

THE RIO GRANDE TEN



PATRICK G. CAVINESS

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Private digital edition.

A Note from the Author

When I began putting this story together, I imagined producing a small number of hardbound books and sending them as gifts to friends and to the families of the Rio Grande Ten. I liked the idea of a real book—something substantial that could be held, read, and kept.

On further reflection, I decided to distribute The Rio Grande Ten in digital form instead.

The way we read and share stories has changed dramatically. Printed books will always have a special place, but digital publishing has made it possible for a story to travel farther, faster, and more easily than a physical book ever could. A digital copy can be sent across the country or around the world in seconds. It can be passed from one generation to another without anyone having to find another copy or wonder where the original went.

That matters to me because I do not want this book simply to be thumbed through once and then put on a shelf.

I hope you will pass it along.

Send it to a friend who loves adventure. Share it with your children or grandchildren. Send it to someone who knew one of the men in these pages—or to someone who never knew any of us but might recognize something of their own life in the story: friendship, youth, risk, curiosity, or the simple decision to say yes when an adventure invitation came along.

The Rio Grande Ten began as ten men and five canoes on a river in 1973. More than fifty years later, the story belongs not only to those of us who were there, but also to the families and friends who have helped keep its memories alive.

I also intend to create a website where readers can find additional photographs, background material, references, and other pieces of the story that could not reasonably fit into these pages. It will also provide a place for questions, recollections, and maybe stories from others whose own experiences were stirred by ours.

So, consider this copy yours—but not yours alone.

If you enjoy the story, I hope you will send it on. Stories survive because they are remembered. They become something more when they are shared.

Patrick G. Caviness
Koh Samui, Thailand
2026

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Photo. *The Rio Grande Ten before launch. We were fresh, confident, and ready for whatever lay downstream. The cover shows the same ten men at the end of the run—after the crash, the rapids, the injuries, and five days together on the Rio Grande.*

Prologue

We did not set out to become a team.

In October 1973, ten men from different places and backgrounds headed toward one of the Rio Grande's most isolated stretches to spend a week canoeing almost a hundred river miles through canyons, rapids, and wilderness. Some of us had been friends for years. Others barely knew one another. A few were strangers.

We were lawyers, soldiers, athletes, outdoorsmen, public officials, finance professionals, and adventurers. We came from different backgrounds and had different temperaments. About half of us were natives of Arkansas. Several grew up in the Northeast. We included married men and bachelors.

What we had in common was simple. We were curious and willing to go.

It began quietly. With ten paddlers in five canoes, we felt a stir of apprehension as we gathered early on the first morning to choose partners. There was some awkwardness as we paired up and decided who would take the bow and who the stern. Even that first morning, small barriers began to fall. Then the river took over.

Wilderness has a way of stripping away the usual ways men measure each other. Titles do not matter. Neither do occupations, accomplishments, or social standing.

What matters is the man beside you. On a fast river, you find out quickly. The river demands immediate cooperation and is unforgiving. It leaves little room for anyone to act alone.

It takes two men working together to paddle a canoe through a rapid. If the canoe turns sideways in heavy water, both have to react. If a boat has to be lined through dangerous water, everyone has a job.

If a man goes into the water, somebody reaches for him. When the way ahead is uncertain, you figure it out together.

Trust comes that way. You do what needs to be done because someone else is counting on you.

Nobody talked about teamwork or friendship. We were too busy trying to get five aluminum canoes and ten men through a canyon wilderness that offered very little room for error.

But somewhere along the Rio Grande, a bond formed among the ten of us. We came to respect one another. And we came to respect the river that was testing us.

Looking back, I remember the wilderness. The rapids. The immense canyon walls. And I certainly remember the airplane crash that nearly ended the expedition before it even began.

But most of all, I remember what changed.

For a brief time, ten men came together, faced danger together, and became something more than the group that had started down the river. Somewhere along the way, a bond formed among us.

At the time, we simply lived it. Then life moved on. Other places, other people, and other experiences followed. Even vivid memories began to fade.

But this one never disappeared.

For that brief time on the Rio Grande, we were bound together by what we attempted, what we survived, and what we shared. We went to the Rio Grande looking for an adventure. We got one. What we had not expected was how long the experience would stay with us.

That is one reason I wanted to tell this story: not simply to remember what happened, but to return, for a moment, to that time when the ten of us were young, the river was ahead of us, and none of us yet knew what we were about to become.

Chapter 1. The Flight

At midmorning on Wednesday, October 3, 1973, six of us gathered at Central Flying Service in Little Rock, Arkansas. A brand-new Beechcraft Bonanza sat on the tarmac. The sky was clear and bright. It seemed a perfect day to begin an adventure.



Our plan was simple. Six of us would fly to a ranch near Big Bend National Park. Four others were hauling five canoes from Denton, Texas. We would meet that afternoon, unload the gear, set up camp, and prepare supper on the U.S. side of the Rio Grande.

The ranch was named for its owner, A. J. Adams. Jim Guy had a map showing a small private landing strip on the ranch. The map gave us its general location, but not much more. We knew the strip was there. We just had to find it.

Big Bend is near the southernmost point of the Texas-Mexican border. The Rio Grande flows southeast toward that location, then turns northward. Our itinerary had us embarking on the river near there.

The land crew had left Little Rock the day before. We would rendezvous at the ranch and then spend five days and nights on an adventure with uncertain risks. Our first night's destination was Maravillas Creek, about 14 miles downstream.

We knew the route featured wild country. It was also isolated and only briefly described in the material we had seen. This was exactly what we were looking for.

Jim Guy and I had backpacked through Yellowstone earlier that year, so I knew his habits. He prepared carefully. Before anyone boarded, he weighed each of us on a scale and recorded our weights. Then he added the backpacks. Sitting on the wing with his figures, he made sure the Bonanza could carry us.

Photo. *Jim Guy records Bill Mathews's weight beside the Beechcraft Bonanza at Central Flying Service.*



With six of us aboard, every seat was filled, and each of us had a backpack weighing about forty-five pounds. Jim Guy recorded our individual weights, added the packs, and confirmed that we were within the Bonanza's carrying capacity.

Until then, I had thought mostly about the river. Watching Jim Guy make those calculations reminded me that getting there would be part of the adventure, too.

The flight plan called for 2½ hours to reach a private airfield outside Dallas. We would refuel there, then continue south. The Dallas refueling should leave enough fuel for the return flight.

Photo. *Jim Guy, Bill, and Peter study the map at Central Flying Service in Little Rock, planning how to locate the remote A. J. Adams Ranch from the air.*



After the weigh-in, we stowed the packs in the tail compartment and climbed aboard. Jim Guy took the pilot's seat. Peter Richardson, the biggest man in the group at about 225 lbs., sat beside him. He had brought his new Kodak Super 8 movie camera and a packet of fresh cartridges. From the front seat, he would have a fine view. He would take advantage of it.

I sat in the middle row on the right side, beside Bill Mathews, a Little Rock stockbroker. Rixey Moore and Jack Cirie sat in the rear. Both were friends of mine and knew each other. Both were Vietnam combat veterans.

I knew they were men you wanted with you when things got rough.

The flight to Dallas was uneventful. While the plane was being refueled, we went back to the maps. This was long before GPS. There would be no electronic arrow pointing us toward the Adams Ranch. The Rio Grande would be easy enough to find. The ranch was another matter.

Photo. *Peter Richardson and Jack Cirie study the map during our refueling stop outside Dallas, trying to pinpoint the remote A. J. Adams Ranch.*



We flew over the Stillwell Crossing area searching for the landing strip. Below us lay desert, scrub, foothills, and very little else. Then Jim Guy spotted a small ranch house near the Rio Grande. At one end of a dirt clearing hung a limp windsock. Could that be it? He picked up the microphone and tried to make radio contact. No response.

Photo. *Jim Guy studies the map from the cockpit as we search the isolated country near Stillwell Crossing for the A. J. Adams Ranch and its dirt landing strip.*



We circled again. This had to be the Adams Ranch. Jim Guy decided to approach from the south, cross the river, and land on the strip. He pointed out large power lines running parallel to the Rio Grande.

“Move the backpacks up from the back and put them on your laps,” he yelled. “I don’t want the tail to drag when we land.” Rixey and Jack reached behind them and began passing the packs forward. Everyone but Jim Guy put one on his lap.

Jim Guy lined up the Bonanza for the final approach. That’s when he said, “I’m coming in hot. I don’t want to hit those power lines.”

We all heard him.

Chapter 2. The Crash

The plane hit hard. For several seconds, we were airborne again before slamming down a second time. Dust exploded around us. The windshield disappeared into a brown cloud. Jim Guy stood on the brakes, but the plane kept charging ahead.

We could hear rocks and scrub brush hammering the underside. Then the plane lurched violently to one side. One of the landing gears had broken off.

We crashed and banged across the ground. Everyone was being thrown around inside the cabin.

My first thought was oddly optimistic. We would keep rolling on out into the desert until we stopped. The plane would be damaged. We would crawl out and figure out what to do next.

That's when the banging stopped. Silence. We were airborne again.

For an instant, we were suspended in space. Where the hell were we? Had we gone over the edge of a canyon?

Then the nose dropped, and the plane went almost vertical. We began to pick up speed again. We were plunging into a ravine.

It was like a Road Runner cartoon—the coyote hanging in midair for one impossible second before dropping straight down.

The plane careened down the steep wall of the ravine. The slope caught us and deflected the craft downward. We plunged deeper into the ravine. Rock. Boulder. Brush. Another rock. Then it stopped.

Each impact had torn away at speed. Inside the cabin, we were violently thrown from side to side before one final crash.

The plane buried itself in thick brush and boulders and stopped, wedged against the side of the ravine. It came to rest at roughly a forty-five-degree angle. Dust filled the cabin. For a moment, nobody moved.

Photo. *The Beechcraft Bonanza rests in the brush following the crash at the A. J. Adams Ranch.*



My head had slammed into the backpack on my lap. The packs Jim Guy had ordered us to bring forward had become airbags. Almost everyone's head slammed into a pack.

Jim Guy's did not. His head slammed directly into the windshield. He turned toward us and shouted. "Power's off! Get the hell out!"

Blood was pouring from a deep gash in his forehead.

My first fear was a fire. We had nearly full fuel tanks.

Jim Guy and Peter forced their cockpit doors open and scrambled out. I looked at Bill. He sat beside me, staring straight ahead, dazed. "Open the emergency window!" I shouted. "Pull the lever!" Bill yanked the handle. Nothing. Again. Still nothing.

No time. I twisted around, braced myself against Bill, and started kicking the window on my side. It was not an emergency exit. After several hard kicks, it popped open.

Then Jack's military training took over. Saying nothing, he came over the back of my seat headfirst and dove through the opening. I could not believe a man his size could fit

through it. Rixey went out right behind him. I followed. Then I looked back at Bill. "It's still stuck," he said.

I reached inside, grabbed him by his jacket collar, pulled him over to the opening, and hauled him through.

Everyone was out. Only then did I fully appreciate what Jim Guy had done. Before shouting for us to get out, he had hit the kill switch and shut everything down.

Fuel fumes hung around the wreck. One spark might have turned the ravine into an inferno. "Get back!" Jim Guy shouted. "It could blow!"

Jack and Rixey ignored him and ran back to the plane. One by one they pulled the backpacks out and threw them clear. The rest of us grabbed the gear and dragged them farther away. We kept expecting the plane to explode. It never did.

Once everything was out and the wreck showed no sign of catching fire, I scrambled up the ravine to find out where we were.

Photo. *The wrecked Beechcraft Bonanza lodged against the side of the ravine.*



I climbed over rocks and pushed through the brush. As I reached the crest, I saw a cloud of dust racing across the field. A pickup truck was heading toward me. Two men were in the cab. Two more rode in the back.

Everyone stared. The bearded driver leaned out the window. I walked over. "Are you A. J. Adams?" He looked stunned. "Yes," he said. "I'm A. J. Adams."

"Well," I said, "we've crashed in the right place."

