

Running Rapids, Vintage 1842

John L. J. Hart

John Charles Fremont in his report of an expedition to the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming in 1842 describes his boat as an "India-rubber boat twenty feet long and five broad." On his return from the Wind River Mountains he followed the Sweetwater River until it joined the North Platte River. He then inflated the India-rubber boat and placed it in the North Platte River on August 25, 1842. The result is described in his journal, of which many editions have been printed. "There appeared no scarcity of water, and we took on board, with various instruments and baggage, provisions for ten or twelve days. We paddled down the river rapidly, for our little craft was light as a duck on the water; and the sun had been sometime risen, when we heard before us a hollow roar, which we supposed to be that of a fall, of which we had heard a vague rumor, but whose exact locality no one had been able to describe to us. We were approaching a ridge, through which the river passes by a place called 'canon,' (pronounced kanyon,) a Spanish word, signifying a piece of artillery, the barrel of a gun, or any kind of tube; and which, in this country, has been adopted to describe the passage of a river between perpendicular rocks of great height, which frequently approach each other so closely overhead as to form a kind of tunnel over the stream, which foams along below, half-choked up by fallen fragments. Between the mouth of the Sweetwater and Goat Island, there is probably a fall of three hundred feet, and that was principally made in the canons before us; as, without them, the water was comparatively smooth. As we neared the ridge, the river made a sudden turn, and swept squarely down against one of the walls of the canon with a great velocity, and so steep a descent, that it had to the eye the appearance of an inclined plane. When we launched into this, the men jumped overboard, to check the velocity of the boat, but were soon in water up to their necks and our

boat ran on; but we succeeded in bringing her to a small point of rocks on the right, at the mouth of the canon. Here was a kind of elevated sand beach, not many yards square, backed by the rocks, and around the point the river swept at a right angle. Trunks of trees deposited on jutting points twenty or thirty feet above, and other marks, showed that the water here frequently rose to a considerable height. The ridge was of the same decomposing granite already mentioned, and the water had worked the surface, in many places, into a wavy surface of ridges and holes. We ascended the rocks to reconnoitre the ground, and from the summit the passage appeared to be a continued cataract foaming over many obstructions, and broken by a number of small falls. We saw nowhere a fall answering to that which had been described to us as having twenty or twenty-five feet; but still concluded this to be the place in question, as, in the season of floods, the run of the river against the wall would produce a great rise, and the waters, reflected squarely off, would descend through the passage in a sheet of foam, having every appearances of a large fall. Eighteen years previous to this time, as I subsequently learned from himself, Mr. Fitzpatrick, somewhere above on this river, had embarked with a valuable cargo of beaver. Unacquainted with the stream, which he believed would conduct him safely to the Missouri, he came unexpectedly into this canon, where he was wrecked, with the total loss of his furs. It would have been a work of great time and labor to pack our baggage across the ridge, and I determined to run the canon. We all again embarked, and at first attempted to check the way of the boat; but the water swept through with so much violence that we narrowly escaped being swamped, and were obliged to let her go in the full force of the current, and trust to the skill of the boatmen. The dangerous places in this canon were where huge rocks had fallen

from above, and hemmed in the already narrow pass of the river to an open space of three or four and five feet. These obstructions raised the water considerably above, which was sometimes precipitated over in a fall; and at other places, where this dam was too high, rushed through the contracted opening with tremendous violence. Had our boat been made of wood, in passing the narrows she would have been staved; but her elasticity preserved her unhurt from every shock, and she seemed fairly to leap over the falls.

"In this way we passed three cataracts in succession, where, perhaps, one hundred feet of smooth water intervened; and finally, with a shout of pleasure at our success, issued from our tunnel into the open day beyond. We were so delighted with the performance of our boat, and so confident in her powers, that we would not have hesitated to leap a fall of ten feet with her. We put to shore for breakfast at some willows on the right bank, immediately below the mouth of the canon; for it was now eight o'clock, and we had been working since daylight, and were all wet, fatigued, and hungry. While the men were preparing breakfast, I went out to reconnoitre. The view was very limited. The course of the river was smooth, so far as I could see; on both sides were broken hills; and but a mile or two below was another high ridge. The rock at the mouth of the canon was still the decomposing granite, with great quantities of mica, which made a very glittering sand.

