

FRANCIS TRIBUNE

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It have been a while since I have done a Francis Tribune, this in spite of the fact that our lives have just been packed. Just last week I bought groceries at IGA instead of Albertsons, and my heart still palpitates at rates consistent with watching an action movie while sleeping on the couch. I really should write a Tribune article about it, but I know that the next thing will come and crowd out the excitement of the groceries, and all will be lost. Since before Christmas and the last Francis Tribune, I have failed to chronologize the 3200 miles road trip around Christmas, a successful attempt to visit family who for some reason saw no need to come see us; the end of an injury free ski season spent mostly with Special Olympics athletes on the magic carpet's learner's slope; the odometer readings of various vehicles complete with the use of mathematics to determine total miles drive for a given period of time, the ... sad but these may never be told. But as I contemplate the events of the past few weeks, there has got be a story. My reader(s) knows full well that I have written about less.



Floating the Grand Canyon

I have now been down the Grand Canyon, the holy grail of river trips. In 1992, I signed up on the National Parks Service's (NPS) waiting list for a permit to privately float the Grand Canyon. Me and several hundred others. Even more thousands followed me, and the waiting list became 30+ years, so NPS changed their format to a lottery. But they still had to deal with those of us on the waiting list. A few



Mark demonstrates how to row through a rapid. The really big waves are to his left, and the idea is to avoid them and go where the waves are not so big. (Unless you are crazy like Jackson and seek out the big waves.) I ran this rapid where the waves were big and it scared me to death. Also note that in the picture, the 18' raft is so big that it makes the rapids look small. They aren't.

years ago, NPS called me up, offered me a 2016 permit, and I accepted. My soon-to-be 24 year wait is almost over.

But then Bob asked me if I was interested in a Grand Canyon float in 2014. While most multi-day float trips are vacationesque with a "just do it" type of approach, the Grand Canyon is different. Everything is grander: travel, length, rapids, logistics. Before I could commit, I needed permission from my employer (taking three weeks off in the middle of the school year is an



The canyon walls made me feel small—that and all the big waves that demanded my attention.

unusual request for most school teachers); from my spouse (I should have been suspicious when Sue was quite eager for me to go); and from NPS (there was a time when if I went on someone else's trip, I would have had to forfeit my 2016 permit). And there were other issues – the cost would

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exceed \$1000, the transportation – it is a 1000+ miles just to get there, the needed equipment – my stuff might work, and of course, my physical fitness and skill level. I got the okay at work and home and NPS. The equipment needs were provided by companies that had a program where you give them money and they loan stuff. The rest was left to fate. I was on. But with who?

It is difficult to put together a group like this. Sixteen people need to be available for a 3+ week adventure that costs a fair amount and requires advanced river rafting skills. Bob, our permit holder, wanted some experience on our trip, and after inviting me, Mark, Jeri, and John from Great Falls, he had enough of the unexperienced. As the launch date approached, our group look pretty sad. Besides experience and river savvy, we needed people that could jell with us. For 19 days, this group will camp together, eat together, pee together (very popular), converse together, work and play together, and probably most importantly, looks out for other another. For 19 days this is our society, there is no escape. We needed people that you would save us when that time came, and for whom we would return the favor — kind of checks and balance system with major consequences if it doesn't work.

As it turned out, Gary, Buddy, Val, Bob, Cindy, Jackson, Steve, and Brad – all from Bozeman – joined us, and the GF five are forever grateful. I think we give Brad, whom Bob had met on a previous river trip, most of the credit for recruiting the Bozeman Eight. Within this Bozeman group were expert rowers, an expert kayaker who took rescue and safety serious, rivers rats that know how to set up river camps, cooks that can set up a camp kitchen and handle meal prep and complicated recipes, and (maybe most important) they knew how to keep the sandblasted and timorous river rats happy and confident. Maria (from

Vermont but sort of from Bozeman), Belinda (from Billings) and Phil (from Idaho and places beyond) filled out the permit. We were all a bunch of old people, in our 50's and 60's. Men and women of great experience might be another way to say it. (I confess, there were a couple that were not

quite 50, but their great maturity made their apparent age much greater than their actual age.

