

Lorna Corson

Lorna Corson, started guiding with ARTA/AzRA in the 1970s and she is still guiding on another trip this year 2023! It was wonderful catching up with Lorna, a long time friend, whom I worked with often in my earlier guiding years. It was fun to remember such amazing events we had on the river together and to hear some new stories in detail. She is an inspiring personality, still going strong and following her heart! Interviews were conducted in Flagstaff in person in October 2022 and by phone in February and March, 2023.

—Sharon Hester

Hester: So, Lorna, do you want to tell me anything about your life before you were a river guide? Is there anything you want to talk about?

Corson: I guess my childhood a little bit, that I grew up in the Park Service, and we lived in very remote and beautiful places in my early years, so I got a taste for that kind of lifestyle, being out there.

Hester: Where are some of the places you've lived?

Corson: Oh, I was born in New Mexico, and then my dad joined the Park Service a couple of years later, and we moved to Alaska, before it was a state.

Hester: Oh wow!

Corson: Yeah, it was still a territory, which is something. (laughter) It was really great living up there. Just our family and a few others were in the Park in winter, and we couldn't get out in the winters, as they didn't plow the road. We

ordered food from a catalogue, and a train dropped it off once a month. In the summers we were out at Wonder Lake.

Hester: Which Park was it?

Corson: Well, it was McKinley, but now it's Denali. We had a team of dogs, that my dad took care of, and my mom homeschooled us. Anyway, we had an interesting lifestyle. And then we moved down to Glacier, Montana, which was really beautiful also. We kept transferring with the Park Service so after four years we moved to Sequoia, and also spent a summer in Yosemite living in a tent. Then we got shipped back east and went to Cape Cod for a little bit, which was nice. Then we had to go to D.C. and for me things went downhill.

Hester: How'd they go downhill?

Corson: Oh, I wasn't set up for living in an urban environment.

Hester: You mean you personally weren't?

Corson: Yeah. Yeah, my family was much better at it than I. I was homesick for the west.

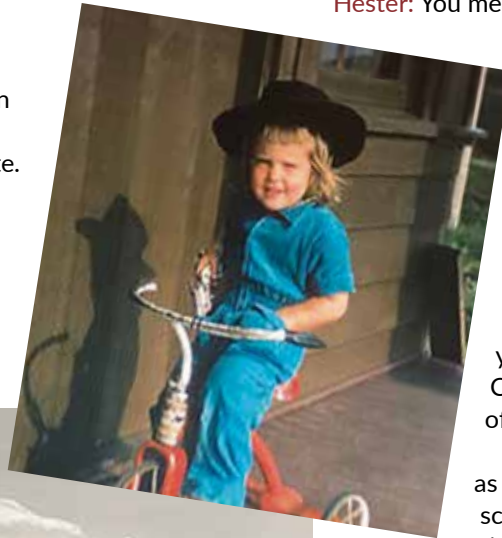
Hester: Where were you in your sibling lineup?

Corson: Third girl out of five kids. Four sisters and a brother.

Hester: So how did you end up in the Grand Canyon or rafting, what kind of led you there?

Corson: Right. Yeah, so as soon as I got out of high school in Virginia, I came right to Flagstaff, to NAU, and studied geology. And I started backpacking in Grand Canyon a lot; and started trying to learn to kayak with some other geology students. I wasn't a great kayaker, but people like

Michael Collier and Dugald [Bremner] were taking me down the Salt River. We went down the Salt River a couple times, and they were telling stories about running the Grand Canyon. And I was like, "I have to do that, see the canyon that way!" But I didn't have any connections, so I decided to hitchhike down the river through the canyon the first time, which you can read about in



Alaska, 1958.
Photo: James Corson



Living at Wonder Lake in Denali Park 1957. Photo: James Corson

Louise Teal's book. [*Breaking Into the Current*]

Hester: It talks about hitchhiking down on a rafting trip?

Corson: Yeah. So, I thought that first trip was just a singular event, that I would only be able to go down the river once in my life. But the next year I met an ARTA boatman, Alvin [*Halliday*] and got to do a couple of assistant trips in 1977. Again, I thought I would always be an assistant; but then in 1978, I decided I really did want to be a boatman, but I didn't know how I could get there with very little river experience. I decided...Well, made it known to ARTA/AZRA that I wanted to be a boatman. And I think they thought I was a little bit small. Being small and female seemed like two things against me, it felt like. But in the end, ARTA was very open to hiring women, but my size was concerning, at least to Rob [*Elliott*], I think.

Hester: So how did you end up proving otherwise?

Corson: I think going on the first all-women's trip with Jessica [*Youle*], Suzanne [*Jordan*], Barb Dupuis and Louise [*Teal*] in 1978 helped. I think since I seemed calm, and comfortable rowing, that's when Jessica started thinking maybe I could be a potential boatman. And Louise gave me a great report, so that helped a lot, I think. I ended up doing four Grand Canyon trips in 1978, and three in Cataract, two of those at high water. ARTA had told me, "Get more experience, and maybe we'll hire you." So, I went up to Utah, but I never planned to stay there—I always wanted to be down in the Grand Canyon. Then they needed somebody, and I was available!

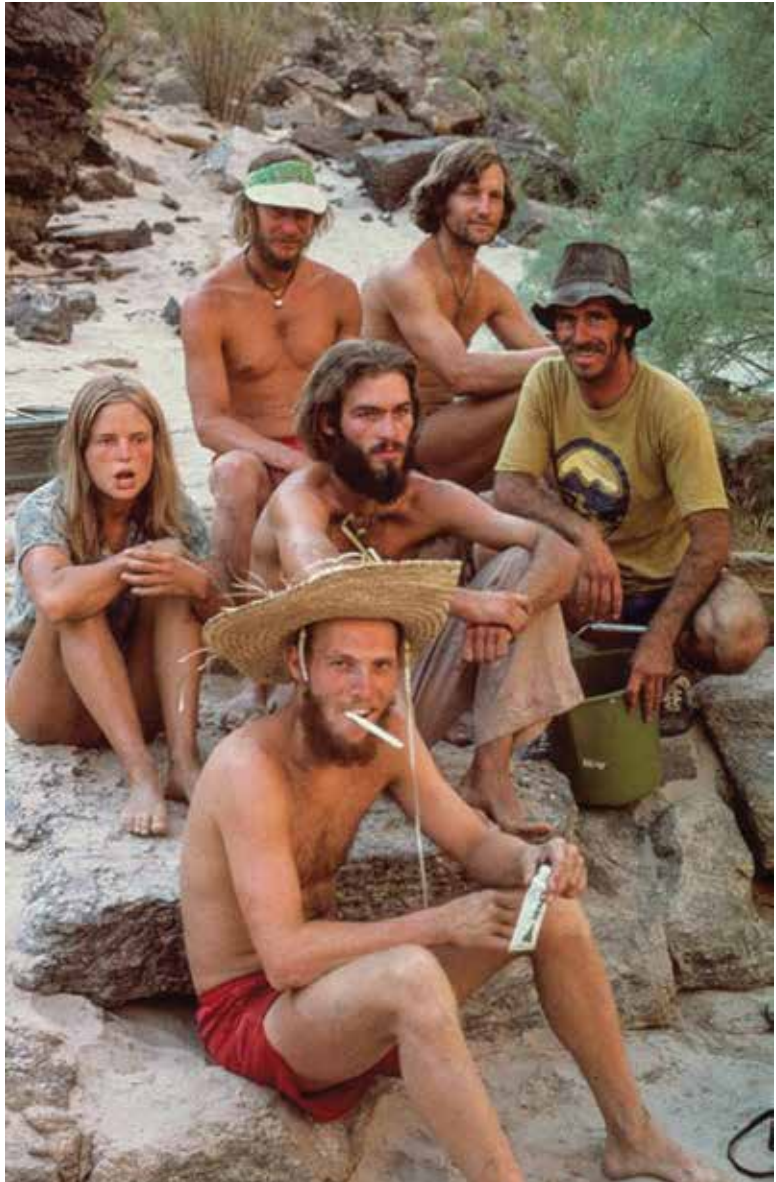
Hester: Yeah, that's how it always works, isn't it?

