

For Harry Aleson, Life was Heaven & Home in Glen Canyon

By Ken Sleight

HARRY'S WEDDING AND THE BERT LOPER WHISKY

The year 1962 was a momentous one. It was the year that Lt. Col. John H. Glenn, Jr. orbited the earth three times and exclaimed, "Oh, that view is tremendous." It was the year that Bill Wells, the Flying Bishop of Hanksville, turned up missing over the Dirty Devil River as he was checking on his cattle grazing in the canyon below. When his prop flew off, he was forced down onto a sand bar.

It was the last year to run the Colorado River through Glen Canyon before the waters began backing up behind the Glen Canyon dam. I scheduled some 16 trips in the Canyon that year. My brochures read, "Soon this Glen Canyon region will be covered with water and the deep canyons will be no more."

In 1962, Harry Aleson, Moki-Mac Ellingson, Georgie White, Kenny Ross, Don Harris, and other river runners were active in running the canyon rivers. Each guide had his or her own character. One character in particular was Harry Aleson. Then 63 years old, this Iowa native of Nordic heritage had accomplished much during his river lifetime.

Harry Aleson was colorful, imaginative, and remarkable. He was an unusual boatman, an inquisitive scholar, and pleasant to be around. He was egocentric and a showman, and he had a strange delightfulness about him.

He had a varied history.

In March 1918, he enlisted in the Aviation Section of the U.S. Army Signal Corps and was sent to France for training. While training, his plane went down and the toxic fumes and gas played havoc with his stomach. Chronic and perpetual stomach problems necessitated the removal of much of his stomach, and he required frequent visits to veteran hospitals. He was able to secure a full disability pension.

During the Depression years, Harry worked for various geophysical exploration firms in the southwest. During this time, he discovered the Colorado River and began boating on Lake Mead. Soon this led to trips upstream on the Colorado into Grand Canyon.

Harry sought adventure.

He and Georgie White swam the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon in 1945 for some 61 miles, and they repeated with an 81-mile swim the following year. In 1945, he also made a five-day upriver motorboat run from Lee's Ferry to Hite through Glen Canyon. He made several trips down the Yukon and the Mackenzie Rivers, and he liked to hike long distances, exploring new scenic areas and archeological sites.

Joining up with Charles Larabee, he called his outfit the Larabee and Aleson Western River Tours. He purchased old surplus navy neoprene rafts, a couple of motors and a few supplies, and he was in business.

His river career was further spurred on by his scholarly pursuits. He liked doing research and assembling notes on the history of the canyons. As part of his research, he exchanged many letters with Otis "Dock" Marson, a noted self-appointed and maverick river historian.

As is common with many river runners, his love for the river cost him his marriage. He and his wife separated in 1940 after 12 years of marriage. Harry had set up house alone in a tent at Quartermaster Canyon.

On the river, Harry would often invite my groups and me to camp with him. As we met on the river, he would often yell over and say, "Let's camp together tonight." And we'd do it. I enjoyed his stories and he put up with mine.

His World War I injury plagued him unmercifully and I was concerned by his bouts of intense pain. His days on the river were obviously numbered. It was becoming more difficult for him to go it alone. So I asked him to join with me on some joint trips during this last river trip year in Glen Canyon. He agreed.

Harry made one stipulation in our agreement, however; we would travel in separate boats—on camping he would take care of the cooking and mess for the passengers he carried and I would do the same for mine. A contrast indeed—he on one end of the sand bar and I on the other. He cooked on a gas stove; I cooked over logs. He provided a table and seating; my folks squatted or sat in the sand. He served his people individually in courses at the table; I made mind dip out of the common pot. He cleaned the dishes himself; I had my folks clean their own.

But, in spite of this awkward arrangement, we continued with our plans. Trips were scheduled on Sept 2 and Sept 12 of 1962. We placed advertisements in Randal Henderson's Desert Magazine. We had a fair response, and the trips went well.

Harry had met attractive Dorothy Donaldson Keyes of Oceanside, California on one of his river trips the previous year. It was one of those "one and only" attractions. A romance developed and they decided to wed and honeymoon in Glen Canyon.