"We reembarked at nine o'clock, and in about twenty minutes reached the next canon. Landing on a rock shore at its commencement, we ascended the ridge to reconnoitre. Portage was out of the question. So far as we could see, the jagged rocks pointed out the course of the canon, on a winding line of seven or eight miles. It was simply a narrow, dark chasm in the rock; and here the perpendicular faces were much higher than in the previous pass, being at this end two to three hundred, and further down, as we afterward ascertained, five hundred feet in vertical height. Our previous success had made

us bold, and we determined again to run the canon. Every thing was secured as firmly as possible; and, having divested ourselves of the greater part of our clothing, we pushed into the stream. To save our chronometer from accident, Mr. Preuss took it, and attempted to proceed along the shore on the masses of rock, which in places were piled up on either side; but, after he had walked about five minutes, every thing like shore disappeared, and the vertical wall came squarely down into the water. He therefore waited until we came up. An ugly pass lay before us. We had made fast to the stern of the boat a strong rope about fifty feet long; and three of the men clambered along among the rocks, and with this rope let her down slowly through the pass. In several places high rocks lay scattered about in the channel; and in the narrows it required all our strength and skill to avoid staving the boat on the sharp points. In one of these, the boat proved a little too broad, and stuck fast for an instant, while the water flew over us; fortunately it was but for an instant, as our united strength forced her immediately through. The water swept overboard only a sextant and a pair of saddlebags. I caught the sextant as it passed by me; but the saddlebags became the prey of the whirlpools. We reached the place where Mr. Preuss was standing, took him on board, and, with the aid of the boat, put the men with the rope on the succeeding pile of rocks. We found this passage much worse than the previous one, and our position was rather a bad one. To go back, was impossible; before us, the cataract was a sheet of foam; and, shut up in the chasm by the rocks, which in some places seemed almost to meet overhead, the roar of the water was deafening. We pushed off again; but, after making a little distance, the force of the current became too great for the men on shore, and two of them let go the rope. Lajeunesse, the third man, hung on, and was jerked headforemost into the river from a rock about twelve feet high; and down the boat shot like an arrow, Basil following us in the rapid current, and exerting all his strength to keep in mid-

channel—his head only seen occasionally like a black spot in the white foam. How far we went, I do not exactly know; but we succeeded in turning the boat into an eddy below. 'Cre Dieu,' said Basil Lajeunesse, as he arrived immediately after us, 'Je crois bien que j'ai nagé un demi mile,'—'I believe, indeed, that I have swum half a mile.' He had owed his life to his skill as a swimmer; and I determined to take him and the others on board, and trust to skill and fortune to reach the other end in safety. We placed ourselves on our knees, with the short paddles in our hands, the most skilful boatman being at the bow; and again we commenced our rapid descent. We cleared rock after rock, and shot past fall after fall, our little boat seeming to play with the cataract. We became flushed with success and familiar with the danger; and, yielding to the excitement of the occasion, broke forth together into a Canadian boat song. Singing, or rather shouting, we dashed along; and were, I believe, in the midst of the chorus, when the boat struck a concealed rock immediately at the foot of a fall, which whirled her over in an instant. Three of my men could not swim, and my

first feeling was to assist them, and save some of our effects; but a sharp concussion or two convinced me that I had not yet saved myself. A few strokes brought me into an eddy, and I landed on a pile of rocks on the left side. Looking around, I saw that Mr. Preuss had gained the shore on the same side, about twenty yards below; and a little climbing and swimming soon brought him to my side. On the opposite side, against the wall, lay the boat bottom up; and Lambert was in the act of saving Descoteaux, whom he had grasped by the hair, and who could not swim; 'Lache pas,' said he, as I afterward learned, 'lache pas, cher frere,'—'Don't let go, don't let go, dear brother.' 'Crains pas,' was the reply, 'Je m'en vais mourir avant que de te lacher,'—'Fear not, I will die before I let you go.' Such was the reply of courage and generosity in this danger. For a hundred yards below, the current was covered with floating books and boxes, bales of blankets, and scattered articles of clothing; and so strong and boiling was the stream, that even our heavy instruments, which were all in cases, kept on the surface, and the sextant, circle, and the long black box of the telescope, were

The river section Fremont took with his India-rubber boats is now covered by the Pathfinder Reservoir. North Platte River runners of the 1960's have moved downstream about 100 miles to the vicinity of Guernsey.

Photo by J. R. Guadagno



in view at once. For a moment, I felt somewhat disheartened. All our books—almost every record of the journey—our journals and registers of astronomical and barometrical observations—had been lost in a moment. But it was no time to indulge in regrets; and I immediately set about endeavoring to save something from the wreck. Making ourselves understood as well as possible by signs, (for nothing could be heard in the roar of waters), we commenced our operations. Of every thing on board, the only article that had been saved was my double-barrelled gun, which Descoteaux had caught, and clung to with drowning tenacity. The men continued down the river on the left bank. Mr. Preuss and myself descended on the side we were on; and Lajeunesse, with a paddle in his hand, jumped on the boat alone, and continued down the canon. She was now light, and cleared every bad place with much less difficulty. In a short time, he was joined by Lambert; and the search was continued for about a mile and a half,

which was as far as the boat could proceed in the pass.

