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SALMON RIVER NAVIGATION

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When Lewis and Clark set out in 1804 to explore a route from St. Louis to the Pacific, they expected to make a short portage from the Missouri River to a navigable tributary of the Columbia.

But they found a barrier: the Rocky Mountains, which they penetrated at 7,362-foot Lemhi Pass. They descended a desert valley to the Salmon River, hoping there to build new boats to finish their trip. But William Clark's exploration of the Salmon River Canyon and even more discouraging reports by local Indians of impassable gorges farther downstream led the party to try an entirely different route.

In 1832, four French Canadian trappers from John Work's Hudson's Bay Company Snake expedition set out to explore the Salmon River Canyon where Clark had turned back. Two of them got through safely, but their partners disappeared in a turbulent rapid after having completed most of their rough trip. From then on, fur trappers decided to take their canoes elsewhere.

A generation later, exceptionally rich placer mines at Florence, located in a high mountain basin more than 4,000 feet above the Salmon, brought thousands of eager prospectors to that area. In 1862, mining parties leaving or approaching Florence ascended and descended the Salmon River Canyon without noticing any gold deposits rich enough to interest them. Other high basins in the region--particularly at Warren's and Leesburg--had plenty of gold, and less productive Salmon River bars attracted miners only during seasons when richer claims could not be worked.

Improved transportation might have led to faster development of mineral resources in the area, but only a usable transcontinental route would justify such an expensive undertaking. Walter W. DeLacy's 1872 Northern Pacific Railway survey offered some hope, but not enough. Although his investigation was "regarded as the most difficult instrumental survey ever made in the United States," he had a highly attractive route--largely because it appeared more direct than other proposed routes and presented less of a problem of winter snow. But unacceptably long tunnels along the lower Salmon were a significant problem, and construction costs would have been excessive. So an indirect route much farther north had to be substituted. Aside from DeLacy's boaters and John Mackay's regular mining trips from 1872 on, Salmon River navigation became

rare for a decade.

Lode discoveries at Shoup in 1882 finally encouraged increased interest in the canyon area that Lewis and Clark had avoided. Stamp mills and other heavy equipment had to be hauled into a country where roads could be constructed only with great expense and extreme difficulty. So commercial navigation finally commenced on the Salmon River to serve a mining population in that area.

Fortified with a load of fourteen gallons of whiskey, five men set out from Salmon on December 1, 1882, on an initial ten-day boat trip to Shoup. Hauling almost eight tons of crew and cargo, they demonstrated that commercial navigation could serve their new mining district. A crew of two followed with twelve more tons of freight, operating on a schedule of only two days. Soon they reduced the forty-five-mile trip to less than one day. From then on, an important mining community depended upon river transportation for freight service. This system had an unusual feature not shared by ordinary navigation enterprises: boats could go only down stream. But lumber was needed along with other supplies, so boats were dismantled at their destination, forming part of the cargo on the river.

Another large gold camp in the area up Indian Creek at Ulysses, also had to rely upon the Salmon River to bring in stamp mills. This proved troublesome. Loads bound for Shoup or Pine Creek sailed by Indian Creek with no trouble, but one large freight outfit bound for Ulysses in 1899 was swept right on past its destination. High water prevented its landing until it had rushed a mile too far. A crew of five had to hack out a makeshift road back upstream to drag the equipment and supplies to an Indian Creek landing. Some flat-bottomed scows were lost in wrecks, but in two decades of practice, experienced crews became expert in working their way through hazardous rapids. Some of them eventually grew bold enough to risk trips through worse rapids on below Shoup.

Among upper Salmon navigators, Harry Guleke emerged as more competent, innovative, confident, and daring than anyone else. Since he knew what he was doing, he felt he really wasn't taking much risk in running dangerous rapids. Having designed a flat-bottomed, somewhat-flexible scow controlled by front and back sweeps, he learned to pilot his two-man craft through anything he encountered in the Salmon River's almost impenetrable gorge. His design, while of necessity more rigid, somewhat anticipated a rubber raft. By 1898 he was active below Shoup. He extended his route greatly to reach a wild gold rush at Buffalo Hump almost as far away from Salmon as Florence was. Then he helped R. F. and J. F. Dwyer complete a hunting trip by boat from Salmon to Lewiston, November 8-December 17, 1902. In 1904, his skills gained a lot of publicity from a long trip in which he had delivered Robert G. Bailey to Bargamin Creek a season earlier. An experienced newspaper reporter, Bailey had

