

# “Set My Spirit Free” A History of SOCOTWA

by Roy Webb

In the past twenty years of researching, writing about, and speaking about river history, I've given many talks to many different groups. Whenever the topic is Glen Canyon, it seems like invariably someone would come up to me afterwards and says, “I went down Glen Canyon with SOCOTWA!” After a while I started getting curious; what was this group with the odd name? I knew about Nevills, and Harry Aleson, and Moki-Mac and the Quist family, all of whom took many people through Glen Canyon over the years before it was flooded by Lake Powell. But SOCOTWA? I ran across their logo, an inverted triangle with a mountain man in the middle, in the Music Temple register books. Obviously SOCOTWA had a lot of impact on Glen Canyon. One of these days, I vowed to myself, I'm going to do some more research and write an article about them.

But it never happened until the 2003 Desolation Canyon CPRG training trip. On that rainy, wonderful trip I was talking around the campfire with Dee Holladay and Annie Payne, president of CPRG; I said something about SOCOTWA and Dee mentioned that in the 1950s, there were only a couple of ways to get down Glen Canyon: either with Moki-Mac or with SOCOTWA. Annie immediately perked up; it turned out that her river mentor, Richard Jones—former owner of World Wide Expeditions—had told her many stories about SOCOTWA trips, and had incorporated many of the traditions and practices of SOCOTWA into his own company. Then and there Annie and I decided to work together on an article for *The Confluence* about SOCOTWA. Once we got back to Salt Lake City, we started setting up interviews with former guides and members of the group, starting with Richard Jones. Richard had started going on SOCOTWA trips when he was only 14 years old, just out of junior high. But at that first interview, also present were Oscar Olson, who had gone on his first trip with the group while he was in the army in 1962, and Dale Labrum, who, as it turned out, was one of the founders of SOCOTWA in the years just after World War II.

Even though Annie and I did a number of other oral histories with SOCOTWA trip participants, from whom we heard a lot of great stories, that first one with Richard, Oscar, and Dale was the most important. From them we learned a number of startling things: first, that SOCOTWA was still in existence, although it had become, as Oscar put it, a “knife and fork” club, a group that met occasionally for dinner, and to listen to a speaker. Next was the extent of their operation: we were both surprised to hear that in the 1950s, SOCOTWA had over a thousand members, owned as many as 30 surplus inflatable rafts and a couple of busses, and could have half a dozen trips on the water at the same time. Finally, from each of them we received an invaluable gift: Oscar had brought with him a book titled

*Socotwa Expeditions: 50 Years, 1948 to 1998.* Dale, as mentioned above, was one of the founders of the group, so we got the story of the beginnings and early years right from the proverbial horse's mouth. Richard was one of the very few members to have continued his involvement with the river industry, so from him we got a long-term perspective on what impact SOCOTWA had not only on the lives of those who joined, but on the river running world as well.

SOCOTWA started and spent most of its active existence from the end of World War II to the completion of Glen Canyon dam in 1963. This was a time of great change and turmoil in the river running world. There were no rules; if you wanted to run the Grand Canyon, you just showed up at Lees Ferry and talked to the ranger (or more likely, the USGS water gauger), and there you went. If you wanted to float through Dinosaur National Monument on the Green or Yampa, same thing: all you needed was a 10-man raft and a few days off. There were still some of the old timers from the 1940s around, but others were gone: Norm Nevills and Bert Loper had both died in 1949, Buzz Holmstrom in 1946. Other river rats had started their own companies and "gone commercial," like Bus Hatch, Harry Aleson, and Malcom "Moki-Mac" Ellingson. Hatch stayed up on the Green and Yampa, for the most part; Aleson was too crotchety to ever get much of a following; Moki didn't really have his own company, he went along on trips run by Al Quist and his sons Richard, Clair and Bob. In the Colorado drainage, the San Juan was about the only river to have an active river company running regular commercial trips: Mexican Hat Expeditions, formed by former Nevills boatmen Frank Wright and Jim Rigg, had taken over Nevills boats and customers after Norm and Doris' tragic deaths in a plane crash in September 1949. Glen Canyon was especially wide open, given the fact that you didn't really need whitewater skills to get down it safely. Running Glen Canyon was only restricted by the terrible road (or what passed for a road) from Hanksville through North Wash down to Hite. If you could get there without breaking an axle or leaving your oil pan on a ledge, you were home free, no rangers, no rules, no regulations, almost nothing save for scenery, the river, and the night sky until you got to Lees Ferry, some 180 miles downstream.