Conversely, it is possible that someone was beyond 60's, but great immaturity made the apparent age much younger.) No one knew everyone else, and some we met for the first time at the put-in. As far as I can tell, this group jelled amazingly well, everyone contributed his or her part to the esprit de corps. My only concern is that it has been said, "If you cannot determine who the jerk is on a river



I had actually had heard of this place although I did not know its name—Redwall Cavern. When I first saw it I was disappointed to find it so small. John Powell had said that 50,000 people could fit inside. Then I got inside and I was the one that was small.

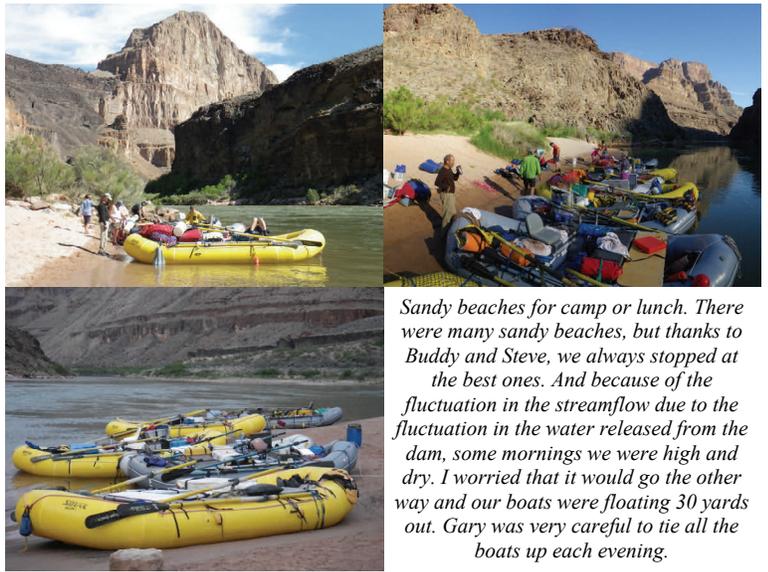


The fashion police can't touch us out here.

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 trip, it is probably you.”

The Grand Canyon is grand on many dimensions. The scenery is on steroids. Canyon walls on both sides rise thousands of feet about the river, and continue for hundreds of miles. The river tries hard to hurt you and even ripples can send you swimming. Before we launched, I researched the canyon in order to better prepare myself, to take in all the neat stuff and learn the right moves in all the rapids, but with knowledge comes stress. The Grand Canyon has generated more published words and pictures than all other western rivers combined. The literature is verbose with superlatives; it celebrates accomplishments, it gives a mystic surreal quality to the place. My story is not so obsequious. Everything seemed overwhelming. On the one hand, it was easy to become jaded, but also it was easy to be completely freaked out and go stir crazy. John Wesley Powell called the place a granite prison. His crew was constantly looking for a way out. My claustrophobia fears never materialized, but that might be because I concentrated my worries on the rapids.



Sandy beaches for camp or lunch. There were many sandy beaches, but thanks to Buddy and Steve, we always stopped at the best ones. And because of the fluctuation in the streamflow due to the fluctuation in the water released from the dam, some mornings we were high and dry. I worried that it would go the other way and our boats were floating 30 yards out. Gary was very careful to tie all the boats up each evening.

My skill remained a concern throughout the trip. After successfully negotiating House Rock Rapid at mile 17, I started to get confident, maybe even nonchalant. But then I flipped in Grapevine Rapid, and for the rest of the trip, I fretted over every ripple, realizing that even the lesser rapids that I had never heard of (i.e. Grapevine) were capable of flipping my raft. I did not have another incident for the rest of the trip, but that was due to vigilance, caution, luck, and the helpful guidance of our group. Gary took my boat through Horn Rapid, and helped me get my confidence back. Mark and Brad took swims in rapids and helped me realize that we all have our mishaps when given enough



chances. And I thank Steve for flipping his raft in Granite in much the same spirit as a father will purposely lose a game of checkers so that his young son will not feel bad. Steve, it worked; I got my game back. The waves and the holes were bigger than most I had ever done, but most rapids were not dangerous with keeper holes and people eating rocks. For the most part, there was a quite eddy at the bottom of the rapid where boats could be reflipped and bodies could be collected safe and sound – albeit a bit cold. The water comes out of the dam at 40-something° F, and it never warms much.