gone to Buffalo Hump and Thunder Mountain before spending a couple of years at his Salmon Gorge mining claim. In a long account in the Elk City Miner, Bailey explained how Guleke's scow had negotiated difficult passages. Thirty-two feet long by eight feet wide, their heavily loaded three-foot-deep freight boat displaced only fourteen inches of water when carrying five tons. Sweeps with twenty-four-foot handles mounted on pivots gave them control of an otherwise unwieldy craft, but they still had excitement as well as problems. Bailey could not really describe his sensation of excitement and concentration during a rocky descent of Pine Creek rapids just below Shoup:

In less than one minute we had passed safely over the danger point, but during this one minute--with breakers rolling 8 or 10 feet high--we had to get in quick work with our sweeps, and throw the boat in rapid succession, from one side of the river to the other. .

. . . After the Pine Creek rapids we shot along at a rapid pace through rapids so swift and narrow that it looked at times as if our boat was too wide to force the passage. Down, down we rushed 'mid the swirling water at a pace that was fully eight miles an hour. Along this part of the river the hills stand on end, in fact it looks as if some of them lean over. Box canyons and canyons that were not boxed, were rushed through, but ever the eagle eye and quick arm of the pilot warded off danger and carried us safely through.

A day later, they had problems with a four-mile stretch in Black Canyon just above has a drop of seven feet. It is sheer drop off, and the combers below roll back in a way to make the stoutest heart quail. The pilot and I debated the matter long and earnestly before putting the boat to the task of making the jump.

But if we were to continue the journey, it was a case of have to. The principal question for discussion was whether or not to transfer the cargo--make the portage.

We decided that running the falls in the empty boat was endangering our lives, and that we could take the chances with the cargo. So we again boarded our ship and pushed out from the shore. Near the center of the falls there was a narrow opening between the huge boulders which it was necessary for us to make if we were to get through at all. When almost to the falls the water began to boil at such a rate that we were thrown clear out of the channel. Seeing that we could not possibly make the narrow opening, with desperate energy we succeeded in throwing the boat to one side, in the lee of a large rock, just on the brink of the falls. And then the herculean task of dragging the

boat a quarter of a mile up stream began. We finally succeeded, and then embarked for another try at the falls. This time we were more successful, and struck the opening just at the right place. As we got into the opening when one third of its length was projecting over the falls, the boat came to a sudden and violent stop. The water was too shallow. But the stop was only momentary. In an instant the water backed up behind us, and the boat took the jump as gracefully as a swan.

Bailey recommended his wild "trip down this river of no return as a hair-raiser." His allusion to a "river of no return" referred to total inability to take boats back upstream to Salmon or Shoup. Aware that his descriptive phrase had been used to describe a similar South American canyon, he felt that it applied equally well to Idaho's Salmon Gorge. Although Guleke worked on channel improvement for a number of years, blasting out particularly difficult obstructions, return trips remained impossible for another half-century. Guleke and his Salmon associates got their river declared navigable in order to qualify for federal channel improvement, but funding did not materialize.

Using only his own resources, Guleke rapidly built up a flourishing navigation business, with other operators attempting to join in after he had demonstrated what could be done.

A major advance in Guleke's range of operation came early in 1908, when he took T. H. Bacon on a Gilmore and Pittsburgh Railway reconnaissance from Salmon to Lewiston. (A generation after DeLacy's survey, construction problems that had blocked access from Salmon to Lewiston might appear less insurmountable.)

Bacon came away favorably impressed. Guleke eventually supplied and escorted Bacon's survey parties to Lewiston, and when that Northern Pacific associate failed to advance past Salmon, he participated in other canyon rail surveys. By 1910, when Gilmore and Pittsburgh passenger service was extended to Salmon, Guleke could return from Lewiston (via Spokane and Butte) entirely by rail. By water, Lewiston was a trifle over three hundred miles from Salmon. By rail, it was well over twice that far.

Making several trips each year, Guleke operated occasionally in winter as well as in summer. In his initial sixteen years of freighting, he hauled nearly three million pounds of cargo in more than two hundred trips. (His Ulysses assignment alone took thirty-three boats to haul half a million tons.) More than two hundred boats were built and then dismantled for lumber after making a single trip. But some were getting larger and sturdier.

