count the number of times we cross the river: 60 in the next 18 miles. After driving hundreds of miles from Prescott, we finally arrive at Hite, Utah, and begin unloading our gear.

In the distance is Hite Ferry, a rustic affair assembled from wooden planks and iron girders. It looks as though at any minute, the entire contraption might take a dive to the bottom of the Colorado. Power is either a Model T engine or a small donkey engine. The captain sits in an ancient, cutaway car sedan while operating the cables.

After inflating the rafts, Jim discovers that the 10-man boat has a slow leak. It’s an inauspicious beginning.

“Oh, Lordy, help us in this mess.”

Jim assesses the new problem from under his steel combat helmet, which he wears continually. The boys like him — he’s sort of a good-natured uncle. He pulls out a tire-patching kit. Applied, it seems to help. The awful hissing sound stops. Like pioneers, we lash old logs to the underside of the raft for floats. This works well. Ropes are attached through loops along the rafts’ sides for safety. We cautiously reload the boat. And off we go on our big adventure, making about 13 miles before supper, which is prepared in our camp on a lonely sandbar. Nighttime creeps up on us. The stars are brilliant. Lightning shows in the northern sky. I’m so tired, I can scarcely get organized before I’m asleep.

In the morning, it’s depressing to see that



**ABOVE, LEFT:** The crew, which included a handful of adults and 17 young men, was transported to and from the Colorado River in a flatbed truck loaded with rafts, oars, bedrolls and personal baggage.

**ABOVE:** After fixing a hole in the largest raft and reinforcing it with logs, the flotilla finally set sail, making about 13 miles the first day.

**BELOW:** By the second day, the boys had named all of the boats, one of which was christened *Photo Man* in honor of Willis Peterson.

the big boat has sunk down. The patch is not foolproof. Two larger logs bring firmness to the underside of the vessel. One is anchored with ropes beneath the prow, another beneath the stern. The raft seems to ride better. But Lew decides to reduce its weight. Each of our small crafts must now take on an extra member.

Thus, each boat complement will be six people, six bedrolls and more canned goods taken from the supply raft. The change leaves Lew and Jim to take on the raft’s problems and manage them the best they can. The large raft is virtually an empty hulk.

The boys decide to christen it *The Derelict*. My boat becomes *Photo Man*. Harold’s is called *Harold Express*. The last is *Bill Nichols*, for William Nichols, a YMCA member and teacher from Chula Vista, California — the only other adult on the trip.

**Y**ESTERDAY’S PROBLEMS seem to be over. Harold takes command of the day’s food preparation, flips 126 pancakes, fries potatoes, and mixes punch and hot chocolate. Very filling. Chocolate is a good pick-me-up drink, morning or night. Lunch consists of our extra

pancakes as a bread substitute, wrapped around meatballs, stew or a scoop of turkey à la king. For water, there are springs along the way. If not, river water, but we must let it settle in a container overnight with purifying pills.

After KP chores, the boats are tied together while Lew stands in his raft and reads passages from John Wesley Powell’s journal, describing the difficulties of the major’s epic journey, and of the Hites building a stone cabin in the wilderness, where they tried to create a living from the land.

Later in the day, one of our group spies a homesite shrouded by cottonwood trees. All row to shore to take pictures and explore the ruins of a hard-scrabble living. Late afternoon, it’s time to find a dry sandbar, because evening comes on quickly. The canyon’s vertical walls shut out light like roll-down blinds. More lightning stabs at banks of storm clouds, but it’s clear overhead.

In the morning, we cut loose from our anchorage and greet the river for another day. I think about the enormity of what we are doing, letting the river take command. It’s now the width of half a football field, and placid. As

we drift, I hear a low murmur, a new sound. It grows louder. It can only be the rush of water. I’m not equipped for a shoot through a new, unreported whitewater rapid, nor did I expect it. I feel impending doom. The current takes us around a bend, and there the sound is revealed: It’s a giant waterfall. In a deafening roar, cascades of water carrying rocks, brush and small trees spew over the rim from last night’s heavy rain and the resulting flash flood — the torrent conceived in a feeder canyon somewhere north of us.

In a land of immensities, it’s simply another example of natural wonder. I photograph the deluge from several angles, but none can reveal the full concept of nature in constant change. We bed down for the night on what looks like a stable sandbar, one that likely will be wiped out within a season’s change. Bedrolls, lying one by one on the high side of the bar, will make for a good photograph in the morning.

Relaxing at last, my mind goes back to Roberta and our new life together. *What is she doing? Is she seeing the same stars? What will the future hold in my new stage as a married man?* My mind is in a whirl. But, back in the present, I set my senses to wake early for sunrise pictures.