What Happened

Only later did we understand what had happened. The landing strip shown on our map was there, and we had found it. But A. J. Adams told us that the ground beyond the strip had recently been root-plowed. A crawler tractor had dragged a massive steel blade under the surface to tear out mesquite and brush by the roots. From the air, the cleared ground looked like a continuation of the dirt runway.

We touched down on the actual dirt strip. Still moving fast, the Bonanza rolled beyond it onto rough ground, deeply ripped and furrowed by the root plow.

Ahead, the flat land dropped off sharply into a deep ravine—a cut in the canyon itself.

Three months later, the Arkansas Gazette reported that the insurer had declared the nearly new Beechcraft Bonanza a total loss. The article said the airplane had struck an unmarked ditch at the Adams Ranch and described Jim Guy as embarrassed by the accident. Embarrassed hardly captured it. The airplane was destroyed. All six of us walked away. And the expedition had nearly ended before it began.

Photo. *The Arkansas Gazette, January 5, 1974.*

8A • ARKANSAS GAZETTE, Sat., Jan. 5, 1974.

Plane Wrecked by Attorney General Written Off as 'Totaled' by Insuror

By the Associated Press

A \$45,000 airplane piloted by Attorney General Jim Guy Tucker ran into a gully while landing at a Texas ranch in October and has been written off by insurers as a total loss.

It had been reported earlier that Tucker had suffered a slight mishap in landing the aircraft, and damage to the plane had been indicated as minor.

Tucker said Friday he was surprised to learn that, in the view of the insurance company, the plane was "totaled."

Asked why he had not had more to say about the crash, Tucker said, "Nobody asked me. And, quite frankly, it's a pretty embarrassing thing to talk about."

The plane was rented from Central Flying Service at Little Rock — October 4, 1973, and was flown by Tucker to the ranch of U. J. Adams near the Rio Grande River in the southwestern tip of Texas. Tucker said he flew to Texas for a river canoe trip.

Dick Holbert, a CFS vice president, said the insurance company had paid the firm for the plane, less the deductible pro-

the plane was insured for \$45,000.

The aircraft was a Beechcraft Bonanza A-36 with 285-horsepower in its single engine.

With Tucker were Bill Matthews of Little Rock, a bond broker; John Moore of New Haven, Ct., who operates a computer company; Pete Richardson of Boston, an assistant to Boston's mayor; Pat Caviness of Little Rock, chairman of the Arkansas River Development Corporation, and Jack Cirre of Philadelphia, a Marine Corps captain.

They planned to meet four others for the float trip.

The plane was down on "a sod landing strip at the Adams ranch and was rolling at about five to 15 miles-an-hour when it struck an unmarked ditch across the runway, Tucker said. He said the ditch was about 1½ feet deep and two feet wide.

When the plane struck the ditch, it bounced into the air, rendering the brakes useless — "I was standing on them, but it didn't do any good," Tucker said — and then the plane settled back to earth, rolled into a slope bank gully and tilted onto its nose.

Holbert said the accident damaged the plane's wings, bent the propeller, bent the engine mounts, damaged the engine, and tore off the landing gear.

brakes and it skidded. The company just decided to write the whole thing off instead of trying to repair the plane. But it wasn't really a pile of junk, like it sounds if you say it was demolished."

Holbert said that Tucker told him that "if anybody mentioned it he would be glad to tell them about it."

Tucker said that after the accident, the six men loaded their gear into a truck, drove back to the Adams house, bandaged his cut, and telephoned relatives and the Federal Aviation Administration.

"The FAA requires two notices to be given. The first verbally must be made as soon as possible. The second, in writing, follows certain forms.

Tucker said that getting the men and gear back to the Adams house and covering his cut took perhaps 1½ hours. Then they telephoned the FAA at San Angelo, Tex., and were told to call the FAA at San Antonio, Tex., he said.

Later, Tucker acquired the forms for reporting the accident to the FAA in writing. He said he did not meet the normal deadline for the written report because he had to return to Little Rock, obtain forms from CFS and then process and send them in.

Chapter 3. The Call

By the time I reached the top of the ravine, the others had formed a bucket brigade and were passing the backpacks up the steep slope.

I shouted down that A. J. Adams was waiting with a pickup truck to take us and our gear back to the ranch.

We later learned that Adams was still not entirely sure who we were. Some of his workers thought we might be running drugs out of Mexico.

We all piled into the pickup and headed for the ranch.

Someone had wrapped tape around Jim Guy's head to stop the bleeding. I found out that Jack had done it.

On the way to Adams' ranch, Jim Guy told me he wanted to call Dickey Holbert, the plane's owner, as soon as possible. When we arrived, I asked Adams if we could use his phone.

He hesitated. Apparently, the drug-runner theory had not entirely disappeared. Finally, he agreed. Jim Guy turned to me. "You know Dickey better than I do. Why don't you come with me while I make the call?"

He was right. Dickey's family had lived just down the street. I had grown up with him and his brother, Donnie. We walked into a small living room and Jim Guy made the call.

To my surprise, Dickey answered. What followed was classic Jim Guy. I'm glad I was there to hear it.

"Dickey? Yeah, this is Jim Guy. How are you doing?"

Pause.

"Oh, fine. We're all fine. We've landed at the Adams Ranch."

Pause.

"Listen, Dickey, banged up the plane a little coming in."

Pause.

"No, we lost the landing gear on impact."

Pause.

"No, the right wing's pretty much separated from the fuselage."

Pause.

"The tail section's partly broken off, too."

Another pause.

“No, the engine’s separated from the fuselage, too.”

A very long pause.

“You know, Dickey, I don’t think you need to come all the way down here just to get the radio.”

Chapter 4. The Rio Grande Ten Takes Shape

I was not part of the initial efforts to organize the expedition. Fortunately, Dent Gitchel was—and he kept detailed notes. The notes captured not only where everyone went but also what they saw, said, drank, worried about, and laughed at along the way.

The idea had begun nearly a year earlier in Denton, Texas. That was when Bob Diffie and two friends took a one-day canoe trip through Boquillas Canyon in Big Bend National Park. The country was beautiful, but the river gave them little trouble.

By the end of the trip, they were already talking about something more challenging: the Lower Canyons of the Rio Grande.

The Lower Canyons were different. They were far more remote and considerably more dangerous. Once committed, a river runner could not simply pull out at the next road or campground. There were no exits. The river was the only route in—and the only route out.

That was part of the appeal. On paper, it sounded like adventure. Only after the canyon walls closed around us did we understand what being committed to the river really meant.

Dent and Bob Diffie were longtime friends. In January 1973, Dent visited Bob at his home near Denton and met his friends and fellow canoeists. They talked about a more demanding expedition that fall and invited Dent to join them. He accepted.

For several months, however, Dent heard nothing. Then, in July, a package arrived from Diffie containing maps, schedules, equipment lists, and information about the Lower Canyons. A sizable group from Denton was expected to make the trip. Bob asked Dent whether he would like to recruit two or three more men from Little Rock to join them.

Dent began looking.

A night or two later, at a small Bar Association cocktail party, he ran into Jim Guy Tucker. Dent casually mentioned that a group planned to run the Lower Canyons of the Rio Grande that fall.

Jim Guy did not ask for time to think about it. “Yes,” he said. “I’ll go.” That was Jim Guy. He could make a major decision sound like accepting an invitation to lunch. Dent sent him the information the next day. Jim Guy studied it and called back. “Let’s go.”

Dent next contacted Charlie “Beaver” Jacob. The two had canoed together before. Dent asked Charlie to stop by his house because he had something to show him.

Charlie didn’t actually arrive with the nickname “Beaver.” He acquired it the first evening we camped together. He went off to collect firewood and returned almost

immediately with an armful. "Damn, man," someone said. "Are you some sort of beaver?" The name stuck.

When Charlie arrived at Dent's house, he looked through the material for about five minutes and announced, "I'm signed on."

For men with that instinct, the decision seemed to have been made before Dent finished describing the trip.

A few days later, Dent was having lunch with Bill Mathews. Bill had been a Boy Scout canoeist and remained an experienced outdoorsman, so Dent brought up the expedition. Bill listened. "You need to know definitively pretty quickly, don't you?"

"Well," Dent said, "I'd like to."

"I'll talk to Nancy tonight. Unless I call to tell you otherwise tomorrow, I'm going." Bill didn't call.

Dent now had three Little Rock companions: Jim Guy, Charlie, and Bill. The expedition seemed to be coming together smoothly.

Then the whole thing nearly collapsed.

A few days later, Dent called Diffie to report his recruiting success. Before he could say anything, Diffie interrupted him.

"I've been dreading calling you," Diffie said. "Everybody from here in Denton has canceled out. I guess the trip is off."

Dent had spent months thinking about the Rio Grande. More importantly, he had already recruited three friends who believed they were going. He was not about to tell them the expedition had been called off.

"Diffie," he said, "I don't know about you, but I've got three other fellows here in Little Rock who want to go. We're making our plans. We're going to float that river. I hope you'll make it."

That changed everything. Until then, the trip had largely belonged to the Denton group. Now the original organizers had dropped out. Dent refused to let their idea die. No longer a tag-along, he became the one making sure it would happen. Diffie elected to stay in, too.

A short time later, Jim Guy called Dent and told him he had invited me. He and I had been on a backpacking trip through Yellowstone in August. During that trip, we had crossed the swollen Yellowstone River on a raft we built from driftwood and parachute cord. Maybe after surviving that together, the Lower Canyons seemed like the natural next challenge.

That brought the number to six—the minimum that Dent thought we needed to make the expedition practical.

Dent asked whether I knew anyone else who could handle himself in remote country. I told him I might.

It was not an invitation to be taken lightly. We would be traveling through isolated areas with little reliable information about conditions. We would need to carry all our food, medical supplies, and other equipment in aluminum canoes. There would be rapids, canyon walls, and primitive campsites, with little chance of outside help. And for everyone who came, it would be a long way to get to the river at the Mexican border.

Despite all that, I found three men willing to go.

The first was Peter Richardson.

Peter and I met while serving as assistant football coaches during our master's programs at the University of Pennsylvania. Peter was a large, powerful man who had played football at Williams College and was also an All-American lacrosse player. The Denver Broncos had signed him, and he reported to preseason camp in 1966. But a previous knee injury recurred there, sidelining him and jeopardizing his chances of making the roster. We developed a strong friendship and had maintained it.

Peter was steady and not easily intimidated. He was exactly the kind of man you wanted beside you when things got tough.

Next came Rixey Moore, a friend I had met in graduate school. He had served with Army Special Forces in Vietnam, including reconnaissance missions in enemy-controlled territory. He was physically tough, self-reliant, and accustomed to operating far from help. He was another man unlikely to be intimidated by a wilderness river.

The third was Jack Cirie. Jack and I became friends and teammates as undergraduates at Yale. Jack had enlisted in the Marine Corps and served two tours in Vietnam. He had the confidence and practical competence of someone who had already faced situations far more serious than anything we expected on the river.

Peter, Rixey, and Jack agreed to travel across the country from the East Coast to join up. Now we were nine and needed one more man to put two in each of five canoes. The last man signed on almost by accident.

Dent was attending a fall Bar Association convention when he found himself drinking with Randy Ishmael, a lawyer from Jonesboro, Arkansas. Months earlier, Dent had mentioned that he was considering a Rio Grande expedition. Randy asked, "Whatever happened to your big Rio Grande float trip?"

“Well, we’re leaving the week after next,” Dent said. “You want to go?”

“Damn right!” And with that, we had our tenth man.

Looking back, there had been no selection committee, no interviews, and little time for careful consideration. One man invited another, who called a friend, who brought someone else along. A few studied the plans before agreeing. Others said yes almost before the invitation was finished.

Now it was time to focus on itineraries, supplies, and equipment. That would prove considerably more difficult than finding participants.

Chapter 5. The Rendezvous

Meanwhile, the land crew was having its share of issues as they drove toward the final rendezvous on the Rio Grande.

Dent Gitchel and Beaver had left Little Rock for Bob Diffie's home near Denton, Texas. From there, the three would head south, hauling five aluminum canoes and most of our equipment. Randy Ishmael, for reasons now lost to history, drove separately to Brownwood and waited for them there.

