

**RUNNING**  
**El Rio de Nuestra Señora de Dolores**  
**in May 1956**

**by Black George**  
**12 March, 2007**

Despite its transitory character, boating was undoubtedly attempted on the Dolores River, but no significant record of early navigation is known. Thus, the first trip to be described which might benefit future travelers took place a mere 60 years ago. In 1948, Preston "Pres" Walker (editor of the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel), and Pres's wife Becky plus their dog, Ditty, and Otis "Dock" Marston (Colorado River Historian), and his wife, Margaret, traversed the river for 207 miles from near the town of Dolores to the river's junction with the Colorado River, and continued 35 more miles on high fast water to "Matrimony Spring" near Moab, Utah. Pres and Dock rowed a Nevills San Juan type of boat (punt), a wooden craft tapered toward bow and stem, and blunt at both extremities. The group departed from a bridge about a mile downstream from the town of Dolores on May 15 and reached Gateway, Colorado, on May 20. Then, after a two day layover including a trip to Grand Junction, they embarked at Gateway on May 23 and reached the Colorado River and Moab, Utah, on May 25. Walker's account, accompanied by 11 photographs, was published in the Daily Sentinel shortly after the trip (Walker, 1948), and Marston's account, a copy of his diary, was published a year later in Colorado Magazine, (Marston, 1949).

**First Trip**  
**05 May, 1956**  
**Dove Creek pumping station (Mile 19.1) to**  
**Mouth of Disappointment Creek (Mile 43.2)**  
**23.2 miles**  
**Bob Gant and George Simmons**

Our first impression was, "The water's cold!" We had no more than pumped our boats and launched them, than they felt soft again, and we had to thoroughly top them off before they were rigid enough to be rowed effectively. Within a few minutes we were at a very unique geologic feature, the Glade Graben (Fig. 6). A graben is a "block" of rock which has been down-faulted in relation to the rocks by its sides, and in this case the down dropping is the result of the solution of salt in an underlying unit of rocks, the Paradox Formation.

A stratigraphic unit named the Paradox Formation underlies the Slick Rock District and extends from there 30 miles northeast toward the Uncompahgre Uplift. This formation is chiefly composed of evaporite minerals including an abundance of halite (common table salt). When salt is buried and under differential pressure it flows, and when the Colorado Plateau was compressed against the Uncompahgre Uplift, the strata in the

adjacent part of the Plateau were folded into anticlines and synclines parallel to the Uncompahgre Uplift. The salt being quite plastic flowed toward the low pressure areas, the crests of the anticlines. As erosion proceeded along the courses of preceding drainages, the water table lowered and upon reaching the salt dissolved it, causing the overlying rocks to collapse. This caused valleys to form along the crests of the anticlines. The drainages continued in their original courses, and instead of flowing in the valleys, they cut across them, and several such anomalies are recognized in this region. The most famous is Paradox Valley, and the closest to the Slick Rock District is Gypsum Valley, along its north boundary.

In the southeast part of the Slick Rock District is a topographic feature known as the Glade Highland, and drilling has revealed that it is supported by another salt anticline, the Dolores Anticline. This anticline is in the incipient stages of rupture, and the Glade Graben represents the first faults of the eventual many which will develop as the fold collapses.

The thought of maintaining a record that might be of subsequent use had not occurred to me. It seemed the presence of other Canyoners would be a very rare for I had lived near the river for two years during which time it had been navigable for only a few weeks, and I had visited the river almost daily without encountering anyone with the intent of boating. Eight years had elapsed since the only known previous voyage and it was claimed as the first trip on the Dolores (Walker, 1948). I was mapping the geology on aerial photographs at a scale of 1:60,000, but never considered locating the rapids or the exact locations where the few pictures were taken (Fig. 7). This could have been easily accomplished as a road which I traveled frequently was beside much of the river. We did apply names to a few features, but these were informal names for our own conversations ("Lost Hat Rapids", Figs. 8,9, and 10.), and are mostly meaningless now, 50 years later.

The oars with which we rowed were those which came with the surplus rafts when they were purchased. They were made of hollow aluminum tubes which "gloved" into each other and snapped into place with small spring-loaded buttons. The blades were so small that they caused little more movement than poles. We enlarged the blades by riveting sheet aluminum extensions, and smoothed the edges with folded copper lining. This improved propulsion immensely, but if we pulled too hard, then the oars would bend and could break.

We had scouted all of the rapids from the Dove Creek Pumping Station to an area around Horseshoe Bend and determined that we could run everything but Snaggletooth Rapid (Fig. 11), the only rapid which we knew by name from the Walker and Marston trip in 1948, (Walker, 1948; Marston, 1949.) We took another long look without changing our minds, and decided that our boats might split a fabric seam if they pounded into the rocks. There was neither a question, nor any impropriety considered!

The crest of the Dolores Anticline intersects the course of the Dolores River near here, and as one progresses downstream the base of the Chinle Formation (Triassic) is

exposed and the top of the Cutler Formation ( Permian) appears. At many places in this region the Moss Back Conglomerate is the lowest member of the Chinle, and this stratigraphic unit is elsewhere the host for uranium deposits. The Moss Back overlies the Cutler Formation in the Slick Rock District, and forever hopeful prospectors had explored the Chinle-Cutler contact with several adits in the Horseshoe Group of claims (near Mile 31.5, river left).