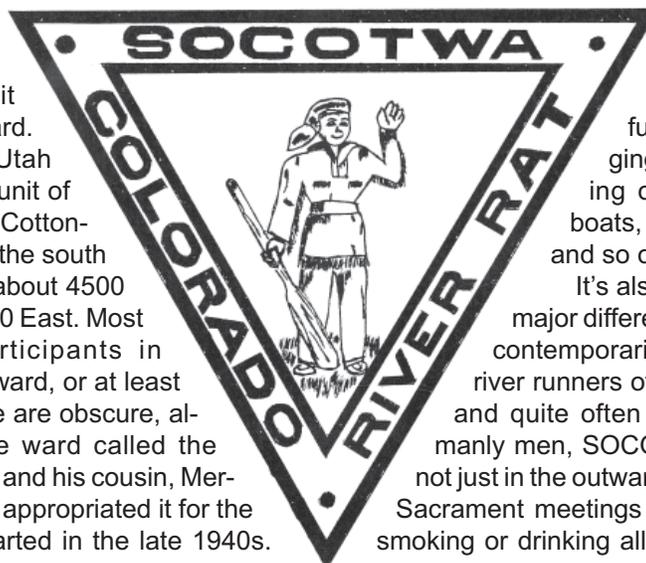
Into this void stepped SOCOTWA. Okay, I know you're asking, what is with that name? It's actually an acronym of sorts: it stands for South Cottonwood Ward. A ward, as all who've lived in Utah know, is the basic administrative unit of the Mormon church. The South Cottonwood Ward comprised an area of the south Salt Lake valley, in Murray, from about 4500 South to 5600 South and about 900 East. Most of the early leaders and participants in SOCOTWA trips came from that ward, or at least that area. The origins of the name are obscure, although there was a choir in the ward called the SOCOTWA Singers. Dale Labrum and his cousin, Merlin Shaw, liked the sound of it and appropriated it for the outdoor adventure group they started in the late 1940s.

Dale and Merlin had grown up together and were always looking for things to do in the great Utah outdoors. After a stint in the Navy during the war, Dale heard about an auction of surplus war materials to be held at the old army air base in Kearns, Utah. He was the highest and only bidder on a brand new surplus 10-man raft at this particular auction, paying \$15 for a raft, complete with paddles and other gear, including grooved wooden plugs used for stopping air leaks caused by bullet holes. Dale named the raft "Sweet Lips," to honor his "lost love and misspent youth," called up his cousin Merlin and said, well, I've got a raft, want to give it a try?

After a couple of misadventures, including a trip down the Jordan River in the Salt Lake valley that involved "diversion dams, barbed wire fences, and a multitude of irate farmers," and an exhausting excursion to Utah Lake that ended up with them slogging through mush ice dragging the boat, they resolved to try other venues for their raft. Their first trip through Glen Canyon was in 1948, although details of that trip are sketchy. Boy Scout groups, which in Utah are all sponsored by the Mormon church, had gone down Glen Canyon with Bert Loper as their guide, and it's likely they heard about how much fun the Scouts had had. But at any rate it was such a success that Dale and Merlin decided to form a non-profit corporation "for the purpose of guiding the youth and providing a meaningful relationship with nature." Interest in the group quickly skyrocketed, inspired by the stories of Glen Canyon that spread through the Mormon grapevine. Within a couple of years their needs had outgrown the original "Sweet Lips," and more rafts and equipment were quickly obtained. By the middle of the 1950s, when plans for the Glen Canyon Dam were made public, SOCOTWA was a going concern, with over 30 rafts and associated equipment, busses and trucks to haul passengers and gear, and half a dozen trips going at the same time. But it's important to point out that SOCOTWA was not a commercial outfitter in the sense we think of today, where guests pay a fee to go on a trip that is catered, and on which all they basically do is get on and off the boats every day. Rather, it was more like a co-operative in which members joined the organization for a nominal yearly fee of \$15, and then paid for each trip that

they wanted to go on. Once you signed up for a trip, usually about \$50 for a week long trip, you were expected to participate fully in the running of the trip, rigging and de-rigging the boats, serving on a kitchen crew, paddling the boats, loading and unloading every day, and so on.