Corson: Then in 1979, a bunch of old boatmen weren't coming back that year, so they gave me a full season that summer and I ended up doing eight trips.

Hester: What kind of boats were you rowing?

Corson: That was when the owners of AzRA divorced [*AzRA became two separate companies within AzRA*]. Rob [*Elliott*] ran the snout boats and paddle boats [*Snout Division*]. Jessica [*Youle*] had the small boats and motorboats [*Havasut Division*]. We got to choose which side to work for, and it was a no-brainer, I went with the small boats and worked for Jessica for probably eight years, I think. And then Rob bought her out, I believe, and by then everybody was rowing small boats [*snouts were eventually phased out*].

Hester: What were some of the things you felt, trying to break in? How did you feel things worked against you or for you? You said you were considered small, and they were worried about that. And then it sounds like you got more experience and they just figured out you could row. Can you address anything regarding that?



The Old Guard, 1978. Back row: Don Alhert, David Lowry. Middle row: Lorna, Alvin Joe Halliday, Bob Melville. Front row: Robert (Moley) Haymond.

Corson: I felt like the boatmen I worked with in the early years were very supportive, really. And I felt like as long as I worked really hard and rowed really well, that they were totally accepting. I mean occasionally you'd meet someone that was a little old-fashioned.

Hester: How about the customers?

Corson: Some of them were much more hesitant to ride with me in the early years. Like, some would never get on my boat the entire trip, because they just weren't comfortable with a small, young woman. Now they don't hesitate at all! So, times have changed.

Hester: Yeah. Times have changed, haven't they?

Corson: Yeah.

Hester: Who were some of your mentors in those early years? Who do you think helped you out? I mean,

it sounds like Jessica and Louise. Anyone else you felt helped you?

Corson: Not really any mentors back then, when I was training Dick Bangles was the first boatman to let me row the big stuff, not just the flat water. Starting in 1980 I worked with Becca Lawton quite a bit and we really bonded, and she was a great rower. Sue Bassett was a good example too, but I wouldn't call either of them mentors, they just seemed like peers. Reading the water seemed fairly intuitive to me, maybe starting on snouts, training on snouts, you learn a lot more quickly.

Hester: Oh, did you initially train on snouts more?

Corson: Yeah. 1977 and 1978 were all snouts.

Hester: Okay. Alright. So that helped a lot, learning your angles, learning your timing.

Corson: A lot, yeah. So, rowing the smaller 18-foot boats [versus 22-foot snouts], I don't know, reading the water just seemed to make sense, the physics of it.

Hester: Right. You'd always been good at reading water; you always had to use skill and intelligence over brawn. Can you tell us more about your college life?

Corson: I ended up studying geology at NAU, but I would work half a day on the grounds crew. I was the first woman that was hired by the grounds crew at NAU. I also was doing a lot of backpacking in the Grand Canyon and had fallen in love with it.

Hester: What did you do on the grounds crew at NAU? What were some of the jobs you did?

Corson: Oh, whatever, you know. I worked in the greenhouse a lot with this older Navajo man. He was great, he was one of the coolest people I've ever met. I was kind of under his supervision. We also mowed lawns



Dory, left run in Lava at low water, 1979.

and weeded, planted flowers and did whatever needed to be done around the campus. I set my schedule up where I could work in the afternoons and go to classes in the morning.

Hester: Sounds like you had a lot going on. So back to your first season working as a full-time guide.

Corson: So yeah, that was really fun. I did eight trips that year [1979], and I got to row a dory in September.

Hester: How did the dory trip go?

Corson: That was great! Because I'd been down there all summer, and so I was more comfortable by then. It was a blast! It was a beautiful old wooden dory, named *Maggie* after Fred Eisman's wife, sort of an antique. And I didn't take passengers, and I didn't have to stay with the trip. I would just row solo ahead of the rest of the trip until there was a big rapid, and then I'd wait for them.

Hester: Oh, no passengers, was it because you were still in training or something?

Corson: I was in training because they needed dory boatmen. We ran dories between '79 through whatever—1982 or 1983. I think? But I decided I didn't really want to row them commercially.

Hester: Why did they quit running dories in the early 1980s?

Corson: Because we had wrecked them all!

Hester: Wow, that would be kind of a problem, wouldn't it?

Corson: Yeah. I mean, prior to 1983 water flows were usually pretty low. And we weren't as skilled back then I don't think, either.

Hester: Okay. So, after the early 1980s?

Corson: Early eighties were not too eventful, starting in 1980, I think, I started working with Becca [Lawton], and then with you in 1984, I think? That was nice to have that female camaraderie on a crew, which was missing in 1979, when I don't think I worked with any other women. Suzanne Jordan and Martha Clark were working for the snout division at that time also.

Hester: Yeah. You worked the high-water years, too. How was that?

Corson: Oh, that was great. I mean, it was exciting—as you remember!

Hester: I remember.

Corson: Yeah. Yeah, that one trip at 75,000 CFS, it was still coming up before it hit 90,000 CFS for a few days. I think that trip started with Becca, Scottie Imsland, Tim Mansfield and Jimbo Tichenor. We started down the river, and the water was maybe only 65,000 CFS

by the second day of the trip. Rob Elliott flew over us in a helicopter while running the Roaring Twenties rapids and dropped us a note in the water that said “water’s coming up to 75,000 CFS tomorrow. You guys are going to run the boats down [to Phantom Ranch and all the passengers will hike out], and we’ve cancelled the passengers that were going to hike in at the interchange. So...you’re going catch up to a snout trip.” The trip you [Sharon] were rowing on, because they [management] thought it would be safer running with the big boats. But as it turned out, the snout rafts were a very hard to row into shore [with the huge eddy fences and strong currents].

Hester: Definitely!

Corson: Yeah, and so we ended up running with your snout trip for a couple days, and then once we got past Phantom, we were on our own again without any passengers.

Hester: Oh, you didn’t stay with the snout trip much after Phantom?

Corson: No, you guys were on a regular schedule and kept your passengers, and we were just supposed to run the boats out as a deadhead and get off the river early.

Hester: I think we did spend the night together after Phantom Ranch one night, at Bass.

Corson: Oh, we did, at Houtuata camp, the first camp that wasn’t underwater.

Hester: Okay. Then you guys took off. Yeah, I think you guys stayed with us through the biggest rapids together.

Corson: Also, AZRA had sent down five extra boatmen at Phantom Ranch to bail for us, because rafts weren’t self-bailing in those days either!

Hester: Wow, so you had extra guides hike in to help bail.

Corson: And to high-side.

Hester: And high-side, [put their weight on the high side of rafts in the waves to help keep them from flipping] that would be important. And how was that trip as far as the rapids and stuff for you guys?

Corson: The rapids? It was all new to us, we had no idea which rapids were worse, and which might be washed out, like House Rock rapid was completely washed out. And Crystal was rumored to be washed out too, but that was not at all the case.

Hester: Yeah, how was it running the river?

Corson: Well, Hance was amazing, did a wild run right down the center. Then you guys flipped a boat in Hermit—Suzanne did, remember? It was an instant flip at that level.

Hester: No, I don’t remember.

