

Epics End

Secrets of Famed Colorado Gorges May Be Lost Forever



BERT LOPER



NORMAN NEVILLS

MEXICAN HAT, Utah (AP)—The secrets of the flaming gorges of the Colorado river system may now be locked away from man's prying eyes—perhaps forever.

Tragic accidents this summer brought death to the two best known among the river-runners who had penetrated the desolation of the last great American frontier.

Bert Loper, 79-year-old Greenriver, U. S. philosopher and semi-hermit who had boated the Colorado and its tributaries for 56 years, perished July 7 in a cataract of the river he loved.

Then Norman Nevills, dubbed "the world's No. 1 riverman," died with his wife, Doris, in an airplane crash near his home here September 19. His tiny boat had logged more than 20,000 miles on the waters of the Colorado, the San Juan, the Green and other rivers.

Unlikely
It seems unlikely that any successors will find the fascination of the mighty canyons sufficient to outweigh the dangers and hardships that go with the river-runners' life. Even if they do, their days of battling mountainous rapids, silt heavy waves and hidden boulders may be numbered. Projected for not too many years in the future are at least nine major dams on the Colorado and tributaries. The dams will make continuous boat trips impossible, backing great lakes up the twisted canyons.

Loper began boating when Colorado's silver mines were closed during the 1893 panic, choosing that means of travel for a prospecting trip. "I've been at it ever since," he often said.

Pioneer
At 70 years of age, he completed a boat trip alone down a 250-mile stretch of the upper Colorado which he had never before traversed. With that accomplished, he claimed to be the only man to have covered the entire stream, from its headwaters in Colorado and Wyoming, to the gulf of California, 600 rapids and 1100 miles away.

The same year he boated through the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and told friends he would make the trip again when he was 80. The kindly "I've just been around a long time." "I've just been around a long time."

Don Harris, one of Loper's best friends, says "There was something about Bert that was so big you couldn't see it all. Talking with him was like talking with history."

Curiosity
He had an unquenchable curiosity to see what was up every tributary canyon. It was pure pleasure for him to struggle for days just to reach a new cliff dweller ruin or beauty spot lost in thousands of square miles of desert.

His calm good humor made him doubly welcome as a guide or companion on river trips. So when a group of veteran river-riders proposed a trip through the Grand Canyon last July—just for the thrill of another ride—it was natural that Loper should be asked. He jumped at the chance to make the 60th birthday trip he proposed ten years before. (He would have been 80 July 29.)

Satisfied
His wife, who lived with him on the Colorado since his whirlwind courtship of her when he was 47.

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RAIN ENSEMBLE—Mary Jo Stephens wears a rainy-day outfit, beret, bog, raincoat and spots, designed by Irene Colle of Hollywood, in plastic, washable with soap and water.

said: "He's where he wanted to be. I wouldn't have it otherwise."

Death took Norman Nevills' wife, Doris, with him in the crash of their little plane. Nevills began running the river in 1933 on a home made scow that took him 187 miles down the San Juan.

It was Nevills who opened the rivers to tourists. After years of struggle to build up his business, Nevills began to reap success in the late '30s. In recent years he had as many parties of movie-makers, government agents and thrill-seekers as he could handle.

Since Maj. John Wesley Powell first went down the Colorado in 1899, some two score persons are known to have been killed on long boat trips. Nevills carried scores, if not hundreds of passengers on his

trips, including several women, and never lost a life.

There are other rivermen, of course. But none in the past has made a full-time career of boating and exploration as Loper and Nevills did.

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There probably is an opening for somebody else.

But just as probably, the mighty Colorado will be the final winner—with most of its colorful desolation and its secrets still intact long after its waters are impounded to light

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