

GEORGIE CLARK...

“WOMAN OF THE RIVER”

BY ANNE CROSMAN

Georgie Clark is single-minded. “The Colorado River is my life, always has been,” she says in a high, squeaky twang.

“The Grand Canyon is my home. Forty-eight years now.” Her eagle-like eyes blaze.

Year after year, May through September, Georgie runs the river, guiding her rubber raft through rapids and falls, giving thrills to city slickers and nature lovers. On a good day, the waves crest at 15 feet, and when they hit, everyone laughs, screams, and holds on tightly. The sun soon dries the soaked boatload.

“I like it because I’m naturally that way—I like to MOVE and I like to GO.” She speaks quickly, spitting out words. “I like the fact that there’s a beginning and there’s the end. And

you meet different people all the time,” she exclaims. “I like people and I like to give ’em enjoyment. I like to show ’em the river. They get a kick out of it.” She pauses.

“That’s the way I like it!”

It’s a famous quote, her business motto, emblazoned on brochures and neon-bright tee shirts.

I book a seat on a trip in early May 1991. She writes me longhand on orange stationery: “I am looking forward to seeing you on the river. We can talk a lot then. Keep your notebook

handy. I am so busy between trips that I can’t arrange anything then. I only have three days between trips and work 4 a.m. until 10 p.m. to be ready for the next trip.

“I would love to be a part of your book.

“Sincerely, Georgie.”

She’s a tiny, sinewy woman with turquoise eyes and a platinum pageboy. Wrinkles line her tanned, leathery face. She shakes my hand with an iron grip and welcomes me to the canyon.

“I hope you enjoy it,” she says. I assure her I shall.

On the river, she is in perpetual motion. For five days, from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., she steers and maneuvers her 37-footlong raft, resting only for midmorning “egg breaks” and lunch onshore. She checks and maintains equipment, instructs her boatmen, oversees preparation of meals, and helps serve them.

She talks with people, and after dinner, pours shots of her favorite blackberry liqueur into our coffee.

Always in command, she seems to be the last in bed and first to rise. At 4 a.m., she rouses the crew to start breakfast, serve, clean-up, then stow everyone’s gear onboard for push-off at daybreak.

Once on the river, she stands silently at the stern of her raft, left hand on the outboard motor, right hand on a safety rope. Her eyes scan the river, picking the best spots to ride the rapids.

When we hit white water, she negotiates fast, efficient passage, avoiding whirlpools, skirting rocks, and twisting in and out of drops and waves.

It’s a lot of work for an 80-year-old woman. But she loves it.

Georgie is a legend in the Grand Canyon. In 1945, she was the first woman to float down the river in a life preserver. She was the first person to take large boatloads of paying customers

down the river, starting in the late 1940s.

In 1955, she introduced her own raft, the “G-boat,” a trio of surplus rubber pontoons lashed together in a special configuration, for greater flexibility and less chance of flipping over.

Her “G-rig,” with a 30-horsepower Johnson outboard motor, is the biggest and safest boat on the canyon river. It measures 27 feet by 37 feet and holds 24 people.

“Everyone watches Georgie run rapids. That’s part of the fun of the river,”

says Ron Hancock, long-time friend and boatman.

A tall, sun-reddened man with broad shoulders and ready smile, Ron motions toward a group of people watching from shore.

Above them tower the red, craggy cliffs of the Grand Canyon. Ron prepares to videotape our run through Hance Rapid, a 30-foot drop at the 76-mile river mark below Lee’s Ferry, Arizona, the trip’s starting point. “Hold on,” he shouts. “Scream and holler and have a lot of fun!”

Georgie says nothing, but leans over the motor and peers out from under a red-brimmed hat, her hawk nose in profile, Georgie Clark head cocked to the left, mouth in a faint smile. She steers to the right side of the river.

All around us is churning white-water, and I see what looks like a big drop ahead. Suddenly the raft plunges and pitches, and we’re in the middle of a trough. A sheet of water smashes the people in the bow, and they scream with delight. In the stern, we get pounded by a second wave and water shoots up through floor space. Everything is soaked, including Georgie.

We look like river rats.

The people onshore shout, wave, and applaud, and Ron swings his camera toward them, capturing the end of another successful run. We check our gear to make sure nothing has washed overboard—hats, glasses, cameras, binoculars. We’ve been told to anchor everything inside our parkas and rain gear. Now it’s time to take off the life jackets and let the sun dry our clothes.

Georgie’s eyes never leave the river. She stays the course, squints into the dark blue water, and relaxes only slightly as we coast into a smooth stretch.

Ron’s video will be sold at boat shows that Georgie attends in the winter to publicize her trips. She calls her company “Georgie’s Royal River Rats” and her brochures include clients’

quotes of praise. In the off-season, she patches and paints her rigs, revises the brochure, and buys supplies for the next season.

“I’m so busy, I never think of me,” she says. “I’m so BUSY.”

Her voice has a tinge of wonder. “I don’t spend time thinking anything about myself. I do what I want, with the good health I have. My sister Marie used to say if I gained a minute’s time, I’d try to put an hour in it.” She laughs a high, tinny cackle.

So you can laugh at yourself? I ask.

“Me? Oh, yeah,” she smiles, showing irregular teeth. “For sure, for sure. That one I can do well.” Her hands are dry and gnarled, her fingernails broken. “I’m all bones now,” she laughs, looking down at her synthetic leopard-skin top and pants. “These were Marie’s idea. I got motor grease on a red shirt once, and Marie got me a whole leopard-skin outfit. ‘Wear these,’ she said.