At the time, Bob was a Braniff Airlines pilot. He lived in Shady Shores, near Denton, with his wife and two children.

The first challenge was simply getting Dent and Beaver to Bob's house. On October 2, the day before the scheduled assembly on the banks of the Rio Grande, Dent packed his gear into his Volkswagen bus. He picked up Beaver at 1:00, and by 1:30 they were headed to Texas.

They did not get far. Near Arkadelphia, the Volkswagen's left-front wheel bearing went "ka-plunk." The two of them started walking over the next hill in search of help. Dent was carrying a Busch Bavarian beer.

A passing motorist stopped. He turned out to be an Arkadelphia police officer.

Dent's Southern charm must have kicked in. He drove them to a garage and helped arrange for the Volkswagen to be towed in. The garage belonged to Rusty Kisling, who replaced the bearing, added plenty of grease, and had them back on the road shortly after six.

Behind schedule, but, in Dent's word, "undaunted," they reached Denton late that night. Diffie gave them a hearty welcome.

At 5:20 the next morning—October 3—the three men pulled away. The Volkswagen had made its contribution and was left in Diffie's driveway.

From then on, they traveled in Diffie's enormous GMC pickup. Behind them stretched a trailer carrying five aluminum canoes. Three were stacked on one side, two on the other.

Dent figured the entire rig was almost forty feet long.

On the freeway it behaved well enough. On smaller roads, every turn was an event. West of Fort Worth, the landscape began to open up. The large trees and green countryside disappeared, replaced by mesquite, dry grass, scrub, and isolated buttes. With every mile west, the land grew harsher and less familiar.

Then the trailer hitch started working loose.

They stopped in the tiny town of May, Texas. The canoe train came to rest in front of Etta Brewer's Gulf Station, a little white building with two old-fashioned gas pumps and a creaking windmill. Dent thought it looked as if it had been there for a thousand years.

Diffie asked Etta if she had a wrench. She did.

Dent later described it as the biggest wrench known to mankind—large enough to tighten a telephone pole. They secured the hitch and continued to Brownwood.

Randy Ishmael was waiting at the Four Winds Motel. He joined the expedition in his station wagon. Dent moved over to Randy's car to keep him company. Diffie and Beaver stayed in the pickup, trailing the five canoes.

The convoy was complete.

By early afternoon, they reached San Angelo, which Dent declared the only beautiful town he had ever seen in Texas. They ate lunch at Denny's, served by a waitress named Zelda.

They stocked up on beer, then turned their attention to another expedition necessity: liquor.

To their relief, San Angelo was only partially dry. To be safe, Dent and Randy drove well outside town to a wet precinct, bought what they believed they needed for the expedition, and rejoined the others. They headed south again.

Beyond Sheffield, the country changed dramatically. The road descended from the high, flat land into a broad canyon. Buttes and mesas rose in every direction. Scrub grass, sagebrush, mesquite, and cactus covered the ground. Prickly pear was everywhere.

What Dent first mistook for palm trees turned out to be another kind of cactus. The settlements grew smaller. Old service stations and weathered mercantile buildings sat beside nearly empty roads. Sometimes a flag out front was the only clue that the store also served as the local post office. The farther south they traveled, the more the country looked like an old western.

They were nearing their goal. The familiar world was behind them. Ahead lay the dry, broken country of the Rio Grande.

Meanwhile, the six of us were approaching the Adams Ranch by air, unaware that the driving crew expected to meet us first at the small airport in Dryden before continuing to the ranch.

Dent's notes say the road crew expected Jim Guy to meet them at the little airport in Dryden before everyone continued to the Adams Ranch. Exactly how that rendezvous

was supposed to work is no longer clear to me. What is clear is that they expected to see our airplane there.

At 6:10 that evening, the pickup and Randy's station wagon reached the Dryden airport almost exactly on schedule. Our plane was nowhere in sight. The Adams Ranch lay roughly eighty miles farther into the remote border country.

As the road crew neared the rendezvous, they noticed the pickup's right-rear tire was low. The mountain of supplies, equipment, and personal gear also needed rearranging. While that was being handled, they treated themselves to a meal at what Dent called the "white" restaurant, rather than the "Mexican" restaurant across town.

Then they began the final leg to the ranch. Randy left his station wagon in Dryden, and he and Dent rode in the pickup's open bed, perched atop the equipment.

Once they left the towns, almost all artificial light disappeared. The sky filled with so many stars that Dent and Randy had trouble finding the Big Dipper. The Milky Way stretched overhead. Stars shone white, yellow, blue, and orange.

The desert air moved across the truck in strange currents. One moment it was warm. The next, cold. Dent thought it felt as though they were passing through invisible streams in a river. They drove deeper into the open range.

Around midnight, the convoy finally reached Adams Ranch and our campsite by the river. For the first time, all ten of us were together. Only then did the land crew learn what had happened to our airplane: the Bonanza was in a ravine, Jim Guy was hurt, but all six of us had survived.

For most of that day, Dent and the others had worried about wheel bearings, trailer hitches, low tires, schedules, and missed connections.

But there we all were. Six from the air. Four from the road. Five canoes. Food, packs, camping gear, and supplies. After most of the others had turned in, Jack and I stayed by the fire and sang Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door." We sang it with a serious sense of conviction.

Behind us lay a wrecked airplane. Ahead lay the Rio Grande.

Chapter 6. The First Day: Stillwell Crossing to Maravillas Creek

The sun was coming up over the mountains of Mexico when our camp at Adams Ranch began to stir. It was Thursday, October 4.

The day before had been about the airplane crash. Now, finally, we were going to do what we had come to Texas to do. Run the Rio Grande.

Across the river, a small cabin stood on a low bluff in Mexico. As we carried our supplies to the water, a man and his two young children came down the hill and sat watching us. A burro poked its head out from behind a mesquite tree. We waved. They waved back.

The river between us was only thirty or forty feet wide. It was shallow enough in places to walk across, but it was also the international border.

We had five aluminum Grumman canoes.

Bob Diffie and Peter Richardson were together. Dent Gitchel and Jim Guy Tucker paired up. Jack Cirie and I were together, Randy Ishmael with Beaver, and Bill Mathews with Rixey Moore.

We carried everything down to the river—tents, sleeping bags, food, coolers, clothes, beer, and the rest of the supplies we would need for the next several days. Then we began fitting it all into the canoes. Jim Guy was there with his head freshly bandaged from the crash, helping with the loading. Peter came down carrying a case of Coors and a large gear bag. One by one, the five canoes settled lower in the water under the weight. After the events of the previous afternoon, simply getting ten men, five canoes, and all our gear onto the river felt like a major accomplishment.

We were not exactly traveling light. For an expedition into some of the roughest and most isolated country on the Rio Grande, we had packed with a surprising concern for creature comforts. The ice chests held beer packed in ice, fresh apples and oranges, wine, and even champagne. The bottles were wedged tightly into the chests so they would not bang against one another as the canoes bounced through the rapids.

Looking back, there was probably some naivete in all of this. We knew the river could be difficult, but we did not yet fully understand what it could do to us or our equipment. At the same time, we had always taken a certain pleasure in living well, even under difficult circumstances. If we were going into the wilderness, there seemed no reason not to take a decent bottle or two of wine with us.

A few things required more serious protection. The guitar traveled in its hard case inside a waterproof carrying bag. All of us were careful with it. Somehow, after five days of rapids, rocks, overturned canoes, and wet camps, it came through without even a broken string.

My camera was stashed in an old military ammunition can—metal, waterproof, and nearly indestructible. I kept it under my seat where it was protected but always within reach. That arrangement worked remarkably well, at least until the river found another way to get at it.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when we packed the last canoe and pushed away from the bank. We were finally on the Rio Grande.

Photo. *Rixey and Bill prepare for the first-day launch, packing one of the coolers into their canoe.*



Photo. *Peter Richardson carries a case of Coors and a large gear bag down to the canoes. His smile captures the relief and good spirits of finally getting the expedition underway.*



Photo. *Jim Guy, his head freshly bandaged after the crash, helps load the canoes and looks more than ready to hit the river.*



The locals called it the “Rye-oh Grand.”

Almost immediately, the country began to open around us. We passed a small farm on the Mexican side. Laundry was spread over rocks by the river to dry in the sun. We paddled past slowly, catching another glimpse of ordinary life along this unusual border.

Within an hour, we reached La Linda, where Dow Chemical operated a fluorite plant. The river swung sharply left beneath the bridge. Nearby, the remains of an old rope-and-plank suspension bridge sagged across the river, its broken span slowly sinking into the water.

Beyond La Linda, we entered Horse Canyon—Heath Canyon on some maps. Whatever it was called, this was our first real look at the canyon country.

Cliffs rose four or five hundred feet above us. Sheer walls, towers, spires, and chimneys shifted as we passed beneath them. Faces appeared in the rock. So did animals and strange figures. The river was beginning to stir our imaginations.

At one stop, we stepped out into waist-deep water. I pulled out a bottle of Gallo Hearty Burgundy. We formed a circle and passed it around. That may have been the first real celebration of the Rio Grande Ten.

Photo. Me enjoying my sip of wine.



Then came the wind. It blew straight upstream. The water was already low enough that we sometimes had to climb out and drag the canoes through the shallows. That was irritating, but what followed was even worse.

Jim Guy guessed twenty or thirty knots. We dug in with our paddles. The canoes moved forward, but the wind pushed them back. Hour after hour, the canyon walls funneled the wind straight at us.

Dent would later write that it felt as though the old ogre waiting downstream was trying to blow us off his river. Jack had already begun calling the Rio Grande the “ole’ ogre”—his name for the threatening presence that seemed to wait for us downstream. The name was starting to fit.

By late afternoon, we were exhausted. At one point, several of us climbed out of the canoes into shallow, fast-moving water to take a leak.

Jim Guy considered our predicament. “This river presents a man with a problem,” he said. “He’s either pissing upstream or pissing into the wind.” There was no third option.

About five o’clock, we reached Maravillas Creek. A broad gravel bar lay where the creek entered the Rio Grande from the Texas side. A small white cabin stood nearby. Above it, the remains of another cabin appeared to have burned down.

Across the river, the land rose sharply into barren cliffs and buttes. The late sun turned some of them orange and pink, while others were gray, green, or nearly white.

Unfortunately, there was a rapid between us and camp. It was the first rapid we had seen that deserved the label “hairy.” The river narrowed at the entrance and picked up speed, funneling us toward the broken water below.

Three of the five canoes swamped. Dent and Jim Guy hit a rock and finally got through by climbing out and dragging their canoe.

Jack and I came last. We stopped above the rapid to study it before going through. We picked our line and made it through without swamping. A small victory. After fighting the wind all afternoon, it felt even more satisfying. Soon we were back on quiet water.

Maravillas Creek had been our planned destination for the night. Despite the crash, our late start, the shallow water, the wind, and three swamped canoes, we remained on schedule.

We hauled the canoes onto the gravel bar. Wet clothes and gear were spread out. Tents went up. Sleeping bags came out. Food boxes and cooking gear appeared. Around us, the canyon walls rose high above the little camp. Everything we had brought with us suddenly seemed very small.

Photo. *First Camp beneath the Canyon Walls. Our first campsite sat on a broad, brush-covered bench beside the river. The red tent looked tiny beneath the massive, flat-topped canyon walls that rose beyond it—a first indication of the scale of the country we had entered.*



Photo. *The Canyon Closes In. From camp, sheer limestone cliffs dominated the view. Layer on layer of rock rose above the river corridor, their vertical faces catching the pale afternoon light. The canyon was beautiful. And its steep walls made it clear how isolated we were.*



Photo. *Making Camp. The group settles into routines that will become familiar over the coming days: pitching tents, unpacking supplies, and preparing a meal. Cooking gear, food boxes, packs, and loose equipment are spread across the ground as the canyon rises behind us—small islands of domestic order surrounded by immense wilderness.*



The roads and ranches were behind us now. From here on, the river would decide where we went.