"Here the walls were about five hundred feet high, and the fragments of rocks from above had choked the river into a hollow pass but one or two feet above the surface. Through this and the interstices of the rock, the water found its way. Favored beyond our expectations, all of our registers had been recovered, with the exception of one of my journals, which contained the notes and incidents of travel, and topographical descriptions, a number of scattered astronomical observations, principally meridian altitudes of the sun, and our barometrical register west of Laramie. Fortunately, our other journals contained duplicates of the most important barometrical observations which had been taken in the mountains. These, with a few scattered notes, were all that had been preserved of our meteorological observations. In addition to these, we saved the circle; and these, with a few blankets, constituted every thing that had been rescued from the waters."

Abandoning the boat, which had suffered a "rent," Fremont and his companions hiked along the banks of the river to Goat Island, where other members of his expedition with adequate supplies were waiting for them.

The portion of the North Platte River run by Fremont is now covered by the waters of the Pathfinder Reservoir in Wyoming. Another account of the adventure is found in the journal of Preuss, recently printed.

A week later the party constructed a "bull boat" from buffalo hides, but found it unsuitable for this portion of the river.

Fremont's rubber boat may have been the first of its kind. In his "Memoirs" (p. 72) he states:

"With the plan fully settled I went in March to New York to obtain necessary instruments and other essentials. Among these I had made an indiarubber boat, with airtight compartments, to be used in crossing or examining watercourses. So far as I know, this was the first boat of the kind made or used in such work. When finished it was brought to Washington by

Lots of Wilderness

We promise

Six months of snow

20 hours daily sunlight in

June

—40° in December

Brilliant auroral displays

Muskeg and mountains

The Computer Center of the University of Alaska, which operates an IBM System 360 Model 40, invites employment inquiries from persons skilled in the computing arts. Joint academic appointments with the teaching departments may be given to qualified applicants. Direct your inquiry to:

Edward J. Gauss

(life member CMC)

Head of the Computer Center

University of Alaska

College, Alaska 99701

Mr. Horace Day, who took much pride in it. It was the early day of indiarubber, when its preparations were not odorless.' Mr. Day himself unpacked it at the house, on a broad gallery opening from the dining room, saying that there 'might be some odor from the chemicals.' There was; to such a degree that it was promptly transferred to the stable, but not in time to avoid a long-contested battle between his 'chemicals' and the obligatory disinfectants. Notwithstanding, it proved of valuable service, until finally it came to a violent end in the line of its duty."

On Fremont's trip to California the succeeding year he took another rubber boat. In the journal of this trip he described it:

"Among the useful things which formed a portion of our equipage was an indiarubber boat, eighteen feet long, made somewhat in the form of a bark canoe of the northern lakes. The sides were formed by two airtight cylinders, eighteen inches in diameter, connected with others forming the bow and stern. To lessen the danger from accidents to the boat, these were divided into four different compartments, and the interior space was sufficiently large to contain five or six persons, and a considerable weight of baggage. The Roseaux being too deep to be forded, our boat was

filled with air, and in about one hour all the equipage of the camp, carriage and gun included, ferried across."

When he reached the Great Salt Lake he used it to reach an island in that lake, his difficulty with the boat being described as follows:

"The men had discovered that, instead of being strongly sewed, (like that of the preceding year, which had so triumphantly rode the canons of the Upper Great Platte), our present boat was only pasted together in a very insecure manner, the maker having been allowed so little time in the construction that he was obliged to crowd the labor of two months into several days. * * * In the course of the morning we discovered that two of the cylinders leaked so much as to require one man constantly at the bellows, to keep them sufficiently full of air to support the boat."

It would be interesting to try to find accounts of other "rubber boats" used in the early exploration of the West.

For the
Fullest
Enjoyment

Stay Fit



443-7460

BOULDER ATHLETIC CLUB
1715 15th Street
Boulder, Colorado

Established 1955
Compare our prices and services.

8

Men



comfortable in
8 ROYALIGHT Bags
during
months of continuous use
on
Alaska's McKinley
and on the way
Catalog on request

The Rubber

Denver: 280 Columbine, Phone 322-0147
Boulder: 1030 - 13th St., Phone 442-7656