Corson: I was right behind her and cut out of the main wave train. Anyway, when we got to Crystal, we were all just terrified and spent all evening and all morning scouting it. And then that’s when we saw a Western motorboat flip. Becca and I were just shoving off to go run it after we had scouted for hours. We were super-scared when someone yelled, “Motorboat flip!” right then, so we pulled back into shore. And that was one of the first



1980. Photo: Dave Edwards

motor rafts to flip in Crystal that week [maybe five motor rigs flipped that week?]. Then we ran our rafts through the rapids, and it wasn’t that bad because we could run so far right, between tamarisk trees and rocks, and pretty far from the big hole. But we were super-excited.

Hester: Right. So, you were so far right of the big hole that you could run right over those rocky shallows.

Corson: Right. I snapped an oar but got a spare in really quickly—me and Louise—she was my guide/passenger [to bail and high-side]—and together we got that spare oar in before people on shore even noticed we had lost an oar, because we were so amped up. But Crystal rapid was definitely worse at 45,000 CFS than it was at 75,000 CFS, I would say.

Hester: Right, I agree. I thought 40,000–50,000 CFS was harder, for sure, than above 65–70,000CFS.

Corson: Yeah.

Hester: If I remember, [back on that trip where Rob dropped the note from the helicopter telling your trip to catch up to the snout trip so we could help you all out] I think when you guys ran into us, our snout trip had people on the up and over hike from Carbon Canyon down to Chuar Canyon, and none of our big snout boats had been able to make the normal pull-in at Chuar to pick them up!

Corson: Right. I think maybe there was one boat in there.

Hester: One boat managed to get in halfway down in the row of shoreline tamarisk trees, down more where the



ARTA, old Havasu boats, 1980.

tent sites below camp are, and folks were just hanging on to the mostly submerged trees. There was still maybe ten or twenty feet of river between the tamarisk and where the passengers who did the hike were waiting. The snout raft passengers were clinging to the tamarisk trees. Do you remember that?

Corson: Right, so we picked up your passengers helped bring them down river to your snout rafts and camp.

Hester: Right. I think Rob told you to come down for support, because the big snout boats would give you guys good support. *[But it turned out to be the other way around]* When your trip first saw our snout rafts, we were all over the river and couldn't get into shore to get our customers. And your trip came right at the perfect moment, with those smaller boats, to pull into that eddy easier than those three-ton snouts. Well, they weren't even that heavy, because most of the passengers were hiking the Carbon Canyon to Chuar Canyon hike, so maybe they were closer to two-ton snouts. Your small rafts could be rowed a lot easier, and you rescued our customers. We would have been in a lot of trouble, I think, otherwise.

Corson: Yeah, that was kind of a circus you had going on.

Hester: What did your family think about you running the river?

Corson: My parents weren't very keen on it because

nobody'd ever heard of such a thing, being a boatman—or running rivers even—when I was growing up. So, they thought it must be dangerous. But in 1983 I brought my mom down the river. I also brought all my sisters and brother and father down through the years. My mom just loved it, she loves water, and she *really* liked the rapids. So, she totally understood from then on and I had a hundred percent support from her from then on. My dad doesn't swim and is not a water person, and he came down in '86, and it was still fairly high water, and he wasn't at all comfortable with that. But he had worked as a ranger on the South Rim, and he loves rocks, so he enjoyed the hiking and everything about the canyon, except the river.

Hester: Uh-huh. In 1983, what did you think about rowing and being down there that year? Do you remember how you felt?

Corson: It was kind of the first time I wondered if maybe I was too small for the job, because I know other people had thought that about me, but then I started wondering a little bit myself about my size. I remember talking to Drifter *[Smith]*, and he was like, "Yeah, we're all *too small!*" I felt like I was a decent rower and I'll never forget those high-water years!

Hester: What are some other things you remember from those high-water years?

Corson: I remember when we had to walk the people around, and they didn't like that.

Hester: Wait, let's go back. Where did you walk the people around? Can you clarify?

Corson: Crystal. We would have the passengers walk over those boulders on river right for a quarter of a mile and we would pick them up below, at the very bottom of the rapid.

The Park Service had made it mandatory to walk passengers for a while, and then we continued to do that for awhile because it felt like such a dangerous swim. Less people in the water to rescue. Later, I remember towards the end of the high-water years, we would camp right above Crystal. We would get up in the dark in the morning and just make coffee for the people, no breakfast. And then we'd run Crystal as early as 6 a.m., because that early we could run on the left side of the rapid which was safer. But if we waited another hour, [*when the higher water release from the dam reached that location*] it was a very nasty right run. We only did that on a few trips, but the passengers didn't like that at all. Getting them up super early, hard hike around the rapid, no breakfast, and we pulled the porta-potty down, and then just started yelling at them [*to load up*]*—especially the interchange people who had just hiked in the day before who wondered what kind of trip this was. And then make them rip their tents down and just get on the boats. But we'd make breakfast down below, usually on the tiny beach above Tuna Rapid.*

Hester: Like de-rig the boats and set up a kitchen again.

Corson: Yes.

Hester: And this was like after 1983–1984, because the water was fluctuating on those trips [*there was little to no daily water fluctuations in 1983 and 1984*]. What year was that?

Corson: I think it was 1986, I don't think it went into 1987. I only did that a couple of times, but it was pretty funny really.

Hester: So, Lorna, we talked about some of the highest flows you ran, and how exciting that was, in 1983. What are some of the lowest flows that you've run that you recall, and any incidents or stories related to that?

Corson: Okay, the lowest water I ran was in 1979. I had been rowing trips in 1978, but I hadn't had my own boat yet, then AZRA gave me a full season in 1979. So it was the first time with my own boat. I went on the Park Service training trip because the Park Service used to do what the GTS does now. It was a great trip! The upper half was a training trip, and then for the lower half they asked if anybody wanted to continue on and row a boat, because they needed someone to row a boat. At that time, I felt like my experience was minimal, so I thought this was a great opportunity to row my own boat before I had commercial passengers. So, I signed on. Also, at that time, having free food for two weeks was very nice! I was pretty broke back then. I stayed on, and it was an amazing trip, 21 days at 5,000 CFS the whole way, I believe or was it

3,000 CFS? It might have been even lower.

Hester: What month was it?

Corson: It was in March of 1979. The Park Service was doing trail work at Deer and Tapeats Creek [*and needed some volunteers*]. But anyway, it was a really great trip. We didn't see any other group of boaters for the whole 21 days.

Hester: Wow!

Corson: I know! Actually, I think some of us saw a sneak private.

Hester: What's a sneak private?

Corson: Oh, we were camped at Deer Creek for like five days. We were just going up to do trail work, but a few of us who were still down by the river, saw a single boat coming down the river. A single paddleboat, a sneak trip, presumably, they didn't have a permit.

Hester: Why do you think they didn't have a permit?

Corson: They started to pull into Deer Creek, but as soon as they saw we were the Park Service, they just hightailed it on by. It was only five older men in that little paddleboat. It was pretty cool—I mean, not that you would do that now.

Anyhow, so on that trip the low water, the rapids I remember most...Well, one thing that was interesting, Helicopter Eddy was just a little pour-over. It was just a bedrock [*ledge*] under there, all the way across the river. We had to go to the far-right side just to get through. Must have been lower than 5,000. Horn Creek was horrifying, and we ended up running right along the right wall the entire way—just pour-over, pour-over, pour-over, and then pulling off the wall at the bottom. It was challenging.

And then the other one that was really hard, of course, was Bedrock. All five boats decided to run left intentionally. That was a good call, because it was such low water, that you had time to straighten up for each potential wrap and pull off or bounce off. It was helpful so in the future, in case you *did* go over there, you knew what to do. Which was get as close to the big rock at the top and then set up for the two potential wraps down the left channel.

