

Transcription: Grand Canyon Oral History

Interviewee: Curt Sauer (CS)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Curt Sauer recounts experiences working in various roles at the Grand Canyon from 1981-1983

Date of Interview: September 30, 2020

Part 5

Method of Interview: Phone interview

Transcriber: Daniel Freed

Date of Transcription: December 15, 2020

Transcription Reviewers: Sue Priest, Curt Sauer

Keys: Grand Canyon, Colorado River, Grand Canyon Management Plan, lottery for private permits, river unit, boatman training, helicopter rescues, Tom Caldwell, Marv Jensen, Steve Martin, launch dates, leave no trace, Tom Workman, river patrols, high water rescues, Dick Marks, Barb Smith, Sam West, John Thomas, sexual harassment, Crystal Rapid, Georgie White

TM: Today is Wednesday, September 30th, 2020. This is a Part 5 Grand Canyon oral history interview with Curt Sauer. My name is Tom Martin. Good morning Curt, how are you today?

CS: Good morning Tom, I'm doing great.

TM: Good. May we have your permission to conduct this oral history over the telephone?

CS: Yes, sir.

TM: Thank you. We wrapped up Part 4, you had started work in maybe 1981 as the river permit manager for Grand Canyon National Park. You had started talking about some of the details of that job, including a computer. Can you tell me a little bit about that computer you were using back in 1981?

CS: Well, it was called a "word processor" and it was over at park headquarters. So, I'd leave the offices at the ranger building down by what was then the post office and go over to the administrative section. You got oriented on this word processor that secretaries at the time were... It was a step up from the electric typewriter.

TM: Was it the size of an electric typewriter? What did it look like?

CS: It looked like an organ.

TM: [Laughs] My gosh!

CS: It was large, it was, I don't know, four or five feet long, probably five feet high. You sat in it like you were sitting at a piano or an organ. Your keyboard was there. I think it was the first "computer" that the park at Grand Canyon had acquired and it was... I don't know what it was, an IBM probably or something. It was designed for processing memos and letters and whatnot, mass mailings. But it allegedly had the capability of generating random numbers, at least that's what it said in the manual. We were trying to come up with a method for generating random numbers for drawing for the private river permit system. We utilized that. I think I followed all the directions and I just eventually decided that, yeah, these are about as random as they're going to get. So all the permits when they came in by the due dates had been numbered and we simply had a drawing using the random number sheet generated by the word processor. And that was at a time when the river management plan had been put into service. I think we went from 90% or 95% commercial activity to 70% or 80% commercial and 30% or 20% private, and that was the start of the private river running increase in the number of permits issued to private folks.

TM: So, you had a bunch of people, they would send you in a request to join the lottery and you would assign them a number, like the first one would be like number one, and then two and three and four and five and on and on...and then you only had so many permits to get out.

CS: Right.

TM: So you'd have the random number generate in the number of permits you had and it would just randomly spew that out?

CS: Yes. And then you'd pull out... If number seven was first, you'd take the seventh one and they were granted a permit.

TM: And you would do that until you had no more permits to give out and that was it.

CS: Right.

TM: Okay. Pretty simple.

CS: And then [chuckles] invariably somebody would put in and they wanted to run in July and then something would come up and they couldn't get their trip together or whatnot, so they'd cancel or they wouldn't send in the final paperwork in time. So we'd take the next random number and call them and see if they could make that slot.

TM: Nice!

CS: So we tried to keep it as full as we could and most of the time it worked out.

TM: Do you have any idea what the cancellation rate was back then? I mean, how many people wouldn't get it together?

CS: No, not really. It was frequent. It's kind of complicated putting together a private trip when you got three or four or five different boats.

TM: It is, yeah.

CS: Four or five different boatmen and crews that they think they have, and then people change their plans or get a job and say, "Well, I can't go."

TM: Right.

CS: And then they scramble around for another boatman or boatwoman. So it was not uncommon for people with permits to cancel, but I don't know what the percentage was.

TM: Okay. So besides running the lottery, what other duties did you have?

CS: Well, I was still in the ranger ranks, so I continued with South Rim patrol operations and emergency search and rescue because of my EMT status. Became the primary responder to river incidents. Then there was the whole administrative background: writing response letters for the River Unit Manager to people that had questions about the implementation of the Colorado River Management Plan. I also taught first aid to boatmen at the annual boatman training, which varied in location to location each year. We had probably 30 or 40 people that attended. And it was more than just first aid—it was a three day, as I recall, a three day boatman orientation for the commercial river runners discussing all kinds of things: rules and regulations for taking care of the canyon, how river trips were being permitted, what was going to be checked, their boats, and their general concerns about what was going on on the river 'cause the boatmen and the boatwomen know that canyon very well and they came up with lots of

ideas on trails that needed to be worked on, crowding at certain stretches in the river because beaches were changing.

TM: Hey Curt? Hang on a second. You've covered four different points that I want to go into in depth. [chuckles] Let's start with river incidents. I'm assuming that you did that by helicopter?

