The Exploration of Glen Canyon

On an October day in 1960 I received a telephone call from Spud Johnson in Taos. He wanted to know if I would like to join him and several of his Taos friends ~~in Taos~~ on a river trip down the Colorado River through Glen Canyon. [Floating down a river on a raft was an adventure that had never before entered my mind.] What I knew about the Colorado was almost entirely confined to the Grand Canyon, in the depth of which as a child I had camped with my parents. ~~Glen Canyon~~ I had heard of described, by those who planned to reserve that part of the river for hydroelectric power development, as an unspectacular, gently flowing stretch of the river unruffled by significant rapids, that in fact the Bureau of Reclamation had started to dam. The trip was planned for a week starting at the Hite ferry crossing, the only access to the river between Lee's Ferry and Moab, and ending one hundred and twenty miles down stream above ~~xxxxxxxx~~ the dam construction at the Crossing of the Fathers where Coronado (?) found a way across in 16___. It sounded like an exciting new experience so I accepted Johnson's invitation immediately. We would be sleeping in the open on the river banks and sand bars, and in case of bad weather we could seek natural shelter or come provided with plastic tarpaulins.

From the very first day I was overwhelmed by the scenery, both in prospect and description grossly underrated. The monumental structure of the towering walls in variety and color defied comprehension. So powerful was the impression I didn't know where to look, what to focus on, and in my confusion, photographic opportunities slipped by. I always seemed to be photographing the wrong things, details of oxidized rock while ignoring convoluted cliffs, ~~and~~ as dominant canyon vistas when a sheet of water-stained wall was staring me in the face. There was so much and such variety, all so new and so young that I could not escape the impression I was witnessing a dynamic remoulding of the earth

itself, as indeed I was. These verical canyon walls, these slots in the Navajo sandstone, these cave-like alcoves and gloomy sinuous passages are the product of geologically progressive events that have only recently attained a quieter resting period. The erosion process began and reached its peak some fifteen thousand years ago with the retreat of the last continental glaciation. Torrents of water, hundreds of time greater than today and loaded with the debris of younger rocks, ground through the friable sandstones acquiring increasing amounts of abrasive material to cut down faster than the walls could be widened by the slower processes of ~~erosion~~ weathering. This is the sign of youth which is the unique character of Glen Canyon, of its spectacular architecture and incomparable beauty.

We visited Hidden Passage and Music temple across the river, made famous by Powell on his celebrated exploration of the Colorado River. He and his men camped there and sang songs enhanced by the reverberating accustics for which they named the place. There were many other hidden passages and even narrower rifts in the sandstone walls that we did not see, did not know existed, and that I would on subsequent trips explore; places like Cathedral and Dungeon canyons. But what I did see and tentatively entered in the short time available on this first ~~trip~~ visit left me with a feeling of frustration and yet determination to come back, to expore other mysterious and secret places that I knew were hidden behind the multicolored sandstone cliffs. I knew that what I had photographed was a superficial record, the slightest vision of this wonderful place. The infinite possibilities required repeated and more leisurly visits than the first, which, though a failure photographically, was the initiation to a wealth of creative opportunities that I could not emotionally ignore.

And so I did come back, twice in 1961 and twice again in 1962,

once in 1963 and in 1964, two times in 1965 after the flooding had begun and finally in 1968 and 1971. Gradually the places I had first explored were being drowned as the water advanced up stream. The small side streams that flowed between banks of reeds, and horsetails, and poison ivy thickets were being inundated. In their place the backed-up water carried with it all manner of organic flotsame from the river banks: branches, bits and pieces of wood, and algal scum that could not thrive before in the fast flowing streams. The verdant canyons were replaced by winding passages of still water above which rose the tops of dying trees. ~~In a~~ heron colony ~~that~~ for years had occupied a grove of trees at a wide place in Glen Canyon. As the trees were submerged and died, the most persistant birds, for a year or two before they also abandoned the site, built their nests on ledges high in the rock walls. As the rising water filled the lower parts of the side canyons, destroying for ever a wild, pristine beauty unrecognized and unappreciated by government beaurocrats, it became possible to enter by boat the higher reaches of some of these canyons that had been inaccessable behind verical walls and waterfalls. ~~But~~ these ~~are~~ is inadequate recompense for what was lost, as the lake named for the first explorer replaced the free flowing river. Rivers clean themselves from the evidence of thoughtless ~~xixixxxixxx~~ human visitation, but lakes cannot. Lake Powell is being polluted by a new kind of flotsome, the products of man's throw-away econmomy.