About two miles downstream from Snaggletooth Rapid the Dolores River makes an abrupt change in course, doubling back on itself in a two-mile hairpin turn (Miles 29.2 - 31.2) called the Horseshoe Bend. A saddle in the bend isolates a hill to the northeast which rises 300 feet above the saddle and 500 feet above the river. We dubbed this promontory the "Dolores Pyramid" (Fig. 12).

We stopped for a "break" at Mile 31.2 (Fig. 13), river left opposite the south end of Joe Davis Hill knowing that after a little more than a mile we would encounter practically continuous rapids for several miles until we rounded the west end of Joe Davis Hill.

We continued on to the Muleshoe Bend Mile 37.5 to Mile 39.2 where we were on very familiar ground. During the Fall this was one of our favorite hunting areas for deer. The two hunters who lost a coin toss became the "dogs" and hiked over the neck of the Muleshoe. The winners, the "hunters" would conceal themselves behind boulders and trees and wait. The "dogs would walk down downstream on opposite sides of what little river existed at that time of the year, slowly flushing the deer along the bottom of the narrow canyon toward the waiting hunters. The "Code for the Dogs" was that they could only shoot if a deer turned back toward them. Of course great care must be taken in a hunt of this sort as the game is between facing groups with rifles.

Three miles below the Muleshoe Bend a ranch road reaches the mouth of Disappointment Creek, and having shuttled a vehicle there early in the morning, this was our egress point.

### **Second Trip 13 May, 1956**

**Bradfield Bridge (Mile 0.0) to Dove Creek pumping station (mile 19.1)  
Bob Gant, Bill Rodgers, and George Simmons in Nicholas Needlefoot**

Prior to the construction of the McPhee Dam in 1983, navigation on the Dolores River was possible from 15 miles upstream from the town of Dolores, at the confluence of the Dolores River and its West Fork, for 222 miles to the Colorado River. Another 2 miles of travel was necessary to reach an egress point on the Colorado at Dewey Bridge. The segment of the Dolores upstream from the town of Dolores is now a popular "daily" for local boaters in kayaks and small rafts. The McPhee Reservoir occupies 25 miles of the river's former course, and it is possible to launch on the Dolores below McPhee Dam, 11 miles upstream from the Bradfield Bridge. However, the 11 miles is open canyon and a

haven, for fly fishermen, and practically all boating commences at the Bradfield Recreation site.

We were aware that numerous archaeological sites occurred in the vicinity, and while mapping along a rim of Dakota Sandstone, encountered one unexpectedly, near the launch site (Fig. 15).

We floated past the old Bradfield Homestead site and then encountered the first of several fences, erected across the river to control the wanderings of cattle (Fig. 16). It was necessary to portage around these rather squeezing under or through them, thereby risking tears which could be inflicted by the barbed wire. This indicated that in some years the spring runoff was not high enough to destroy these barriers.

We paused for lunch (Fig. 17), and then as we progressed downstream, Ponderosa Canyon became deeper and deeper, and when we reached Pealed Pine Canyon, nearly 10 miles below the Bradfield Bridge, it was 1,600 feet deep. The walls of the canyon here the hosts for huge ponderosa pine trees, one of which had toppled athwart the river, completely blocking its course (Figs. 18 and 19).

The Ponderosa Gorge maintained its character all of the remaining distance (Fig. 20), and around Mountain Sheep Point to our exit at Big Canyon Rapids by the Dove Creek pumping station—deep (1,700 feet), narrow, fast water, and accompanied by an abundance of Ponderosa Pine trees.

**Third Trip**  
**20 May, 1956**  
**Bridge over river in Gypsum Valley (Mile 63.6) to**  
**Bedrock (Mile 96.8)**  
**33.2 miles**  
**Clyde Duren, Bob Gant, and George Simmons in The Waters of Lodore**

We took no pictures on this trip and my recollections are two-fold. One of them is the sinuosity of this segment of the Dolores River. I know of no place where one can travel such a long distance and end such a short airline distance from his origin. Entering Slick Rock Canyon at Mile 63.6, the river twists and meanders as if it were on a flood plain for nearly 30 miles until reaching La Sal Creek (Mile 92.7). If the river were a road, and a car drove down it at night, the driver would run down his battery honking at his own tail light. My other memory is the navigation of Clyde Duran. I rowed the first ten miles, and Bob the second. What we didn't know until after he commenced his turn was that Clyde had not previously rowed a boat, and his ride was like playing "bumpo cars" in the park. He was unable to miss rocks unless so many were present that smacking all of them was impossible. He could paddle neither forward nor backward and every stroke carried us to where we shouldn't be. We tried to educate him, and then to demonstrate by example, but he was too stubborn to be talked out of his seat, and insisted on completing his turn. So we laughed and laughed from one ricochet to the next and thought of naming a dance step for his maneuvers, The Dolores River Waltz.

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