Hester: Set up how exactly?

Corson: Set up for the wraps, so that you didn't hit them sideways, you hit them straight.

Hester: You mean like the bottom part of the island where boats flip on the island?

Corson: Yeah, first on the left run you want to enter right next to the big rock or island in the middle of the channel, to avoid the big, keeper eddy top left, and then further downstream the water kind of pushes you onto the left wall where there's a rock promontory. Once you pull off of that you set up for the potential wrap on the right side at the bottom of the Island, which is where most people *do* flip.

Hester: Right.

Hester: Did you find it hard to row at those levels?

Corson: I didn't know any different, really, because it was my first trip with my own boat. But, I mean, yeah, it was great, because the Park Service's boats were much lighter than AZRA's boats. AZRA had rowed snouts until that year. The Park Service had really nice equipment and light boats—like maybe one passenger each. It was a great training trip for me.

Hester: Well, that was nice! Anything else you can remember about low-water trips?

Rowing the rapids, any problems people had at 5,000 CFS? People today, with the reduced river flows, because of long term drought, are really concerned about rowing the river at 5,000 CFS. Right now, we're seeing lows at 6,000. Do you really think it's something guides have to worry about much?

Corson: I do think, like working, say, a fourteen-day trip in April or May in the wind, you need more time, unless you don't want to hike at all. You know, back then we did do shorter trips, and we made it. But we didn't really hike as much in the seventies. The way AZRA trips are run nowadays [*with lots of hiking*], I think there should be more fifteen-day, sixteen-day trips, to make up for the lower and slower water flows.

Hester: I think AzRA [*non-motor*] trip lengths back in the seventies and even early eighties, were twelve days. And then we got thirteen, and eventually we got to fourteen for most all trips [*except early spring and late fall season, which are 16 days*].

Corson: I know, I know, we didn't have as much time to hike back then. But later at high water with the faster flows, we could hike more, because we had so much more time, so we explored a bunch of new hikes from the river.

Hester: Yeah, things might have to change, as far as the length of the trip, in order to hike as much. But do you really think it's that challenging to row the rapids at 5,000 CFS, versus, say, the perfect level of 15,000 CFS or something?

Corson: Yeah, I think it will be more challenging, there is going to be more accidents and ripped boats. Bedrock and Horn Creek in particular, there's going to be a lot more trouble, I think. Lighter boats would help some, but that is not likely to happen. Or go back to Sport Yaks [*historic tiny plastic one-man boats*] perhaps, Ha!

Hester: Any other interesting things that you can think of from your career down there?

Corson: Well, that flash flood at Havasu was huge. You were there for that, too, in 1984. That kind of left a huge impression on me. It was maybe the wildest moment of my life. After that, I got sort of paranoid of flash floods and quit working the monsoon seasons.

Hester: Why don't you tell us your version, your story, of the day.

Corson: That's a long one. It's been covered so much. You and Jeffe Aronson have covered that story pretty well.

Hester: Well, I don't know that others have heard it from your perspective, though. Let's talk about it a little

bit. I mean, everyone has a different perspective on it, what they saw and felt and heard, and where they were. I always think it's really interesting, myself.

Corson: Right, it is, yeah. You and I were up Havasu Creek, only we didn't go to Beaver Falls like a lot of the group, and we were just hanging out in the creek, relaxing, and some of the other passengers [*who didn't do the hike all the way to Beaver*] were doing the same. We knew that there had been monsoons lately, but that morning it was crystal clear. Back then, we usually spent the whole day hiking at Havasu, making a bag lunch. That was just standard procedure back then. Then the clouds started building upstream—huge, dark cumulus clouds—and we were looking at them and thinking, "It's really likely that we could have a flash flood." And it started pouring down hard rain, so you and I ran back down Havasu Creek to the boats. We were hunkered down under the rock overhang sheltering on the boats, in the mouth. And there were quite a few other people there, like some other boatmen and a few other passengers. Then we both heard the water change sound and looked at each other. We couldn't see anything, there was no roar. It was just a slight change in the sound. You yelled flash flood! And I ran towards shore, because I didn't have my life jacket on. My boat was the very first boat [*up Havasu Creek*], and I didn't want to run towards it [*and the incoming flood water*] not wearing one. You ran out to your boat and got your knife out and started cutting boats apart, which was great. And I ran to shore and...Well, I'll tell your story first, about the kids that were on the boat. You yelled to them, "Take a boat and row it to the right shore!" The one big kid who had been rowing quite a bit, rowed to the right shore, just as you said, around the corner, through the rapids. He was on his own, with the boat, and he tied the raft up, he did good. You got your boat to the left at the motorboat pull in, and Lowry, also got his to the left shore. But most other boats went downriver in a pack of four boats.

While we were still in the mouth of Havasu, Bill Wasley ran upstream to my boat. He had his lifejacket on and was trying to high-side it looked like, which I thought was kind of crazy, because I don't know, I just thought they would all flip. And boats were ripping off the wall, then he yelled, "There's a body coming down!" So, I was standing right at the confluence, Edwards and Suzanne where there, too. I don't know the order of events exactly, but Dave Edwards jumped in and saved the woman's life, definitely. And Dave Lowry ran down the shore and got a throw rope to him and helped get them in. She was semi-conscious. Suzanne and I were there, when the four boats came by, full of flood water, tied together entering the main channel of the river. I had a rope with all four boats [*some rafts were still attached to each other with bowlines*] they were full of muddy flood water. I tried to wrap the rope around a boulder, to hold it, you know. The flotilla of rafts was entering the rapid at 45,000 CFS [*not including the Havasu flood waters*], so that wasn't going to happen, and

it felt dangerous, so I just let go of the rope. And Suzanne, at that same time, jumped onto one of those four boats. She went down river about eight miles, had to bail all four boats, and then tie them in a way that she could row one boat and tow three. Finally, near Tuckup, she got all four boats over to shore and waited.

Backtracking to the mouth of Havasu, then we started running up Havasu canyon, thinking there would be more bodies coming down the creek, after the one woman came down in the flood. She had been at the first crossing and had her shoes off, getting rocks out of her shoes.

Hester: And by “she” you mean the person that came down in the flood?

Corson: Yeah.

Hester: Okay.

Corson: Yes. So we ran up there with throw bags, just feeling sick, thinking it’s going to be a really awful thing. But we didn’t see anybody else, and finally we looked across Havasu Creek [*near the first crossing*] and there was Moley [*Robert Hammond*] and a bunch of other boatmen, Jeffe Aronson, and Joel Schaler, with a bunch of passengers, and they were okay, they were all together. That’s when we set up a Tyrolean traverse near the mouth and brought almost two trips worth of passengers [*two AzRA trips were there that day, one from the Snout Division and one from the Havasu Division*] across on the Tyrolean system, spanning above the flash flood. That was pretty wild. A lot of people weren’t super-comfortable with that. But luckily by then we’d done a head count and figured out everyone was accounted for and alive.

Hester: Oh good.

Corson: And so, it became—not fun—but a lot better. And then we remembered the lifejackets were tied to the boats that went downriver. So, we only had half as many lifejackets and half as many boats as we should have. That’s when we learned to leave the lifejackets on shore. Luckily a motorboat just pulled into the mouth right at dusk. It was getting dark, and the flash flood hadn’t subsided. So the motorboat took a bunch of our people on it, and they had some spare lifejackets, so at least they were safe on the motorboat, or safer. My boat was one of those that went downriver, so I got in *your* boat, and we headed down river at 45,000 CFS with headlamps.