It's also important to point out two other major differences between SOCOTWA and its contemporaries on the river: unlike the other river runners of the day, who were portrayed as, and quite often were, hard-drinking, hard-bitten manly men, SOCOTWA was thoroughly Mormon—not just in the outward trappings of Sunday School and Sacrament meetings during the trip, daily prayers, no smoking or drinking allowed (but plenty of opportunities



for romance, which was winked at by the leaders)—but in the detailed organization, the pioneer spirit, and the shared heritage of ancestors who made a home out of a wilderness. Indeed many of the SOCOTWA leaders were leaders in their local wards; Merlin Shaw was a Bishop, for example, and others held similar positions in the church. Next—and in this they differed not only from other river outfitters but from the standard practices of the Mormon church then and now—women were active participants in all aspects of the trips. Women such as Deween Durrant, Mary Plowgian, and Nancy Anderson served as chefs (who actually managed the kitchen crews instead of doing the actual cooking), as planners, guides, boat captains, and even expedition leaders, as the trip leaders were called. Finally, another Mormon tradition was keeping a journal, and a surprising number of passengers did so, sending copies back to the SOCOTWA offices in Salt Lake City. These ranged from simple type-written accounts a few pages long, to elaborate bound publications with photos, maps, and drawings.

By the middle 1950s, the Glen Canyon trips were down to a routine. The group would meet in Salt Lake City, usually in the vacant lot by Merly Shaw's house in Murray, and then travel in a bus down to an intermediate stop like Green River, Utah, or Arches National Park. There they would be met by a stake bed truck which already had all the boats and river gear. All the personal bags would be loaded into the truck and all the passengers would pile in on top for the bone-jarring, dusty ride down through North Wash to Hite. Once there, the group would be divided into boat crews, which would also be the kitchen crew for one day's duty, the boats were inflated, all gear loaded, and they were off. Each day started at 4 A.M. with Merly Shaw playing a tune on his harmonica, save for Sundays, when they got to sleep in until 5:30. Water fights, a feature of SOCOTWA trips, usually started right away and didn't stop until they were off the river at the end of the trip. Another activity was wallowing in mud bogs; everyone would coat themselves with mud and roll around; some groups would create tableaux of mud-coated figures.

Favorite stops included Bert Loper's cabin at Ticaboo; the petroglyph panel at Smith Fork; SOCOTWA beach at Bullfrog Rapids; Shaw's Spring Canyon, a small side canyon that SOCOTWA claimed to have explored for the first time and where there was a fixed rope for swinging out into the river; and of course Hole-in-the-Rock. Given the Mormon background of virtually all the passengers, the hike up Hole-in-the-Rock was more in the nature of a pilgrimage than just a hike, and even reluctant passengers were inspired by the prospect of a Dairy Queen at the top of the trail. (The mythical Dairy Queen was peripatetic; sometimes it was at Hole-in-the-Rock, sometimes on top of Rainbow Bridge, sometimes up the Escalante a ways; it was a standard trick to play on first-timers). Music Temple was also a favorite, and Sacrament services were often held there, with hymns and people playing instruments, and all would sign the register books found in a can under an overhang. Camps were at places like Lake Canyon, Hole-in-the-Rock, and Forbidding Canyon, where the meals were simple but filling fare such as hamburgers, spaghetti,



SOCOTWA stew, Merly's famous breakfast of bacon, potatoes and eggs mixed together, and so on. Lunches were equally simple, and usually eaten on the boats as they floated along.

The highlight of the trip, though, was the hike to Rainbow Bridge. It was a long slog, 14 miles round-trip, but there were few who didn't go. The camp at the mouth of Forbidding Canyon (sometimes called Aztec Canyon, after the name of the creek that flowed through it) was often crowded, and it was one of the few places where the SOCOTWA trips would run into other parties; government surveyors, private trips, even other outfitters such as Mexican Hat Expeditions or Ken Sleight's Wonderland Expeditions. While the hike was a long one, the goal at the end, and the beautiful slickrock pools along the way made it worthwhile. Once at Rainbow Bridge the more adventurous would use the fixed ropes to climb a buttress on one side of the bridge, from which they could climb down onto the top of the span. Others would look through the registers and sign their names, and lounge in the dammed-up pools at the bottom. Once everyone was back down, it was time for lunch at the Contest Pool. The contest involved running or edging up a steep slickrock slope as far as you could, then make a mark on the wall with a rock. The next contestant would try to reach a little higher or farther. Despite their sore feet and sunburned skin, that night was there was often a grand fiesta, for it was the last night of the trip. Concerts with ukuleles, a violin, and of course Merly's harmonica were held, and one 1958 journal describes a square dance held by firelight.

