recently, I had the good fortune to be asked by SMM to go down the Canyon. It didn’t take me long to reply. The last time I rafted the Colorado, I had to pay for it, along with the other geology students on the trip. This time would be different. I would be a “facilitator,” a “resource participant.” I would be expected to contribute something for my free ride.

My only previous association with SMM was studying fossil snails collected by Bruce Erickson at the Wannagan Creek crocodile quarry in western North Dakota. I had no experience with the museum’s Department of Continuing Education or its director, Dave Chittenden. Was I in for a treat!

My compulsive disposition surged as I prepared for the trip. Studying the Canyon’s geological history is so pleasing that before I knew it, I had produced a small “book” of handouts for our group. Although I had met some members of our group on a pre-trip gathering, it wasn’t until the first or second day on the Colorado that faces became personalities. At about the same time, our
Colorado isn't always whitewater. It's time to relax.

Our group, which included many obvious type-A's, started to undergo inner-Canyon-behavior-modification (ICBM). This modification is most manifest in leaving pettiness, shyness, and assorted urban hang-ups behind. My ICBM was evident from a look at my notebook; it remained blank after the second day.

Our group was profoundly non-geological. One college student from Grand Forks professed an open interest in the subject, but that was about it. Undeterred but with some trepidation, I commenced my series of two-bit lectures wherever and whenever someone was willing to listen. (Some compulsive behavior, I'm afraid, is hard to modify.)

Our first day on the river was largely an orientation. We rafted from Lake Mead into the silt-infested waters of Granite Gorge. We saw our first agave roasting pit and Anasazi pictographs, explained to us by our outfitter/leader Steve Glass. Our first camp was on the rocky slopes below Rampart (Sloth) Cave—a stinky place by all accounts. My tentative, spontaneous lectures on this first day ranged in subject from the huge travertine deposit at our lunch stop to the seas that first inundated northern Arizona. The evening tacos were a fitting repast at the end of the day, and we spent our last waking moments gazing up at the stars from our raft and discussing the early development of life.

Our second day on the Colorado was spent leisurely motoring upstream to our Surprise Canyon campsite—a lovely silt beach with only one (as far as we knew) accommodating tarantula. Topographic maps were passed out so the interested could follow our journey. It was a perfect day to inflect the geological history of the Canyon on unwary voyagers; every mile of our 30-mile trip beckoned for some comment. We saw the sandstones, shales, and limestones deposited in Cambrian seas some 530 million years ago. These rock sequences have been given marvelous names—Tapeats, Bright Angel, Muav—which were derived from creeks and canyons further upstream. We passed the towers of a defunct bat guano enterprise on our way to the "Great Unconformity," an irregular surface separating the sandstones of the Tapeats from the underlying and much older igneous Precambrian rocks. We saw the other limestone formations of Lower Granite Gorge, including the Devonian Temple Butte and the Mississippian Redwall. These rocks are clear proof of the movement of seas back and forth across northern Arizona some 300 to 400 million years ago, when this area was dominated by an equatorial-type climate. Evidence of landslides and movements of the earth's crust along faults was also the order of the day.

Our first long hike was up boulder-strewn Surprise Canyon. A recent hard rain had washed a huge amount of red silt into our raft-landing area. The mucking around we did coming into the area was nothing compared to our adventure getting the rafts unglaed and into deeper water after the Colorado lowered its level during the day. The hike, with its discussions of cultural sites, fossils, and rocks, was overshadowed by the physical exertions necessary to leave Surprise Canyon. One and all pitched in to finish the job. Our group, friendly enough to start with, now had an esprit de corps that would last throughout the trip.

The next day was dominated by the rigors of our most intimidating hike. A
steep climb up crumbling Precambrian granite and up an even steeper talus slope of angular blocks of Tapeats Sandstone served as a fitting warm-up for a pre-lunch hike that took almost all day in the blazing Arizona sun. We hiked to a cave dwelling with some paintings located at the base of the Muav Limestone. Getting there brought our group to its lowest ebb, especially those members who followed my lead up a somewhat more difficult "path." Undaunted, more or less, we luxuriated in an effortless float down to our next campsite, affectionately known as "Toad Heights," across from Reference Point Rapids.

By this time, the personalities among the party had sorted themselves out into the philosophically inward (quiet boat) to the philosophically outward (garrulous boat). I was remanded to the latter. This sorting out process was important to the well being of our troop. The Canyon instills a spectrum of possible feelings and an individual can and should experience them all, but will probably end up focusing on a particular mood. The Canyon is a great place to have fun. It's open and free, and spirits soar. It's also a place to be at peace—setting off by oneself on a hike, floating quietly down the river, or standing at a scenic threshold. For a student of geology, the Canyon is even more; it's a magnificent picture of the past. What more could a geology teacher want than to have a semi-captive audience in the Grand Canyon?

Our last full day on the river was spent hiking up a fault trace to a beautiful exhibition of drag-folding and Anasazi artwork. Obviously, the best was saved for last. The site included several agave roasting pits, numerous pictographs and paintings, and a scenic view beyond compare. The day was, however, beastly hot, and I felt like my speech was more slurred than usual. As we arrived back at the rafts, which were now almost too hot to touch, we established our own ritual for dealing with the heat. Dipping a canvas bucket into the cold water (46°F) of the river, each willing person (everyone as far as I know) was baptized in the slit of the Colorado. The protracted wait to leave, which might have sullenned any other group, became a festive occasion.

As we rafted out of the canyon the next day, the group was only slightly melancholy. Our experience, although brief, was intense and satisfying. The recipe for the trip was a big hit. The ingredients consisted of one Grand Canyon with lots of sun and one seasoned and enjoyable director of continuing education, mixed well with 29 people who knew that getting along makes everyone happy.

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Pulling together, something our group did very well.
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