That evening, we gathered around the campfire. Bob Diffie had been a bit quiet on the first day. But whatever restraint he had brought to the Rio Grande disappeared. He began to dance. Dent later described it as “wild, delirious, and exuberant.” None of us had seen anything quite like it, and none of us was likely to see it again.

Rain came during the night.

Diffie slept through the night on his back, mouth open, face up toward the sky. The next morning, he was in no shape for breakfast. He managed only one thing: a tall glass of aspirin. Our opening day on the Rio Grande had come to an end.

Chapter 7. Hear the Roar

Friday, October 5, was our second day on the river.

Diffie was still paying for his dance around the fire the night before, but we broke camp at Maravillas Creek and prepared to head downstream. Before leaving, we gathered for a group photograph.

We looked remarkably bland and serious. Dent said we should strike a mean pose or no one would believe the stories we were already collecting. The truth was, we were feeling pretty good about ourselves. The airplane crash was behind us. We had survived our first day on the river. We had fought the wind, run a few rapids, swamped a few canoes, and reached the place where we intended to camp. We were getting a little cocky.

The river moved faster that morning as we passed through the Vegas de Los Ladrones —the Outlaw Flats. Flat-topped buttes rose above the river, and thick stands of cane crowded the banks. The sky stayed dark and overcast. Now the north wind was behind us...a considerable improvement over the previous day.

About one o'clock, we stopped on a gravel bar. We had come prepared for the hardships of the river, but that did not mean we intended to surrender every small elegance along the way. Jim Guy and I decided the occasion called for more than just water and sandwiches. Out came three magnums of champagne, followed by tins of smoked oysters and oranges.

Corks flew. Pictures were taken. The afternoon improved immediately.

Later, near two old fish houses, Dent stepped from the bow of his canoe onto what looked like shallow water.

It wasn't.

He completely disappeared.

For a moment, all Jim Guy could see was Dent's startled face, one ankle hooked over the side of the canoe, and his World War I-style campaign hat floating on the surface above him.

Around another bend, the men in the lead canoe heard strange sounds ahead. Almost human. Then we saw the source. Wild horses. The herd moved away through the cane, but a white stallion stood his ground, watching us.

For a few moments, neither side moved. Then the stallion turned, picked his way through the brush, and followed his herd.

By evening, we reached Reagan Canyon and made camp. After dinner, cigars appeared. Jack reached for his harmonica. Peter moved among us with a half-gallon of Jim Beam, pouring a full splash into each cup. We sang, laughed, and let the day unwind around us.

Only a few days earlier, some of these men had barely known one another. Now, trust and familiarity were taking hold.

Saturday morning began quietly. By six, the camp was stirring. Randy, Jim Guy, and Bill were fixing breakfast. Peter drank coffee and smoked a cigarette. Beaver fiddled with his equipment. Diffie remained stretched out on his shelter half. Dent was already awake and taking note of everything. Then he saw me. "Brother Caviness just arose."

The sky remained overcast, though patches of blue were beginning to break through. Around us, Reagan Canyon rose in every direction. The Rio Grande swept past our camp, bent briefly to the northeast, then swung east again.

On the Texas side, a massive wall of rock climbed several hundred feet nearly straight up before giving way to a band of vegetation and another rise toward the ridge. Across the river, broken rock lay beneath red sandstone cliffs. Narrow spires rose above the cliffs, and one looked like a great stone chimney.

The walls changed with the light. Dark walls turned red or gold. Shadows shifted. Hills seemed to shift shape as we passed them.

Downstream, an old stone cabin stood weather-beaten and solitary on the hillside. Every now and then, we saw more evidence that someone had once tried to live in this country. The traces seemed temporary and futile. The canyon did not.

That morning, we moved deeper into Reagan Canyon. For roughly the next forty miles, it would define our world.

The river made a long sweep to the left and seemed to disappear into a wall of rock. As we drew closer, an opening came into view. Two immense walls parted, and the Rio Grande slipped between them. We followed, leaving the open country behind us.

Beyond the opening lay a stone corridor. Sheer rock rose almost vertically from the river. Shelves, cracks, ledges, towers, and huge weathered blocks climbed above us.

From the canoes, we had to tilt our heads back to see the tops. The river revealed itself one bend at a time. Each turn carried us around another wall, while the canyon hid whatever waited beyond the next.

With each bend, the outside world seemed a little farther away. The river was carrying us deeper into the canyon. At times, we paddled in sunlight. Then a bend carried us into deep shadows beneath cliffs hundreds of feet above us.

High above us, buzzards were no more than black dots against the sky. Riding the warm currents on their massive wings, they circled slowly before settling along the canyon rim to continue their watch. We joked that they were scouting ahead, waiting for disaster—and future meals.

Dent had one word for the country around us. “Awesome.”

Along the Texas bank, we passed the abandoned Asa Jones pump house, perched high on a bluff, with a pipe descending toward the river. Not far beyond, we heard water trickling down the cliff.

A spring bubbled directly out of the rock. Dent and Jim Guy pulled their canoe up against the bluff, cupped their hands, and drank. Dent remembered the water as slightly warm, fresh, and delicious.

By then, we had run several rapids. We were learning to read the river—to see where the current accelerated, where it curled behind rocks, and where smooth water might conceal trouble under the surface. We were learning to angle the canoes through curling waves and towering haystacks and pick our way around exposed rocks.

We were becoming better canoeists. We were also learning how deceptive it could be. Smooth water did not always mean easy water. There had been bumps and collisions, but no serious damage. Up to this point, nothing had stopped or rattled us.

Then the river grew strangely calm. The surface broadened and smoothed beneath the canyon walls. We paddled in silence. No sign of trouble appeared ahead as the current carried us deeper between the cliffs toward another bend.

For a few minutes, the Rio Grande seemed almost peaceful. Then the sound changed. Before we saw the rapid, we heard it.

Chapter 8. Running Hot Springs Rapids

The roar came from beyond the bend. It grew louder and deeper as we neared the turn. This was not another stretch of broken water.

We pulled the canoes ashore on the Mexican side and climbed onto the rocks to scout Hot Springs Rapids.

Photo. *Scouting the Line. From the boulders above the rapids, we studied the channel through the rocks.*



Large boulders had washed out of San Rocendo Canyon* and become lodged across the river, creating a natural barrier.

The current tore through the narrow gaps between them. There seemed to be only one practical line for a canoe, and even that was hard to follow. Dent estimated the river dropped eight or ten feet from top to bottom. It looked more like a wild mountain stream plunging downhill than the Rio Grande.

At the bottom stood a massive, nearly square boulder. It was maybe ten feet above the water and nearly as wide. The river slammed into it head-on, plunged downward, and curled back beneath the surface. We called the hydraulic a suck-hole. It could drag a man under and hold him there long enough to kill him.

We stood on the rocks, studying the currents roaring through the boulders. It was dangerous. Some of us were going to run it anyway. Scouting had shown us the route. It had also shown us exactly what could go wrong.

Dent and Jim Guy had already decided. They would go first. Jim Guy took the stern, and Dent sat in the bow. Dent tucked his campaign hat under the seat, and they backed away from shore.

Going first carried its own danger. No canoe had shown us the line. From shore, we could see where the river dropped away. But from water level there would come a point where the surface simply disappeared ahead of them—the horizon line. Once they crossed it, scouting was over. For a few seconds, they would be blind to what lay below and helpless to know which way to go next.

The current gathered speed as they approached the drop. The canoe moved toward the horizon line, then slipped over it and out of our sight. From then on, every choice had to be made in motion.

Dent later described the moment: “At the very top of this precipitous drop, there was a white haystack of water. We didn’t know whether to go left or right around it, and we decided to try the left, which was our fatal mistake.”

Photo. *The Mistake. Dent and Jim Guy chose the left side of the white water.*



The canoe struck a rock just below the surface and stopped dead. The current pressed against it. The canoe stayed pinned. They were trapped at the lip of the rapids, the river rushing past them.

Dent climbed out, hoping that without his weight in the bow, the canoe would slide free. If it did, he planned to jump back aboard. The moment he entered the water, he felt the current's force. He caught the bow and fought the current. Dent recalled, "The water's current left me powerless. I grabbed the canoe's bow and held on with all my might, but I couldn't hold on." Just before Dent lost his grip, Jim Guy jumped from the stern to free the canoe. That's when everything fell apart. The canoe broke loose. Dent was swept downstream. Jim Guy disappeared into the rapids behind him. The canoe followed, only a few feet from their bobbing heads.

Dent was being swept straight toward the huge boulder at the bottom. He feared the canoe would crush him against it. Then the undertow dragged him out of sight. Dent remembered it this way: "Suddenly, the great ogre of the Hot Spring Suck-hole reached up, grabbed me by the shirttail, and pulled me deep underwater."

He felt no impact. The river sucked him under, flipping his body over as it hurled him toward the massive boulder. Then the current suddenly shot him back toward the surface. When he came up, the canoe was several yards away

His campaign hat, our first-aid kit, and Jim Guy's air mattress floated in the current.

Jim Guy surfaced and grabbed the canoe. Dent caught the first-aid kit in one hand and his hat in the other, then swam toward shore. Jack Cirie moved downstream along the bank to help recover the men and their gear.

Dent noticed his left foot felt heavy, as though it were trailing behind him. He could not remember hitting anything. Once ashore, he had trouble putting weight on it. Jim Guy had a severe bruise on his thigh.

Both men were shaken. As Dent later admitted, they were also "sorta proud to have been the pioneers."

Their run had nearly ended in disaster, but it left the rest of us with one useful fact: Do not go left of the white haystack.

The remaining canoes would try another line. Randy and Beaver went next. They paddled hard into the chute. At the lip of the rapid, the canoe seemed to hesitate before the river pulled it down into the run. The water boiled over submerged rocks, ricocheted off boulders, and broke across the canoe from both sides.

Photo. *Committed to the Run. Randy and Beaver had crossed the point of no return.*



Within seconds, the current swept them toward the main drop.



They cleared the chute, but the canoe filled quickly and sank under them. Both men plunged into the river. Much of their gear went with them.

The current carried them a long way—Dent thought nearly half a mile—before the men and their equipment could be recovered.

Photo. *Overwhelmed. The canoe is nearly under the water as Randy and Beaver fight to stay upright beyond the rapids.*



Photo. Rixey and Bill followed. Their canoe entered the broken water at an awkward angle and began taking on water almost immediately. Among the boulders, it overturned, throwing both of them into the current.



Men stationed below the rapids waded out to intercept them. Bill was caught and pulled toward safer footing on the rocks. Both he and Rixey emerged with scratches and bruises, though neither was seriously injured.



By then, the bank was crowded. Men shouted warnings, scrambled after gear, and tried to keep track of canoes and people being swept downstream. For a few moments, confusion took over.

Peter and Bob chose to portage their canoe and gear around the rapids.

Jack and I were last. By then, the rapids had taught us plenty. Dent and Jim Guy had shown us the wrong line. Randy and Beaver had shown how quickly a loaded canoe could fill with water. Rixey and Bill had shown us that getting through the first drop was only the beginning.

We stripped every piece of gear from our canoe and carried it around the rapids. Then we hauled the empty canoe upstream and prepared to make our run.

Photo. *Running the Rapids. With the canoe stripped of gear, we made our descent.*



Without the gear, the canoe rode higher and answered the paddles faster. We had also watched every run before ours. Even so, the descent was wild. We ricocheted off boulders. Water broke over the bow and poured into the canoe, rising around our knees, yet we stayed upright.

When we cleared the last stretch of rapids, Jack and I raised our paddles in mock defiance of Dent's ogre. It was pure bravado. Observation, an empty canoe, and a fair bit of luck had carried us through.

No one had escaped unscathed. Men had been thrown into the river. Canoes had swamped or overturned. Gear was scattered downstream. Dent had injured his foot, Jim Guy had badly bruised his thigh, and several others had cuts and bruises.

But everyone was alive—and proud we had survived.

We gathered the canoes and whatever gear we could, reloaded, and pushed back into the current. And then, almost as suddenly as it had begun, the violence was behind us. Ahead, the river settled back into quiet water.

Hot Springs Rapids still roared in the distance.

It had given us our first real measure of the river—and of how quickly control could slip away.