Harry called the coming two-week wedding trip his "Farewell Trip to Glen Canyon." Sept 30-Oct 13, 1962. Fare \$300. He advertised the two-week trip in Desert Magazine. He had a few takers and ended up with only a small group.

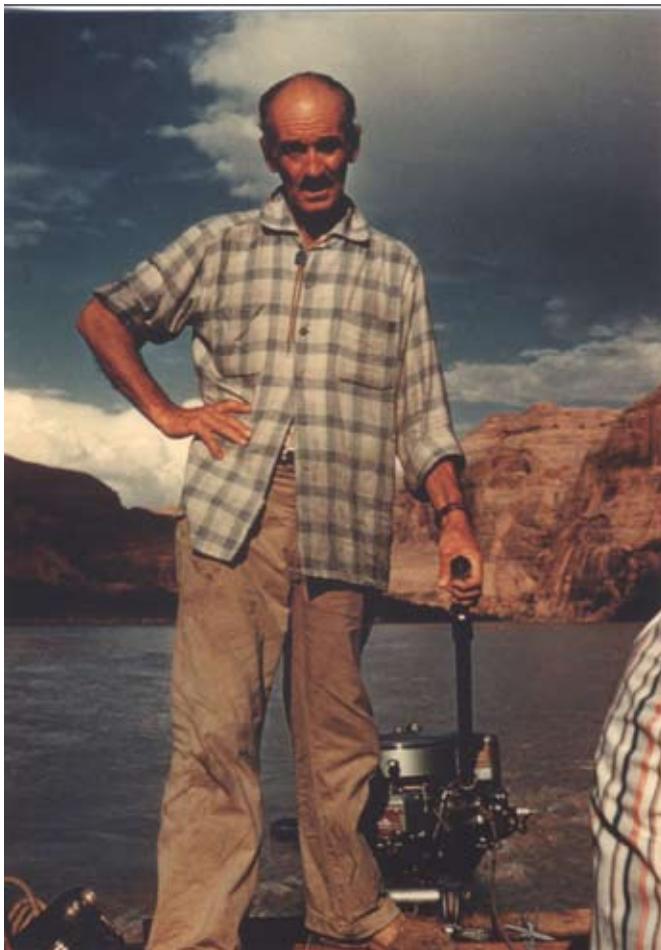
Trip members included Bering and Barbara Monroe of San Bernadino, California and Edna Fridley of Brigham County, Utah. Dock Marston said he would join if he could find transportation to the wedding site and be out of the canyon soon after the wedding.

Harry had told me of his plans. I told him I'd boat down, attend the wedding, and take Dock out. I would also pick up Bill Wells, the flying bishop of Hanksville, at Halls Crossing.

Harry had also told me there would be a special surprise at the wedding. Bert Loper's whisky, which was had been lying under the seat of his Dodge Power Wagon for years, would finally be brought out.

One must know the story to appreciate its full significance. Back in 1949, Harry made a momentous river journey through Grand Canyon with Bert Loper and other noted river people. During that trip Bert was swept from his boat and became lost to the river. On recovering the boat, Harry found a bottle of Seagrams 7, which he then placed under the seat of his Power Wagon for safe keeping. When I once asked him when he planned to open it, Harry told me it would be on a very special occasion. Surely, I expected to be invited to such an occasion.

The wedding party had been on the river for a week when October 6 arrived. I put on at Hite on October 6. My driver would pick me up at trip's end at Cane Creek. I had two 10



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Harry made a number of trips in the Glen and Escalante canyon area in search of Everett Ruess, a young lad who disappeared in the canyons in 1934. Through Harry, I had the privilege of coming to know the Ruess family. Harry had earlier taken Everett's mother, Stella, into Davis Gulch. Later, I took Everett's brother, Waldo, there too.

Interestingly, Edward Abbey had once inquired of Harry about a job as a boatman. Abbey, in his letter, described himself as "a tolerable camp cook, an excellent dishwasher, a fair First Aider, [knowledgeable...] about geology, biology, and Major Powell, and can even play the harmonica."