There are two things that seem to characterize SOCOTWA trips, and that appeared in every journal we read, and in every interview: the emphasis on having fun and romance. Water fights and mud wallowing have already been mentioned; boat crews held competitions and often brought along specially made flags, or color hats for their boat mates. Shaving by the men was frowned on, and while the women would wash their hair, no one was supposed to wash their clothes. Sacre Dulce, an LDS choir group that went on many SOCOTWA trips, was famous for practical jokes. On one trip they somehow smuggled an iced watermelon along, and ate it on the boat in front of the other crews; on another trip, boat leader Glen Fagg secretly brought along ice cream packed in dry ice, with Dairy Queen cups, chocolate topping, and even maraschino cherries. The effect of seeing the Sacre Dulce crews

eating these treats on the boat, while the others washed down smashed peanut butter or Vienna sausage sandwiches with heavily chlorinated water, is easy to imagine. The alleged Dairy Queen at the top of Rainbow Bridge has already been mentioned, and other practical jokes were common in camp. However, it was all done in a spirit of fun. The other aspect of SOCOTWA that seems to crop up in every account is the romance. More than one person we interviewed said that they had met their future spouse on the river, had proposed, or had at least had a brief river romance. Dale Labrum, one of the founders of SOCOTWA and participant on many trips, wrote of meeting his future wife on a trip where everything had gone wrong; flat tires, bugs, wind, poison ivy, a boat flip: "I had already set the wedding date with a bimbo, and she was engaged to a turkey, when we experienced this magical SOCOTWA trip together. Nonetheless, when ... I saw a smile on her blistered lips and she said 'Wasn't that a beautiful moment when we were surrounded by rainbows?' I knew she was the one." They were married three years later and have been married almost fifty years now.

The earliest SOCOTWA trips took out at Lees Ferry, but after construction on Glen Canyon Dam started in 1956, they could only go as far as the landing at Kane Creek, near Crossing of the Fathers. There the boats would be unloaded and washed out; the gear piled up in the back of the old faithful yellow and red stake bed truck, and the weary, sunburned group would climb in on top of it and rattle their way back to civilization, the town of Kanab in the early 1950s and later, the Wahweap Motel. It was time to wash up, comb some of the sand out of their hair, and don their new SOCOTWA t-shirts, given to them at the end of the trip. There the trip began to split up; some left right away, while others would often stop at the site of the Glen Canyon Dam, or visit Bryce Canyon National Park. Once back in Salt Lake City, there was usually a final dinner at someone's house, and their SOCOTWA Glen Canyon trip was over.

Even though Glen Canyon was the main attraction for SOCOTWA, it wasn't the only river trip they offered. Some groups ran the San Juan or the "daily" stretch of the Colorado, from the Dewey Bridge to Moab, Desolation Canyon on the Green, and exploratory trips were done on the Snake River and the Middle Fork of the Salmon in Idaho. The leadership discussed trying Cataract Canyon or the Grand Canyon, but they never ran either of those stretches of river because the former was deemed too dangerous, and the latter too long. One whitewater river they did run on a fairly regular basis, however, was the Green through the Canyon of Lodore in Dinosaur National Monument. Before the Flaming Gorge Dam tamed it, Lodore was a wild stretch of river; spring floods could run as high as 25,000 cfs. At high water it was one continuous rapid, with such famed Class III and IV falls as Disaster Falls, Triplet Falls, and Hell's Half Mile. Even experienced river runners like Bus Hatch and Frank Swain often got themselves into trouble in Lodore. The SOCOTWA crews, made up of equally inexperienced guides and paddlers, often found themselves over their heads. On a high-water 1961 trip, one of the boats wrapped around Winnie's Rock in the first

rapid and was lost, despite an all-day effort to free it. Other problems in Dinosaur were caused by weather; in the spring they were often beset by rain and wind. They never carried tents, so they went to bed wet and cold and rose the same way. On the Yampa, the trips were sometimes plagued by mosquitoes. So Dinosaur never held the same attractions that Glen Canyon did for SOCOTWA groups.

In some ways, SOCOTWA was ahead of the curve in river running; they ran more trips and had more boats on the water than any of the early outfitters, and all with volunteer crews. Being ahead of the curve in anything can be risky, and in the wrong situation or setting downright dangerous. It was a function of too many boats on the water with too many inexperienced people—both passengers and staff—and the odds finally caught up with them. SOCOTWA had its share and more of on-river and campsite accidents, and even some tragedies. Of course sunburns, bug bites, cuts and bruises were common and expected, just like they are today; but there were also several cases where horseplay got out of hand, or someone tried to climb a wall that was a little too steep, and bones were broken. SOCOTWA had good first aid, as good as you could get at the time, and many times there were doctors along as passengers. But if you broke an arm or an ankle, or dislocated a shoulder, there were no evacuations. The injured limb was splinted or stabilized, and the other passengers pitched in to help the injured member of the group until they got back to civilization; it was just looked on as part of the risk of going into a wilderness. In the early 1960s, though, SOCOTWA suffered a series of tragedies that staggered the SOCOTWA membership. Even though two of these tragic events didn't even happen on the river, they seemed to spell the end of SOCOTWA's active river program.

