

Lone Boatman Completes Trip Down Turbulence of Colorado

Buzz Holmstrum, 28, enjoys exploring rivers. It started out as a mild hobby a few years ago, but when his first boat went on the rocks and sank, there was born a determination to build better rapid-shooting craft, and conquer not only the river that thwarted him in the beginning, but all that offered new fields of conquest.

So it was that the young man set out 52 days ago to conquer the mighty Colorado, and drew into the boat dock at the foot of Hemminway Wash yesterday afternoon to become the first human being to negotiate the river alone from the treacherous upper reaches of the Green river in Wyoming to Boulder dam.

There have been other expeditions that successfully made the same trip, but each has included several persons and at least two boats, and in every other instance, one of the boats has been lost in the rapids along the way.

Holstrum is a service station operator when he's not following his hobby, and can be found most any month of the year on the job at Coquille, Oregon.

He works hard during the year, saving his money in preparation for a new vacation experience, and this year had amassed a capital of \$500 for the trip down the Colorado.

He built his own boat, specially designed for cataracts. It is a simple row boat, 15 feet long and five feet wide, carrying air compartments at either end to prevent sinking.

From the time he completed his conquest of the turbulent Salmon river from Salmon, Idaho, to Lewiston last year, he has been studying all available data on the Colorado, and has been in constant touch with governmental bureaus in Washington for additional information.

"Everybody I talked to or corresponded with advised me against attempting the trip, telling me it was certain to be fatal for a lone individual no matter how well equipped, to battle the rampaging river as I proposed to

do," he explains.

"That only made me more determined to try it. Also, it made me more ready to follow the advice of Major J. W. Powell, first human being to traverse the river, who declared the secret of his success was in taking infinite care in studying all the rapids in every other little detail with the daily routine," he explained.

Holmstrum launched his boat in the Green river October 4, 1937, and when he reached Boulder City last night had covered 1,100 miles without accident and had, as he put it, "a grand vacation."

"I could make a blood and thunder story of my experiences, and there'd be no one to say I was lying," he said this morning when interviewed, "but I don't believe in doing things like that—I prefer to tell the truth."

When contacted this morning, Holmstrum had divested himself of a two month growth of whiskers, and was chafing under the restraint of waiting the arrival of news reel camera-men from Los Angeles.

"I have to get back to work—I've spent all my money and have to earn some more," he declared.

Following the Green river to Cataract Canyon where it joins the Colorado he was forced to "portage" his boat thru three severe sets of rapids. This, he explained, means to drag the boat around the rocky shoals an inch or two at a time, and is "plenty hard work."

"One day I made only four miles," he said. "That was when I was forced to pull and shove the boat most of the day."

On two other occasions, he had to follow a similar procedure to get his staunch little craft past rapids as he was unable to "shoot." Both of these were in the Colorado river proper.

"There is on an average of one rapid to the mile," he explained. "That means I must have negotiated at least 1100 all told. There are supposed to be 385 in the Grand Canyon alone, but I was

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unable to count that many.

"Here's where you have to be extremely careful," he continued. "I studied each one of the cataracts for some time before starting thru. Usually it took about a half hour to map out a plan of action, although I have studied the water as much as an hour before deciding whether to attempt to send the boat thru or 'portage' around them.

"Closest I came to actual disaster was one time I had watched a 'reverse wave' for quite a while. I finally decided it was nothing but water and that I could get thru all right. I took one last look before starting, and caught a glimpse of a jagged rock sticking up. If I had headed into the current there, I would have banged into that rock, and wouldn't have been here today to tell the story. And I almost did.

"I guess I was lucky on the trip. Everybody told me it was almost surely fatal to try going thru Grand Canyon alone, but it seemed the river was at the right stage the boat better than I expected it would be, and everything just worked in together."

Holmstrum carried his own food supplies, stopping to replenish his larder at Jensen and Green River, Utah, Lee's Ferry and Bright Angel, Arizona.

At Diamond Creek in the Grand Canyon, he met the geological party from California Institute of Technology and spent a short time there.

"They got the idea I was pretty well broke, and in the morning when I left I found they had taken up a collection of most of the available cash in camp to give me. I couldn't accept it, of course, but it sure touched me deeply, their generosity."

Holmstrum said he followed maps of the river all the way, and that the first intimation he had that he was nearing Boulder lake was when he came around a bend where there was supposed to be a bad cataract and found instead the smooth water of the upper end of the lake.

"My first impression when I hit the lake was one of relief," he explained. "I thought 'Hurrah, my troubles are all over now.' But you know something, that sentiment didn't last very long before it was replaced by the emptiest feeling. It was as though everything I had striven for so long had been accomplished and there was nothing left to do."

Holmstrum said he drank the muddy river water all the way, and that he had a strange feeling of "suspicion" regarding the clear water of the lake.

"I brought along a bucket o

the silty river water and drank it a day and a half after I reached the lake. It was not until that bucket was empty that I turned to the clear lake water."

Commenting on the trip he said: "It was worth everything it cost me in time, money and the rest. It seems like I actually lived more in a few hours out there on the river than I have in a year in the city.

"You get out there and wonder why you ever took the material things of the world so seriously. Things that seem important 'back there' don't even enter the picture on a trip like that. It seems like you get a new conception of life and what it really should mean."

Telling of the infinite care he used at all times, Holmstrum impressed upon his interviewers that his boat was his most important consideration.

"Just one little slip and there I might have been, in the middle of nowhere 'without a boat,'" he declared. "I guess I landed a hundred times a day, and each time I tied the boat carefully and securely. I could have beached it and let it go at that, but one time it was almost sure to get away.

"I guess I spent a total of several days time tying and untying my boat."

He described his trip thru the Grand Canyon as "next to the biggest thrill of the trip."

"The rapids were terribly bad down there, and there was nothing but the sheer walls of the canyon rising sometimes as high as 4,500 feet, straight up. It makes you think about how insignificant man really is when compared to the magnificent works of God.

"And yet, when I came out into Boulder Lake I had an even greater thrill. For there was a man-made lake which to me was the most magnificent sight along the entire 1,100 mile trip.

"It got me all mixed up, comparing the two. Now I don't know which really is the greatest—that deep gorge in the canyon or the man-made lake."

Only five expeditions have previously conquered the river. First was Major J. W. Powell who with a party of 12 in four boats started out from Green River in 1869 and proceeded to Bonelli's Ferry, now under Boulder Lake.

Three of the men deserted the party with all the scientific notes and were massacred by the Indians.

Major Powell then returned in 1871 in a repeat trip to gather again the data that was lost with the deserters two years before.

Third party to tackle the river was under direction of Julius Stone in 1909 and included five men and four boats. They went from Green River to Yuma.

In 1911, Emery and Ellsworth Kolb of Grand Canyon made the same trip and in 1933 Dr. R. G. Frazier of Salt Lake City followed with six in the party and and four boats.

In each instance at least one of the starting craft was lost en route.

Holmstrum's first trip was down the Rogue River in Oregon from Grants Pass to Willow Beach on the Pacific.

"I lost my boat the first time, and that's what started me on this business. I determined to build one that would make the trip and in 1935 was successful."

Holmstrum says that the Salmon river is rated as the nation's most dangerous stream from a navigation standpoint, but that after having travelled both, he picks the Colorado by a wide margin.

The young man is the guest of Jim Webb at the Boulder Dam Hotel and will remain there until tomorrow morning when he will take the bus to Green River, get his automobile and trailer, return to Boulder to pick up his boat and then return to Coquille to start selling gasoline once more.

Holmstrum kept an intimate diary of his trip, recording his impressions en route as well as the events of the trip.