CS: Yeah. The boatmen, very seldom could they get out with any radios, just because of the nature of the canyon, so they would use signal mirrors. They would find planes that were flying over—either scenic tours at lower elevations or it wasn't infrequent for them to flash commercial airlines that were flying over the canyon. The pilots would see the mirror flash and they came to understand that that was an emergency signal. Through their communications systems they would get ahold of Grand Canyon dispatch, give the best location that they could based on where they thought the mirror flash was—at river mile 20 or river mile 110, or they'd say "about 20 miles west of Phantom Ranch." So the call would come in from dispatch that there was a mirror flash and we would respond. So I would go up to the helipad with a jump kit, meet the helicopter and we would fly off the South Rim and fly down into the canyon. Frequently if they said it was 20 miles west of Phantom, we'd enter at Phantom and fly the river. And we were flying the river about 100 feet above the river. All of the pilots that I flew with were Vietnam veterans.

TM: Okay, do you remember any of their names?

CS: Tom Caldwell was one I remember very well.

TM: What can you tell me about Tom Caldwell?

CS: Well, typical pilot. Confident, experienced. I flew several missions with him. There was another fellow by the name of...I think his name was Rick, but I'm not sure about that. I'll go back to Tom for a minute. Tom and I were on several different flights and on one of them, we had a near air mishap. To me, it looked like the other helicopter was about a mile away, but I remember him saying, "I refuse to die in a mid-air crash!" So, about seven years ago, Tom was involved in a mid-air crash. I'm not sure where that was, I think it was down flying into Flagstaff, but I'm not sure.

TM: Yeah, it was about a half mile from our house.

CS: Oh yeah? Well, there you go. Small world. So we would fly, especially with this other pilot, we would fly above treetops on the South Rim and that's how he flew, because that's how he flew in 'Nam. You don't go up high. So we would fly over the treetops—pinyon pines—and drop down off the rim and immediately dive down to the river at a rapid rate of descent and make up 5,000 feet in elevation change. And then we'd fly the river and look for a boat trip that was in distress, whether it was private or commercial. My job was to get out and assess the situation and, if need be, evacuate the patient or call for a second helicopter.

TM: This would be a Bell Jet Ranger? What kinds of helicopters were you using, do you remember?

CS: Yeah, it was a Jet Ranger. You could readily fasten a rig for internal litter evacuations. And the boatmen were always very helpful. If we had to extract using a litter, then we couldn't take anybody else with us, but frequently there was a family member that was also on the trip, so we would take them out as well.

TM: So did the rivers have a signal panel and an X or something or would you kind of slowly work your way along? You'd see a river trip, everybody would of course would see you and they'd all be looking at you, and you'd just kind of fly on by looking to see if they were waving?

CS: Every time we came across a river trip, whether they were still on the river or they were beached, mostly if they were still on the river, we'd slow down and they'd just wave. Most of the time they had found a beach and they had many people standing on the river. You could hear the helicopter coming and they'd be waving frantically, or there might be a mirror flash, or they could be an X on the beach, or a panel out, but it was obvious that that was the trip that we needed to contact.

TM: And you mentioned with Tom, a near air mishap. Was that because you guys saw another helicopter not far away or how did that...?

CS: Yeah, there was another helicopter not far away, I think it was a scenic flight. Not sure it was the same company.

TM: So it would kind of make sense why Tom was at treetop level, because he was trying to avoid the scenic flights making their loops.

CS: Yeah, and it was just more expeditious to get there quickly.

TM: And then you guys would drop into the canyon and you'd be out of their way. What kind of injuries would you see, then, down on the river?

CS: Head lacerations, broken bones, heart attacks, drownings. That was actually a frequent call would be missing person. In the mornings we'd respond to a flash and there was a passenger missing. Now middle of the night... I think it's still the same now, but the way it was then, your human waste, you were supposed to go down by the river to urinate, and then they had ammo cans fashioned as toilets and that was where you would defecate into plastic bags that were treated with lime. Those were loaded into the ammo cans in such a manner as to be transported out of the canyon. But people would go down to the river's edge in the nighttime to urinate and they'd get a little too close to the river and fall in. I always believed that the primary cause of that accident was alcohol. But we never...not to my recollection anyway, 'cause this was a hot topic every time...so it was just a drowning.

TM: Do you have any idea when the park started using helicopters in a big way to respond to river incidents? Again, commercial use really grew in the second half of the 1960s, and this was early in the 1980s, so clearly sometime in that timeframe from the late 60s through the 70s, that would have become much more commonplace.

CS: I remember in '72 when I was in Cottonwood, that I would frequently hear helicopters being dispatched to the river. So, sometime in the 70s, I'm not sure. Eventually we had a helicopter stationed at the South Rim at the fire cache. It was leased from, at that time Grand Canyon Helicopters. They were just another scenic tour company out of Tusayan and they got the contract to have a ship stationed at the South Rim. Sometime in the 70s, late 70s, maybe early 80s, there was enough activity on the river and shuttling people to the North Rim that it was more expeditious to have a helicopter on standby rather than waiting for a helicopter that was out on a tour to get back, unload their passengers, and then fly up to the South Rim and meet us at the helispot.