**T**HE NEXT DAY brings our first noted landmark. Tapestry Wall looms ahead, formidable in appearance, made more so in the evening light. Our camp sits on a long bar in front. As we look up at its face, the enormous escarpment holds us in awe. It’s perhaps a half-mile long, with vertical sides 400 to 600 feet high. I use my 35 mm Exakta to make photographs of our campfire and boats, with the wall as a backdrop. The coloration of the cliff is unique, as though some petulant genie poured buckets of paint — from dark purple to orange to red — over its face. The following morning, our eyes open to a clear blue sky. I take several shots of the wall in brilliant sunlight. It’s a panorama that seems to stretch for miles.

As I turn away, I smell smoke. The guys have set fire to a pile of driftwood nearby. I’m not sure I go along with the idea.

“We are clearing the river for better flow,” they say.

But it’s home to a lot of small wildlife, I think to myself.

I keep silent. And Harold and Lew seem not to notice. The river will take care of its own during a later flood.

Back on the river, I think about how difficult it is to make scenic pictorials or detailed camera studies from a floating platform. It’s disappointing to see such enticing compositions and scenery go floating by and not be able to react to them artistically.

Suddenly, there’s a shout from the *Harold Express*: “Hey, there’s the wrecked steambot.”

Our flotilla pulls up to examine the rusted skeleton. *Photo Man* anchors last — we usually stay in the Tail End Charlie position while navigating the river for better photo possibilities, and to keep an eye on the other rafts.

The guys get out of their boats. The water is only a couple of feet deep. The old hull is now embedded in rocks and partly covered by sand — a mute testament to the willful Colorado. A rusted boiler plate, corroded iron stanchions, a capstan missing its hawsers, bent railings that go nowhere ... they’re all tacit evidence of a river’s retribution.

But why has the steamer come to such a dismal end? Charles Spencer, a mining entrepreneur, had a dream to furnish supplies to mining camps on both sides of the river. To carry freight and mail, and provide general transportation. In late February 1912, the 85-foot paddle-wheel steambot *Charles Spencer* was launched at the mouth of Warm Creek, making it the last boat of its kind on the upper Colorado.

But the river had other plans. Spencer found the river current so strong that it took more coal, and thus more money, to operate the ship’s furnace than he would have realized in profit. Two years later, Spencer was dead broke and quietly left the Lees Ferry area. The steamship was abandoned to the will of the river and broke up. Portions of it still lie scattered along the sandbars of Glen Canyon.

The wreck is like a magnet to the guys, who can scarcely be pried away. To me, it’s a most fascinating sidelight, conjuring up all those river happenings of early pioneering days. One thinks of river pirates, gamblers, gold miners, con men, characters played by Clark Gable.



**A** FEW DAYS into our trek, I receive the baptism of the capricious river. For some reason, a malicious current catches hold of my boat and sends it around the far side of an island. Admittedly, my experience at being a river pilot is nil. What isn’t apparent at first turns out to be a 3-foot difference in water level as we round the island. Suddenly, a wave of water sweeps over us while *Photo Man*, with me sitting at the prow, plunges downward into a churning cauldron. The raft, being flexible, bends in the middle in an attempt to stay level. I’m completely soaked as I try to keep my Speed Graphic safe.

The other crews watch with apprehension

**ABOVE:** Evening comes early in Glen Canyon, where vertical walls shut out the light.

**RIGHT:** The long voyage from Hite, Utah, to Lees Ferry, Arizona, covered 154 miles, leaving plenty of time for the boys to polish their whittling skills.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** After a long day of sitting still on the rafts, the boys burn off some energy on a natural waterslide.

as we dive into a whirlpool. Our craft is out of control. Unbelievably, we spin in circles, caught in a cement-mixer-like grip as our crew vainly tries to propel our raft. Then, by sheer providence it seems, our crew, me included, is adrenalized with super muscle power, and we madly paddle our raft outward through the swirling water to where the current is less deadly. Finally, we reach the sandbar where the other rafts have landed and flop to the ground, exhausted. An ordeal for all. We stay there for the night, not wanting to tempt fate again.

The following day, the Escalante River heaves into sight. Just below the confluence is where the historic Hole-in-the-Rock event — an almost biblical affair — occurred. In a sandstone niche, early Mormon pioneers chiseled a descent that averaged 25 degrees and in some places was as steep as 45 degrees. Work was slow and tedious, but on January 26, 1880, 250 men, women and children in 83 wagons slowly made their way down this precarious “road.” Following the wagons, a thousand head of cattle, in a churning cloud of red dust, poured downward through the chute, forming a torrent of horns and hooves, bawling in fright. They were driven and prodded to the river, then ferried to the other side. It’s an unbelievable story. On the face of the cliff, I shoot pictures of the angled



historical plaque describing the feat.

