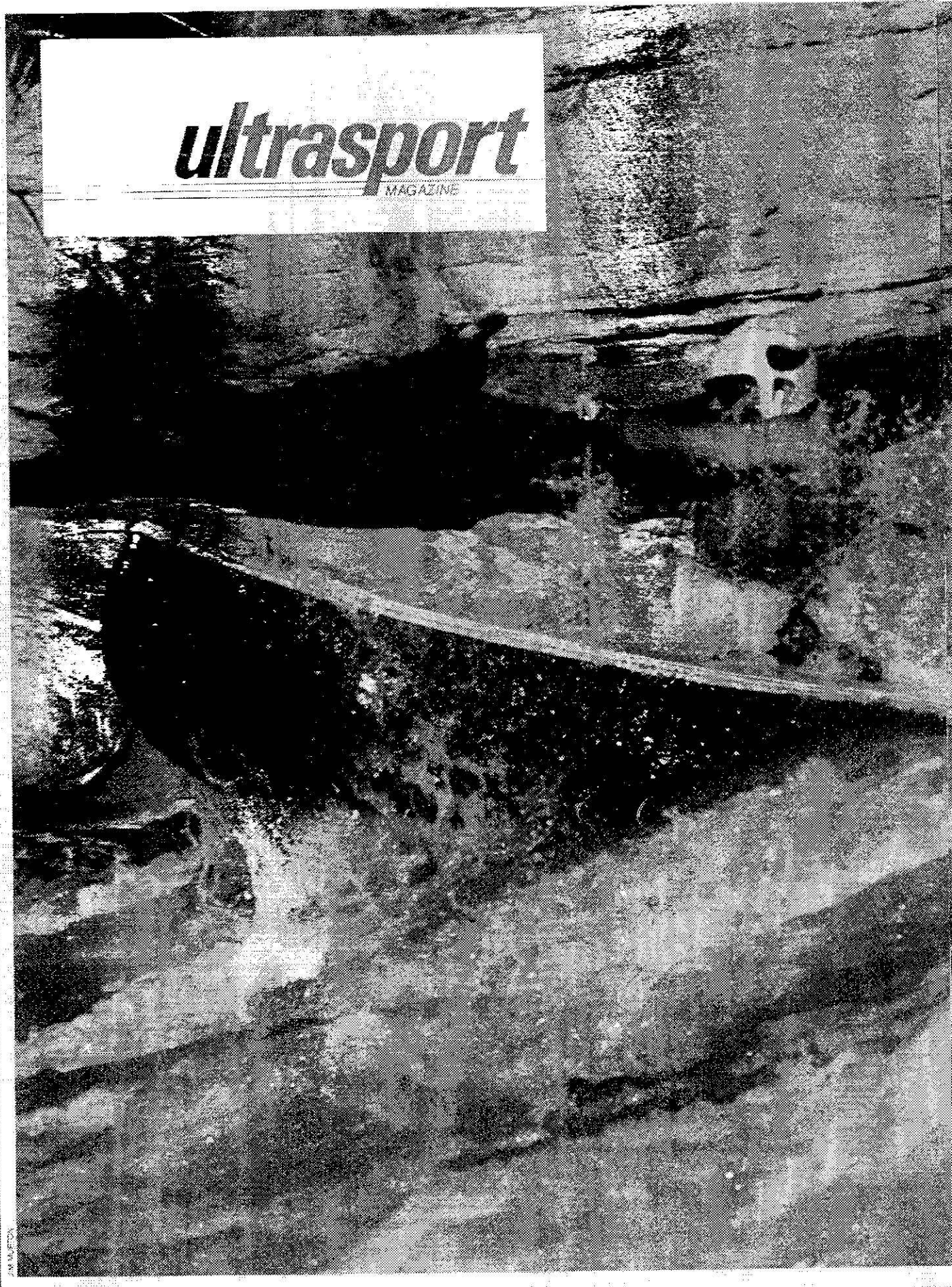



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MAGAZINE





RAPID TRANSIT

They chose to travel light.
The river always travels fast.
BY DAVID GOODMAN

“Hook right”

I called out routinely from the bow as we entered Upper Disaster Falls.

“Yup,” acknowledged Jingo from behind. “Let’s run it on the right.” We maneuvered the canoe over to that side of the small rock, aiming to stay left of a large sandbar.

“Damn it,” Jingo said abruptly.

The boat drifted just above the sandbar, and we were suddenly committed to run the rapid through a constricted channel. I looked over to see the foaming white wave train ricocheting off the canyon wall. Strong water, I thought, but not something we couldn’t handle.

