



Rainbow Bridge in the 1940s. Note the rider on a horse under the right side of the bridge. Courtesy Dick Griffith

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The River Bug Bites

1942



The flow of the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon is the result of many smaller tributaries combining to form the mighty Colorado. The San Juan River is one of those tributaries. Starting high in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado, the San Juan joins the Colorado deep in Glen Canyon, not far from Rainbow Bridge. Along the way, the San Juan passes the small windblown hamlet of Mexican Hat, Utah.

An oil boom in the early 1920s drew William “Billy” Eugene Nevills to Mexican Hat. In 1928, Billy was joined by his wife Mae “Mo” Davies Nevills and their only child, Norman. Born in Chico, California, in 1908, Norm had finished two years of college in Stockton, California, by 1928. In October of 1933, Norm married nineteen-year-old Doris Drown. The newlyweds floated the San Juan River from Mexican Hat twenty miles downriver to the Honaker Trail in December 1933. In the spring of 1934, they floated the San Juan from Mexican Hat roughly seventy miles downstream to Copper Canyon. Accompanied part way by Billy and Mo, the ever-thrifty Norm had built the two boats the group would travel in, using lumber salvaged from an old outhouse and a cattle trough.

Norm was hired as a river guide on the San Juan for a party from California in 1936, and in 1938 was paid to organize a river trip from Green River, Utah, through Cataract and Grand canyons, all the way to Lake Mead. The 1938 expedition was the outcome of a meeting the previous year between University of Michigan botanist Elzada Clover and Norm. The 1938 Grand Canyon journey included Dr. Clover and one of her students, Lois Jotter.

Clover and Jotter were the first women to travel all the way through the Grand Canyon by boat, although one other woman had preceded them part way through the Canyon. In 1928, the honeymooners Bessie and Glenn Hyde had made it over 226 miles through the Canyon before they went missing and were never seen again. In the fall of 1938, another honeymoon couple made the attempt. The French couple, Bernard and Genevieve DeColmont, with their friend Antoine DeSeyne, paddled wood and rubberized canvas kayaks to Phantom Ranch, where bitter cold forced them to hike out.

The success of the Clover expedition did much to develop Norm’s fledgling river running business, and articles like the one Moulty saw in the *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel* only added fuel to his business fire. In April 1942, Moulty wrote to Norm inquiring about a river trip on the San Juan. Moulty, now thirty-seven, expected to be drafted and wanted to see if he could arrange a river trip with Norm after the war. Four days later, Moulty wrote Norm again, saying he could do the river trip before entering the military. Moulty sent Norm \$100 as a fifty percent deposit for a June San Juan River trip, reserving two spaces for Janice and himself. In that letter he wrote “The Southwest is my favorite part of the country. I like the big open spaces where people are few and far between.”

A month later he and Janice drove out through the sand traps and miles of choking dust to Mexican Hat, arriving on May 31, 1942. Janice was hesitant about the trip, but would laughingly recall years later that “if he was going to go along and get drowned, I would go too.” Mexican Hat boasted a one-lane bridge across the San Juan. The town was named for a wonderful sombrero-shaped rock naturally balanced on a tower of sand-