The Grand Canyon is very fine sand, but not in an elegant way. It is one of those things that you bring home with you – just ask Sue. It is more like grainy dirt. And it is everywhere. It is on your shoes, in your shoes, between your toes, and under your toenails. It is all over the boat, on your skin, in your hair, in your sleeping bag, your tent, your pasta salad, the groover seat, the cleaning water. It is in your dust proof camera, your cereal at breakfast, mixed up with your contacts, in your underwear, in the map you are reading. And it works as scouring powder that scrapes whatever surface, and then leaves a new film of more sand where it scours that. I am so tired of sand. It did not help that the slightest wind planted sand wherever. One especially windy morning I wore ski goggles. Hey, you never know when you might need

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Here are few excellent photos from Buddy's collection. In the second one down, John is rowing and I am loving being a passenger, in the rest I am rowing and Jeri is my passenger. I am impressed with how big the rafts look and how they make the waves and rapids small. Once in a rapid, about all one can do with these big rafts is hang on and maybe try to keep it straight. I wonder if a smaller boat would be better since it could be controlled more easily. Yet, as I remember it, the waves were big enough and the thrill grand enough, I am not sure I want a smaller boat to make for more thrills and possibly more impressive photographs.

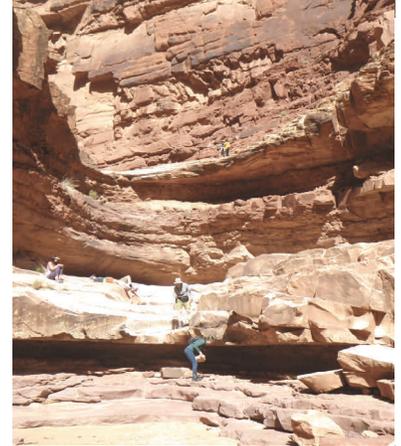
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a pair of ski goggles in Grand Canyon so I had packed them. I was teased unmercifully for wearing them, but I wouldn't be surprised that next time the persecutors will bring ski goggles. At home the sand lingers. Sue is sweeping it off the floor, wiping it off the furniture, and finding the washing machine lined with clumps of fine red sand. Pick up any random item, and you can announce with 98.6% accuracy, "This went down the Grand Canyon."

I read somewhere that it is best to not wear underwear while floating the Grand Canyon, an idea I considered as some twisted opinion from a wannabe free-thinker, but I too adopted sans underwear. On the trip, it never came up in conversation. I never asked anyone, "Are you wearing underwear?" but in my experienced opinion, underwear was just another tool for scraping unmentionable places. And speaking of clothes in general, there is no point changing clothes to be clean. It would usually take ten minutes to render a clean set of clothes to a container for dirt. Extra clothes were necessary for warmth early on in the trip, and were handy when you could not find the clothes you are looking for, but not for freshening up. There was no freshening. It was pretty cool when Jackson or Steve or Val donned some previously unseen clothing and made a fashion statement, and for a moment they even looked clean, but for the most part, clothing was a function of sun protection and dirt collection. I wore long sleeved shirts, long pants, hat, gloves, and neoprene booties or socks with sandals. And for my face, I grew a beard augmented with a touch of sun screen. The sun never got a chance on me, except for my lips which burned the first day and never did heal until the trip was over.

Weather in March, anywhere, is tough to predict. In general, our weather was wonderful.

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Sides hikes were fascinating, but there just wasn't time to do very many. Steve and Bob picked out a few of the best ones. The side hikes emphasized the overwhelming nature of the Grand Canyon to a first time visitor. Everything is sooooo big. We look pretty small here. All my 913 pictures look like cheap snap shots that don't capture the essence of the place. If I return, I hope I do not lose the grandeur of the place.

