

50th Anniversary of the Jet Boat Up Run

Buzz Belknap and Phil Smith

Between 1955 and 1960 a series of events – in New Zealand and the United States – brought together a team that fulfilled a long held dream of making a trip upriver through the Grand Canyon. Earlier attempts by Harry Aleson and power boat pioneers Rod Sanderson, Jim Jordon, Ed Hudson and Otis (Dock) Marston, and a 1959 team led by Bill Cooper met defeat at Mile 217 Rapid or at Lava Falls.

We employed a newly developed marine jet which had been perfected by CWF Hamilton in New Zealand. The campaign extended from May 3 to July 12, 1960.

Our strategy took advantage of the high spring run off of the then undammed upper Colorado Basin. The fuel plan was ambitious. Starting with 1500 gallons of high octane gasoline at Lee's Ferry, we had 400 additional gallons delivered by mule train at Phantom Ranch and 550 gallons delivered to the river at Whitmore. Caches were laid on the downstream phase of the expedition to provide fuel for the uprun. The plan was conservative in that we cached enough fuel for a return to Lake Mead from Soapcreek Rapid in the event the upriver attempt was stopped there by the rapid or low water.

Spring flows were not great as predicted and came late because of a colder than normal spring. When the uprun party reached Lee's Ferry the Colorado had dropped to 11,400 cusecs.

The Colorado River through everything it had at us: treacherous low water, turbulent high water, huge rapids, submerged boulders that caused many accidents and constant fiberglass boat repair, injury at Vulcan requiring an emergency helicopter evacuation and the loss of a jet boat in Grapevine. On July 12 three jet boats completed a 690 mile round trip from Lee's Ferry to Boulder City and return.