TM: Got it. And in theory, well I can't say, I'm assuming that the Grand Canyon Helicopters do have different pilots, some of which knew the canyon well and some might not. So whichever one sort of came in and unloaded, they'd say, "Well go up and fly to the park cause they want us to do something up there," and would that individual have a knowledge of someone like Caldwell, who flew the canyon a lot and if somebody said, "Twenty miles west of Phantom," he'd know exactly where to go.

CS: Exactly. And you became familiar with your pilots and developed a rapport with them. So that was a good part of it.

TM: Okay. And then you mentioned response letters about the Colorado River Management Plan. That doesn't sound near as exciting as flying with Tom. What was that all about?

CS: It varied. I was drafting letters for the River Unit Manager, Marv Jensen or Steve Martin, to respond to various and sundry questions. Some of them were from owners and operators of commercial trips, some of them were answering questions from private river runners. I remember one of the first letters I wrote for Marv Jensen—this is a story that always stuck in my memory—I was an EMT and whenever I saw red, it reminded me of blood. So I drafted up this letter for Marv. He finally got around to reviewing it maybe half an hour later, and he called my office and said, "Why don't you come on in here, I got a few changes." I walked into his office and there was more red on that piece of paper than there was black! I said, "Hold on a minute, Marv!" I trotted back to my office, opened my jump kit, got a couple gauze bandages, ripped them open, ran back into his office, and started applying direct pressure to the bleeding. He said, "What are you doing?!?" I said, "There's blood on this! There's more red than there is black!" He said, "Well, there's just a few changes I want made." [chuckles] "Okay, we'll make them!" It was probably...I can attribute my writing skills to Marv Jensen and Steve Martin, and then later on Superintendent Dick Marks, 'cause the letters had to be right and they knew what they wanted it to say. And it gave me a good orientation to what the issues were. The commercial owners weren't real happy that they had their use levels cut by some 20 percent, which effected their bottom line. They were all very well to do and many of them had direct access to the congressmen and the senators. So when we interacted with them you had to know what you were talking about. They disagreed with what the plan was, and Park Service thought that it was a good plan. It was highly controversial. Regional Director Howard Chapman made several different trips out to the Grand Canyon because of the River Management Plan. That went on the entire length of time that I was there and I'm sure it continued after I left.

TM: So I'm trying to remember that history. The park came out with a wilderness-framed plan in 1979 which converted all the commercial owners motor trips to river trips and increased their user days for doing that. Increased the private, the do-it-yourself folks, some too. That plan got pushed back with some congressional assistance, if you will. Was that at this time we're talking about? Then morphed into the 1981 river management plan which was basically a no-change alternative, I guess? Well, not quite, but...

CS: Yeah, that was the 1981 plan when I got involved with... And there were still motorized trips and oar powered trips commercially.

TM: Yeah, okay. 1981 plan, alright. And they were still pushing you guys on that, oh my! Hmm, okay.

CS: Yeah. And commercial river companies trying to get the launch dates that they needed was another part of my job.

TM: How did that work?

CS: As I recall, there was an annual commercial river running two day meeting that the owners attended, with some of their boat people/boatmen/boatwomen/boat people and they would negotiate amongst themselves. Something would come up and they wouldn't be able to fill one of their launch dates and another company would be able to and so they'd scramble around and change the schedules. Mostly the schedules, obviously, had to be developed well in the future so that they could advertise and fill them. That was done during the winters.

TM: And there was one company that only launched on Sundays? Was that...?

CS: I don't recall that.

TM: Whether I heard that or not, I don't know. Okay, but understand, developing that well into the future would make sense, because they would need to put a brochure together and get that out to people with a date on it.

CS: And schedule their personnel.

TM: You mentioned that there was a two day meeting with the owners and some of the guides and you would work out scheduling. What other things did you talk about during those meetings?

CS: Use levels, regulations, disposal of human waste. Mostly scheduling is what I remember. And, you know, Marv and Steve were the ones that were running those meetings.

TM: Okay. I think you already told me what you remember about Marv Jensen, but maybe you didn't. And about Steve Martin. What do you remember about these gents?

CS: Marv was from Utah. Had a lovely family, treated us like family. Treated Barb Smith, his secretary, like family. We had absolute loyalty to Marv Jensen and to Steve as well. So Marv, he was a soft-spoken man, but he had his certain beliefs about how the river should be managed and he had the support of the superintendent and that's how he expected us to manage the river unit and manage the people. He was a good man. I think he left the Grand Canyon and became assistant superintendent at Mojave Preserve when it was first created. That also caused quite the hullabaloo in Congress. I don't remember the players' names, but I think the first year's annual budget for the Mojave National Preserve, courtesy of congress, was \$1. I'm not sure where he went from there. He didn't have much of a staff, obviously. But I think that's where he went when he left the river unit. That would have been about '83, I guess.

