

## Georgie White; Legend of the Colorado River

By Richard E. Westwood

My research for a book about Georgie White has covered nearly two years. Three file drawers of trip logs, interview transcripts, news items, letters, and other materials about her make a short article difficult. Almost every trip she took in her forty-six years of river running was an exciting adventure. At this writing I have a first draft of eight chapters completed and have just scratched the surface.

Two books and thousands of articles have been written about this amazing woman, but those stories are incomplete and in many cases inaccurate. She was born Bessie DeRoss on November 13, 1910 at Guyman, Oklahoma, and reared in Denver, Colorado, (contrary to her claim of having been born and raised in Chicago). Georgie had a strong and colorful personality that caused people to be attracted to her or to dislike her intensely. She was twice married and twice divorced.

By her own admission, she was not a good wife. She married Harold Clark at Denver in 1928 and they were divorced in Chicago in 1941. Her marriage to James White (Whitey) at Los Angeles in 1942 lasted until their divorce at Las Vegas in 1970, when she took back the surname, Clark.

Georgie didn't know much about the history or geology of the canyon, but she was a motivator and entertainer. If she did some fantasizing and exaggeration, she was not much different from other adventurers of her time. Many passengers came back to go with her year after year. The things she did accomplish were enough to fill volumes.

Georgie was a slim athletic woman with piercing blue eyes and a dominant personality. She was an avid hiker, bicyclist, a lover of animals, and a strict vegetarian. She was living in Los Angeles in 1944, while World War II was still being fought on two fronts. In that year, following the tragic death of her fifteen-year-old daughter, Somona Rose, at the hands of a hit and run driver, Georgie was greatly depressed. To help her over this crisis friends took her to a Sierra Club meeting where adventurer Harry Aleson



Georgie's triple pontoon rig ("big boat") on her 1957 river trip from Green River, Utah, to Hite. Georgie is in the process of reversing the side pontoon. Note the deflated front chamber suffered from a stick that tore the fabric while going to shore. Photography by L. C. B. McCullough. Photo courtesy of Rosalyn Jirge.

was showing pictures of Grand Canyon and the scenery of the Colorado Plateau. She was fascinated by what she saw and begged him to take her along on his next trip. She, Aleson, and Gerhard Bakker, a biologist from Los Angeles College, boated across Lake Mead into Grand Canyon and hiked out to the rim and across the Arizona Strip to St. George. For Georgie it was love at first sight, an affair with the river that only grew stronger with the years.

In 1945 she and Harry swam the lower portion of Grand Canyon in life jackets, nearly drowning in a giant whirlpool. In 1946 they floated a longer stretch using only a three-by-six-foot aviation life raft. Georgie wrote Harry in August of 1947, "When the rapids are mentioned I forget everything else, they cast a spell on me..." Later that year in the icy weather of October the two of them tackled Cataract Canyon in a seven-man army surplus raft.

In the late forties and early fifties Georgie and Harry Aleson took more boat trips, hiked the old Hole-in-the-Rock road made by Mormon settlers in 1880-81, retraced part of the route taken by Escalante and Domingez in 1776, and explored many other exciting places on the Colorado Plateau. On these expeditions Harry was the leader, but Georgie was learning and gaining experience.

By 1950 there had been enough publicity about Georgie's hikes and boat trips with Harry Aleson that she was considered by some to be an experienced boatman. That year she worked as a boatman for Mexican Hat Expeditions and doubled as chaperon for five young starlets being featured as "River Goddesses" by a Hollywood film producer. The movie was filmed in Glen Canyon and took several weeks to complete. Before it was over Georgie decided that if she could take care of those "dingalings", as she called the young ladies in her charge, and get them through safely, she could lead anybody through the canyons. Bob Rigg, one of the other boatmen, said, "Georgie was one strong tough lady! She never missed a stroke. She could pull a boat with the best of us. And she was a great, positive contributor to the entire trip."

Elgin Pierce became her first passenger when the two took a raft trip through Grand Canyon in 1952. Their raft flipped in Hance Rapid, but Georgie stayed with it and was able to bring it to shore. They managed to get the raft right side up again and continue down the river. The next year she led her first "share the expense" trip, a party of six, through Grand Canyon. This excursion was an exciting one, except for the tiresome lining and portaging at the major rapids.

On subsequent trips Georgie would begin innovations that made portaging unnecessary. She first roped three ten-man rafts together side by side, so that if one section of this "triple rig" got into trouble in a rapid the others could pull it out. Occasionally one section of the raft would fold over onto another. This became known as a "Georgie Sandwich." When this happened, passengers would have to lift up the overturned section and flop it back into place.

Next Georgie went to using three thirty-foot bridge pontoons lashed side by side, driven by an outboard motor.