Footnote: * Dent's original log spells it "San Rocendo," as did some contemporary river guides. Modern maps generally use "San Rosendo."

Chapter 9. Perfect Campsite

We paddled another hour before finding a campsite on the Mexican side. Dent's injured foot was worse. As soon as we unloaded and set up camp, he took codeine and crawled into his tent for the night.

The rest of us believed we had found the finest campsite of the trip. It sat on a grassy, flat knoll overlooking the river. The weather had cleared, and stars filled the sky above the canyon. The half moon from our first night on the river was already growing toward full.

Photo. *The Canoe Corral. For the first time all day, the five canoes were quiet. We tied them together below the campsite on the Mexican bank, their bows pointed upstream as if they were ready for more. From above, they looked almost peaceful. An hour earlier, Hot Springs Rapids had battered every one of them.*



Photo. *Passing the Gear Up the Bank. The campsite was beautiful, but getting our gear to it was work. Every bag, tent, pot, and piece of gear had to be hauled up the steep bank. Six of us formed a rough bucket brigade. After a day of paddling and swimming, we had little left. But camp still had to be set up before dark.*



Photo. *Drying the Camp. Almost everything was wet. Peter, Jack, Jim Guy, and others spread tents and sleeping gear across the grass while the last of the equipment came up the bank. After the chaos of the rapids, the work felt reassuringly ordinary. Dry the tents. Find the sleeping bags. Cook supper. Tomorrow could wait.*



Photo. *Our Kitchen. We quickly ceded most of the cooking duties to Captain Diffie. His stew became the hit of the trip.*



Photo. *The Chivas. Jim Guy and I had carried the Chivas Regal from Little Rock, planning to save it for the end of the expedition. Hot Springs changed the schedule. We had overturned canoes, lost gear, pulled men from the river, and learned how fast the Rio could overwhelm us. That was celebration enough. The bottle came out early.*



Photo. Peter took a swig. Rixey drank straight from the bottle. There were no glasses and no ceremony. A few hours earlier, we had been shouting over the roar of Hot Springs. Now nobody had much to say.



Photo. A Moment to Remember. I took my turn with the Chivas. The photograph caught me a moment later. I don't remember what I was thinking, but it probably wasn't complicated. We were out of the rapids. We had all made it. The canoes were tied below us. We had found a magnificent place to spend the night. That was enough.



Standing there afterward, Bob gave us what became the expedition's unofficial motto.

"River, you ain't shit."

The sarcasm was obvious. The river had just proved it was anything but forgiving. That was why the line was so funny. We used it for the rest of the trip, especially when the Rio repeatedly reminded us who was in charge.

Six days later, at the old Texaco sign marking our takeout spot, Diffie looked back at the river and delivered his final verdict. "Yeah. River, you still ain't shit."

By then, we knew exactly what he meant. It was bravado turned inside out, a joke and an admission of respect. The Rio had earned plenty of our respect.

Jack Cirie thought the river deserved the last word—or perhaps we did. Some time later, he put the whole adventure into verse. It was pure Jack: irreverent, profane, and unforgettable.

"River You Ain't Shit — Ode to an Ogre." By Jack Cirie

South of Marathon, Texas, on an overgrown landing strip,
A Beechcraft single engine was makin' its final trip.
The landing was long, the runway was short,
We hit at an ass-jolting speed,
Jim Guy hit the brakes, while Pete shot some takes,
Of the fresh-cut tumbleweed.

Yet it wasn't the stammerin' of big Pete's camer-in'
That set our nerves to poppin',
Nor was it the speed or the rushing tumbleweed,
It was that goddamn sudden stoppin'.

All six got out clean from that flying machine,
But the sky plane sure took a lickin'.
We shuffled around, and there was hardly a sound,
'Cept for big Pete's camera clickin'.

Rancher Dave in his truck said, "Christ, what the fuck,"
As he wheeled over rock and branch.
When up from the crash a survivor did dash,
Saying, "Hi! Is this the Adams Ranch?"

We smiled, and we joked, Lady Luck we had stroked,
We each knew it could have been worse,

Yet we were fucking amazed, in a few short days,
When we discovered the Ogre's curse.

Now the Rio Grande is a hard river,
And it mothers a land that is rough,
And its white-water arms hold hidden charms
For fools who float like they're tough.

And strong men have wept as their comrades were swept
Over Hot Springs Falls, I've been told,
Where the Ogre's a-rumblin' as floaters are tumblin'
Into his wicked "suck hole."

Jim Guy, he was first, 'cause he had the thirst
To take on the Ogre that day.
He started on down but soon was aground
Where the baby Ogres play.

It's not the water that fucks you up,
Nor the rollin' river mentality;
It's when both you and canoe
Just overdo the "suck hole's" hospitality.

Jim and Dent made it out and let out a shout,
"That was one hell of a ride."
Pat sat on the shore, shooting pictures galore,
Of the next boat about to collide.

Two more boats slammed down, and Pat looked around
At Cir and said with mock force,
"So far as we've gone, and don't put me on,
How do you like your first-day crash course?"

As their canoe started down,
The onlookers found
It was empty except for the two,
Who were staring ahead and hiding their dread
By thinking about Diffie's stew.

But just like the stew
That ole "suck hole" knew
It would get you comin' or goin'.
Yet somehow it missed and let out a hiss,
A promise of a second showin'.

That night we did ease our fear with some cheese
And bottles of Gallo red.
We sang by the fire, and our spirits soared higher,
So we befriended Jim Beam instead.

Then suddenly there, right through the air,
Just inches above the hot flame,
Was gentleman Moore, on an aerial tour,
And the evening was never the same.

But fear of fryin' won't stop fools from tryin',
And Pete did a hot cartwheel.
Randy Ish. he howled, and the Ogre growled,
The scene was fucking unreal.

And as we look back on our Rio Grande track,
We realize with a soft, sweet cuss,
It wasn't the days on the river's maze,
But the nights that were killin' us.

So if you want to take me, Ogre,
Or if you want amends,
You can have my soul (for what it's worth),
Just let me bring my friends.

But don't be impatient, Mister O.,
For our brave team to hit—
You'll know we're near if you can hear:

"River, You Ain't Shit."

Photo. *A Quiet Moment. While the rest of us made camp, Rixey wandered off alone and stood looking up at the canyon walls.*



After the violence at Hot Springs Rapids, the stillness felt strange. No one followed Rixey. No one needed to. Some places make talk unnecessary. For once that day, the Rio Grande was still. And so were we.

Chapter 10. Through Upper Madison Falls to Panther Canyon

Our fourth day on the Rio Grande brought some of the trip's most spectacular scenery. The canyon walls seemed to grow larger and more dramatic as we moved downstream, and the river picked up speed. We encountered stretches of swift water, enjoyable rapids, and enough action to keep everyone fully alert.

By then, the river had taken a toll on all five canoes. The aluminum hulls had been battered against rocks and boulders, and the rivets were beginning to pop loose. Every boat leaked.

Jack, as usual, came up with a solution. We turned the canoes upside down to let the bottoms dry. Someone had brought along a rubber mallet. Jack used it to hammer out the dents in the canoe.

Then he poured a little camp-stove fuel over the damaged areas and set them on fire, using the heat to drive out the remaining moisture around the rivet holes. Once the metal was dry, he packed chewing gum into the leaking rivet holes and sealed them with duct tape strips.

It was not exactly a factory-authorized Grumman repair. But it worked.

Photo. *Field Repairs. Jack improvises a repair on a leaking canoe.*





After several hours, we reached Burro Bluff, a massive orange rock wall rising from the Texas side of the river. Just below it lay Upper Madison Falls.

The Upper Madison was no rapid to take lightly. It came in two sections. The upper portion could be run, but only a couple of hundred feet below, the river dropped into a second section that was completely impassable. The descent was even steeper than Hot Springs Rapids, leaving no room for error.

Three of our canoes were lined through both sections. The other two crews decided to run the upper section, reach shore immediately, and then line their boats through the lower falls.

Running a rapid was only one way to get downstream. If a rapid looked too dangerous to run, we had two choices: line the canoe through from shore or portage around it. Portaging meant unloading everything and carrying both the canoe and the gear over rough ground, often hemmed in by steep canyon walls. In country like this, lining was usually the better choice.

Lining meant using ropes at the bow and stern to guide the canoe through rocks and shallows. Usually, one or two men would hold the upper rope, while one man at the bottom of the passage held the other end. Often, one or two men would help steer the canoe past the rocks and broken water. In theory, the current carried the canoe while we controlled its direction with the ropes.

In practice, it was wet, exhausting work, and sometimes nearly as dangerous as running the rapid. Men stood waist-deep in fast water, braced against rocks, pulling on the lines while others pushed the canoe away from boulders or tried to keep the bow pointed downstream. One wrong angle, and the current could take control of the canoe.

Photo. *Guiding a canoe through the current. One man controls the line and others keep the hull clear of the rocks.*



There was nothing graceful about it. Sometimes we pushed. Sometimes we pulled. Sometimes we simply hung on. A loaded canoe that had seemed manageable on shore became something entirely different in fast water. Keeping it under control took all the strength we had.

Photo. *Peter leans into the rope, using his weight against the current as the canoe is lowered through the rapid. There was no finesse. Just pull, hold, and keep the boat from breaking free.*

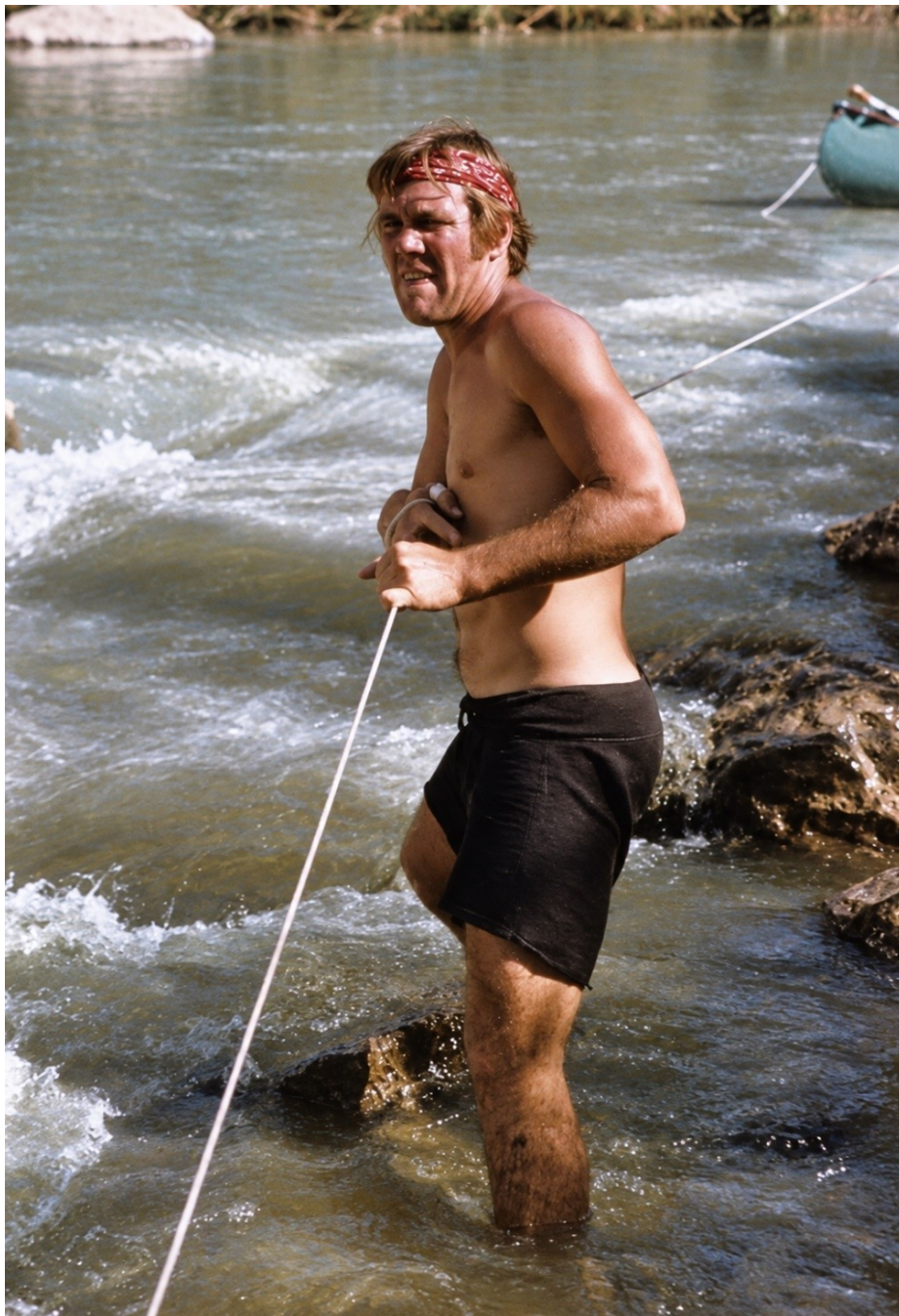


Photo. *Despite his bad foot, Dent found ways to help, working a line once he was in position.*



At times, the river won. If a canoe swung broadside and filled with water, the force was almost impossible to control. At that point, the safest choice was to cut the canoe loose rather than risk having it yank a man off his feet and into the rapid. Then the guys downstream had to catch the canoe before it disappeared around the bend.