TM: And what do you remember about Steve?

CS: Steve was a very intelligent, funny guy. Very well driven by Park Service goals. I think he became Regional Director, I think. And he was very active, he was also a boatman. When he could, he went on patrol and did everything that boatmen do, from helping out around the kitchen at night to trail work, and then would get back in the office and deal with all the politics.

TM: You mentioned the annual boatman training, three day orientation for the commercial employees at different locations. I'm trying to remember—I did this interview with Steve Martin and he talks a little about this—it was the park's idea to help the employees and listen, as you said, to the employees about what needed to be done and how to get them a little more oriented with sort of the park early "leave no trace" concepts. Does that ring a bell?

CS: Yeah. You were basically floating through wilderness and you needed to "leave no trace" is the phrase. So the bonfires slowly went away to fires that were built in, kind of like 3 foot by 3 foot aluminum fire pits that they carried with them. You would find rocks along the way around camp, and build your fire in that fire pit that was supported off the sand by rocks. And then in the mornings, you'd make sure that the fire was dead out and those ashes were carried out as well. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if those ashes were dumped in the river. The Colorado is a mighty river as you know. It always surprised me that, okay, if you're going to urinate, go down to the river's edge and at least urinate in the wet sand 'cause you knew that that was what the river level was going to be for the next several days cause of releases from Glen Canyon Dam, and it would be washed away. That was the best solution because there was no feasible way you could carry all that urine out on a 7-day trip for 36 people or 14-day trip for 20 people. So that was the best solution. I think at one time they even considered port-a-potties at the various camp beaches, which was fortunately decided that that was

ridiculous from the logistics standpoint, plus people are urinating in between camps. So, there were discussions like that. Fire pits—you used to just collect wood and build some large bonfires. When you have that many people and that many trips going down the canyon, the beaches, which are sand, basically off-white yellow, ended up being full of charcoal and ash and blackened in the camp areas and that wasn't acceptable. So we had first aid and we had rescue procedures. Just general operational stuff.

TM: And those were held at the Albright Training Center? Or you mentioned they moved around, where else would they be?

CS: Well, let's see. Albright, what's the town—Page, Page, Arizona. The owners meetings were frequently held in Las Vegas, of course. The boatmen got to go to Page. I don't think we ever went to Flagstaff, but Page or Albright is basically what I remember. And there was a lot of socializing at night. As I mentioned earlier, they were boatmen/boatwomen/boatpeople that worked for the Park Service that came from the river running community so they knew all the people, well, many of the people they were meeting with and in the evenings they had river stories to tell. You know, another thing that was covered was the history of the Grand Canyon and the geology of the Grand Canyon. So there was quite the educational component about natural history.

TM: Would you bring in special speakers for that?

CS: Yeah, there were. I think Bob Euler probably did some presentations, or some of his cultural staff. I think Ernie Kuncel might have come a couple times to teach some more advanced medicine. That's my recollection.

TM: Alright. It was curious that the private river runners they didn't get an orientation like this. I guess that's because they sort of only did one trip a year. They'd come in, they'd do their trip, they'd go away and you'd never see them again. Whereas the...

CS: Well they received information on how to properly deal with their camps and orientation through the mail. And then when they checked in at Lees Ferry, every trip was checked before it left. They were checked for safety to make sure that everybody had proper lifejackets, and they were checked to make sure they had ammo cans set up for their porta potties, and that they had a fire bin.

TM: Did you do any of those orientations there, yourself?

CS: Oh, I did a few of them, but mostly that was Tom Workman, was the Lees Ferry ranger at the time. He did almost all of the check-ins. I don't really recall who filled in for him. At Lees Ferry, Tom was the Grand Canyon ranger and there was another Glen Canyon ranger stationed at Lees Ferry. On Tom's days off, I think the Glen Canyon ranger did the checkouts.

TM: So they would kind of cover for each other a little bit?

CS: Yes.

TM: That's good. And they'd just look to make sure you had the oars, and you had the lifejackets in good shape, and do a little orientation, and that was it?

CS: Yeah. The commercial checkouts didn't take near as long because a boat crew would finish a trip and three days later they'd be back on the river. They knew what they needed, they knew what they needed to do. The private trips took a bit longer. Some of the private river runners were commercial boatmen from other parts of the country that put together a crew and so they knew how to plan for a seven day trip or a fourteen day trip. Some of them, this was the first time they'd ever taken on a fourteen day trip and they were more than happy to have a ranger there answering the questions that they had.

TM: Did you get a chance to do any river patrols at all or were you pretty much... If you're doing the permit manager job, there's a lot of office work there.

CS: I got the opportunity throughout each season to participate in partial trips. During the fall and early spring I actually got to go on a couple full trips, fourteen days, which were mostly associated with trail work. Steve and the boatpeople wanted me to understand what went on down there so that I can answer questions. Again, it gets back to the story about the backcountry permit officer Rocky Mountain being required to go out on patrol and being oriented; and dispatchers being oriented; and having an office person that was running river permit issuance to know what he was talking about. It was frequent enough.