‘If you get grease on them, it’ll look like another spot.’ So I have!” They’ve become Georgie’s signature. A leopard-skin flag flies at the stern of her G-rig.

Tonight we’re sitting in captain’s chairs at campsite, a sandbar that stretches 100 yards. Tamarisk trees with frond-like branches separate us from the canyon wall 40 feet back. The

crew is preparing dinner and people are unrolling their sleeping bags. The sun sets quickly and soon we are in shadow. Georgie drinks beer from a can.

“I worked all my life. Born on it, raised on it,” she says rapidly. “I’m a workaholic. If I’m not working, I practically feel uneasy. I’m used to doing things a certain way. And I always did manage to work for myself.

“I worked in real estate and at things where I could be my own boss. No matter what, even in the Depression, I was determined to work for myself, come



hell or high water. I raised my own daughter when there ain't nobody around." She smiles and looks pleased.

Growing up poor made her strong. "We ate simple food: celery, beans, cabbage, and prunes. We ate rice, cucumbers, raw potatoes, baked potatoes, and tomatoes. All the things they

say are GOOD for you now. We didn't have pies or cakes or anything sweet, because we couldn't afford it."

After marriage, she graduated from high school, gave birth to a daughter, and headed west to explore deserts, canyons, mountains, and rivers, including the Green, San Juan, and Colorado.

She hiked, climbed, swam, and paddled. She attributes her stamina to good genes.

"You inherit things. I believe you inherit TERRIFIC," she says earnestly. "I don't need glasses and my hearing is good.

I'm always active. I'm Irish and English on my mother's side, French on my father's. My mother used to say, "That's French and alley cat." She laughs delightedly. "Of course, that makes you sturdy, because, anybody knows, animals or otherwise, these are the sturdy ones. Not if you're a thoroughbred, you'd never be sturdy. I like the mutts, I pick up the mutts." She grins.

Georgie always has had pets. Three cats and a dog live in her mobile home in Las Vegas, and she lavishes attention on them.

"I feed 'em and pet 'em and let 'em sit in my lap," she says. "I always turn on the TV for 'em. The cats like to look at TV. Not for me, I don't watch. The first night I'm back from a trip, I stay up to keep 'em company, even though I'd like to go to bed.

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"My sister used to accuse me of liking animals better than people, because I RAVED for them first," she goes on quickly.

"My family's all dead: mother, brother, two sisters, and daughter. My father left us early on. My mother never talked agin' him. He was a Frenchman from France and she said he just

simply should not have been married, that he was a party guy.

So we didn't know anything about dads. When people today yak all this stuff about 'You should have two parents,' I just laugh, because my mother was so terrific."

She doesn't mention two former husbands. I read in her book, Georgie Clark, Thirty Years of River Running, that in high school, she married Harold White, the father of her daughter.

Later they divorced and she married James Whitey. "He eventually went his way and I went mine," she writes. "Although I have been married most of my life, I'm afraid I've always

been quite independent. I have always lived life my own way, no matter what my husband thought. Of course that's not the way to get along with a man, but then that was the way I have always been."

Her animals are her family now. "I like pets really as good as humans. Anyone can benefit from pets," she goes on enthusiastically.

"It's too bad when people don't like animals, because animals, I think, are the BEST thing on earth. When I have a dog, I usually have a yard where he can run free.

"And cats," she exclaims. "I love cats because they will have freedom, even if they starve to death. I always say I'd be like the cats. I'll go sit on a fence and howl, even if I starve to

death!" She laughs hard. "Animals treat you just like you treat them. You've gotta have the interest, put them BEFORE you.

Whatever you get, take care of it." She looks fierce.

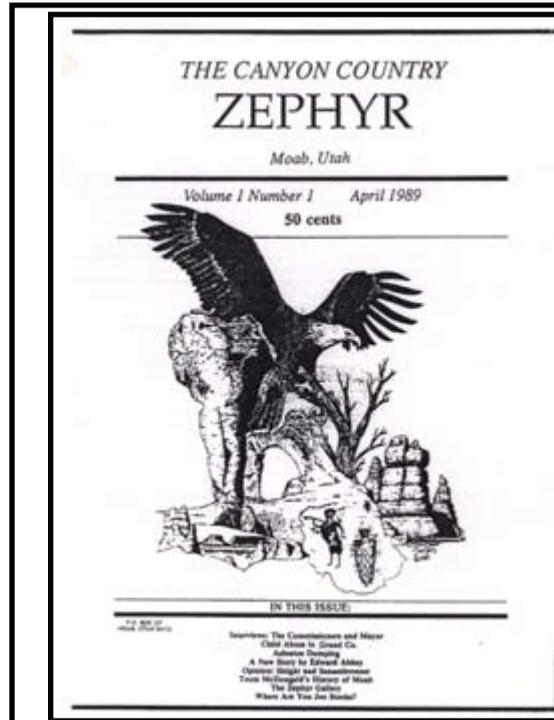
Georgie is a loner. Except for a couple of good friends, including her office manager, she keeps to herself. "I like to live alone," she says. "I don't even let anybody know the address. I don't NEED anyone, so I'm never lonely.

"My mother taught me to be self-sufficient. She always said, 'We're poor, there's no down.' And she never downed me. She told me to go for it! When I was thinking of going down

the Colorado River in a life preserver and people said it couldn't be done, my mother said, 'Go for it! I'm sure you'll make it.'"

The smell of grilled meat floats over to us and Georgie excuses herself to oversee dinner. Hungry boaters have lined up with their cups and plates. Appetites run high on the river.

Later we talk about her daughter Sommona Rose, who was killed at the age of



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