Steve, one of our elders who had visited this place more than any of us, was like a little kid when he was telling me about the place on the bottom. His excitement about the place was natural and unpretentious, but now in the comfort of my room with time to reflect, his awe struck response to a place he had visited many times before is a favorite moment for me.



Buddy told us that this vantage point is the most photographed point on the river. We are hiking up to a granary used by early Indians to store grain. The hike was mildly terrifying, and I have no idea where the Indians planted grain so they could store it up here. My theory is that it was a hoax by NPS to weed out the rift raft from the river. This picture also illustrates my poor picture taking, although it was a cloudy day with limited photogenic light. I am hoping to get copies of some of the other's pictures. They have got to be better than mine.

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The first night – the night before we actually launched – I woke up with frost on my bivy bag and my winter coat was handy, but the days and nights progressively got warmer. Daytime temperatures eventually were in the 80's and 90's. The nights got warm enough to make sleep uncomfortable. It tried to rain one evening and skies were mostly cloudy early in the trip, but I reminded myself that it was 7° F when we left Great Falls. Several days during the first week, we were hit with wind – upstream wind of gale force, strong enough to take a loaded 18' raft in current, and blow it upstream, and the wind created whitecaps and spray that drenched us with volumes of water comparable to rapids or downpours. One day we spent a couple hours hunkered down in whatever shelter we could find waiting for the wind to ease up. Sometimes we had little tornado like waterspouts. It was pretty cool to see when watching them from shore, not quite as interesting when hit by one while on the boat.

I could go on and on, but the Grand Canyon is documented better by others and you can read all about it. We were blessed with good weather,

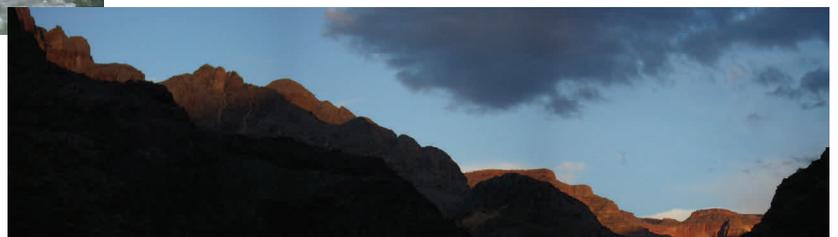
good camaraderie, and minimal mishaps, but the blessings did not stop there. We had great food due to good ingredients and people that know how to make good great. I took notes on how Buddy and Val set up a kitchen. I will be making adjustments to my camp kitchen and B&V will get credit for the improvements. Gary encouraged me to expand my repertoire on dutch oven dishes, and patiently he tried to teach me how to tie knots. Maria's example has encouraged me to experiment a bit when recipe and ingredients don't jive. In spite of the relentless grinding sand, we had minimal health issues. Cuts and sores don't heal quickly in that environment, but our resident medic Jackson kept us all safe and sound. Besides being knowledgeable in the ways of medicine, he had really sharp needles for digging out cactus spines, and he had really good advice like, "Don't stand so close to that cliff, Vern." And if Jackson could not heal with skills and equipment, Belinda and Cindy made it all better with empathy and feeling. If we had an owie, or were cold, or a cramp that needed attended, C&B were all over it. And they did not accept denial as a viable excuse. Cindy found a scorpion on Mark's shoulder, she got it off, and it became a "show and tell" item.

Have I mentioned how grateful the Great Falls Five were to the Bozeman Eight? We trusted Steve and Buddy's familiarity with the best camps and the baddest rapids and reasonable distances that could be covered each day, and so we had the best, the safest, and the smoothest. While fighting the headwind, I was by far the slowest to reach the scouting beach for House Rock Rapid, but no one gave me a hard time about it. When I flipped, everyone got involved with my rescue and recovery. It took nine people to flip the raft back over, and the rest of the crew took care of Jeri and me with warm clothes and general comfort and concern. Phil even built a fire, however I think that was for

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Sometimes the only thing to do is go right down the teeth of the rapid and hope for the best. It usually worked, but the slightest error—or the slightest bit of bad luck—made all the difference. And if you flip or get washed out, it really isn't that big a deal. Your pride takes a hit, and no matter how much you know about rescue it is scary, and it might delay us a bit while we right the ship and tend to the baptized, but the terror is over in a few seconds, and life goes on.