I find two scorpions under my bed-roll in the morning and am relieved they didn’t get inside. How long will the odds last?

**I**T IS SUNDAY. Lew asks us to gather on a sandbar, overhung with a huge mesquite tree, for an hour of introspection. We’re asked to contemplate our lives, each of us to his own beliefs, and to consider the culture we are passing daily. All the boats are on watch to see who might first discover cliff dwellings. Those ancient tenements, perched in the river’s palisades, are visible for only a few minutes as the river’s current carries us along. Sharp eyes point out a row of ollas, large ceramic pots, sitting undisturbed on a ledge.

Even with the help of binoculars, the time is short to observe an ancient life. Walls of roughly laid blocks of adobe brick, cemented with mortar of more adobe, stand in the cave entrances and crevices. Are they Anasazi homes — abandoned perhaps 100 years before Columbus unknowingly discovered the Americas?

Aside from searching for elusive dwellings, each day brings a quiescent sheen of water as far as one can see, until a turn of the canyon cuts our line of sight. The Colorado seems to be bidding time, a young river building future

determination to gather strength for its encounter with hidden shelf rock, flinging skyward waves in a frenzy of crashing water. How Powell’s little skiffs managed to slide through those roaring rapids is a wonder. There are times when even modern, flexible motorized rafts, guided by expert hands who know the river’s whims, fail, and boats wind up upside down.

But for us, for now, the river is in abeyance, slowly undulating, a soothing massage. I bend to its will. My mind saunters back to the time when I was young, and Mom, a fan of Paul Robeson, the stellar athlete and renowned performing artist, would wind our Victrola and listen to him sing *Ol’ Man River*, filling our parlor with melodious voice. The verses of *Ol’ Man River* are appropriate in our remaining sojourn of the Colorado’s quiet waters: “That ol’ man river, he don’t say nothing, but he must know something, ’cause he just keeps rolling.”

**A**FTER BREAKFAST, the river’s insistent current carries us to a most fascinating stop: Narrow Canyon. Sheer, tapering walls lure our group onto a quarter-mile hike along a rock-filled streambed. I’m carrying an Exacta around my neck and a Speed Graphic in my hands. Then, without warning, our pathway becomes too narrow for us to pass through.

To climb above this bottleneck, one must lean one's back to the wall, push one's feet against the opposite wall and shimmy upward for a couple of inches. It's a feat of strength. Harold goes up first. He's done this before. The boys think it's the greatest feat they've ever witnessed. They start climbing and scooting, as though they're turbocharged caterpillars in the craziest race you have ever seen. Three or four boys finally worm their way to a wider chamber above. I marvel at their agility. But most of the guys fall, sliding down backward. Bruised egos. No harm done. I stay below.

As if by magic, the climbers find a deep pool with a rope dangling over the water. The guys begin swimming and yelling as they dive into the icy pool. It's too cold, though. After the aquatic sports, it's difficult for them to work their way downward. And it's more dangerous than climbing up.

Just beyond the swimming hole is a slot canyon like no other. Sheer walls go up a thousand feet. Above, the sun's



rays make a few seconds' pass, then are lost for another day. Luminescent light reveals cliff colors — reds, pinks, lavender, almost blue in turns and twists — luring anyone with an artist's bent to try to replicate the canyon's palette of color and form.

But I am apprehensive. If there's going to be an accident, here is where it will happen. And it does. I fumble a film pack. Drop it. I pick it up, and it's wet and bent. Meanwhile, Harold is exasperated and getting anxious. "We've gotta go, fellas."

The sound eerily echoes back to mock us. There's a rush to get everybody together. Harold starts to count heads. Two smaller boys are missing.

Following their own agenda, the truants appear with skinned arms and scratched noses. I thought them lost forever. They've extricated themselves from exploring the canyon's side labyrinths and feel proud. "I'll talk with them later," Harold mutters. We're in a hurry.

"Andale," Harold shouts. That gets everybody's attention. "We have 18 miles to go for the day."

He counts everyone again to be sure we're all together. It's down canyon now, over a slippery, muddy creek bottom. Outside, our three rafts unite with Lew and Jim, who stayed on the wayward *Derelect*, waiting for the rest of us. The current helps us get underway and boosts our rowing power to the other side of the river. To Music Temple.

Docking our boats a little upstream, we pick up a trail. An easy one. We walk a quarter of a mile through a tangle of overhanging cottonwoods, box elder trees and huge boulders.

