

The 1937 Carnegie-Caltech Colorado River Expedition

By Erik Berg

2009 Grand Canyon River Guides GTS

The 1937 Carnegie-Caltech Colorado River expedition is one of the most overlooked of the early Grand Canyon river trips and yet one of the most interesting and amusing. Led by Caltech geologists Ian Campbell and John Maxson, the three-boat expedition was launched to conduct the first comprehensive study of the ancient rocks of the Inner Gorge as part of the Carnegie Institution's larger geologic program at the park. The group included three other geologists (Eddie McKee, Robert Sharp and Jack Stark) and three boatmen including noted Grand Canyon river runner Frank Dodge.

Starting from Lees Ferry on October 11, the group reached Phantom Ranch on October 26 and completed their journey at Pearce Ferry on Thanksgiving Day. Much of their six weeks on the river was spent exploring side canyons to collect and photograph rock samples – providing the first serious river-level geologic study along many sections. Well organized, adequately funded and supported by experienced boatmen, the group enjoyed a relatively smooth voyage that was free of major accidents – prompting river historian 'Doc' Marston to call it the best planned trip to ever run the canyon. Evenings were spent in card games and boatman Owen Clark's fine camp cooking would be remembered fondly for years.

The relative ease of the expedition allowed for a more relaxed atmosphere and encouraged an on-going series of wisecracking, nicknames, practical jokes and hi-jinks usually associated with much later river trips. Equally interesting and amusing was the interaction between the various group members which ranged from good-natured teasing to often heated debates on geologic theories. Other highlights from the journey include Dodge's near upset at Upset Rapid and the group's on-river meeting with 'Buzz' Holmstrom during the latter's historic solo trip down the canyon. Many of these debates and distractions were recorded by Stark in a humorous illustrated epic poem entitled "The Doggerel Log of a Canyon Trip" while other events were captured in the detailed diaries of several members as well as the expedition's photographs and live movie footage.

Although later researchers would dispute some of their scientific findings, Campbell and Maxson's work helped lay the foundations for modern Precambrian studies at the canyon and identified and named numerous rock layers including the well-known Zoroaster Granite and Brahma Schist. Aside from the scientific contributions, the trip is historically important as the last group to run the famous Separation and Lava Cliff rapids before they were subdued by the rising waters of Lake Mead and they were one of the last to make the trip before Norman Nevills initiated the era of regular tourist trips. In addition, their meeting with Holmstrom was the first ever meeting of two parties on the river.

1937 Carnegie-Caltech Expedition - Quick Facts

The Crew

Ian Campbell (Expedition Leader) – Professor of geology at Caltech.

John Maxson – Professor of geology at Caltech.

John Stark – Professor of geology at Northwestern University.

John Sharp – Graduate student at Harvard University (past student of Campbell)

Edwin ‘Eddie’ McKee (lower section only) – Park naturalist and geologist

Francis ‘Frank’ Dodge - Lead Boatman

Owen Clark – Second boatman and camp cook

Merrill Spencer – Third boatman

The Boats

Three Sixteen-foot Stone-Galloway style oak and mahogany boats:

Fairchild (Dodge), *Collier* (Clark), *Eliel* (Spencer)

The River

Running at 5,500 fps at time of launch on Oct 11.

More Details

Berg, Erik, “‘The Best Trip I’ve Ever Been On’: The 1937 Carnegie-Caltech Colorado River Expedition”, *Journal of Arizona History*, Winter 2007, pp. 375-402.

Berg, Erik, “Rock Hounds and River Rats: The 1937 Carnegie-Caltech Colorado River Expedition”, *Reflections of Grand Canyon Historians: Ideas, Arguments, and First-Person Accounts*, Todd Berger, ed. (Grand Canyon, AZ: Grand Canyon Association, 2008). pp. 59-66.

