

Conversation with Frank Wright

by Tom Rice

Frank Wright sits underneath a wall-sized black and white photograph of the site where he camped his first night in Glen Canyon. The large, Navajo sandstone walls which loom above the camp, and the pristine beach that spills along the Colorado River, are now buried by the water of Lake Powell. Only the sound of a lake boat or a fin of an invading fish can reach them now.

He does not appear like the typical boatman we run into today. He is in the class of early river runners like Kenny Ross, Norman Nevills, Ken Sleight, and even John Wesley Powell, but uniquely individual as only an early explorer can be. No flip flops, no chrome ammo can, no rendition of his most recent death defying run through "Satan's Gut;" only stories of a seldom travelled era that almost all of us will never get to see or experience.

Nevills' name, for he had recently read about him in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Because of this article, Wright was interested in Nevills and in his trips down the river. The following week, Nevills returned for more repair work and asked Wright to join him on the float from Bluff to Mexican Hat. Frank Wright was off and floating.

Wright envisioned his day run from Bluff to Mexican Hat as a leisurely, friendly float where he would get to sit back, enjoy the scenery, and let the others do the rowing. It began that way and then suddenly changed when his turn to row the boat came up. With no experience behind the oars, Wright suddenly found himself at the oars of a wooden Nevills boat, manipulating the vessel down through the sandwavs of the San Juan River.

Wright made it to Mexican Hat, relieved but still wary of his skills at the oars. He returned to Blanding only to embark on one of many more trips with Nevills; this time from Mexican Hat through Glen Canyon. From that point, Frank Wright

became a skilled oarsman--a fact recognized by Nevills--and not simply a Nevills' boatman.

In 1948, Wright, was the 97th recorded traveller through Grand Canyon. He became enamored with the river as so many boatman do. He fell in love with the country. Associations with new people on every river trip made him aware of the uniqueness and the beauty of the land and the cultures which surrounded him.

Ingrained in Wright's head are fond memories. Said Wright, "Very few saw Glen Canyon as it was and as it still could have been." It was undisturbed, ...one of the most beautiful places on earth." As Wallace Stegner supports wilderness for the sake of being able to look into wilderness and believe in wilderness, Frank Wright claims the beauty of Glen Canyon was for the sake of being able to peer at beauty and have it peer back. The concept is summed up simply when he describes his favorite spot in Glen Canyon, "It is too special of a place to explain."

...And then humans created the lake. Up the Escalante River, in the Cathedral of the Desert, is where Wright abruptly met the fate of the country which is now choked by the silt and the water of Lake Powell. He and two others hiked into the Cathedral. A pool, a small cascade of water, and the maidenhair ferns draped on the rocks, combined with the silence and the beauty of



Mr. and Mrs. Frank Wright
photo courtesy of Frank Wright

I sat down with Frank Wright on a sunny December morning at his home in Blanding, Utah. Memories of his river trips beginning in 1948 with Norman Nevills began to unfold. His first trip was a float down the San Juan River from Bluff, Utah, to Mexican Hat, Utah. Shortly before that trip, Wright was working in his repair shop in Blanding when Nevills stopped by to get some vehicle work done. He recognized

the event, were mesmerizing. They whispered to one another, walked silently. Even though he had visited the Cathedral many times during earlier river trips, Wright continued to be in awe of the sheer beauty. Suddenly, the bark of a dog shattered the peace, followed by yells of teenage boys running up the canyon. The lake and the lake boaters had found the beauty of wilderness and would change it forever. It was a realization that Wright and others would never be able to shake.

Frank Wright is not an environmentalist, nor an industrialist. He feels that Glen Canyon Dam was a mistake. On the other hand, he agrees with the commercial advantages--to a degree. He sees water through the eyes of someone who lived in an era when water was looked at from a different angle. Never-the-less, he does recognize the destruction that Glen Canyon Dam wrought upon the country he respected.

Wright can put a few other things on his list of accomplishments. After Norman Nevills died in a plane crash at Mexican Hat, Wright and Jim Riggs bought Nevills Expeditions. Later, he followed John Wesley Powell's route from Green River, Wyoming, through Grand Canyon, seeing not only Glen Canyon, but also Flaming Gorge, before a reservoir drowned it as well. In 1957, when flows as high as 100,000 cfs were roaring down Grand Canyon, he became one of the first boatmen to pilot a rigid wooden boat through such high water.

The high water trip of 1957, his last river trip, prompted the boatman Frank Wright to sit back and reflect upon his experiences in an industry and in canyons that will forever be out of our reach. His thoughts and memories of places once untouched should remain in the historical record. One day they will be important to those who want words of experience to accompany the pictures of lost canyons.