TM: In this time did you get a chance to actually row a boat?

CS: Mhm hmm. Yeah, I became as proficient at rowing a boat as I did at climbing. [chuckles] Not very! I never took a river trip as a boatman in charge of a boat but I had lots of different opportunities to row. We started with the little rapids and graduated to the big rapids. I think when I went through Lava, all of the passengers except the boatman got on other boats. [chuckles]

TM: So you were lonely!

CS: I think probably halfway through that run I wished I was on another boat! [laughs] But we made it.

TM: That's funny! So one of the things that I'm thinking about in this time period, '81/'82/'83, was the high water year of 1983. Were you still working in the permits shop then?

CS: No. In '82/'83, Marv had transferred and Steve Martin had transferred and they needed a river unit manager. I forget what I was by then, a GS-7, a GS-9...probably a GS-9. So I applied for the job and I had the most knowledge of anyone applying for that job on the Colorado River Management Plan and how the river operation ran. I was selected as the river unit manager, which surprised me. I think it surprised a lot of people.

TM: Why?

CS: Because that position was replacing Marv Jensen and then Steve Martin, who had taken over after Marv left, and it was a highly controversial position, But I was selected for the position by Superintendent Dick Marks.

TM: You must have known what you were walking into?

CS: Yeah. But it was a challenge that I was willing to accept. Again, it was another promotion. More money. More exposure.

TM: So you had some training on how to staunch those letters, to keep them from bleeding badly. [CS chuckles] I'm assuming that that would have been very helpful now navigating what was a very politically charged environment.

CS: Yeah, it was extremely helpful. Now, instead of just walking from one office to the next office down the hall to Marv to edit the letters, I would get in a car and drive over to headquarters and have Superintendent Marks edit the letters. And he had a different writing style so I learned to write his letters. Always in the background was a lady by the name of Barb Smith, who was Marv Jensen's secretary. She was the Mama Bear. So she reviewed my letters before they went anyplace. She had a lot of experience in dealing with the correspondence and the communications that were going on between the Park Service and the rest of the world at the time.

TM: What do you remember about her? What can you tell me about her?

CS: Feisty! [chuckles] I don't know. She was probably 50, I don't know how old she was. Her husband worked for maintenance. It seemed like she'd been there for decades. A little high-strung, but I think that's just the way she dealt with the pressure.

TM: I'm sorry, what did you say she was?

CS: A little high-strung. She could go off. [chuckles] Usually it wasn't at us, it was about somebody else, something that was going on. But once she vented, she was, like, back to being Barb. She took care of all the administrative needs that we had.

TM: Wow! So she was doing payroll?

CS: Payroll was done over at administration out of Mr. Ozanich's office, chief of administration. She was reviewing all the orders, she was keeping budget. I think we had monthly budget meetings, so she'd prepare all the documents for us and then we would take them to the meeting, and the chief budget officer would conduct the monthly budget meeting. Barb was the backbone. She kept all the behind-the-scenes stuff flowing.

TM: And she would help edit your letters?

CS: Oh yeah. And she'd figure out where to move money from one account to the other account, which was all legit. Projecting, you know, "we're not going to spend this much in this account this year, so let's take that and move it over here and you can go ahead and buy another boat." "Oh okay, great!"

TM: Where was the boat shop at that time?

CS: How do I describe where the boat shop was? So we were at the ranger office, which was...I don't know, I'm sure everything's moved by now, but, the old post office, the community building, just across the street was the ranger offices. The South Rim rangers were downstairs, backcountry rangers were upstairs. You'd go uphill towards the maintenance yard and take your first left and just drive up... It was only...less than a quarter mile. Wasn't far at all. You could walk up there. The warehouse, that's what was there! The main warehouse was the centerpiece. If you stood and looked at the warehouse and looked over to the left, that was the boat shop, which was an old, rickety, broken down service garage, I think. Double-wide doors. And if you looked to the right was the mule pens/corrals. So yeah, it wasn't that far away. You know where it is now?

TM: Yeah, it's a really nice building. Well, everything is really different now. Because...well, we'll talk about that later on. Bring you up to speed. So river unit manager, were you then in charge of not only the guides' training seminars, but the commercial operators annual meeting, and the river patrols, and the permit/the lottery for the do-it-yourself river runners, and assigning who is going to be on patrol trips and who is doing service trips, whether they be trails trips or science trips. Were you doing all of that?

CS: Well, but I had a staff. Yeah, I was responsible for all of it, but the river patrol trips and the river trail trips... River patrol trips were scheduled by the lead boatmen, Sam West, John Thomas, at the time, coordinated with a fellow by the name of Richard Hanson on trail trips. I organized the owners meeting, but I was accompanied by the boatmen. So yeah, I had a great staff. Brad Lundquist, I think was his name, succeeded me as the river permit issuance person. Yeah, I think that's his name. So we had a full staff. And we had Barb [chuckles] who made all the travel arrangements for the meetings and stuff.