Photo. *When the boat is broadside to the current, and it takes on water, the line can become almost impossible to hold.*



There was nothing heroic about lining the canoes through. It was mostly aching arms, rope burns, shouted instructions, and stubborn determination. But without it, we simply could not have navigated stretches of the Rio Grande.

Dent later wrote, "All Sunday morning, Jim Guy and I had been a little apprehensive on the river because of our upset the night before."

Hot Springs had changed how Dent and Jim Guy approached the river. They were no longer eager to lead into every rapid. Instead, they hung back—sometimes second, third, fourth, or even fifth—watching the others before committing.

Immediately below Upper Madison Falls, the river gave them another test. Everyone decided to run it. Dent and Jim Guy went through cleanly. One by one, the other canoes hung up or fouled on rocks. Theirs was the only boat to make it through without trouble.

It was a small victory, but after Hot Springs, it felt much larger. Their confidence had begun to return.

Several miles downstream, we reached Lower Madison Falls. There was no question about running it. Huge rocks stretched across the river, leaving no navigable opening, and the water tore through at tremendous speed. Once again, the only sensible option was to line the canoes through.

By late afternoon, we had reached Panther Canyon, a broad, deep canyon entering from the Texas side. We stopped just upstream of its mouth and found a broad rock ledge that made an almost perfect campsite. It was our last night on the river.

Photo. *Coming Ashore at Panther Canyon. As evening settles over the river, Randy stays in the stern while Beaver pulls the canoe's bow onto the bank. We have reached the campsite for our final night in the canyon.*



After the tents were pitched, the gear put away, dinner cooked, and the dishes washed, everyone gradually drifted toward the rock ledge overlooking the river. We built a good

fire. The moon was up, and stars filled the canyon sky. Tall river cane along the bank rustled in the night air. The canyon walls rose around us into the darkness.

There was whiskey. Someone spread out an air mattress or sleeping bag on the rock. We talked about the trip and the lives we would soon return to. Someone brought out the guitar, and before long it was making its way around the group. We sang songs we all knew.

Photo. *Music on the last evening. Jack strummed the guitar and played harmonica during our final night in the canyon.*



Nothing dramatic happened. Perhaps that is why the evening stayed with us. The serenity did not go unchallenged.

At some point during the evening, a small copperhead began crawling across the rock ledge toward Dent's foot. Within seconds, ten supposedly fearless river runners had formed a cautious circle around a very small snake. Randy finally settled the matter by grabbing a piece of firewood and clubbing it. Beaver had apparently intended to sleep outside that night.

After the copperhead incident, Beaver reconsidered and climbed into Dent's tent.

Years later, Dent remembered Bill Teneyk, our shuttle driver, summing up the country after hearing about the copperhead: "Ain't nothin' down here that won't stick ya, sting ya, or bite ya."

By about ten o'clock, most of the group had gone to bed. Jim Guy and I stayed up longer, climbing the hill above camp to look downstream toward Panther Rapids. We could hear the water in the darkness. In the morning, we would run the rapids.

Chapter 11. From Wilderness to Reality

The next morning at Panther Canyon, Dent's battered ankle had stiffened so badly that he could barely walk. Jack improvised again. He wrapped a spare T-shirt around the blade of an extra paddle and secured it with duct tape. Dent had a makeshift crutch. He could hobble around camp, and once he was in the canoe, the ankle mattered much less.



After our last breakfast on the river, we turned to Panther Canyon Rapid.

It had looked and sounded treacherous the night before. Once we entered it, the rapid became one of the best runs of the trip: tall standing waves, big rocks, a strong side current, and a bluff waiting if we missed the turn. It demanded skill, but it never felt truly dangerous. We all ran it. It was thrilling.

An hour and a half, or two hours, later, we reached San Francisco Canyon. It was huge. There was what looked like a fishing trailer perched high on the bluff. We beached the canoes where the dry canyon met the Rio Grande and walked across the mud. Rixey pointed to fresh deer tracks. The displaced sand was still damp. In that heat, the tracks could not have been old.

The San Francisco Canyon rapid was exciting to run. The current built strongly against the Texas wall, and we had to paddle like hell to keep from slamming into it. Most of us glanced off the wall, but it was great fun. We stopped below the rapid and watched the other canoes come through. It was a beautiful sight, especially now that we knew a little more about what we were doing.

In this two-frame sequence, Jack and I are about to lose control of our canoe and the situation. We do not know it yet. In the second frame, the canoe has twisted too far to recover. A third frame would have shown both of us in the water, carried downstream by the river. By then, we might have become a little too confident.

Photo. *Point of No Return. In the second frame, our canoe had twisted too far to recover.*





Photo. *By the end of the trip, Rixey and Bill had become a well-coordinated river-running team.*



We went another hour or two beyond San Francisco Canyon and stopped on a small gravel bar on the Mexican side. Lunch was deviled Spam, cheese, Melba toast, and crackers, served on the blade of a paddle. We washed it down with a few of our remaining hot beers.

Photo. *Lunch on the Rio Grande was served on the blade of a paddle.*



Then we heard something we had not heard in days: an outboard motor. Two small dinghies came downriver, two men in one and one in the other. The man in the lead boat carried a large pistol on his hip. Jack had the only gun in our group. Without a word, he moved closer to his canoe and positioned himself near his pistol. He stayed there, watching the armed stranger closely, ready to respond, if necessary, until we knew who they were and what they wanted.

We hollered back and forth. One of the men called out, "Do you know where you are?" I yelled, "Yeah, approximately." He replied, "Tell us. We don't." They came ashore. They were fishermen who had put in at the mouth of Maravillas Creek for a weekend of floating and fishing. They had no idea where they were or what they had gotten into.

A plane had circled us the day before and again that morning. Now we knew why. Their families were worried. One man's brother had been flying the river, searching for them.

The fishermen had cut trails through the canyon brush and carried their boats around the rapids. They had lost one of two big ice chests full of fish. They were tired and overdue, but otherwise all right.

We traded them a beer apiece for several chunks of ice. We had been without refrigeration for two days. As luck would have it, ten beers were left. Each of us would have one last cold beer that afternoon.

Not far from Sanderson Canyon, we realized my camera was missing. Beaver remembered setting it on a distinctive boulder and walking away. The camera was expensive, but the thirty-six Kodachrome exposures inside it mattered more. We already knew those photographs would be precious.

We passed the hat, collected \$150, and hired some men with a motorized rubber raft to go back for the camera. Against the odds, Beaver's description of the boulder was good enough. They found the camera and brought it back. I'm still struck by their honesty—and by the trouble they went to to find it.

We ran a few more rapids. Slowly, the great canyon walls fell away. The country opened into rolling desert. We saw goats on the hillsides, buzzards and hawks overhead, and sheep near the river. After days enclosed by rock walls, the horizon opened again.

We paddled hard. Around 5:30, after dragging the canoes through a shallow rapid, we stopped on a sandbar. Jim Guy and I began to worry we had missed the takeout point. If so, we would have to continue to Langtry and spend another day on the river. None of us had that day to spare.

Our maps and notes had grown vague, and none of the landmarks looked familiar. We sat on the bank, studying the paper maps and looking upstream for the others. Finally, Diffie and Peter said they would go ahead to see what was around the next bend. A couple of hundred yards later, we heard a yell: "There it is!" I thought they meant another bad rapid. "What? The rapid?" I yelled back.

"No. The Texaco sign." It marked Dudley Harrison's camp, and our final take-out point.

Photo. *The Texaco Sign. Dudley Harrison's camp—and the end of our river journey.*



The others soon came into view, and all five canoes paddled into Dudley Harrison's camp. Our truck was waiting there.

It was about six Monday evening. We were tired, wet, bruised, and more than ready to stop. But none of us would have traded a mile of it for anything.

In five days, we had traveled nearly seventy-five miles of wild river and deep canyons, battered our canoes against rocks, run some of the Rio Grande's wildest rapids, and brought every man and every canoe through to the other end.

We loaded the canoes and gear, piled all ten of us into the truck, and headed for Dryden. Dent, Jack, Bob, and I rode in the cab, while the rest rode in the back. Randy and I still had half a gallon of Jim Beam, which we passed around freely as the desert rolled past.

Photo. *The Last Portage. Hauling a canoe out of the Rio Grande for the last time.*



Photo. *Securing the Canoes. Diffie checks the clamps on the trailer's canoe rack.*



Photo. *The Rio Grande Ten at the end of the river run, October 8, 1973.*



About seven, we reached Dryden. We must have looked pretty scroungy because we tried both small cafes, and both said they wouldn't serve us. Randy went to get our friend Bill Teneyk, who ran the general mercantile and had arranged our canoe shuttle. Bill came down, opened the store, and sold us ready-made sandwiches, cartons of milk, cookies, and cake. We gassed up, retrieved Randy's car, shifted some gear, made some telephone calls, and eventually got ourselves organized.

At about ten that night, we headed for San Angelo after calling ahead to the Holiday Inn. We pulled into San Angelo around two in the morning, split into three rooms, showered, and slept a few hours. By the time we finished, there must have been an inch of mud in the tubs.

The airplane group—Bill, Jim Guy, Peter, Rixey, Jack, and me—left on a commercial flight around six. The road crew got up around eight, ate breakfast, and headed home: Beaver, Diffie, and Dent in the truck, and Randy in his station wagon.

Beaver and Dent drove through the evening and reached Little Rock around one Wednesday morning, October 10.

By the time we were all home, the Rio Grande was already becoming a memory. Ten young men had gone in search of adventure. We came home tired, bruised, sunburned,

and carrying stories we would still be telling more than fifty years later. We had no idea how long those stories would stay with us.

Epilogue. The Old Ogre Smile

More than half a century has passed since the ten of us put our canoes into the Rio Grande and headed downstream.

We did not think we were doing anything historic. We were young men looking for an adventure. Jobs, families, and ordinary responsibilities waited somewhere beyond the canyons. For a few days, our world became wonderfully simple: five canoes, ten men, a river, and whatever waited around the next bend.

Six of us had survived an airplane crash before we even touched the water.

Dent endured discomfort for most of the second half of the trip but never complained. No one else was hurt. The canoes and gear arrived and survived. And after all that, we looked toward the river and thought: Why not?

That says something about our age.

We were confident. Too confident at times. We had prepared, but none of us knew what the Rio Grande would demand. We figured it out as we went. We paddled. We carried. We lined canoes through rapids too dangerous to run. When we misjudged the river, we paid with swamped boats, scattered gear, bruises, and a few close calls in fast water.

But danger is not what I remember most. I remember the stillness. Mornings when the river lay smooth as glass and the canyon walls caught the first light. Evenings when ten tired men sat beneath a sky crowded with stars, and the outside world felt very far away. I remember paddles entering the water and canoes pulled together along the bank at day's end. Laughter. Stories of the day's exploits. And the friendship.