Hester: Did we have lifejackets on, or did we give them away to other people?

Corson: I *don’t* remember that, but I don’t think I had one.

Hester: I know I did, because I know I put my lifejacket on when the flood hit. But I seem to remember a lot of guides didn’t have lifejackets.

Corson: I bet that’s true. We finally found Suzanne and the four boats she had, plus the motorboat that helped us. Then we all triple camped at Tuckup. We patched some boats, drank some whiskey and were just happy to be alive.

Hester: Yeah, that was quite a day. It was epic.

Corson: It was. I’ll never forget that either.

Hester: After that, how did you feel about being down in the canyon, and the way things had changed so fast?

Corson: It seemed flash floods were scarier than rapids. And then later I think I started worrying about—even now—rockfalls, as much as anything. There is a lot of objective danger down there.

Hester: Right. What other stories can you recall, events from your career down there?

Corson: Let’s see...So then in 1987 I kept working, but I cut back to four trips per season, when I met Norm [*Larson*], and I started being a climber as well as a boater. That was a big part of our life, I mean, I was already skiing a lot in the winters, but climbing is the same season as boating, kind of, so I wanted to do less trips and climb more. But then in the nineties, I kind of went back to working more trips to qualify for AzRA’s profit sharing. And Norm rowed a boat in 1989, he took a baggage boat. He’d been a kayaker, but he [*didn’t think*] rowing would be that fun. Then he started really enjoying it, and he would work one or two trips a year with me, so that meant that I was doing more like five trips a year—to be not apart *too* much. And it was great that he got to know my friends, which he really enjoyed.

Hester: And tell us about Norm, like how you met him, when you met him. You’re married now, right?

Corson: Right.

Hester: When did you get together?

Corson: I moved to Wyoming in 1982. I got to know



Norm and Lorna mid-1980s.

Running the Jarbidge-Bruneau, 1999. Photo: Norm Larson



On the Nizina River in Alaska, 1995. Photo: Norm Larson



Below:

Escalante take-out, two miles of slickrock, 1988. Photo: Norm Larson



Winter climb on Buck Mountain, Tetons, 1993. Photo: Norm Larson





Left – Climbing Moonlight Buttress in Zion when it was still an aid route, 1995. Photo: Norm Larson

Below – Climbing in Indian Creek, 2010. Photo: Norm Larson



Skiing in the Tetons, 2011. Photo: Norm Larson



Skiing in Canada, 2011. Photo: Norm Larson

him working carpentry, really, because I was trying to be a carpenter, and he was a good carpenter. We had mutual friends too. We got together in 1986 and he taught me how to climb, and I got him into rowing in the canyon.

Hester: You shared a lot of mutual experiences with each other and learned from each other.

Corson: Right. And we always ski together, too, and that is still a big part of our lives.

Hester: Any other things you want to talk about?

Corson: I guess as far as the canyon goes, there was a point in time in the nineties when I was thinking maybe I was getting a little burned out. And then we started doing the “Hiker Specials”, and that really charged me up again. That’s all I really wanted to do, was to do a lot of hiking down there, accessing side canyons from the river. I wasn’t as much of a whitewater person as a canyon person. So, when we started doing longer, sixteen-day trips, with some really good passengers—not so much right away on the hiking specials, but now more so.

Hester: What do you mean by “good passengers,” when you say that?

Corson: Well, just that they [*the office staff*] try and screen the passengers to make sure that they really are into hiking and have a reasonably good fitness level.

Hester: So, the passengers were better hikers, is what you meant.

Corson: Yeah. I also I did several charters with two Alaska groups in the 1990s and 2000s. Both groups were *great!* They were great people and hikers. That sort of kept me going. These two groups, they came every other year, and I would do a trip with one or the other every fall, and we would go *big*, and hike whatever we wanted, lot’s of layover days. It just really got me excited again about being down there and doing new hikes, we could take them anywhere.

Hester: Can you name some of the really unusual or bigger hikes than normal? Can you talk about some of that?

Corson: Yeah. So, this one group of Alaskans, the crew realized that they were exceptional, but we didn’t know *how* good they were. And they were older—older than us—and we weren’t young, really, by then. It was me, Ed [*Hasse*], Bill Karls and Jerry Cox. We decided we were going to layover at Nankoweap and go up to Mystic Falls, which is like an 18-mile round trip hike.

Hester: That’s a long way in the canyon!

Corson: Yeah! Right. So, we thought, “Well, we’ll just see how far they go, and see if *some* of them can make it.” So, we went to Mystic Falls that day. We left right at first light, and the whole group made it, basically. They were tough people! They were just so self-sufficient, they had brought their own first aid kit, their own water filter, and they were just solid. So, then we kept doing trips with the same group and crew. We’d go up to Shaman’s Gallery, Tapeats Cave, Merlin’s Abyss, upper National to the Nautiloid beds, and again back to Mystic Falls. One time Jon Hirsh

and I took a group up 150 mile canyon using a rope, which was beautiful, a lot like Matkat, but I wouldn’t recommend that one for safety reasons. So along with all the classic hikes, and they loved it, doing new hikes, and we loved it! So the same guides would always get on that trip, pretty much the same crew every time.

The other group from Alaska was a big, huge family. The older couple would bring all of their grandkids when they got to a certain age. And they had a lot of grandkids! They were great people too, and good hikers. So that really inspired me, having quality trips like that, plus no interchanges at Phantom Ranch. There were other charter groups from Alaska too that were really fun to work with.

Hester: It’s interesting how the customer base inspired you.

Corson: I know! Yeah, and there are trips where you don’t really feel that way about the passengers, but I find more and more that I meet really great people. The cool thing now is that they’re mostly my age, too. I can really relate to them.

Hester: Uh-huh because the average age of the guests in the canyon is about sixty.

Corson: Right, so I’m a little older than them, but...

Hester: That’s an average. So, there’s a lot of older ones.

Corson: Right. But I guess also down there, the bonding I had with other women, like Becca and you, and later Ginger [*Birkeland*], Faye [*Atkinson*], Lora [*Colton*] and Somer [*Morris*]. Even to this day I still have a bond with the other boatwomen that I rarely would have at home. That’s been really valuable. And the male guides too, working with liberated men from the early years to the present. That has been a real treat, and the first time in my life I’ve felt treated as an equal.

Hester: I recall a few other stories. I don’t know if you’re interested in talking about them, or if you have some other ones. There was a streaking incident at Saddle.

Corson: I think you should tell that one.

Hester: It’s not my story. (laughs) This is *your* story.

Corson: But you tell it so much better.

Hester: What about the broccoli lady? Can you tell that story. I wasn’t there.

Corson: Well, I don’t know. That one doesn’t really come across that well as a story. You had to be there.

Hester: Ok. Were you around when some of the dories sunk, or some of those incidents?

Corson: What was that?

Hester: When the AzRA dories got sunk or damaged. Do you remember any of those stories, were you there for any of them?

Corson: That was a pretty good story. One time, it was in the early eighties, we called it the “disaster trip” because it just started out—it was really low water for some reason—maybe 1981, 1982. I forget. The first incident was when we got to the first rapid, Badger, and the dory got wrapped there. It was Dave Edwards’ first dory run, I think. He wrapped in Badger on the left, and

a private trip helped us out, because we couldn't get the boat off the rock—it was pretty far from shore to get ropes to. So, the private boaters took some of our passengers on top of their kayaks and delivered them over to the shore at Badger. And delivered the rope to the stuck dory. Eventually, we got the boat off, but it had holes in it. So, we patched it that night and the next morning.

Hester: And so that was night one, right?