He swore again, his voice tense. My eyes were focused on the waves—four footers, I estimated. We were about 60 feet away and drifting steadily closer. Why was Jingo so nervous? We can run it, I thought. I anchored my legs against the nylon thigh straps bracing me in the boat.

Butch Cassidy would have laughed. We had come all the way from Maine to paddle the Green River through the canyon country of eastern Utah, a remote and inaccessible terrain that had been Cassidy’s home as he hid out from posses. As we paddled down the river, we came across old abandoned shacks and broken-down ranches that had once sheltered many of the West’s most famous outlaws, including Cassidy, the Sundance Kid and the Wild Bunch. An old-timer we met upriver told us that Butch was loved by the rugged cowboys and backcountry folk of the Green, be-

cause, like Robin Hood, he often protected them from assaults by greedy bankers and other nefarious interlopers.

Like Butch and Sundance, we had chosen to travel fast and light. Our trip was to be the first "alpine style descent" (to borrow a concept from mountaineering) of the Green River by canoes, as best we could ascertain by talking to local paddlers and Gary Nichols, the author of *River Runners' Guide to Utah*. The Green, the major tributary of the Colorado River, is considered one of the West's premier whitewater runs. It is usually run by commercial rafts, or paddled by kayaks and canoes with raft support.

In the world of whitewater paddling, canoes have only recently been explored as viable crafts for serious whitewater travel. We wanted to bring together the technical challenge of running the river with the elegance of self-sufficient travel—a throwback to the style in which the canyons were explored over 100 years ago by Major John Wesley Powell. We shunned the concept of a "siege descent" with a big party of support people; we chose boats maneuverable enough to allow for challenging, aggressive routes through the whitewater—no "slipping" (paddling around) the more difficult runs. Although untested, with so

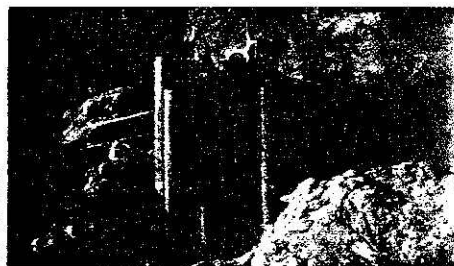
and an hour or two of total survival time. If we lost a boat, two paddlers would somehow have to get out of the remote canyons on foot; the remaining boat could not hold four people. That might pose some interesting problems, since many of the canyons we would be traveling through were only accessible by river. If we lost gear, we would have to endure subfreezing nights with little or no protection. Each boater would ultimately be responsible for his own rescue if a boat went over. With the continuous nature of some of the rapids, rescue might be difficult.

My compatriots for this journey were a colorful crew. Paul "Jingo" Nicolazzo, 29, was the veteran of the team. He works as the whitewater specialist for the Hurricane Island Outward Bound School in Maine, and runs Moosehead Mountaineering, a private guide service in Greenville, Maine. Jeff Russell, 25, is a life-long Mainer, and head river guide for the Rapid Transit raft company based in Portland. Jim Murton, at 31 the elder statesman and comic relief of the expedition, owns the North Country Rivers rafting company in Maine. All three are expert kayakers. As a mountaineering instructor for the Hurricane Island Outward Bound School (who partially sponsored the expedition) and a freelance journalist, I was, compared to the others, a newcomer to whitewater.

We could not predict what we would encounter on the river. The water level changes dramatically from season to season. As we were starting out in late October, we knew



DAVID GOODMAN



Left: Nicolazzo, Russell and Murton study up. Right: dugout where Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch spent time in transit.

much gear over such a long distance, the canoe seemed the ideal craft.

We planned to run the entire 300 miles of the Green's famous whitewater canyons in eastern Utah and (briefly) Colorado. We anticipated that the journey would require about 21 days on the river, and we were prepared to encounter full winter conditions. Our canoes would be packed with three weeks' worth of gear and food—a quarter ton per boat—and we would go without raft support. While conventional wisdom dictates that three boats and six paddlers are the minimum necessary for safety, we decided to run the river with four paddlers and two boats. The stakes would be high, but we would be much more mobile and, we felt, would be running the river in a simpler, purer style of wilderness travel.

"What happens if we dump?" I asked Jingo when he first described the expedition. He looked puzzled that the answer wasn't painfully obvious to me.

"We *won't* dump," he said.

There were many reasons why we could not. The river, at about 45 degrees, is one of the coldest in the lower 48 states. A swimmer without a wetsuit would have about 30 minutes before losing consciousness at that temperature,

the water would be relatively low, which made conditions ideal for canoes (loaded canoes would stand a good chance of getting swamped in big springtime water). But it might also make the route hazardous and rocky. East Coast paddlers are accustomed to rocky runs, but we had no way of knowing just how difficult the water level would make the rapids on the Green.