The first occurred in May of 1961, on a trip through Split Mountain Canyon on the Green. It was a large group, 55 people, and very high water. At the last small rapid before the Split Mountain boat ramp, where the river pushes up against the cliff on the right, one of the boats got too close and was momentarily pinned by the current. Everyone was thrown clear except for Don Jaspersen of Provo and a woman named Peggy Robinson. Ms Robinson was pinned against the wall by the boat, while Jaspersen was knocked unconscious when his head hit the cliff and thrown into the bottom of the boat. The next boat behind them was able to free the trapped boat; Ms Robinson floated clear, face down, but was brought around. Mr. Jaspersen, however, was dead when they pulled him from the overturned boat. SOCOTWA members had barely had time to digest this awful event when in September of that same year, Walt Scott, a long-time SOCOTWA leader and the person in charge of maintenance of their vehicles, led a large group of Scouts into the Zion Canyon Narrows. On a Sunday, as they were hiking along the bottom of the canyon, a sudden flash flood hit the party and Scott and four of the boy scouts were washed away. Their bodies were all found later, as much as ten miles downriver. The small, close-knit group of SOCOTWA staff was deeply shocked by this sudden loss of someone they all knew so well.

But worse was to come. In June, 1963, a large group of Boy Scouts from the Pleasant View Ward in Utah Valley

were in the back of the SOCOTWA truck on the 50-Mile Mountain road south of Escalante, Utah, on their way to meet a SOCOTWA river trip at the bottom of the Hole-in-the-Rock trail. There they would trade passengers, the river crews hiking out, while the Scouts hiked in to run the last stretch of Glen Canyon. It was one of the most isolated spots in the entire state. As the truck labored up a steep grade out of Carcass Wash, the engine stalled, and as it began to roll backwards the driver could not stop it. The truck rolled off the road and overturned, spilling all passengers and gear and then rolling over some of them. Four adults and eight scouts were killed instantly, while twenty-six more were injured, some critically. Among the dead was Merly Shaw, the most well-loved member of the entire SOCOTWA family. With his loss, and the flooding of Glen Canyon when the gates closed on the dam that same year, the heart went out of the SOCOTWA river program. Even though in later years the group still did occasional river trips, it just wasn't the same. Dale Labrum, one of the founders of the group, shaken by the loss of his friend and cousin, walked away and resigned from the board. One member, John Josephson, took over the river gear and changed the name to Travel Institute, and continued to run some trips through Dinosaur and Desolation Canyon, but SOCOTWA's years on the river were finished.

Even before these terrible occurrences, SOCOTWA had branched out into land trips by bus. Groups went to the Seattle and New York World's Fairs, to the Hill Cumorah Pageant in New York, even to Mexico. These were run the same way as the river trips; they camped out in parks and campgrounds, and brought along their own kitchens and food. Many accounts were written about these trips, but they are outside the scope of *The Confluence*. Suffice to say that they continued into the 1980s and beyond, and as mentioned above, SOCOTWA is still in existence.

Despite these tragedies, many people in Utah and elsewhere have nothing but fond memories of their experiences with SOCOTWA. In the commemorative book SOCOTWA published on its fiftieth anniversary in 1998, members related not tragedy, but how SOCOTWA helped them establish patterns in their lives that they still held to. They remembered the fun times, the camaraderie, the shared joy of the river and the experiences of traveling to far and wild places with a group of friends. Many wrote about the lifelong friends they had made while on a SOCOTWA trips; others remembered the moon over the cliffs in Glen Canyon or the practical jokes by Sacre Dulce. Deween Durrant summed it up for everyone when she wrote:

*Very simply, SOCOTWA fulfilled my needs. It provided me with the opportunity to expand my horizons; to experience adventure and daring; to travel to places and see things I never could have afforded. SOCOTWA helped me to establish a circle of friends, a sense of belonging, feelings of acceptance, self confidence, and security. In short, it set my SPIRIT free. [...] What a brilliant landscape of memories these SOCOTWA trips and experiences have provided for us! What a rich heritage of friendships and contacts we've enjoyed from teen age through the "golden" years! What a great legacy of laughter, love, and learning, has lighted our lives!*