TM: What do you remember about Sam West?

CS: One of the most...eloquent is not quite the word...one of the smoothest boat operators I've ever seen. When he got in that boat, it was like he and the river were one. He could read the river. Just a real good boatman. He was into meditation, yoga. We did different stuff on the river. First we had yoga every morning and then we had stretching. And then ergonomics was coming into fashion, so we hired an ergonomic consultant and took that person on the river trip so that we could learn to move with the weight and flow through the air. And then like, "just pick the box up!" Always calm. Sam was always calm and never appeared to be in a hurry. John Thomas could play a mean guitar. We'd sit around camp at night and he'd pull out his guitar and we'd have singalongs to all the folk songs and the old songs. He was another excellent boatman, as was Kimmy [Johnson]. They were hard workers.

That was the time... That river unit probably lasted for another year, then, when I came in and then the river unit was reorganized into the River Subdistrict and became part of the Canyon District. So you had the Inner Canyon, the River, and the Backcountry. Those were three different parts of the Canyon District. And that was, I think, the first... I don't recall if Larry Van Slyke was the first one to come in or if he was the second. There was another fellow by the name of Bruce Wilson that was Canyon District ranger. I don't know whatever happened to him. Paul Anderson was brought in as the Backcountry Subdistrict ranger—another Rocky Mountain boy that I knew in Rocky Mountain. Larry VanSlyke was Canyon District ranger. I don't recall who was the Inner Canyon, Paul might have had both of them. So that was quite the folderol amongst our staff, because we had been independent. We were the River Unit and we stood alone. And so when Dick Marks reorganized us, it did not sit well with me and it didn't sit well with boat people. That's the way it was done, so that's the way we learned to live with it. We lost, I think, in my opinion, we lost a lot of autonomy, but that was the way the park was organized so that's what we did. It didn't really change the river operation so much. You still rowed your boats, but you lost some of your budget and you lost some of your influence with the superintendent.

TM: Because you were reporting to the Canyon District ranger, who would then report to the superintendent?

CS: Yeah. Technically, he would report to the Chief Ranger and, under the river unit, I reported directly to the superintendent.

TM: So, I've got to ask you a question just for your general thoughts on this, you know, in the last 10 to 15 years the amount of sexual predation by boatmen on other individuals on those river trips has caused a severe amount of distress amongst the Park Service and its employees and had caused a huge amount of change. It would seem as though being close to the superintendent, as you were, might have been a way to keep that under control. And I'm assuming that there was none of that sort of stuff happening at the time?

CS: There was none of it on the river unit that I knew of.

TM: None on the river?

CS: None. No. None of the boatwomen that I know of were harassed in any way. They were treated as equals. Cindy Burns was hired as camp cook, she was elevated to boatwoman. Kim Johnson came in, she was... I don't know what you call them now... She was a boatwoman/boatperson/boat individual. They were all employees of equal stature. So yeah, I find those reports distressing, to say the least. I don't know the details and I didn't follow it, but at least in '83, '82, '81, and before I joined the river unit, I never heard of any sexual harassment in the river unit. I don't really know of any... I don't have a recollection of any sexual harassment amongst the backcountry permit office to river patrol. You know, it could have been going on. I have a tendency to go to work, and work, and come home. But, I could be wrong. You'd have to ask the women that were there. I just didn't see it happening. It wasn't happening

when we had our guide meetings. I mean, there was partying going on, but there was no sexual harassment.

TM: Thank you. Just trying to go back a little further with this. I think you're the furthest back that I've asked this question to. I know people ahead of you are going to start talking about it, but not so much then, '81, '82, '83. Okay.

CS: That I knew of.

TM: Yeah, right. Well stated. And then, the water of '83. So by 1983, you are the river district manager, the river unit manager.

CS: Or river subdistrict manager, whatever it was at the time.

TM: So that change had happened that you're talking about, where now you're a part of the Canyon District?

CS: That's my recollection, have to look at the paperwork. But yeah, I'm pretty sure. '83, '84...yeah. That was reorganized by '83.

TM: Okay. And at one point, I'm trying to remember how that worked, whether it was Bureau of Reclamation that got in touch with you guys saying, "Hey, we've got a lot of water here and we're going to start letting it out," there in the spring/summer of '83, and then it kind of got a little more impressive. Did you get down on the water then? Were you involved in any of those rescues on the river?

CS: I was primarily involved in rescues on the river. As were about eight other rangers. So when the flows came, there were already river trips on the river and there was no way to communicate with them, other than we put John Thomas—we might have put two folks on the helicopter, but I know that John was on the helicopter—with messages that we had written out and attached to, I think they were blue flags, floaters. His job was to contact every river trip and let them know that on a certain date the dam would be releasing, I don't remember the numbers, 50,000 cubic feet per second, 80,000 cubic feet per second, whatever it was. The routine then was 10- to maybe 32,000, occasionally, cubic feet...

