

"It would not be overblown to say *The Emerald Mile* deserves a spot on the bookshelf alongside such classics as *Cadillac Desert*, *Desert Solitaire*, and *Encounters with the Anabrid*. It's that good." —*THE DURANGO TELEGRAPH*

THE EMERALD MILE

THE EPIC STORY OF THE FASTEST RIDE
IN HISTORY THROUGH
THE HEART OF THE GRAND CANYON



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disaster when three members of the expedition drowned less than thirty miles below Lee's Ferry. (This was the trip that produced Robert Brewster Stanton's striking description of a debris flow as he and the other survivors clawed their way toward the rim.) That tragedy was later followed by some rather comical attempts to shoot motion pictures on the river, one of which included a former tenant of the Central Park Zoo named Cataract and a "mostly Airedale" mutt from the Salt Lake City pound named Rags. Together, they became the first bear cub and the first dog ever to boat through the Grand Canyon. Then in the winter of 1928, a pair of newlyweds from Idaho headed downstream in a cumbersome wooden scow accessorized with a kerosene-burning stove, a mattress, and a set of box springs, which was later discovered floating in an eddy forty-seven miles from the end of the canyon. (The bodies of the couple, Glen and Bessie Hyde, were never found, and the details of their disappearance remain a mystery to this day.)

As dramatic as those ventures may have been, none involved an effort to sprint through the canyon in the manner that Powell and his starving crew were trying to do as they completed their "race for a dinner" during the desperate weeks of August 1869. But finally, in the summer of 1949, the second chapter of this subchronicle was composed by an overweight pharmacist from Paso Robles, California, named Ed Hudson. On the morning of June 12, Hudson and a group of friends pulled out of Lee's Ferry in a motorboat called the *Esmeralda II*. They had two goals in mind: to test-drive the boat, and to stash gasoline supplies in preparation for returning the following year when Hudson planned to take a bold stab at running the entire canyon backward by charging upstream from Lake Mead to Lee's Ferry—an audacious vision that, as he would discover, would prove impossible until the advent of the water-jet engine.*

The *Esmeralda II*, which Hudson had cobbled together in his garage, was unlike anything ever before seen in the canyon. Nineteen feet long and built of plywood, she was modeled along the lines of a Higgins landing craft, a vessel that had been used extensively during World War II for amphibious landings in the invasion of Normandy and throughout the Pacific Islands. On the Colorado, the *Esmeralda II* represented an invasion of a different sort. Propelled by a seventy-five-horsepower inboard engine, she was the canyon's first-ever motorboat, and the roar of her four cylinders heralded the wave of internal-

*In July 1960, a New Zealand inventor named Bill Hamilton led a squadron of three jet boats equipped with propulsion-driven engines from Lake Mead to Lee's Ferry, the first and only time the canyon has ever been run in reverse. Several years later, the Park Service declared it illegal to drive motorboats upstream inside the canyon. The ban remains in effect to this day.

combustion-driven rigs that would soon dominate the world at the bottom of the canyon.

Although Hudson and his crew stopped to camp each night along the shore and also suffered a daylong delay at Phantom Ranch because the mules that were hauling in their resupply of gasoline had stampeded and strewn fuel cans all over the trail, they nevertheless made excellent time, clearing the entire stretch from Lee's Ferry to Pierce Ferry in five days and ten minutes. This was the shortest trip in history from the head of the canyon to the Grand Wash Cliffs. Which meant that in addition to having pulled off the first successful motorized run down the **river**, Hudson had decisively established a Grand Canyon speed record.

That benchmark immediately caught the attention of two brothers who had already carved out places for themselves within the **river**-running community. Jim **Rigg**, the older of the pair, was an ex-soldier and a talented aircraft mechanic from Grand Junction, Colorado, who had become a partner in a company that conducted commercial **river** trips on the Green, the San Juan, and the Colorado. Jim's younger brother, **Bob**, joined the outfit in 1951. The two men were natural athletes who had a gift for rowing and a solid feel for white water. They were also fond of adventure. So that year they decided to see if they could smash Hudson's motor-driven speed record using nothing more than the muscles in their arms and a pair of oars.

Actually, adventure was only part of the **Rigg** brothers' motivation. As partners in a fledgling **river** company, one of the concerns that kept them awake at night was what they would do if one of their passengers suffered a traumatic injury and had to be evacuated from the canyon. At the time, there was virtually no means of summoning outside help, aside from hiking to the rim or attempting to flash a passing aircraft with a mirror, and helicopter extraction was still in its infancy. So if something truly awful happened to one of their clients—a broken femur, a fractured skull, a ruptured spleen—and they absolutely *had* to get that person to a hospital as fast as possible, how long, the brothers wondered, would it take to row out of the canyon?

Intent on finding an answer to that question while also inscribing a new entry in the record books, they pulled away from Lee's Ferry at 7:20 on the morning of June 9, 1951, aboard a wooden boat called the *Norm*, carrying only their "emergency supplies"—a pair of sleeping bags, a screwdriver, a section of plywood patching, their water bottles, and two glass jars, one filled with peanut butter and the other with jelly. Their plan was to run almost every rapid "wide-open," which meant they would not be stopping for a single scout, except at Lava Falls. They took turns at the oars, each brother rowing for about an hour at a time, and they moved with unbelievable speed, passing beneath the metal

footbridge at Phantom Ranch late on the first afternoon and anchoring to set up camp just above a tributary drainage called Bass Canyon, 108 miles from Lee's Ferry, around 8:00 p.m. that night.

The following morning they were back on the water at dawn, and by early afternoon they were pulling over at the top of Lava Falls. After taking a quick look at the rapid, they agreed to tackle it by threading through a narrow chute on the left-hand side that featured a sharp drop-off. As they hurled down the tongue, **Bob**, who was at the oars, felt a series of harsh bangs reverberating up from his blades. "Man, we got rocks on the oars!" he cried.

"You're doing great," declared Jim, who was riding "fish-eye," splayed across the deck. "We're going the right way!" Indeed they were. A few seconds more and the little boat had been spit out of the bottom of the rapid and was rocketing through the tail waves without a scratch.

When darkness descended a few hours later, they kept right on rowing, dodging the rocks by sound until just before midnight, when they finally eddied out, wolfed down another ration of peanut butter and jelly, and snatched a few hours of sleep.

They peeled through the final stretch of **river** on the morning of the third day, reaching the Grand Wash Cliffs shortly before 11:00 a.m. and establishing three separate historic precedents. This was the first time that all but one of the rapids had been run wide-open in succession, a testament to the skill of two extraordinary young men who had a total of only three previous Grand Canyon trips between the pair of them. They had also set a brand-new speed record of fifty-two hours and forty-one minutes. And they had proved that a hard-hulled, wooden oar boat could more than hold its own against motors.

The **Rigg** brothers' run is justifiably remembered to this day as one of the most impressive feats of boatmanship the canyon has ever seen. To run the whole 277 miles in just over two days seemed nothing short of miraculous, an accomplishment that evoked both admiration and envy within the guiding community. But it also raised some stark questions about whether racing down the Colorado might not cut directly against the grain of what was emerging, among those who knew the **river** world the best, as a consensus about the most fulfilling and exemplary way to experience the canyon.



Of the many attractions that draw people to the bottom of the canyon, perhaps the most potent and beguiling is the realization that the experience is the *opposite* of a race—the antithesis of rushing from where you are toward someplace you think you would rather be, only to discover, once you arrive, that your true goal lies somewhere else. That is a defining characteristic of life in the world