Corson: Yeah, night one. The second day we finally got down to North Canyon mid-day and decided to hike it. We came down from the North Canyon hike, and one of the boats was now on top of a rock. The water had dropped, and the rock had ripped a 5- to 6-foot hole in the floor when the water dropped, and left the boat perched on it. We had to camp there, on night two and patch. And this is like a twelve-day trip, of course. So, we're patching that boat the next day, and finally we get out of North Canyon on the third day. Luckily, we didn't have an interchange, I don't think. But anyway, I forget where the next incident was, but I think there was one more rip. Maybe below Nankowep Rapid? We didn't hike after that, because we were trying to make up the time. Then at Elves Chasm as we pulled out of there, Drifter [Smith] hit a piece of limestone in the river, and it just shredded a tube. So, we camped right below there, to patch that. We weren't having any fun at all; we were just patching boats. Next, we got down to Bedrock, and it was really, really low water, and Dave Edwards went left of the rock in the dory. I think I went left that day too but was luckier. It was really nasty level and the dory flipped and got stuck in that big, nasty eddy on the upper left. The dory was completely submerged and went underwater for really long periods of time, we couldn't see it most of the time. But you could hear it scraping along the bottom, hitting the rocks, it just sounded horrible. And then it would rise up occasionally, and we'd glimpse the bottom of it, then it would sink again. We were all on the left side, parked down below the rapid now, and working to rescue the dory. I think David Lowry finally was able to clip a carabiner onto the bottom, and we got it to shore and spent the whole rest of that day patching that dory. We wondered if could even be rowed out of the canyon? But Dave Edwards was able to row it out, but that boat never went back out on the river again. So, I think all the wrecked dories were why AzRA quit rowing dories in the 1980s. Finally we made it to Diamond Creek, and as we were drying the boats, one of them, Alvin's boat, just *exploded* in the sun. (laughter)

Hester: At least you didn't have to patch it! Lucky you were at takeout.

Corson: No. It was just like this huge, loud kaboom. Because those dark grey boats, you had to bleed the air out, and we had forgotten, I guess. The trip was just a disaster.

Hester: Yeah, sounds like a *bunch* of disasters.

Corson: But nobody got hurt.

Hester: Right. Do you remember any of the guests that

trip, what they were thinking or saying?

Corson: Hm, not really. I think they didn't realize how unusual it was, maybe. I think they would have liked to hike more, but after North Canyon...we didn't have time to!

Hester: You pretty much didn't hike anywhere, huh?

Corson: No, we didn't have time. The water was low as well.

Hester: Right. Do you have other things you want to talk about?

Corson: Hm, let's see...In the 90s when I was starting to feel a little burned out again, Cam [Staveley, AzRA manager at the time] asked me to lead a trip. I had never wanted to lead trips because I was terrified of public speaking. But he talked me into it and that turned out to be a good thing. I really started enjoying leading trips, and just trying to hike more and be more efficient with our time. Getting out of camp faster and moving faster on the river. I really enjoy the logistics of that. So that kept me going, trying to perfect the efficiency of a trip to get in more hiking. And now...I'm starting to wonder if I am too old, but I'm still hanging in there—45 years, plus a couple before that when I was training.

Hester: That's a long time. That's probably one of the longest, if not the longest, time a female guide has worked in the canyon, I bet.

Corson: I think so, yeah, especially since I never missed a year until 2020 Covid year, I missed that season. I looked it up, and Georgie [White] was down there thirty-nine years.

Hester: Oh! Okay. That's a long time to be down there, 47 years.

Corson: Yup.

Hester: So, what other accomplishments, on or off the river, do you feel are important to your persona?

Corson: Pretty much skiing in Jackson is amazing, I never regretted moving here. We just backcountry ski, and it's a great area for that. Plus, we go to Canada to ski a lot as well for some new terrain. Before I moved here, I didn't really know how to ski, but it's a huge part of my life now. Climbing also is, and all the traveling we've done is most always for climbing.

Hester: And that's you and Norm?

Corson: Yeah. Always.

Hester: How long have you guys been married or together?

Corson: Married 34 years, I think.

Hester: Thirty-four years. Wow. That's a long time. And you guys do all those activities together, except for rafting not so much anymore, right?

Corson: Right. But Norm didn't quit raft guiding until sometime in the mid-2000s, because he was down there at least 25 or more years, which was great.

Hester: I remember working with Norm. He was always a good worker.

Corson: Yeah. And fun! He was a climbing guide prior

to rafting, and he just didn't want to guide anymore, in any capacity. Which I understand. Norm introduced me to climbing, and that's a huge part of our life as well. That's all we do when we go away from home, basically—unless I'm doing the river—is we go on climbing trips. We took a lot of trips, including quite a few international trips, and climbed some pretty big routes. It's really been rewarding.

Hester: What are some of those places?

Corson: We've been to South America a few times, Patagonia, Peru, Chile, Nepal and Argentina. Also, Canada and Alaska a fair amount. Norway was the most recent trip, which was great. We have done some big routes, like Lotus Flower Tower in the Cirque of the Unclimbables, the Howsers in the Bugaboo's. Climbers would recognize those climbs, but most people wouldn't. We also climbed a lot of desert towers, and walls in Zion, like Moonlight Buttress etc. But the Wind Rivers, in Wyoming near our home, was our main climbing area. We did quite a few first ascents in there, when we were in our prime. It was great, because it was our local range, and we knew it so well. And people just don't get back in there that much, because of the long approaches. They're beautiful mountains. We're not doing as big of routes as we did when we were younger, but we're still enjoying climbing.

Hester: Right. Do you have more thoughts you want to share?

Corson: It was unusual to be guiding so long as a woman. Like you said earlier, there's quite a few men that have been down in the canyon a long time, a lot that started the same time, but we were sort of the first career boat women, I think, and some women had to give guiding up when they had children. Another thought, my old friends in Flagstaff, Sue Beard and Richard Hereford, have really taken care of me through all those years. They make coming down to work a trip easy and are always fun to visit. That really is part of my longevity down there, I wouldn't still be down in the canyon without their support.

Hester: By "take care" of you, you mean you could stay with them, and they would host you, and you could hang out with them?

Corson: Yeah. It's really made a huge difference.

Hester: Yeah. How do you stay in shape, basically, every winter, to get back into summer? How does that work for you?

Corson: I don't know, I don't do anything training for rowing, that's for sure. I think the rock climbing helped a lot, we usually go climbing before the river season and get a little upper body strength. And I think after that many years you sort of have muscle memory or whatever. I never felt like my size was that bad of a thing, but now that I'm older *and* small, I do feel like it's not a great combination. There's a lot of small boatwomen down there now, which is cool.

Hester: Yeah, there's a lot now.

Corson: Yeah, but getting older doesn't make it easier.

Hester: No. The body sometime really hurts in the morning.

Corson: Yeah, no matter what you do.

Hester: If you want, tell me a little bit more about how you feel things are going for you now, and where you see yourself headed, that would be great. And how you felt about working on the river all these years.

Corson: Uh-huh. I guess I am going to retire soon, but I've been saying that for so many years that nobody believes it anymore. I know I have to, but I don't want to. I'm going to do everything as long as I can—Grand Canyon, skiing, climbing—and carpentry. We kind of have to keep working as we don't have a retirement plan set up. But I also really love the cabinetry work we do, making kitchens and furniture. I would really miss it. So as long as we can do all those things, we will.



Working in the cabinet shop, 2000s. Photo: Norm Larson

Hester: Right. Hopefully you'll be back on the river next summer and doing your "hiking special" trips.

Corson: Well, one of the Alaskan groups is going to come back, so I'd really like to do that fall trip. That will probably be their last trip, and possibly my last trip too.