TM: That was like every day, Monday through Friday?

CS: Yeah it was a fluctuation. The boatmen knew; if you pull in at this time, the river's at this flow. We're going to have to get up in the middle of the night and move our boats back down or they're going to be high and dry with the motor rigs. They knew the river. They knew the fluctuations. But to go to these changes, we felt represented a safety issue. So John and maybe someone else got in a helicopter and flew the river from Lees Ferry all the way down to probably Diamond Bar. And every river trip that they saw, they hovered above the camp, or they hovered just downstream from the boat if it was on the river, and threw out messages that were designed to either land on sand or designed to float. And that was the way to notify the boat trips of what was going to occur over the next three days and tell them camp high because this water was going to be getting to mile 90 or mile 115 or whatever by... So that was the initial response.

Well, when the water came, it totally changed the dynamics of the rapids, unseen since the dam had been put in place. Certainly not unseen historically. The historic river runners knew if you ran the river at a certain time of year—you could run it during spring runoff but you probably weren't going to come out. So, it changed the dynamics of many of the rapids. Not just the large ones, but certainly Crystal and Lava were affected, especially Crystal. The initial call came in—I forget exactly what day it was—but there was a distress call and I believe it was below Crystal. One of the motorized rigs had flipped. All of

the passengers went in the water. They were able to affect rescue from the other boats that hadn't flipped. So there were probably, what, 12 people in the river? I may be confusing this, but one of the men drowned. We went down, and by that time they had rescued most of the people, well, they had rescued all the people, extracted them from the river. The fellow that drowned was missing, I think, maybe we recovered him. But what I remember is we extracted his wife. While I'm doing this, Larry and all the other district rangers and EMTs, Ernie Kuncel, all the rangers are trying to figure out what we're going to do next, Butch Farabee. We decided that we would evacuate all the people off the river that wanted to come out. None of the boatmen would come out, of course, they wanted to stay with their boats. They wanted to experience it. Understandable. And I'm not sure if it was that day, but what I remember about that day is, we brought that wife back up to the rim and we were in full bore rescue mode and there was no place for the wife. At that time we didn't have any post-trauma stress counselors for victims, etc. so I put her in my car and I drove her over to my house. I walked in to my wife and said, "This lady I'm about to bring in, her husband has drowned and we don't have any place for her, and you need to take care of her." Connor sort of looked at me and said, "Okay." That was the last I ever saw of that lady. Connor took care of her. Eventually communications were established and I don't know if she left and went to Flagstaff or went back to wherever the river outfitters were based out of. But she stayed for two or three hours at the house, and the ranger's wife was expected to take care of her. Which is not uncommon if you get into the history of the Park Service throughout up until whenever we got around to having counselors for victims and their family members. It's just the way the Park Service was then, and probably in the 60s and 70s, too. Probably true at Glacier and Yellowstone, bear mauling's, and whatnot. So we went into full bore removal. We evacuated 164 people over the next day and a half, or whatever it was. River companies sent buses. I don't know the logistics of how it was handled on the South Rim, because I was involved in flying down and evacuating people. I think Sam West and John Thomas were also involved in that. We had three ships at the time, three helicopters.

So, also during that time, I'm supposed to talk to the superintendent with district ranger Larry Van Slyke. He made the decision to close the river, which did not go over well with the commercial operators. But that's the decision that we made until we could get a handle on what was going on. While the river was closed—and I don't know if it was three days or a week—they decided that we would send a motorized river raft through the canyon to determine the conditions of the rapids. I think there were three commercial boatmen on that rig. The superintendent decided that I was going to accompany the trip. Which even at the time, certainly in hindsight, didn't make a whole lot of sense to me, because I was the least experienced boatman on our staff. I don't recall if I actually suggested to the superintendent that they send Sam or John—I think I may have, we had pretty good communication between the two of us. But I ended up going on a three day river trip. To me it was like, "This is moving incredibly fast." But what I remember is the three boatmen, could have been four, that were experienced boatmen, would look at each other and say, "This is Horn Creek? Was that Sapphire that we just went through?" The whole river had changed. The beaches were changed. To go through the canyon on a motorized rig, in what I recall being three days, was incredible! It's 225 miles from Lees Ferry to Diamond Creek and we did it in three days, four days?

TM: Yeah, you guys were going ten miles an hour, easy.

CS: You pull into what was a camping beach and there's barely enough room to set anything up. Not just because the beach was being eroded, but because the beach was flooded. So that was the summer of '83.

TM: I wanted to ask you about one place on that trip, whether you noticed this or not. The pre-dam river runners running over 50- or 60,000 cubic feet per second, were worried about a place called the Granite

Narrows between Tapeats Creek and Deer Creek. Where it seemed to them as though the river current would come up on river left and go across the river to river right, into this big cliff. And if you were rowing a boat, the current would just put you against the cliff and then flip your boat. But with a motorboat it'd be different. You could use a motor to steer clear of that, though Georgie got tangled up in that with her motorboat at one point in the 50s. Does that ring a bell with you at all, that one spot? Did you guys even notice that?