HP motors (one a spare) with me on my own raft, as I needed motor-power to hurry Dock out of the canyon when I met him. But, for the present, I wasn't hurrying. I rowed over to the left bank of the Colorado and walked up to Woody Edgel's cabin in White Canyon. My friend Woody was the legendary operator of a contraption called the Hite Ferry. After we talked for some time and had a long nightcap, he drove me down to my boat. He gave me a bottle of wine to present to the wedding party for him and sent his best wishes.

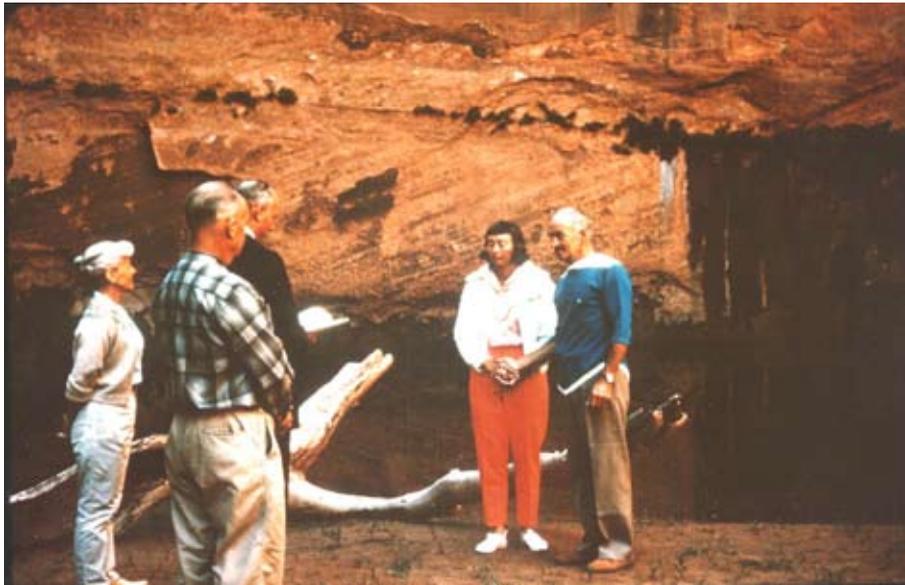
Shortly after midnight, I started down river. The stars were bright, the river was lovely, and I rowed and drifted most of the night. On arriving at Red Canyon, I pulled to the bank and walked up to Bert Loper's old cabin to stretch my legs. The place looked most

peaceful in the moonlight. Then I pushed off again and spent the daylight hours enjoying the river.

I arrived at my destination, Hall's Crossing, left bank, way after dark on the 7th. I sank into my sleeping bag and dozed off to wait for light. Early the next morning, Oct 8, I found a note from Harry stuck in a stick suggesting that I go meet Bill Wells as he flew in. He gave me directions to the airstrip and marked the direction to the strip. He had even counted the exact paces, several hundred of them. He had many such idiosyncrasies.

So I did as I was directed, except for counting the paces. (The note is lost in my archives somewhere.) I knew where the airstrip was and Harry knew that I knew it, but he gave me precise directions anyway. My route was the same route followed in 1882 by a Mormon wagon train. I hiked the mile to the top of the mesa and, on arriving there, found another note from Harry, addressed to Bill, welcoming him to Glen Canyon with directions to the river where he would meet me.

At about 8:00 a.m., I heard the hum of Bill's newly repaired Cessna. He made a good landing, and with him was Hanksville resident Nina Robison, who came to join in the festivities and to write an article for the Deseret News.



**The marriage was on time—10:00 a.m. ..
We again gave our congratulations and best wishes.
Harry correctly reported that it was
a real “moving experience.”**

Bill was attired in his proper dark blue suit and polished shoes, hair combed, and all of that—typical of Mormon bishops who perform wedding ceremonies on a river. The three of us walked down to my mud-covered raft. I wiped a part of the tubes off for a clean seat for them. Then we boated down river a couple of miles to Harry and Dottie's camp on the right bank of the river below Hall's Creek. The happy six-person party was there to meet us. Five tents had been set up. The table and mess were correctly placed among them.

