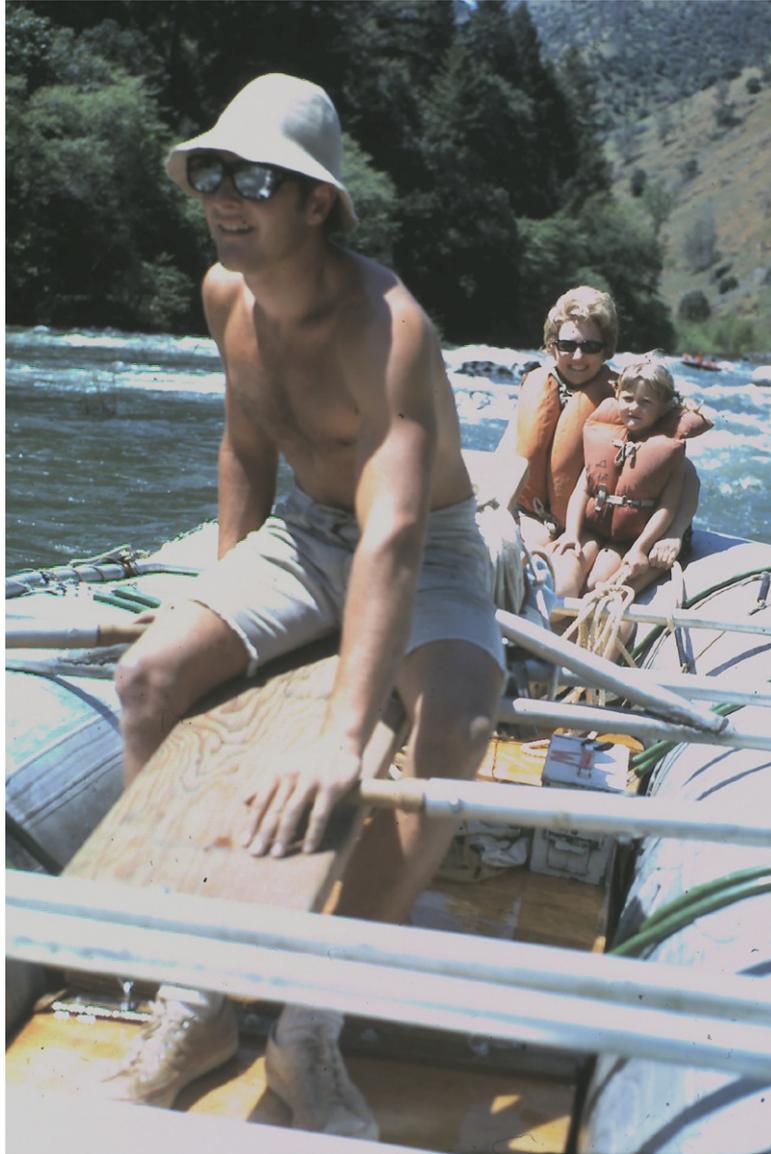


My Favorite River Hat

Pete Winn, 1972



Although this picture shows my favorite river hat, it was taken on the Main Salmon in 1969, not in the Grand Canyon. My mother and sister Heidi are in back.

I was really attached to my river hat. It was part of my identity. I needed it. That is, until I met Helen.

She was one of those unforgettable characters you get to meet in the Canyon. Everyone loved her. On our oar trips in the early 70's, we encouraged our passengers to switch boats every day. After a few days, people would wait to see which boat Helen go on, then rush to join her.

Helen was a great story teller. She could also read your palm and tea leaves. Before we had even floated through the Paria Riffle, she had asked me if I was a Scorpio, then told me it was OK if I was.

She really liked my hat. I don't know why, it was just a dirty old cowboy hat that had long ago lost

its shape and looked more like a Huck Finn hat. She was always stealing it so she could wear it. As long as she rode on my boat, that was OK with me.

I tried to teach her to row, but the oars were just too heavy and the eddy fence currents always dragged her off the rowing seat. But she loved to help out in camp. I recall she made the coffee almost every morning.

Back in those days, the Diamond Creek road wasn't maintained and there wasn't a boat ramp at Pearce's Ferry, so we had dinner at Bridge or Separation Canyon, floated all night to Emery Falls on the lake "current," and a motor boat towed us to South Cove. We had a wild party on the boats that night, and Helen was the star.

The next day, we'd said good-byes with tears in our eyes, and no one was really ready to face the world we'd completely forgotten about. The passenger bus was about to leave us behind to complete the take-out when I impulsively hailed the driver. I jumped aboard, ran back to Helen's seat, gave her a big kiss, put my cherished old river hat on her head and rushed off the bus.

That fall I went to visit her at her home near San Francisco. My hat was hanging on the wall above her fireplace, surrounded by pictures of her Canyon friends. Did I mention Helen was a seventy-five year old retired fortuneteller, with several grandkids my age?