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Utah Boatman to Enter River Runners' Hall of Fame

Posted By Colby Frazier on May 13, 2015, 1:46 PM

By way of mainstream attention, river runners garner about as much ink in history books as newspaper reporters—that is to say, not much at all.

But in Utah, where many of the nation's greatest boatmen and women learned to read water and carry people safely through thundering whitewater, the John Wesley Powell River History Museum in Green River has for years quietly been inducting influential river runners into its hall of fame, which currently contains the names of 17 strong-shouldered adventurers.



Courtesy Photo

Laphene "Don" Harris

On Friday, the name of revered boatman Don Harris will be added to that list—an honor that some say is long overdue. “Don was sort of just an obvious choice,” says Tim Glenn, the museum’s executive director. “We have his boat here. He should have been in there from the beginning.”

Harris, born Laphene Harris in Soda Springs, Idaho, in 1911, was on assignment in Green River for the United States Geological Survey when he met famed boatman Norman Nevills. According to the Utah State Historical Society, this meeting sparked Harris’ interest in river running.

Together, Nevills and Harris built the first three cataract boats—stable wooden vessels that were 16 feet long and 5 feet wide. These boats were designed by Nevills, but according to Glenn, Harris helped with construction and was able to keep one.

Harris’ boat, the Mexican Hat, was constructed in 1938 and is housed in the museum.

In a world of outsized egos and big whitewater, Harris, who was 92 when he died in 2004, is remembered as a humble expert, who retained his government job while operating a river-running company and witnessed sweeping changes to the business and technology of river running.

“He was so versatile in his trips,” says Bob Quist, who recently sold Moki Mac River Expeditions, the business he and his family had operated for the past 45 years.

Quist marvels at the experience Harris had, from starting off in tiny wooden boats, plowing through the rubber revolution, to piloting 33-foot pontoon boats and then to transitioning into hard-hull motor boats.

“He was a master, he was just a terrific, terrific, highly qualified boatmen; just a gentleman,” Quist says.

What made Harris' trips so good, Quist says, is that he emphasized quality over quantity, choosing to keep lean the number of humans he packed into a boat, even if this meant he would make less money.

“He was interested in going on a quality trip and offering a quality small trip to the people that he took,” Quist says, noting that Harris was a “guy that was just interested in doing it in the spirit of doing it right.”

Now Harris' name will sit alongside many of his contemporaries, as well as that of John Wesley Powell, the one-armed Civil War veteran who in the late 1860s, with a pair of rough crews, led the first known treks down the uncharted waters of the Green and Colorado Rivers.

Harris' induction into the River Runners' Hall of Fame marks what Glenn hopes is a new era for the museum.

Glenn, who has been at the helm of the museum for the past year, says he hopes to make inductions a more regular occurrence. To that end, he says, efforts are underway to form a committee of river runners and historians who will decide which potential future inductees will make the cut.

“I think it's something that actually means a lot to the river runner's community,” Glenn says.

An induction ceremony is being held at the museum Friday, May 15, at 5 p.m. Advance tickets are \$15 or \$20 at the door. Quist and Ken Sleight, a boatman and confidante of the late river and desert-loving author Edward Abbey, will be speaking.

More information is available at JohnWesleyPowell.com.

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