I happily said hello to each guest, and chatted with red-eyed Dock Marston. He told me of the great party they had enjoyed the night before at the very time I was sleeping across the river. He revealed to me that they had guzzled down Bert Loper's whisky! Dock boasted of drinking his share of the historic beverage. Knowing Dock, I think he likely drank more than his share.

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This revelation took me by great surprise. I was utterly pissed. I had been imagining the sacred bottle would be passed around in a toasting genteel fashion, in a civilized way, on the wedding day—not consumed in a guzzling frenzy. I felt somewhat left out.

Harry and Dottie retired to their tents to change to their wedding togs. On her return, Dottie wore a tangerine-colored blouse, a long strand of coral beads, tangerine capri's and white sweater and shoes. Harry wore tan slacks and a blue pullover shirt with white trim at the collar with V-points at the bottom.

My feelings of rejection lessened somewhat as I joined our party of nine, hiking together a quarter-mile up Little Eden Canyon to “The Chapel.” There, at the end of this narrow box canyon, was a beautiful pool in a fern-covered grotto. It resembled a small Cathedral in the Desert. A thin ray of light entered the grotto, and peace and tranquility prevailed. It was indeed a beautiful cathedral in which to wed.

Bill began the ceremony, expressing the right scriptural and prayer words, the right words of council, the best wishes and all of that. Then the words of the ceremony itself. Harry took the ring, made of Navajo-silver and turquoise, and slipped it on Dottie's finger.

The marriage was on time—10:00 a.m. Bering and Barbara Monroe served as their witnesses. We others stood to the side looking on. We again gave our congratulations and best wishes. Harry correctly reported that it was a real “moving experience.” The bride and groom seemed very happy—like a couple of newlywed kids.

We then hiked back to their camp. From my pack came Woody's wine, (a far cry from Bert's whisky, I noted to myself,) and we toasted each other. I sauntered about looking for the empty Seagram 7 bottle, hoping to steal it. At least I'd gain a possible lingering whiff. But I couldn't find the damn thing. Dock, I'm sure, had already stashed the treasured artifact in his duffel.

On schedule, I then took Bill and Nina back up river and walked with them to the Cessna. I bid them adieu and saw them off. Hiking back to my boat, I was soon on the river. I picked up red-eyed Dock at the wedding camp, said goodbye to the honeymoon party and headed downstream to Cane Creek. On our trip down, Dock asked me what I was going to do the following year. I told him I'd be taking very few trips from Hite anymore. We talked long about the history of the canyons. Dock had branded himself an expert in these sorts of things.

Dock and I landed at Cane Creek on the 10th, after camping and exploring en route. Dock was able to get to the airport at Page as scheduled to meet his airline connections.

POSTSCRIPT

As a postscript to that eventful trip: I continued taking boating trips in Glen Canyon and winter hiking trips in Escalante Canyon. I moved my family to the small town of Escalante to be nearer the canyons. I set up a base camp in the lower Escalante.

Harry boated on the reservoir with his newly acquired jet boat, taking my guests to Rainbow Bridge and returning them to the base camp. He and Dottie had moved to Teasdale, Utah. Harry was in and out of hospitals. Dottie was there with him all the way—and it was as Harry had said following their wedding: “Dorothy is the most wonderful wife any man can have.”

The Flying Bishop continued flying for us.

The sly fox, Dock Marston, continued collecting historic accounts of the canyons and we corresponded for years. But I never saw the Seagram artifact again.

And the wonderful, adventurous, and sometimes caustic Edna Fridley began tripping with me, taking over 40 varied trips on the rivers and into the canyons. (Her husband, Charles, who made one trip in Escalante, financed her travels and, in turn, helped me to continue my manner of living.)

In the spring of 1972, I met with Harry at the Prescott hospital when he was very ill, extremely thin, and barely able to talk. We chatted again briefly of our many shared experiences. Harry died in Prescott, Arizona on March 27, 1972—his final Farewell Trip.

--Ken Sleight floated Glen Canyon more times than he can remember. He still despises BuRec for Glen Canyon Dam and is still mad at the late Dock Marston for drinking Bert Loper's whisky.

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