Jingo designed and built spray decks made of rigid vinyl especially for the trip. He expected that traditional spray decks made of canvas or nylon might collapse or tear under the force of the waves we anticipated, causing the boat to fill with water and turn over. But he only had time to check the new decks once on the water in Maine; the expedition would have to be the acid test of his experiment.

After launching our boats below the Flaming Gorge dam in northern Utah, we began a three-day run through the flatwater section of the river. The water was surprisingly clear and brutally cold. By day four, my hands were cracked and bleeding from constant contact with it. At night the temperature typically plunged to the low 20s. Each morning we had to wait until the sun got high enough in the sky to melt the ice that glazed the canoes.

We rounded a wide bend on day three to see the humbling and majestic Gates of Lodore—the entryway into Lodore Canyon, and the rapids that awaited us there. In 1825, General William Henry Ashley wrote of his passage through the eerie Gates: "I was forcibly struck with the

gloom which spread over the countenances of my men; they seemed to anticipate a dreadful termination of our voyage, and I must confess that . . . things around us had truly an awful appearance."

I peered into the dark, 2200-foot high canyons ahead. We would hit the first section of Lodore Canyon's major rapids the next day. That night we went to sleep hoping for high water. We were in for an unsettling surprise.

When the sun rose, we looked in horror to see that our canoes, which we had tied up at night with several feet of water beneath them, were now sitting on mud flats like beached whales. The water had dropped dramatically overnight, courtesy of the dam upriver. "It's a different river now," said Russell softly as he peered at the shoreline. What little we knew about the rapids we would encounter that day was now made nearly irrelevant. Rapids known to be easy might be treacherous, and big holes and waves that we were anticipating might have disappeared behind the dam's concrete walls 50 miles upstream.

It was in Upper Disaster Falls, so named because explorer Major Powell lost one of his dories there in 1869, that the river unveiled its power. These were the second major rapids of the canyon, and it was there that Jingo and I had the closest call of the expedition.

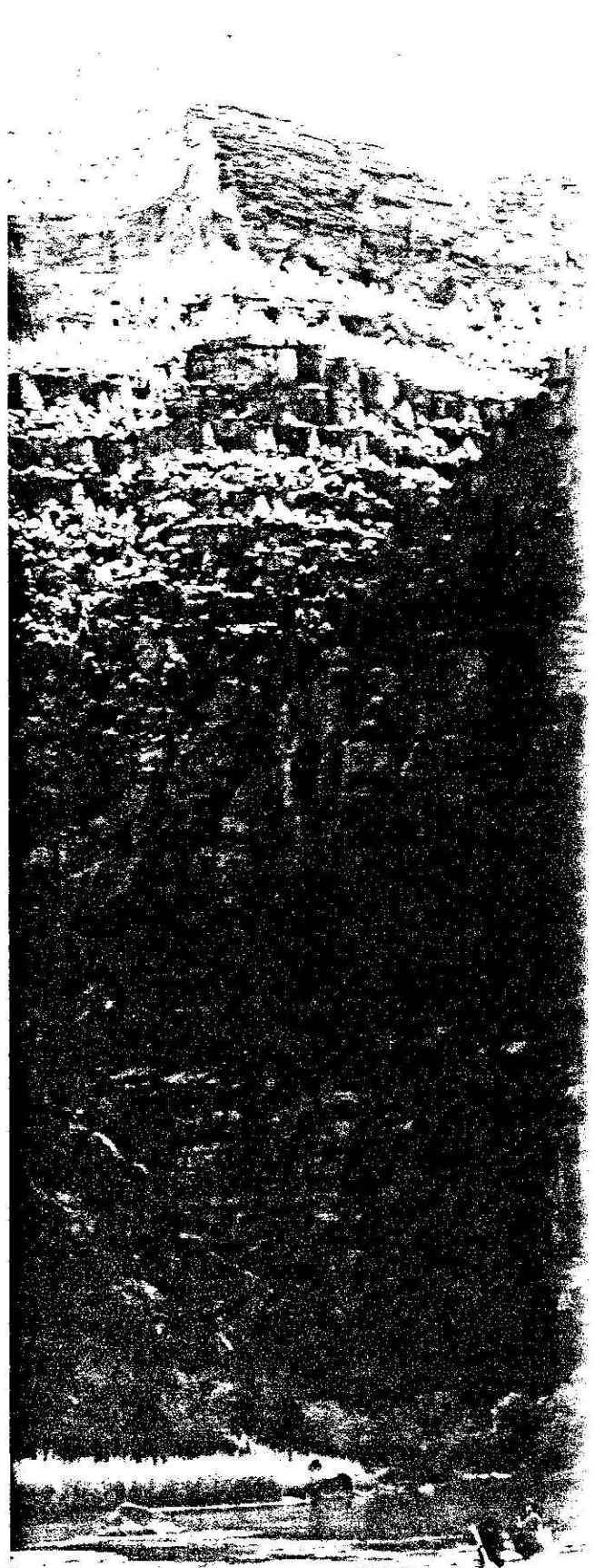
As we floated around the top of the sandbar, Jingo suddenly cried out, "Back paddle!"