Hester: I see. Yeah, when they quit coming, you'll quit coming, it sounds like.

Corson: Right.

Hester: What have you found to be the hardest part and the best part about your career guiding in the canyon?

Corson: Hm. Oh gosh...The best part was just living outside and being around a bunch of friends, and solving problems, and just living and being in the canyon for that much time. The hardest part? I don't really know; it's been mostly good. I guess for me, because I was a shy person, that part was challenging, in the beginning especially—to be in public. And it still is hard, but I've learned how to deal with it better.

Hester: Do you think you're not as shy anymore?

Corson: Yeah, I think I'm much less shy, but I still am shy, somehow, I learned how to go outside of myself temporarily—almost have like having two different personalities—one when I'm on the river and one when I'm not.

Hester: What's different? Like when you're not on the river, how are you different?

Corson: I just don't socialize much. I do a lot of stuff outdoors, but I don't interact with a lot of people. So, to be around people 24-hours a day is challenging, but I have enjoyed getting to know a lot of the people.

Hester: Would you say for you being shy has probably been the hardest or the most challenging part of guiding?

Corson: Yeah, I would say so, for me, yeah—more than the physical part of guiding.

Hester: Have you ever been really afraid down there of anything?

Corson: You mean of the river?

Hester: Well, anything on the trips, or the environment, or the weather, or the river?

Corson: Oh yeah! Starting with the river, of course I think all of us have been afraid, I imagine, because it's serious stuff. But definitely rock falls and flash floods. Flash floods, during the eighties, became my biggest fear, now I think its rockfall. Yeah, I worry about something really horrible happening, where you don't have much, if any, control over it. You make the best decisions you can, but in the end, it often comes down to luck.

Hester: That's one of my fears too. I mean, you're in the bottom of just a huge hole in the ground, and everything goes downhill, no matter where you're at.

Corson: I feel it more and more every year. It's just objective danger versus something you have control over.

Hester: Right. Do you think the longer you're down there you see more and more evidence of those kinds of events, and realize it definitely happens, even though it's not that often that you do see it?

Corson: Right. And you might have used the best judgment but...When National blew out that camp, people camped there every night, and it seemed safe because the drainage was further downriver than the main camp, but it turned out otherwise.

Hester: Yeah, you just never know.

Corson: I know, we see a lot more geologic events than I would have guessed.

Hester: What do you think makes an ideal participant, or even the worst kind of participant guests you might have on a trip? How's that been for you?

Corson: Oh, I think that's improved for me. Well, two things: I think I mentioned most of the passengers are my age, so I can really relate to them better than when I was in my twenties. And then also, I think because I've sort of, some people would say cherry-picked, but I've worked with a lot of charter groups over and over that I really like, and I worked the hiker's specials, and tended to be with people that really wanted to hike, which is really what

I care about. And so, through the years it's just gotten better and better, being able to do that. Of course, there are people who push your buttons too as we all know.

Hester: Well, yeah, that makes sense as you get older the average age of the guests is about sixty, it's definitely easier to relate—the guests to relate to you too.

Corson: Right.

Hester: How do you think guiding for the guides has changed over time? I mean, how many years have you been down there, like every year at least a couple trips? In 47 years, how have you seen guiding change?

Corson: Oh, it's changed a lot! In the beginning everything was so unorganized, but it was fun, and it was wild, and the boatmen were all just a bunch of young, wild and crazy people. We had very few rules, and it was pretty much leave Lees Ferry, and you were on your own. And now, every year there's more and more rules between Park Service, AZRA *and* the industry, basically. It has to be that way, I guess, but it's definitely a lot different. I think the hardest thing for me now is that we must always be politically correct—like if boatmen can't tell a joke, because every joke is politically incorrect, then that's a whole different type of person that you're going to attract. I just think we lost a little something there, much more mainstream. But other than that, every generation has been fun. I've been there for parts of six different decades, and every era has had something that was really fun and changed enough to keep me interested.

Hester: What do you think is good about it now? What changes do you see that are for the better?

Corson: That's a good question. Let's see, for the better, I don't know? I guess we are more professional, more safety aware, maybe...I don't know, I like seeing young people that are willing to get away from social media for an extended period of time, it's nice to see that. They're quite different from a lot of their peers, and I like to be part of that, I guess. We still laugh on trips more than I would anywhere else.

Hester: Yeah, definitely more safety features. I mean, in the old days you just had flares and a signal mirror. We now have satellite phones, InReach devices *and* radios.

Corson: Yeah, for sure. And the training is better.

Hester: Can you tell me what you like about running rapids.

Corson: I think the focus required to enter a rapid in the best place. Like entering Lava in the perfect spot. Especially back when Lava still had that good slot run, that was my favorite run. I just loved the slot run, and the concentration that you needed entering it. It was all about the entry, really, once you made the entry it was a straight shot. I was sad when the slot run disappeared.

Hester: Are you referring to what was called the dory slot, the dory run? Or no, was it called the bubble line?

Corson: No, it was just 'the slot'. It wasn't any particular type of craft's run, as I don't think that dories did it any more than rafts necessarily. It was the same run, though.

Hester: Yeah, it was the bubbles line, you followed the bubbles down, it went in that little slot right next to the hole on the left, but in smoother part of the wave.

Corson: Some people did, but I never looked at the bubbles, it seemed too distracting. I just focused on the slot between the rooster tail wave and the ledge hole.

Hester: I remember the bubbles led right to the slot, but they disappeared after, I think, a flash flood out of Prospect Canyon in the nineties, right?

Corson: No, it was in '83, I believe? I think Lava got rearranged then, but it's been gone a long time.

Hester: What did you key off of to do that slot run? Lava Falls is pretty much just a horizon line.

Corson: Oh, just looking really, close, *and* watching the currents, because you always felt like you were going to go in the ledge hole, and if you *didn't* feel like that, then you were too far right. So, you just had to hang it out there. It was such a fine line, a beautiful thing.

Hester: What do you think is your favorite hike and rapid down there, and why?

Corson: Oh, let's see, favorite rapids change year to year, or decade to decade. Probably my favorite hike is the Tabernacle, just because it's so different than any other hike.

Hester: Great hike. Folks reading this may not know what the Tabernacle is, can you explain it some, or what it's like and why you like it?

Corson: Okay, yeah. It's a about a mile above Nevill's Rapid [75-mile]. You follow ridges for 2,000 feet, so it's like a little island in the sky, a little mountain in the middle of the canyon. The views are spectacular, and just a constant gradient up, up, up. It starts with a narrow ridge that you've got to be a little careful on, and after that it's mostly just a good aerobic hike with amazing views. And you get a nice summit, I think that's what's unique about it.

Hester: Right. There's not that many hikes with summits, that end at the top of a mountain, in the Grand Canyon. That's definitely special.



Eddy Cruise, 2008. Photo: Glenn Sherrill

Corson: Yeah. Right.

Hester: What have been some of your favorite rapids over time? You mentioned the slot run in Lava.

Corson: For a long time, my favorite big rapid was Hance. Once the left run shut down it wasn't as fun, I really loved that run. The maneuver you had to make entering. Almost touching the big rock with a downstream ferry, then spinning and dodging rocks down the left side of the rapid.

Hester: You mentioned the left run at Hance shut down. There used to be a left or a right run choice. What happened?

Corson: Oh yeah, a big flash flood out of Red Canyon closed off that left channel with debris. But that was a fun technical run. It was only doable at mid- to high-water, not low water. I don't think it'll ever come back—maybe someday, but probably not in our lifetimes.

Hester: Yeah, that is a fun rapid, for sure, and that was a fun run.