She called this her "Big Boat." Eventually she cut out the bottoms and placed an inflated rubber sausage in the oval center of each pontoon. This gave the passengers a convenient back rest and eliminated the need for bailing. This huge contraption would take the largest rapids in safety. Now, anybody, old or young, could make the trip.

With these big rafts she took larger and larger groups down the Grand Canyon, bigger parties than any other outfitter. She also ran trips down the San Juan, the Green, and Glen Canyon. Then she branched out farther, running the Snake, Salmon, and Columbia rivers. In the 1960s she began exploring rivers of Mexico. One excursion down the flood-swollen Rio De Santiago nearly ended in disaster. The overturned boats had to be abandoned and the party was forced to swim across the river before hiking out of the deep jungle canyon.

In the early days most of the other boatmen referred to Georgie as "That crazy woman of the river." But that didn't faze her. She kept right on doing what she wanted to do and doing it her way.

Georgie also ran rivers in Canada and Alaska. She did not pay her boatmen a wage, but did pay their expenses, except once. At the end of a run of the Chitina and Copper rivers of Alaska expenses had been higher than expected and Georgie came up short. She didn't bother to tell Dick McCullum until they got to the airport that she couldn't pay for his ticket home. He was left behind to make his own way back. Despite this, Dick remained loyal to Georgie and worked another four summers for her.

Georgie had a great passion for running rapids and the mystique of Grand Canyon. She wanted to share it with as many people as possible. Her big boats would carry more passengers than the cataract boats or single rigs, making it possible for her to offer the lowest rates of any outfitter. The good movies she made of the trips, which she showed at lectures throughout the winter, made her trips in demand. Because she was a woman doing what was normally done only by macho males, she was in demand for television talk shows. She became better known than any river runner since Powell.

Outfitters who once had criticized Georgie for taking such big crowds down the canyon began to switch from smaller boats to big rafts like hers because it was more profitable.

Georgie started many of her Cataract Canyon trips at Moab. On one of these runs she discovered a dead man floating in the river. Using oars from the boats, they dug a grave in the sand and buried him beside the river. A young Catholic priest said last rites over the grave. Later, Georgie was relating this experience on the Groucho Marx show. Groucho said to her, "It looks like you need to take an undertaker along." "No." Georgie quipped. "Just a shovel." When the audience roared, Groucho was upset because he thought Georgie had upstaged him.

Georgie never lost her head in a difficult situation. She also liked to test other people to see how they would react. Sometimes she would wrestle with her boatmen. Dick McCullum said, "I never knew whether to try to win or lose."

Georgie called her outfit "Georgie's Royal River Rats." She maintained that running rivers made you a river rat, but only by running Grand Canyon were you eligible to be a "Royal River Rat." Her initiation ceremonies were legendary---blindfolded, led over rocks and in the water, questioned about rapids or other features of the canyon and whacked on the bottom with a paddle when wrong answers were given, eggs broken on the head, winding up with a celebration drink of brandy. An arm patch and certificate was then given to prove that you were now a "Royal River Rat." At the end of her trips she would throw a party for everyone at a Boulder City or Las Vegas hotel.

When the Park Service began licensing outfitters to run Grand Canyon, Georgie got one of the smallest allotments of all. This suited her fine because she wanted to lead every one of her trips while the larger outfits hired boatmen and could thus send several trips down per week. In later years Georgie ran only Grand Canyon, her first love.

When Georgie would plow down the gigantic waves of Crystal Rapid or Lava Falls without pausing to scout them, boatmen on shore would be reminded of a "Georgie" story and relate it to their passengers. Long before her last run in 1991 she had become a living legend.

Georgie was a "women's libber" long before the term was invented. Personal example was her only contribution to the cause. She didn't even hire women boatmen, preferring Los Angeles County firemen for the most part.

In 1990, Ted Hatch decided that it was about time for the river community to recognize Georgie for her pioneering spirit and contributions to the industry. On her eightieth birthday, November 13, 1990, he threw a party for her at the big Hatch warehouse at Marble Canyon. Georgie was hesitant to come, because she thought few people would show up. How wrong she was! Over five hundred people showed up. Hatch hired a dance band and there was beer for everyone. Ted Hatch claimed the first dance with Georgie. Brian Dierker popped out of a raft decorated like a birthday cake and whisked Georgie away to watch the fireworks from nearby cliffs. The band played until morning. It was a bash to remember.

Georgie boated through the 1991 season and had her brochures out for 1992. But cancer got her and on May 12, 1992, she passed on to the big rapids in the sky.

If any reader has a special story to tell about Georgie, they are invited to write me, Dick Westwood, 5302 N. 79th Place, Scottsdale, AZ 85250



Georgie in lower Labyrinth Canyon on the Green River in 1957. Georgie reached The Confluence on June 13 at an approximate flow of 89,000 cfs (USGS, Water Supply Paper). Photography by L. C. B. McCullough. Photo courtesy of Rosalyn Jirge.