CS: I don't recall noticing it. Whether or not the professional boatmen noticed it, I don't know. Speaking of Georgie... [chuckles] Wonderful woman. Eccentric. I'm sure you have all kinds of stories about Georgie. In September of 1983, we had our first son and almost all of the river company owners sent me congratulatory cards. Georgie sent us a baby blanket. And that kid carried that baby blanket around for the next four years. It was his favorite blanket, and it came from Georgie. We had met, she really didn't know me. I didn't know her except through the business owner meetings and maybe occasional meeting on the river. But I just always thought that kind of indicated the kind of person she was.

TM: So on that three day trip, did you guys go out to Temple Bar?

CS: Yeah, I think we did.

TM: Okay, and what was your assessment after the trip?

CS: My recommendation to the superintendent was that we keep the river closed. I don't recall how long it actually stayed closed. I think all the commercial companies had to advise their passengers of the increased safety risk, and if they decided they didn't want to go, had to refund their monies or reschedule for the following year. But eventually that situation subsided and we got back to normal. And then it was a river trip to assess the condition of the beaches.

TM: So during that time of the high water with the river being closed, all the trips that were above Phantom ended up piling up at Phantom. Do you remember anything about that?

CS: No, I don't. I would assume that that's probably where we evacuated several other people that wanted to come off the river. But I don't remember that particular detail.

TM: Okay. And then the river was opened back up again and those trips headed out downstream again, but as you say, a lot of those people may have left. A lot of passengers may have left the river by then. Then you mentioned another trip to assess the beaches. Did you get to participate in that trip as well?

CS: No. I was up on the rim dealing with the politics. Or more accurately, dealing with the economics.

TM: How do you mean?

CS: Well, every time you close the river and there's 8-10 river trips leaving a day, that's an impact to the bottom line of people that are making, grossing anyway, millions of dollars a year. It wasn't so political as it was driven by the economics. Which, you know, we're seeing again today with the pandemic. Same thing, much smaller scale.

TM: Did the river concessionaires want some sort of funding or did they want some sort of special compensation for the river being closed?

CS: No. I don't think any of them ever asked for that. They understood the safety. Some of them thought it was safer than others. Of course the Park Service is the one that has to be looking out for the "can you do something safely?" Can you climb El Capitan without a rope safely? Well apparently, you can. But not everybody.

TM: Right. And then in the position of being responsible for public safety, caution is often merited.

CS: Otherwise you end up getting sued. Well, you end up getting sued anyway but you tend not to lose.

TM: Looking back on that situation now, it worked out the best. It's over almost 40 years now. What struck you the most about that whole event?

CS: Hmm. Well, let's see. The utter chaos of the rescue, the amazing dynamic of the Colorado River, and the concerns that were going around about the stability of Glen Canyon Dam. You know, those side spillway tunnels are in sandstone and they were releasing a lot of water. I was told that after the water subsided, they found pieces of sandstone that ranged from the size of a Volkswagen Bug up to the size of a house that had been carved out of the sandstone. Now, I have no idea how stable that dam is and what it could withstand. Bureau of Reclamation said at the time that it was stable, and they have a lot more engineers and a lot more knowledge. So it certainly was. It's almost a ferocity of the river, which that's the way it used to flow. The canyon flows were back like it should have been in the springs, just without the sediment. So from the canyon's perspective, it's just another flood. But from our perspective, it was pretty wild. I mentioned the chaos of the rescue. When you have 3 ships going and pulling off 164 people, you know just the logistics of getting them taken care of, and doing it all before dark or starting on it early morning the next day, that was pretty intense.

TM: Yeah I would imagine that's something you didn't do a lot of planning for, a lot of training for. And then you really have to just roll with the punches as they land.

CS: Yeah I would say that all of the employees at the park came together, not just the rangers. The maintenance folks. I'm sure administration was running around with a lot of stuff to do to take care of all the immediate logistics. I imagine that some sort of an incident command system had been set up. In '83...yeah, in the early 80s was when the Park Service was just starting on incident command system. We ran our searches using ICS. Paul Anderson, the Backcountry Subdistrict ranger, was the leader in that operation, on the education and the process. So yeah, it was an interesting four or five weeks.

TM: I bet, I bet. Well, you and I have been yik-yakking about this wonderful 1981-83 period for almost an hour and a half. This is probably a good time to wrap up this Part 5 and maybe we can pick this up again and you can have some time to think a little bit more about this four or five weeks of 1983 and we'll land back into the middle of it next time, what do you think?

CS: Sounds like a plan.

TM: Alright. With that, we'll call it a wrap for Part 5 Grand Canyon Oral History interview with Curt Sauer. My name is Tom Martin. Today is Wednesday, September 30th, 2020 and Curt, thank you so very much!

CS: Thank you Tom, it's been a pleasure.