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 on a river trip down the Colorado through Glen Canyon.

What I knew about the Colorado River was almost entirely confined to the Grand Canyon, in the depth of which as a child I had camped with my parents. I had heard Glen Canyon 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 begun 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 twenty miles downstream above the dam construction at the Crossing of the Fathers (Kane Creek) where ~~Coronado (?)~~ Escalante found a way across in 16__.

Floating down a river on a raft was an adventure that had never before entered my mind. It sounded like an exciting new experience, so I accepted ~~Johnson's~~ Spud'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 in 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, or 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 vertical 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 times 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 weathering. This is the sign of youth which is the unique character of Glen Canyon, of its spectacular architecture and imcomparable 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 accoustics 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 visit left me with a feeling of frustration and yet determination to come back, to explore 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 leisurely 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 upstream. 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 flotsam 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. A heron colony 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 forever a wild, pristine beauty unrecognized and unappreciated by government bureaucrats, it became possible to enter by boat the higher reaches of some of these canyons that had been inaccessable behind vertical walls and waterfalls. This 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 human visitation, but lakes cannot. Lake Powell is being polluted by a new kind of flotsam, the products of man's throw-away economy.