Corson: Yeah. I always liked Upset Rapid. Well, I mean everybody likes Upset, right? Pretty much. But one that people don't really talk about much and I really like is Waltenberg Rapid, and it's getting more attention now at lower water flows. It's an exciting rapid.

Hester: Right, and it's sharp, too. So, are there any other stories you want to talk about?

Corson: I don't know, I'm not a great storyteller, but I could tell one story about the rockfall at Stone Creek.

Hester: Yeah, that would be great, because I don't think I've heard it in detail.

Corson: Okay, I think a lot of people remember that event and I don't remember the decade, but I feel like it was in the early 2000s. We were on a hikers' special trip, and we were all super excited to be down there in April and it was a beautiful sunny day. So, just for starters we had this one passenger on the trip who was kind of hard to like. He was a cop, and he was just a hard person. He had started the trip with a woman he had talked into going, but she had no interest in being on a river trip. She was his girlfriend—short-term girlfriend. Apparently, she realized on day one, actually in the first hour that she didn't want to be on a river trip under any circumstances, but we were already past Lees Ferry. So, I talked with her, and she said she just wanted to hike out, and that was it. There was no point in talking her into staying. So, we said okay, you can hike out at Phantom. And of course, the guy stayed on by himself. He was just kind of a wild card, we'd go on a hike, and he would get way ahead of everybody. Sometimes we had a schedule to meet, so we'd have to run after him and find him and tell him, "Okay, we're turning around, we're going to go back and have lunch." And he didn't seem to really like that I was a woman leader, either. Maybe I read that into it, but I felt like there was an element of that.

Hester: Were you head guide on that trip?

Corson: Yeah, I was. So anyway, this guy wasn't a huge problem, but he was a bit of a problem. And sometimes



Lava, 2021.

we would have to chase him down, and say, “No, you can’t do that...” When we got to Stone Creek, we decided to do a half-over. [*versus lay-over*] We had lunch, and we were all super-excited. It was a *beautiful, sunny* day. And he came up to me and asked, to his credit, if he could go to the lower waterfall. This other woman on the trip was wanting to do that too, so the two of them went up to the lower falls, and we guides were cleaning up lunch, getting ready for a big hike in the afternoon. We finally got lunch wrapped up, and with the entire rest of the group were hiking toward Stone Creek. We were excited to be going to do the Stone/Galloway [*up and over*] Route, plus go to the end of Stone Creek at the slot waterfall. Suddenly there was this incredible cracking noise. It sounded like artillery, and huge rocks came off the wall, right down into where the lower waterfall is, where people go every day. If we had all been up in Stone Creek, we would have had such a triage situation—for those that survived, I mean. But only those two people were up the Stone Creek, so we waited a minute—we thought more was going to dislodge—until we thought it was safe to go in there. Suddenly the man and woman came running out, and he was injured. Luckily, she didn’t have any serious injuries. When they heard the noise of the rock cracking, they ran back towards the river, which probably saved their lives. She told him to run, and she said it was because I had told

them about flash floods, and she thought that’s what it was when they heard the noise. So, we were all just like... You know, we were so close to having the whole trip up there as well. And that rockfall was as big as a semitruck—the rock fell down and shattered. He ended up having to be helicoptered out, as he had broken his ankle and lost a toe. It got severed. Fortunately, we had a physician on the trip, and she was really helpful. We got the helicopter quickly and got him out. Then we didn’t really want to hike Stone Creek at that point because we were all pretty shaken. So, we [*thought*], “Oh, we’ll just go up Galloway Canyon instead a little ways and take it easy,” and we all started up Galloway. Then the physician who had helped us fell on her face and put her teeth through her lip. The whole thing was unsettling, so we just went back to camp, decided not to evac her and got her lip steri-stripped and that was that. But we found out later, we had probably startled a bighorn sheep when it saw us all coming, and *that* is what dislodged the rock. Because on a later trip we found a dead bighorn sheep in the debris that fell down, so he didn’t survive the fall.

Hester: Oh, and you guys didn’t go up and check the area out, or look for the missing toe?

Corson: No. We thought it was unstable to go up there, it could be just the first wave of rockfall. But the next year, we’re doing the same hikers’ special trip for AZRA, and

that same guy comes back, the guy that got injured and helicoptered out. Yeah, it was cool, he was like a different person. He was much gentler, and I was leading again, because that's what I like to lead—the hikers' special trips. And he would always ask me if it was okay when he did stuff. He was a very different person. He had changed jobs, stopped being a cop, that was pretty cool. One of his goals on the trip was to hike Stone Creek. So, we did.

Hester: Did he hike okay without his toe?

Corson: Yeah. I mean, his ankle had healed, and it was just his little toe, I think.

Hester: Oh, okay. And did you do the Galloway Stone hike you had set out to do the year before?

Corson: I'm not sure if we did. Probably. I don't remember.

Hester: That's a cool story. It sounds like he kind of learned a life lesson, to pay attention to what the guides were saying.

Corson: Right. And he actually felt like it was partly his fault, which in that case it really wasn't, you know.

Hester: Uh-huh. Well, that's a great story.

Corson: Alright! That's it for stories.

Hester: Okay. Well, I think I've covered most of the questions I had thought of. Oh! what do you think is one of the keys to rowing well in the Grand Canyon? Like any tips for new guides down there, tips for rowing, or tips for being a successful guide. Do you have anything to say about that?

Corson: Okay. Yeah. I think one key is not to overdo it. Don't work as many trips as you can. In the first couple of years, you want to do that, but learn to pace yourself or you'll burn out. I recommend having another job or skillset. I've seen the people who relied solely on being a guide, and when they got old, they got kind of...you know, they didn't really want to be there, but they had to be

there financially. So, it's better to have a second career. As far as rowing, I don't know, because I was small, I felt like entering big rapids I had to really be on it—like more than somebody that was very strong and large. And that was a good thing, because it taught me to read the water really well, and just be there before you needed to. And when you're making a difficult cut or whatever, keep your angle really steep, more than 45 degrees, so you don't lose that angle. I never was good at momentum runs, I always relied on just being right where I wanted to be before I needed to be there. And I think still to this day I wouldn't mind being a big strong person, but it's nice to see that you don't have to be that strong or big, that it's more about timing, angles and remembering the runs.

Hester: Right. Well, I guess in closing more, what's most important to you?

Corson: I was just thinking the stuff I didn't talk much about was my other life, away from the river: moving to Wyoming, and then learning to ski. That was a huge thing for me, like what makes me happy in my life. Because I wasn't a skier, and I can't imagine not skiing now, it's just been a great part of my life. And carpentry, I really enjoy that too. I always wanted to be a carpenter but didn't know what my options were as a woman, especially in a culture like Wyoming. So traditional. But it worked out, took a lot of years, a lot of decades to get there, but I really enjoy what Norm and I do, making furniture and kitchens and custom cabinetry. I can't imagine my life without *that* either.

Hester: That's probably been a good income, or job, or company to have up in the Jackson Hole area, I bet.

Corson: Yes. Oh, it's a great area for that, a lot of people willing to pay for what they want.

Hester: Right. So, what's most important to you now in your life? It sounds like you may or may not work next year, guiding. What do you think is going to be most important for you now in the future?

Corson: I think both skiing and climbing will be the most fun. But our energy, you know, in our late sixties isn't what it used to be in our forties, but we're just going to keep doing those things as long as possible. I will be guiding in Grand Canyon in 2023 but I feel like I've already kind of pushed that envelope, but those other two things I hope to keep doing for as long as possible. Plus traveling more. And cabinetry also, we'll keep doing that.

Hester: That's great, it sounds like a good plan. Thanks for the interview.

Corson: Great! Okay, thanks.



Silly boatmen, 2019.