"Back hard!" he added, his voice rising. The time for the subtle communication that takes place between paddling partners had just ended. "Now draw . . . hard . . . pull harder . . . keep drawing!" he shouted. His voice was disappearing in the chaos and thunder of the rapids.

Jingo set the boat's angle so that we were broadside to the powerful current. My muscles were straining as I leaned out over the side of the boat, pulling the canoe hard and fast toward the small eddy that I now saw. The boat began rocking ominously in rhythm with the waves that were alternately lifting and dropping us. In a moment we were both powering forward, charging to break out of the current and hit the small pool where the water flowed in opposition to the downstream channel. I leaned hard into the eddy as the reversing current hit the side of the boat; Jingo stabilized the canoe on a low brace, and we came to an abrupt stop.

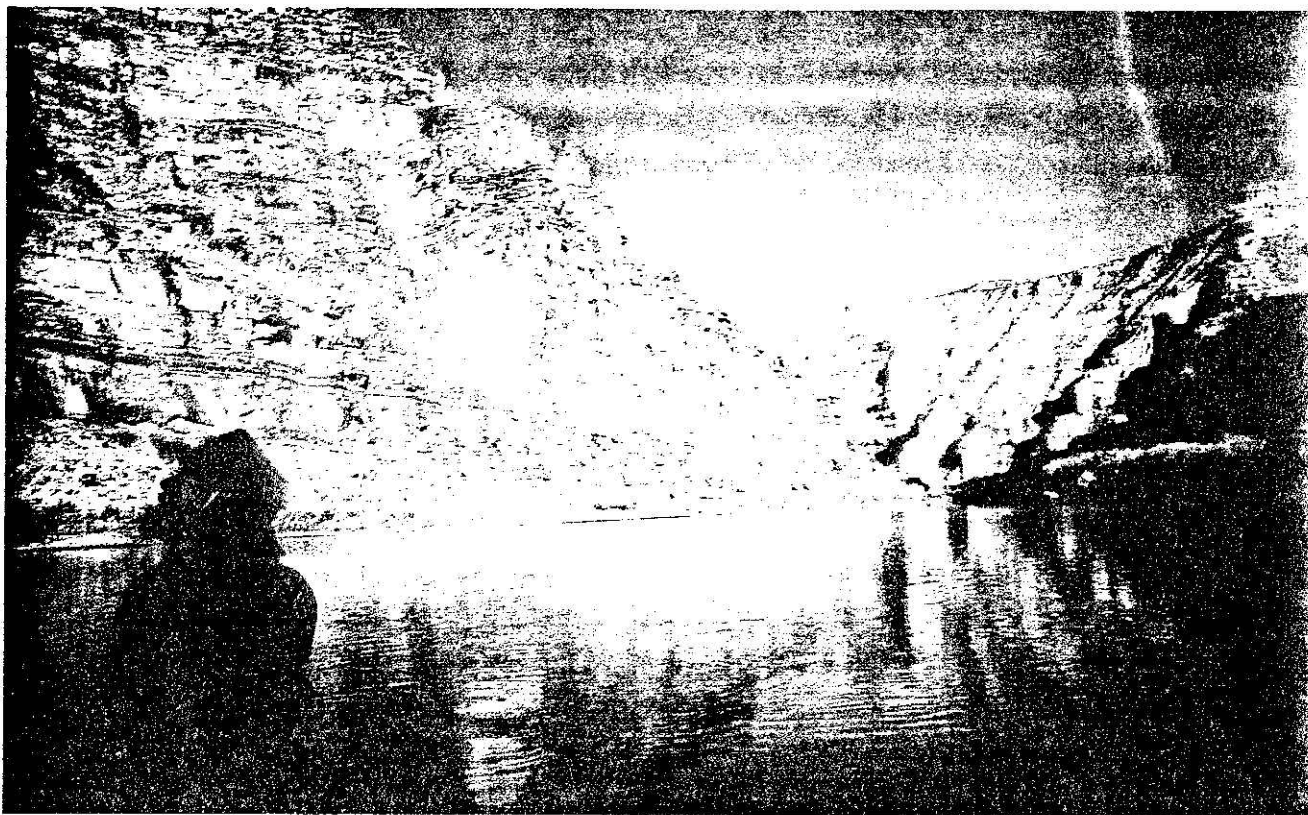
"Nice," he said quietly, sounding relieved. We were both panting and sweating hard. We paused to plot a course downriver and out of the mess we had gotten ourselves into. It was then that I, who had been paddling and looking in the opposite direction at the eddy, saw the source of Jingo's panic: less than 20 feet away, across the pulsing chain of white waves, several hundred tons of angry river slammed beneath a large overhanging section of canyon wall. It was, Jingo said later, the worst undercut he had seen in his eleven years of paddling rivers. It didn't take much imagination to picture what would have happened had we been sucked into the dark, cave-like undercut: our boat and five hundred pounds of gear would have been thrown into the wall and held there by the current. We would have been pinned, helpless to extract ourselves from the boat, and unable to swim out of the furious torrent.

