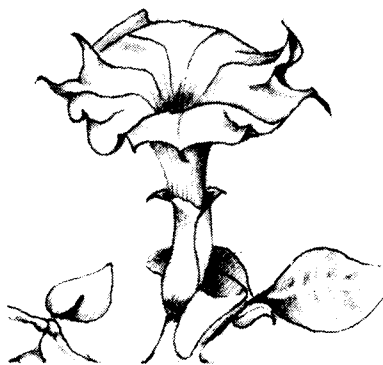


# The Confluence

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## Don Hatch: River Man

by Roy Webb

There could be nothing more appropriate than having a profile of Don Hatch in this first issue of *The Confluence*; Don has spent more time on the Green and the Yampa and the Colorado than probably any three of the rest of us put together, and is still one of the most ardent advocates and defenders of the Green and its lovely surroundings.

Don Hatch was born May 31, 1928, in Vernal, the second son (out of four--the Hatch families run to boys) of Bus and Eva Hatch. He literally learned to run rivers at his father's knee, as did all the Hatch boys. Don remembers that he was a teenager before he actually got to see a rapid; before that, his father Bus would make him crouch down in the cockpit of his Galloway-style wooden boat, so that all Don saw was the wooden sides of the boat and his father's knees. Later, at a very early age, Don and his brothers began to run boats for their father, on the occasionally commercial trip that occurred before the war.

Because the river running business was small in those days, the river community was a small one. Everyone on the river knew everyone else. Anyone who came to run the famed rapids of Lodore would stop at the Hatch house in Vernal, there to spend the night telling river stories. Norm Nevills, Amos Burg and Buzz Holmstrom, Roy DeSpain; all of them were guests with the Hatches at one time or another. In 1938, when the French kayakers passed through the Uinta Basin, a ten-year old Don gave up his bed for one of the party. Two years later, when Norm Nevills passed through on his way to launch at Green River, Wyoming, he stayed with Bus, and Don remembered sitting up just outside the living room, listening in wonder as tall tales were woven about rivers and canyons.

After World War II, Don entered the University of Utah, where he studied education. He graduated and obtained a teaching certificate in 1950, and began a long career as an elementary school teacher in Salt Lake City. Don chose teaching because it allowed him his summers off so he could pursue his first love--running rivers. Every summer, without fail, he was on the river with his father and brothers. At war's end, wooden boats were still the norm, but Don saw the future (like a number of others at the time) in the inflatable surplus rafts that were just then becoming available. He soon convinced his father to make the switch--no small task in itself--and Hatch pioneered the use of inflatables on the Green and Yampa. As war-time restrictions on travel eased, more and more people wanted to take advantage of their new freedoms and see more of the country. Many came to Vernal to try their hand at river running, and Don and Hatch River Expeditions was there.

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In the late 40's, when the Echo Park Dam controversy erupted and threatened to flood his beloved canyons, Don was one of the few Vernal natives to dare oppose the dam. From his home in Salt Lake, Don would keep track of the latest statements from the Bureau of Reclamation and inform his father (who also opposed the dam) so they could plan ways to thwart the Bureau. For his views he was vilified in Vernal, told he was a traitor to the community, and warned not to return. Don laughed it off, knowing that he was right and that eventually the community and the nation would come around to his way of thinking, and so they did. In the meantime, he spent more and more time on the river, as Hatch River Expeditions grew from a part-time family business to a major outfitter.

There was still time for other adventures, though; in 1952, Don climbed up

to the rim of the Canyon of Ladore with Charles Eggert, an independent filmmaker. The discussion turned to Major Powell, and Eggert mused that he would some day like to follow the course that Powell followed. Don replied, "Maybe we will someday, Charlie, maybe we will." Three years later it was a reality; Don, Charles Eggert, and various others (including a woman named Cyd Ricketts Sumner), set off from Green River, Wyoming, for a voyage that would take them all the way to Lake Mead, retracing Major Powell's route for the last time before the great dams were built. Don, however, although he was the driving spirit behind the expedition, wasn't there at the finish. At Lees Ferry, as they readied their boats for the final stretch through the Grand Canyon, Don received a message from his father Bus. Bus had been hired by Lowell Thomas to fly to Pakistan and raft the Indus River for a documentary that Thomas was making. Bus knew that he needed help

in this undertaking, so he called on Don. Don stayed with the Eggert party until Phantom Ranch and then reluctantly left them, eventually to make his way to the gloomy gorge of the Indus in far-off Pakistan.