Tentatively, I enter nature's roughly hewn tabernacle. First recorded by Powell in 1869, its immensity fills me with awe. We're enclosed in an amphitheater of celestial proportion. There's a spiritual quality, too. Invoked. Felt. I am transported by its meaningful solitude. My eye scans the far reaches to where a church's apse would rise. A few of our group have gone to the other side and appear tiny, the size of ants. Looking downward, I find all the wonderment around me is repeated as an image in

a font-like baptismal — a crystal-clear pool in the middle of the floor. Above, through a thousand feet of sandstone, a fissure has created a skylight, allowing a luminescent beam of light to brighten the surface of the water.

Great slabs of sandstone, multicolored from exfoliation, seem haphazardly joined together and form huge bulwarks, or walls, which actually curve and flare upward into a roughly formed, vaulted ceiling. Using Powell's dimensions, the floor is about 500 feet deep and at least 200 feet wide. I'm enclosed under a circular dome some 200 feet high.

Is this Coleridge's *Xanadu*? I wonder.

In addition to the Temple's renowned physical attractions, its acoustical qualities are fascinating, too. Powell describes his musical feeling for the Temple, of which he's become so fond: "When Old Shady sings to us at night, we are pleased to find that this hollow in the rock is filled with sweet sounds. It was doubtless made for an academy of music by its storm-born architect, so we name it 'Music Temple.'"

Music aficionados suggest that "a one-second note reverberates 11 seconds." I hear some of our guys say they hear a resonance of tone when they sing. I start humming. But, being non-musical, my efforts fall flat.

Powell, during his second and more successful river trip in 1871, inscribed the date and his name, along with those of F.S. Dellenbaugh and F.M. Bishop, on the Temple's wall.

**T**HE CONFLUENCE of the San Juan River, which is in flood, gives us a last surprise as the two currents collide. Caught in turbulence, *The Derelect* — we never think of it as a boat — goes through the ferment. I sit high on a bedroll to time myself for a quick shot. Nichols is next and gets a good schussing. An old-timer would say, "Hell of a shellacking." Then our raft dashes through a curtain of red water. Or is it very thin mud? The third boat, Harold's crew, laughs at us. They manage to use their oars to swerve their craft aside, averting a dousing.

Up ahead is Rainbow Bridge, and



**OPPOSITE PAGE:** A young crew member examines inscriptions made by members of John Wesley Powell's second journey down the Colorado River in 1871.

**ABOVE:** Rainbow Bridge, which spans 275 feet across the creek channel below, was one of the highlights of the "YMCA Boys Club River Adventure."

**ABOVE, RIGHT:** By the end of the two-week adventure, everyone, adults and young men alike, was exhausted and ready for a return to civilization.

seeing it has to be the zenith of nature's splendor. A 6-mile hike leading to the bridge starts as a small streambed. The guys carry cans of meatballs and the everlasting pancakes for a noon meal. At the 2-mile stop, we find fresh spring water. Another 2 miles for a second water stop, and then on to the bridge.

At first sight, a far-off, partly hidden bulge of rock seems to follow as one scrambles along a parapet-like, boulder-strewn trail. Then, around the last outcropping, a sandstone colossus looms in the distance. I shut my eyes, lest I am disoriented. It can't be real. But I see blue sky beneath the curve of the massive formation, proving it is, indeed, a monstrous sandstone bridge, one

that spans 275 feet across the creek channel and is 290 feet tall, 42 thick and 33 wide. It's unbelievable. The American Indians thought so, too, for only a god could have conceived handiwork of such magnitude. They refuse to walk within its shadow.

In the background, Navajo Mountain looms at an elevation of 10,348 feet, as if one needs another of nature's monoliths to behold. A registry stands nearby for all to sign. After everyone has made pictures, I gather the group for an overall shot. Our group appears insignificant against the natural overpass. It's a memory we'll have forever.

We hike 6 miles back to the Colorado River. It's late. I'm exhausted. All of us are.



The following day, we have raft problems. Our boats are tied together as we head toward a huge, scary-looking rock. Caught in a second whirlpool, we actually whip around the rock so fast that it snarls the ropes from the other rafts. No time to think. By supreme effort, we dislodge ourselves, cut our rope and row furiously to quiet waters. I picture myself, after all these days, in the water, not knowing how to swim. Later that evening, we camp where the new dam might be built. It's our last night on the river.

By noon the next day, after floating for 154 miles, we arrive at Lees Ferry: "Mile Zero." A fellow from Del Webb is waiting with the truck. It's surprising how quickly the boys can deflate the rafts and reload while shouting and kidding. The oars are taken as souvenirs. At Cameron, everybody buys a quart of milk. It seems to fulfill a yearning. We eat supper in Flagstaff, then drive to Prescott. I elect to continue on to Phoenix with three other guys.

My 14-day furlough is over.

Roberta, here I am. **AH**