

A Brief History of River Guides on the Colorado River System

By Herm Hoops

Until the 1970's a river trip remained an expedition. Shuttles were long and difficult, river information was hard to obtain, and once you launched there was little help in case of a mishap.

When John Wesley Powell planned his descent of the Green and Colorado Rivers in 1869 he accumulated as much information about the rivers and their surroundings as was possible. That desire for river information continues to this day. Today's river guides contain a wealth of information, from natural and human history to regulations, access and shuttle information, hikes and camps and maps of the river. Some even include drawings of rapids with little lines that indicate how the rapid should be run!

Modern guides are in color and come in waterproof editions. Powell had no such luxury, making his maps and notes on onionskin paper with pencil and ink. Although the intent of Powell's maps and information were intended to fill in an unknown section of the country, early river runners found them the only information available to plan their trips. From then until the 1950's Colorado Plateau river maps, guides and information were hard to come by.

By the mid-1970's non-commercial river running began in earnest. Land managing agencies provided simple maps showing major rapids, campsites and basic information. U.S. Geological Survey maps also provided information to river runners, but even at that late date some sections like the Orange Cliffs were only in draft stages. Bureau of Reclamation had detailed maps that included features like river profiles, but a person had to know they were available and ferret them out.

LES JONES SCROLL MAPS

Les Jones, of Heber City, Utah, was an engineer and avid river runner. Jones began running rivers at the age of eleven. He built a kayak, running most rivers solo, and taking movies from a camera mounted on a football helmet.

By the early 1950's Les began taping USGS maps together and filling in the missing contours (early USGS maps were usually detailed only to the headwaters of the planned impoundment.). Les began using aerial photos, USGS maps and his own drawings and notes to trace and draw detailed maps on a scroll paper strips 7-10 inches wide. The maps were not waterproof and faded in sunlight, so they had to be protected from water and sunlight. Later his maps were copied onto waterproof mylar. Jones copied a river profile on the map above the river segments, labeling rapids and features on both. The maps contained rapid ratings, drawings of major rapids, Powell and other historic river camps, historic inscriptions and other detailed information. Les was one of the first maps to contain conservation messages. His Flaming Gorge/Red Canyon map included the following message: "Oppose Marble canyon Dam M. Pt. 37 ½ below Lees Ferry and Bridge Canyon Dam M. Pt. 238 in the Grand Canyon. They cut off river boating forever thru Grand Canyon Park & back reservoir into Grand Canyon Parks. Get Lees Ferry to Lake Meade plus Dinosaur National Monument on the Wild Rivers Bill S1446. WRITE % Mr. Church Wild Rivers Bill House of Congress Washington D.C. The Grand Canyon is the worlds

finest Guided White Water Run for ages 8 to 80.”

Jones never advertised his maps, one found out about them through word of mouth. His maps covered just about every river segment on the Colorado Plateau (and other Western rivers) even segments like Flaming Gorge - now damned. Although somewhat inaccurate by today's standards, les Jones maps were loving works of art and a boon to river runners seeking information.

THE POWELL SOCIETY GUIDE BOOKS

In the sixties the Powell Society began as a loose organization of river running lawyers, doctors and professionals from Boulder and Denver, Colorado.

In 1967 the U.S. Geological Survey, Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society planned a trip to commemorate the Powell Expedition of 1869. Gene Shoemaker, a famous astro-astronomer, combined his knowledge of geology and river running to rephotograph the pictures taken on Powell's second exploration of the Colorado River in 1871—72. Their work, ““In the Footsteps of John Wesley Powell,”” was published in 1987, and began photo matching work continues. The Powell Society of Denver, Colorado was in the process of writing a series of river geological and historical guidebooks. Members of the Powell Society accompanied the six segments of the trip to gather information for their guidebooks.

The Powell Society guides covered Dinosaur National Monument and Vicinity; Desolation & Gray Canyons; Labyrinth, Stillwater and Cataract Canyons; and Marble Gorge & Grand Canyon. Then guides authored by well-known geologists covered geological information, historical information and rated the rapids (Colorado River Rating System). Although the river maps were small, one could follow the progress down the river through the detailed descriptions in the booklet. Again, unless one knew about the “Society” the guidebooks were only advertised by Park Service Natural History Associations.

FOUR CORNERS GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY SAN JUAN GUIDE

The Four Corners Geological Society was formed in the 1950's and conducted geological trips down the San Juan River. In the 1960's Don Baars, a geology professor at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, led many trips down the San Juan and wrote profusely of the region's geology. Baars conducted trips and collaborated with the Nevills' and Kenny Ross in conducting the geological trips.

Although many of Baars' papers were published in the 1960's, it wasn't until 1974 that the Four Corners Geological Society published a very complete guide to the San Juan. Primarily oriented to geology, the guide in the image of the Powell Society Guides, also covered river history subjects. Small cairns, no longer present, were placed along the river as keys to the guide.

THE BELKNAP GUIDE BOOKS

Bill Belknap was a well-known photographer of the Grand Canyon, who rubbed elbows with the

likes of Buzz Holmstrom, Norm Nevills, Don Harris, Bert Loper, Lois Jotter, Frank Wright, and Doc Marston. Bill was an avid river runner with many notable runs including the jet boat up run of the Grand Canyon in 1960.

In the 1950's the Belknap family conceived the idea of producing river guidebooks. Bill, Buzz, Fran and Loie Belknap all played key roles in preparing the guides. Their endeavor evolved into the Belknap family's publishing firm, Westwater Books, and included guides for Westwater Canyon & Canyonlands National Park, Dinosaur National Monument, and Desolation & Gray Canyons. The guides that eventually were published in waterproof editions contained accurate maps, interpretive material covering history, geology, flora and fauna, and many of the Belknap photographs. These guides were the forerunners of today's modern river guides. Still in publication and revised regularly the Belknap guidebooks still contain some of the best information on rivers for river runners.

MAJOR RIVER RAFTING BOOKS

Until the early 1970's most river books were oriented to canoeing and Eastern Rivers. In 1973 Michael Jenkinson published *Wild Rivers of North America*, a potpourri of river information and history. The book was an important link to sources for Western river rafters.

In 1975 William McGinnis, a graduate student at a California university published a river runner's guidebook for his master's thesis project. McGinnis book, *Whitewater Rafting*, was the first major definitive and inclusive compilation of information about Western Rivers.

In 1972 I traveled around the country running rivers to gather information to write a detailed river guide. During my travels I ran a 12' Selway down Lodore and flipped in Disaster Falls. Shaken, I roped my boat down all major rapids in Dinosaur. On that trip I met Bill McGinnis, and shared all of my information with him - which he copied and used as the basis for his book. In the meantime I had sent my draft out to a many river runners for their review and comment. I received many suggestions, but a disturbing remark from a long time Oregon river runner left its mark on me: "Are you writing this guide because you love the rivers and want to help them, or to feed your ego." After several weeks hurt and deep thought about that remark - I burned my manuscript and began looking at rivers and river running in a different light.

River guidebooks can provide important information to river runners. But river runners should understand that conditions can change rapidly and dramatically, rendering a guide meaningless. While a river guide's basic orientation can be critical, too often river runners allow the guidebook to take away their right to discovery of places and self. As Kenny Ross told me: "Recognize, don't memorize. The river tells you what it is doing and what its about to do."

In these days of store-bought river runners and agency bought information, there is no feeling comparable to making one's own discovery. To learn to scan for anomalies that contain miracles and nonsense along the river is to begin to understand our place in these beautiful and fragile canyons.

A river guide does not take you down the river - you must do that.

References:

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Guide Book and Belknap River Guide books.