Memory has its own order. The moments that frighten us seem enormous when they happen. Years later, smaller things remain: a gesture, a face, a song sung at night around the fire.

The Rio Grande gave us many chances to depend on one another. No one announced that he was brave. No one talked about teamwork. Someone simply stepped forward and did what had to be done.

A canoe overturned. Someone grabbed it.

A man went into the water. Someone reached for him.

A hard stretch appeared. We stopped, studied it, argued a little, and found a way through. Then we moved on.

We called ourselves the Rio Grande Ten. I do not remember the name seeming important at the time. We were simply ten men sharing an adventure. The name acquired meaning later. Because ten was never going to stay ten forever.

After the river, our lives scattered. Careers shifted. Families grew. Some moved away. The years passed almost unnoticed. We saw one another less often. Then some of the men who had sat in those canoes were gone.

A young man does not imagine that part. At thirty, friendship feels permanent because time seems unlimited. There will always be another dinner, another trip, another story. You assume there will always be enough time.

Then fifty years pass. And you realize something else. The people who you shared extraordinary experiences with do not entirely leave you. They stay attached to those moments.

For me, Jack will always be somewhere on that river. So will Jim Guy. Diffie and Randy, too. Sadly, each of them is now gone.

Peter and Dent are still part of that river for me, too. So is Rixey, though over the years our paths simply diverged. And I still hope to see Beaver again.

I can still see five canoes stretched along the water. Men leaning into their paddles. Jack and I heading toward water we probably had no business entering with quite so much confidence.

For a few seconds in an old photograph, we are young again.

That is one reason I wanted to tell this story.

At eighty-five, I know memory is imperfect. Details fade, and stories shift in the telling. Dent's contemporaneous notes restored events I had forgotten and corrected some I had remembered differently. Photographs brought back faces, places, and moments I had not thought about in years.

Memory does not have to be perfect to matter. After fifty years, what remains may be the essential parts.

I do not remember every mile of the Rio Grande. Or every meal. Or every campsite. Or every conversation. But I remember how it felt.

The immense canyon walls. Our small canoes beneath them. Looking downstream, wondering what was around the bend. The excitement of making it through something difficult.

There is a temptation, when looking back on adventures from youth, to make them more heroic than they were. I don't want to do that. We weren't heroes. Sometimes

we were skilled. Sometimes we were lucky. Sometimes we were naive and foolish. Probably all four in fairly equal measure.

But we went.

And the going is what matters most to me now.

Many experiences that stay with us begin with a decision that barely seems important. Someone has an idea. Someone else says yes. A trip takes shape. The moment comes, and you take it. Only later do you understand what that decision set in motion.

Years later, you discover that the decision became part of who you are. The Rio Grande became one of the turning points in my life. I could not have known it then. None of us could. We were too busy getting through the canyons, surviving the rapids, and keeping the canoes upright.

Jack Cirie understood something about the experience that took me much longer to appreciate. He turned the river, the canyon, and our old jokes into something larger—memory and friendship.

He called it "TEXACO."

I can think of no better way to leave the Rio Grande than to let Jack have the last word.

TEXACO

(TEXas)

(Adams)

(Canoe)

(Ogre)

By Jack Cirie

Some say it's not all one wants

But I say it's all one needs.

Friends, the river, moonlit canyons

And lonely tumbleweeds.

And when you see a river

Twisting its way through an ogre's land

Somewhere in your mind's dusty canyons

Reach out and take my hand.

We can "line" through life's indifference

With ropes of reverie

And remember a time

Of ten strong, a river and camaraderie.

Somewhere south of Dryden, 'neath the cold Texas stars,
Is a red and green Texaco sign and a river that was ours,
And sometime as I drift back
Across a hundred miles,
I am certain I can see
That ole Ogre smile."

The Rio Grande Ten: 1973 and Later Life

Dent Gitchel's original roster recorded where we lived and what we did in 1973. More than fifty years later, it provides a snapshot of who we were when we set out—and where life took each of us afterward.

Dent Gitchel — Little Rock, Arkansas

1973: Dent Gitchel, thirty-two, was a Little Rock attorney with Cearley & Gitchel. An experienced canoeist and outdoorsman, he played a central role in organizing the expedition and shared a canoe with Jim Guy Tucker.

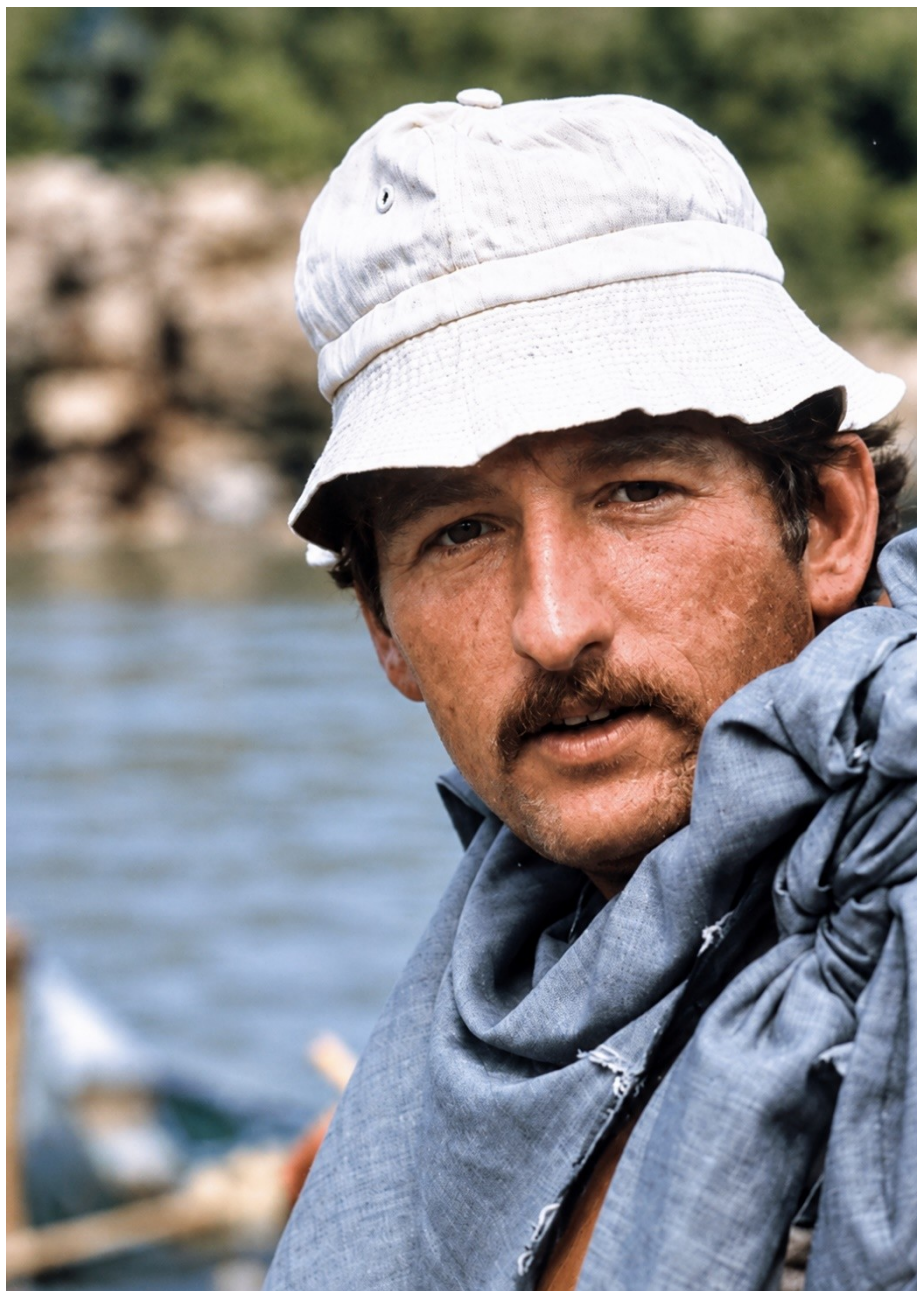
Later Life: Dent went on to a distinguished legal and academic career. He joined the faculty of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock School of Law, became the Arkansas Bar Foundation Professor of Law, and is now Professor Emeritus. A longtime friend of Jim Guy Tucker, he also served as Tucker's chief legal counsel while Tucker as governor. Dent continues to live in Little Rock.



Bob Diffie — Shady Shores, near Denton, Texas

1973: Bob Diffie lived in Shady Shores near Denton, Texas, and flew for Braniff International Airlines at the new Dallas/Fort Worth Regional Airport. Bob gathered information and sent Dent maps, schedules, and planning materials. The other Denton canoeists later dropped out, but Bob stayed with the expedition. He shared a canoe with Peter Richardson.

Later Life: After retiring from USAir, Captain Bob Diffie moved to Little Rock. He later developed congestive heart failure and died of a heart attack in 2001.



Jim Guy Tucker — Little Rock, Arkansas

1973: Jim Guy Tucker was Arkansas's Attorney General, an experienced pilot, and an eager outdoorsman. He piloted the Bonanza, carrying six of us to the river. After surviving the crash at Adams Ranch, he climbed into a canoe with Dent the next morning.

Later Life: Jim Guy represented Arkansas's 2nd Congressional District in the U.S. House from 1977 to 1979. He was elected Lieutenant Governor in 1990 and served as Governor from 1992 to 1996, succeeding Bill Clinton after Clinton became President. He later spent considerable time in Hong Kong pursuing international business ventures. Jim Guy and Patrick remained close friends for the rest of his life. He died in Little Rock on February 13, 2025, at age eighty-one. On February 21, he lay in state in the rotunda of the Arkansas State Capitol.



Randy Ishmael — Jonesboro, Arkansas

1973: Randy Ishmael was a lawyer in Jonesboro, Arkansas, with Barrett, Wheatley, Smith & Deacon. He became the tenth member almost by accident. Dent had mentioned the trip months earlier. He joined the overland party in Brownwood and traveled with Dent, Diffie, and Beaver to the river. On the river, he shared a canoe with Beaver.

Later Life: Randy continued practicing law in Jonesboro until his retirement. He died of cancer in 2016.



Charles “Beaver” Jacob — Little Rock, Arkansas

1973: Charles “Beaver” Jacob lived in Little Rock and was affiliated with Custom Audio, Inc. He and Dent began the overland journey from Little Rock and later joined Diffie in Denton. On the river, Beaver shared a canoe with Randy Ishmael.

Later Life: According to Dent, Beaver is alive and well and still lives in Little Rock. After leaving the stereo-component business, he turned to restoring historic houses in Little Rock’s Quapaw Quarter. He and his wife, Judy, continue to live there.



Peter Richardson — Boston, Massachusetts

1973: Peter Richardson lived in Boston and served as Executive Assistant to the Mayor. Patrick had met Peter at preseason football training camp at the University of Pennsylvania, where the two later coached Penn's freshman team together. Peter had played football at Williams College and was a four-time All-American lacrosse player. The Denver Broncos drafted him as a tight end, but a serious knee injury ended his professional football career. Big, powerful, steady, and difficult to intimidate, Peter was well suited for an expedition into isolated country. He traveled from Boston to join the group and shared a canoe with Bob Diffie.

Later Life: After working as a political consultant, Peter retired to Grafton, Vermont, where he and his wife Nancy live. He remains active in local politics and serves on the community's governing board.



Patrick Caviness — Little Rock, Arkansas

1973: Patrick Caviness lived in Little Rock and worked on the executive staff of Arkansas Governor Dale Bumpers. After the two returned from a backpacking trip through Yellowstone, Jim Guy Tucker invited him to join the Rio Grande expedition. On the river, he shared a canoe with Jack.

Later Life: Patrick's career later spanned banking, finance, healthcare, venture capital, teaching, and business ventures across the United States and Asia. After many years in Hong Kong, he retired to Koh Samui, Thailand, where he has lived with his partner, Frederique, for the past 24 years. More than fifty years after the expedition, he began reconstructing the story of the Rio Grande Ten, drawing on memories, photographs, and Dent Gitchel's contemporaneous notes.