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FRANCIS TRIBUNE

PROVIDING READERS WITH MORE AND MORE ABOUT LESS AND LESS WITH THE
HOPE THAT SOMEDAY EVERYTHING WILL BE PROVIDED ABOUT NOTHING.

The Francis Tribune is written by Vern Francis and edited and censored by Vern's superior, Sue Francis. The newsletter is published four times annually, give or take a bunch, addressing a wide range of bona fide and fictitious issues of the day. The written words are mostly therapeutic for the writer, and it is with the upmost sincerity that said writer apologies to the unfortunate reader(s). Hey, there could be a reader, for that matter, there could be two readers and thus the plural option. The content is complete fabrication; however, it is not beyond the writer's conscience to include unadulterated truth when such content enhances a story or helps develop a theme. Neither writer nor censor accepts responsibility for damages that may occur via reading this newsletter. And anyone who may wish to complain is just itching for a fight and it would be better if said malcontent would shut up and write his or her own stories. If there is great appreciation of this non-award winning publication (hey, it could happen) or if you would like to receive future editions, respond to the contact information to the left and the powers that be will see what they can do.

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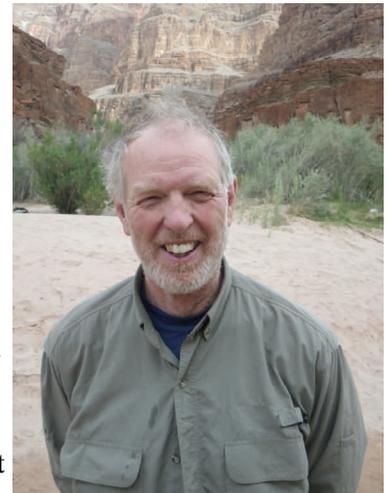
himself as he was freezing and had his own issues with cold. And when Steve and Cindy flipped, Jeri and I needed to return the favor in re-flipping the raft and making sure everyone was warm. We enjoyed watching Buddy and Gary and Steve go through the big rapids, and appreciate their determination to get the rest of us through safely. Bob, the kayaking trip leader, and Bob, the Bozeman kayaker par excellent, have convinced me that good trip needs a couple kayakers. And fellow Nebraska boy Brad proved that honing one's skills on the Loup and Elkhorn really do – 45 years later – progress to the Grand Canyon. Val and Maria and Phil did little things around camp – well, actually big things – that often would go unnoticed because they did them so smoothly.

And so to the Great Falls Five: Jeri, it was you and I for 90% of the trip and you are a wonderful float companion. John, you were the backup rower for this trip and we needed you. And you proved yourself capable, next time you will be a primary rower. And Mark, with this 225 miles added to all the rivers we have rowed together, I think it is safe to say that somewhere on this trip we pasted the 1000 miles mark. And Bob, thanks for including us in the river party. I know your Trip Leader status was the result of a lottery drawing, but you accepted and performed the role well.

And now I look to my permit in 2016. I am pretty sure that Jodi and Claude want to join me. Richard has been waiting for my permit since the mid-90's. Sue is on the fence, my report has not convinced her to want to go. And there are others that I OWE at least an invitation. But I also see the value of experience and kayak support and there are fifteen proven GC river runners that I would love to have join me in 2016. Really! Even you, Maria, in spite of all the hard times you gave me. 2016! It is a testimony to the grandeur of a Grand Canyon float that you would go again, even if it is with me. My permit is for 16 people. I am glad I have a couple years to sort this out.



Most of the plants in the Grand Canyon are more than ready for vengeance. Walking near them will hurt.



Eighteen days out. I did not plan to grow a beard but my shaver died. I was a bit disappointed that my beard was grey. And when Belinda took this picture, I did not know what I looked like. But she was pretty sure that I needed some documentation of my appearance. Using three free motel razors and some cheap shaving cream, it painfully all came off. Mark said it was the longest he had ever gone without shaving. Me too. And neither of us had our wives on this trip.