Spinning the boat around on the eddy line, we maneuvered rapidly through the bottom of the chute and soon saw our partners. They were moving quickly up the river bank, rescue ropes in hand. But if we had been trapped, there would have been little they could have done.



Murton and Russell approaching hot stuff in Hell's Half Mile, Lodore.

PAUL NICHOLAZZO



Russell slips through a quiet section of Desolation Canyon, keeping an ear out for the echoes of bigger water.

The next day, we awoke to snow. It had fallen high on the canyon walls, settling along the sedimentary lines to form spectacular red-and-white striped patterns above us. We ran through Lodore Canyon and Whiripool Canyon smoothly and quickly, reaching Desolation and Gray Canyons on day nine, three days ahead of our schedule. There the river dropped 515 feet over 83 miles and promised the biggest water we had yet encountered.

Paddling quietly through Desolation Canyon, which at one point is over 5000 feet deep—deeper than much of the Grand Canyon—we would hear, echoing off the rock walls, the tell-tale bass drone of a big drop, only to find a small riffle when we rounded the bend. Later in the Canyon the walls were set back and the echoes dispersed; we came upon S.O.B. rapid with hardly enough warning to see the six-foot waves leaping skyward. We began to understand the river's quirky, chameleon personality.

Getting hit by the walls of water in Desolation Canyon, jabbing, slapping and stroking the wall-slammng wave chains in Gray Canyon, I moved beyond feeling that paddling was a battle. The rapids had a mysteriously peaceful component, a center at which our boat became just another molecule of water dancing effortlessly in the current. A big wave would rise up in front of us. We would backpaddle a few strokes, and roll smoothly over it, making sense out of chaos.

We came to Coal Creek Rapid, supposedly the biggest rapid on the Green, on day 13, the day before the end of our journey. We were confident going into the last major drop. Helmets had long since been lashed to the deck; Jingo was only zippering his life jacket half-way, and Jeff and Jim didn't even bother to fasten their spray skirts. We decided to run the rapid "dry"—rocking the boat with our hips so we would roll over the tops of the waves rather than

crash through them. This technique allowed us to run a drop without taking on any water—like free climbing, it is a "clean" way to paddle.

"You can't fight the water—that will get you nowhere," philosophized Jingo as we floated down the long black tongue which exploded into the big waves of the rapid. The waves were getting closer. I was in the stern, trying to concentrate, wishing Jingo would shut up. "Other folks meditate. I paddle," he explained as five-foot waves spewed foam in every direction. We rocked gracefully over their tops, Jingo still babbling on. I deliberately set the boat up at just the angle needed to submerge the bow in the next wave. Jingo disappeared momentarily in the froth, then popped back up. He cursed me as the frigid water cascaded down his open wetsuit, then paddled on with no further philosophical discourse.

We pitched our last camp on a white sandy beach. That night, a full moon cast a silver glow over the canyons; but for the 35-degree temperature, it would have seemed like a remote island in the South Pacific.

The river frolicked on downstream, headed for that thundering canyon to the south, the Grand. We had completed the first self-contained canoe descent of the Green, running every one of the river's fabled rapids. Technically, the descent in this style was not as difficult as we had expected, the rapids neither as big nor the boats as awkward. But as the river passed beneath us that last evening, I thought I heard it laughing, unimpressed by our accomplishment. Rivers are that way, you know. They keep you light. ■

David Goodman is a freelance writer based in Boston. His writing has appeared in The Nation and other national publications.