John “Rixey” Moore — Los Angeles, California

1973: John “Rixey” Moore was about thirty. A 1966 philosophy graduate of the University of Virginia, he had served with the Army’s 5th Special Forces Group as a Green Beret in Vietnam, including reconnaissance missions in enemy-controlled territory. He brought an unusual combination of military experience, physical toughness, self-reliance, and an appetite for adventure.

Later Life: Rixey settled in Southern California and built a successful career as an actor and writer. He appeared in numerous television series and films, including *Clear and Present Danger* and *Executive Decision*, as well as hundreds of national commercials. He later wrote two memoirs, *Hostage of Paradox*, about Vietnam, and *Company of Stone*, about parts of his later life. His adventures continued: he competed with the U.S. bobsled team and became an accomplished pilot. In later years, he lived in the Los Padres National Forest in Southern California.



Bill Mathews — Little Rock, Arkansas

1973: Bill Mathews was one of the Little Rock members of the expedition. An experienced outdoorsman, he paddled a canoe with Rixey Moore through the Lower Canyons.

Later Life: Bill spent most of his adult life in Colorado. After retiring, he returned to Little Rock, where he lived for several years. In his later years, he developed dementia and is believed to have died a few years ago.



Jack Cirie — Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

1973: Jack Cirie lived in Philadelphia and was a Wharton student. A former Marine officer and one of Patrick's close friends, he brought the calm self-confidence of someone accustomed to difficult situations. On the river, he paddled a canoe with Patrick. Around the campfire, he played guitar and harmonica, and later his poem "TEXACO" became one of the enduring records of the trip.

Later Life: Jack remained a close friend of Patrick and the other members of the group. He died suddenly of a brain hemorrhage at fifty. His absence was deeply felt when the Rio Grande Ten gathered again twenty years after the expedition.



The Rio Grande Reunion — Twenty Years Later

Twenty years after the Rio Grande expedition, the nine surviving members agreed to reunite in Little Rock, Arkansas. The reunion was set for the weekend of October 3, 1993, twenty years to the day after we had begun our journey.

The plan was simple. We would return to Little Rock with our wives and girlfriends for a long weekend and do what old friends do: tell the same stories, argue over the details, laugh at the parts that had grown over time, and remember the young men we had been in 1973 on the Rio Grande.

For the reunion, I made two large portrait posters for each member of the Rio Grande Ten: one photograph from the 1973 expedition and another from 1993. I also put together a slideshow featuring the airplane wreck, the rapids, the campsites, the faces, the foolishness, and the narrow escapes.

Life had carried us far from the Rio Grande.

After Bill Clinton's election as President, Jim Guy Tucker became Governor of Arkansas. Jim Guy and Betty hosted a reunion dinner at the Governor's Mansion. During the dinner, Jim Guy turned to Dent, by then a respected lawyer and law professor, and asked him to take a leave from the university to serve as his chief legal counsel. In his characteristic style, Dent said yes.

It was a long way from aluminum canoes, wet sleeping bags, and hot beer on a gravel bar. Our lives had taken very different paths. For one weekend, they came together again.

Much of the rest of the weekend unfolded at Captain Diffie's house. We ate, drank, and made music. The old stories took over.

Music had always been part of our gatherings. That weekend, it came back in force. Jim Guy and I played guitar. Everyone sang the old songs.

Dent was the real musician among us. Over the years, he had played professionally, formed successful bands, and performed at concerts and festivals across Arkansas. He played lead guitar and mandolin and sang bluegrass. Captain Diffie was not far behind. He had become a superb dobro player -- too good, in my view, to be considered an amateur. Dent and Diffie provided the backbone, and the rest of us joined in.

We played. We sang. We drank. And we told the old stories again.

Peter Richardson



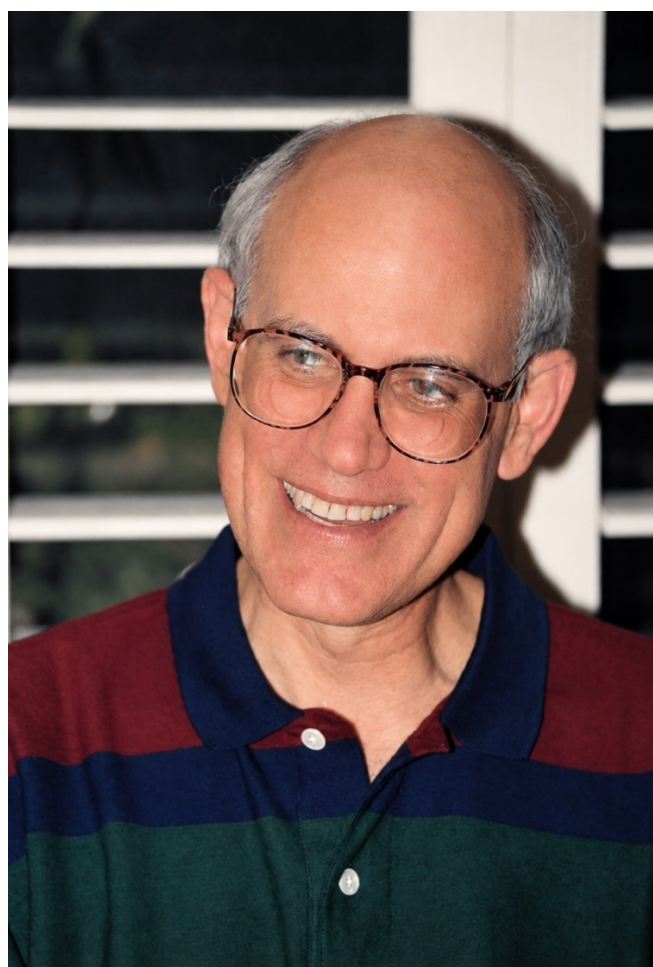
Jim Guy Tucker



Bob Diffie



Bill Mathews



Rixey Moore



Dent Gitchel



Charlie "Beaver" Jacob



Randy Ishmeal



Pat Caviness

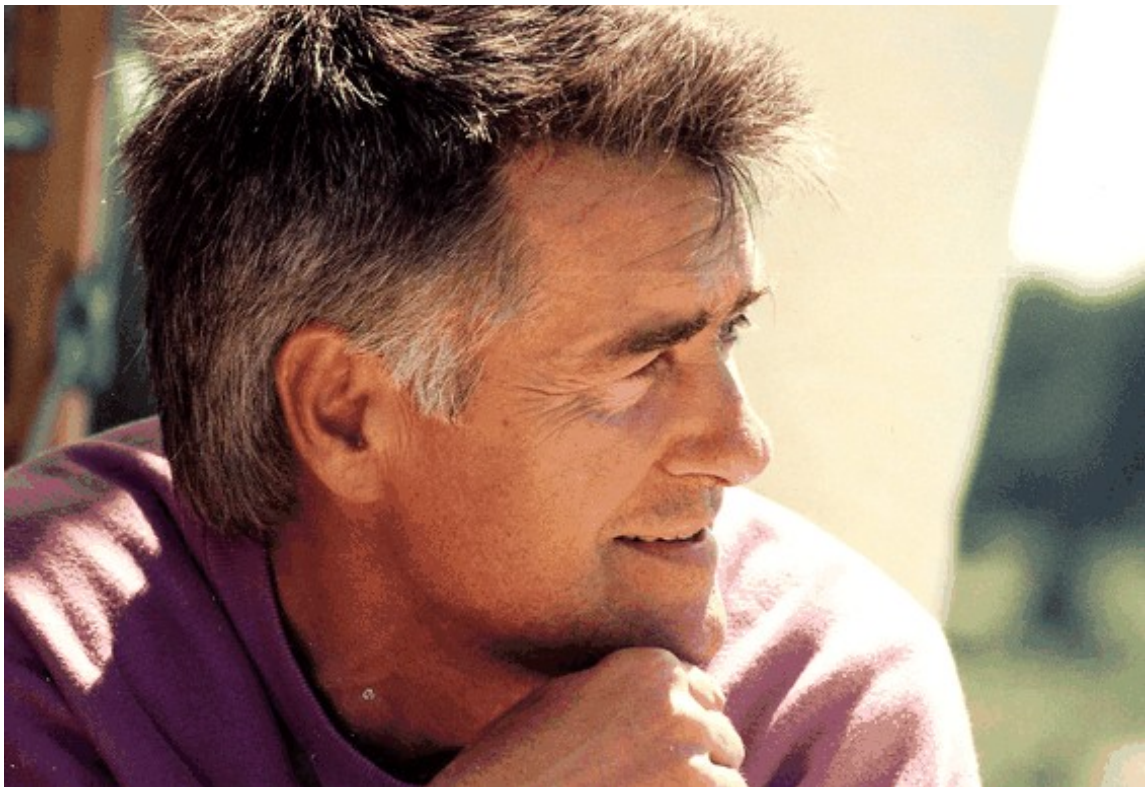


One man was missing. Jack Cirie had died suddenly in Seattle in 1991, from a brain hemorrhage at fifty, shortly after his wedding. His absence was impossible to miss. Jack had been one of the strongest personalities on the trip—a Marine officer, outdoorsman, canoe partner, poet, and friend.

During the reunion, we read his poems: "River You Ain't Shit" and "TEXACO."

For a few moments, Jack was with us again. That alone made the reunion matter.

Photo. *Jack Cirie on a sailboat near Seattle shortly before his death.*



We had come together to remember the Rio Grande. Instead, we discovered the river had preserved something for us. In the photographs, we were still the young men who had gone down the Rio Grande. The songs carried us back to those nights around the campfires.

Twenty years later, we could still recognize the men we had been.

Almost.

Acknowledgments

This account could not have been written from memory alone.

I am especially indebted to Dent Gitchel, whose concurrent notes preserved an extraordinary amount of detail about the expedition—where we went, what happened, what we said, and often what we were thinking at the time. More than fifty years later, those notes provided an essential framework for reconstructing the journey.

Peter Richardson read the manuscript closely and challenged me on accuracy, sequence, pace, and expression. His recollections added details that only another expedition member could offer.

I am also grateful to two professional writers who offered me invaluable advice—Ed Massey and John Dolan. Ed is a published author and longtime friend, whose thoughtful reading, encouragement, and perspective on the manuscript helped me recognize possibilities in the story I had not fully seen.

John Dolan, the author of fourteen published books with a substantial international readership, was willing to read what I thought would be the final draft before I sent the manuscript off to a printer. His sharp eye caught a number of misstatements and places that needed correction. More important, his comments caused me to rethink entirely how I wanted this story to reach its readers.

It was John's suggestion, reflected in "A Note from the Author" at the beginning of the book, that led me to abandon the idea of a small printed edition and instead produce a digital version that could be shared easily with friends, family, and others connected to the Rio Grande Ten. He changed not only how I planned to publish the story, but how I thought about who I wanted to read it and how best to place it in their hands.

Other friends and readers offered comments, questions, and encouragement as the manuscript took shape. Their feedback helped me see where the story was clear, where it needed explanation, and where I should trust the events to speak for themselves.

I am also grateful to the surviving members of the Rio Grande Ten, who helped refresh memories, resolve discrepancies, and bring old events back into focus.

Finally, I remain grateful to the nine other men who made the trip with me. Whatever imperfections remain in the telling are mine. The adventure—and the friendship that came from it—belong to all of us.

About the Author

Patrick G. Caviness grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, and graduated from Yale University, where he played football. He later earned an MBA from the Wharton School and a doctorate in health systems management from Tulane University.

His career has spanned Arkansas state government and banking, as well as healthcare, finance, venture capital, teaching, and business ventures across the United States and Asia. For much of the past four decades, he has lived in Hong Kong and Thailand.

His travels have included backpacking in the Rockies and the High Sierra, sailing the English Channel, and other trips to remote and unpredictable places.

In October 1973, he joined nine other men on a canoe expedition through the Lower Canyons of the Rio Grande. More than fifty years later, drawing on photographs, contemporaneous records, and the memories of those who were there, he revisited the story.

The Rio Grande Ten is his account of that undertaking—and of the friendship that endured long after they had left the river behind.