Arriving in Rawalpindi, Don found Bus and the film crew ready to fly to Skardu, where the river voyage would take place. Since the plane was already loaded with boats and cameras, Bus told Don to wait and come on the next days flight. It was a long wait; the weather closed in the next day and Don and others of the crew were forced to wait for three weeks before a flight could get in. Once there, they found the river huge, swift and cold, but the old instincts took over and soon they were running the mammoth rapids of the Indus with alacrity, if a bit cautiously. Unnerved by his experiences on the boats, the director made them switch to the nearby Gilgit River, a tributary of the Indus. Here too Don and Bus were able to run the boats, though the rapids were gigantic. Finally, the movie was "in the can," and the film and the boat crews readied for departure. The director, however, decided he needed one more shot. The next day, as Don rowed a seven-man inflatable while Bus followed in a pontoon with the camera aboard, Don lost an oar. When it looked like the big pontoon would run him down, Bus turned the camera boat, which went sideways into a mammoth hole and flipped. Don, recovering his oars easily, rescued one of the crew, but one man, one of the actors in the film, was drowned and the body never recovered. Nor were their misfortunes over; in the meantime Don had contract typhus, and was forced to spend three weeks in a hospital in Rawalpindi, hovering near death.

In the 1960's, river running began an explosion period of growth, meaning more and more work for the Hatches, especially Don and his brother Ted. Bus was aging, a result of a hard life, and turned more of the business over to his sons. Bus died in June 1967, and shortly thereafter Don left his teaching career to move to Vernal and operate Hatch River Expeditions full-time. Also during this time he was heavily involved with the Wester River Guides Association, which he had helped start back when he lived in Salt Lake City. Don was always one of the leaders of the WRGA, and recognized early on that the association needed to become more professional if it was to respond to the many challenges that commercial river running faced in those days. Increasing regulation, burgeoning numbers, escalating competition, the private vs. the commercial debate, and the controversy over motors in the Grand Canyon were all issues that involved the WRGA, and Don was in the middle of all of them.

The first time I met Don Hatch was in 1984, when I was doing research for my



first book, a history of river running of the Green. We met at the Hatch office at Cap Mowrey's old house in the east part of Vernal, a part of town often known as Hatchland. The first thing that struck me about Don was his friendliness; even though we had never met, he welcomed me into his house like I was one of the family. As we talked, another point came to me: Don had no agenda, no axes to grind, as far as river history went. Of course he was proud of Hatch and the record they had compiled, but he was more than willing to give others their due. His only concern, and an admirable one, was for accuracy in the history I was planning to write. Having made a fair share of that history himself, he had every right to be concerned that it be recorded accurately.

During that time, a friendship developed between myself and Don, as can so easily happen with a man so open and caring. One day, as we stood outside the Hatch office, under the big cottonwood tree that shades the house, we talked of river history and his family's place in it. Don commented casually that he would like to see something written down about his father. Something clicked in me; why couldn't I be that someone? To shorten a long story, I ended up writing the biography of Bus Hatch called RIVERMAN: THE STORY OF BUS HATCH. Don worked with me throughout that process, as did his brother's Ted and Frank, and it was a better book for it. Bus had his faults, and not all found him pleasant to be with; he was quick-tempered, a perfectionist, not above chewing out a new (or old) boatman for a slight infraction. But I was able to see Bus through Don's eyes, and despite Bus' faults, it was a good portrait that emerged, of a man concerned for his family and for the rivers that were so much a part of his life.

Today Don enjoys a position of prominence in the hearts of river runners everywhere; during a recent recovery from a serious operation, he mentioned how he was amazed at how many people called and wrote to wish him well, and how old boatmen "seemed to come out of the woodwork." Anyone who knows Don wouldn't be surprised; however, in a business that still projects a macho, "strong and silent" image, Don has always been an exception. Supportive, caring, concerned, even nurturing, whether it be a novice boatman or an equally novice historian, Don Hatch has been and will remain one of the best-known and most-loved rivermen on the river.