He could haul eight tons in a twelve-by-forty-foot boat, although his standard eight-by-thirty-two-foot scow still served his Lewiston traffic.

Increased publicity for Guleke's enterprise came in February 1912 when Caroline Lockhart published an account of one of his

mine-machinery trips in Outing. Readers learned that "those who know the West from the Mexican border to the Canadian line consider the Salmon river the wickedest water, next to certain portions of the Snake, between these boundaries." Although Guleke had provided some channel improvement, Salmon River's rapids still presented a challenge. An early venture was terrifying enough:

For an instant it seemed as though the boat poised on the edge of a precipice with half her length in mid-air before she dropped into a curve of water that was like the hollow of a great green shell. The roar was deafening. When the sheet of water that drenched us broke over the boat it seemed to shut out the sun. The barge came up like a clumsy Newfoundland, with the water streaming from the platform and swishing through the machinery in the bottom. Guleke was there at his sweep, unshaken by the shock, throwing his great strength upon it first this way then that, to keep it in the center of the current--the tortuous channel through which we were tearing like mad.

Sometimes the water shot over the top of partially submerged great boulders, again it struck them with a force which made it boil and seethe. We sat, the baler and I in tense, strained, silence and during that seven miles Guleke never lifted his eyes or relaxed the muscles of his set jaw, but steered with the sureness of knowledge and determination. The praises I had heard no longer seemed extravagant. A novice would have lasted in that water about one minute, or only so long as it would have taken him to drown

"That's the worst, isn't it?" I hoped that he would not notice the quaver in my voice. "Oh, no, it gets worse as you go farther down there's the Growler, the Big Mallard, and the Whiplash that I mind more than the Pine Creek Rapids."

After he achieved national recognition of the Salmon River's navigational possibilities, Guleke's business expanded along recreational lines. After 1912 he began to take hunting and pleasure parties into a canyon fabulous for big game and fishing as well as for scenery. But he continued to supply a series of mining camps and isolated ranches. He generally made at least four trips to Lewiston each season, between April and November with enough intermediate journeys that he had taken 400 boats down by 1918. Aside from supplying mines and ranches along his route, he shipped high-grade ore and farm and ranch products out to Lewiston markets. A modest Salmon Canyon economy grew out of his recreation and transportation business. J. R. Painter developed a guest ranch and mine near Dixie that offered gold

hunting as an additional allure for more applicants than his facilities could accommodate.

A renewed campaign in 1918 to get federal authorities to invest a small amount of funding in channel improvements attracted a lot more attention to Guleke's enterprise. Then in 1919 and 1920, he took expeditions of motion picture photographers who prepared spectacular feature films that led in 1922 to an arrangement for a regular movie with a Salmon Canyon setting. By 1920 Guleke had a new shipyard in Salmon, where his crews turned out new boats as fast as he could use them. That season he was entirely booked up by June. His lower Salmon freight business remained at a high level and complemented the increased recreation trade. His former lucrative freight traffic to Ulysses and Shoup, however, suffered with the construction of roads. The road from North Fork to Indianola was accepted as a county road on April 13, 1903. (In April, 1901, the county commissioners accepted the proposition of Ulysses Mine owners and declared the road from the mouth of Indian Creek to Ulysses, which had been built by mining interests in 1899, as a county road.) The road was extended on to Shoup in 1918 and the first automobile reached the camp in July. Shortly thereafter a truck service was started, running from the railroad in Salmon to the mines.

In 1921, as part of a national power-site inventory, Guleke supplied a five-month United States Geological Survey expedition which engaged in a thorough investigation that showed exceptional opportunities for hydroelectric plants. No major dams resulted from this survey, but more publicity attended all the effort. Then in 1922, he built a specially designed forty-five-foot dredge to haul equipment and to operate with a screw propeller run by a steam boiler plant. He floated the dredge to a point below Colson Creek and turned it over to the owners, who planned to take the boat farther downstream and work the Salmon River bars when water conditions were more favorable. National patronage for his recreation trips continued to thrive. By 1922, several outfitters had begun to operate out of Salmon, but Guleke retained his ascendancy. Eleanor Medill Patterson (then a retired Polish countess, Eleanor Gizycka, but destined to gain prominence as a newspaper publisher with interests in the New York Daily News, Chicago Tribune, and Washington Times-Herald) published a long account of one of Guleke's 1921 trips in Field and Stream, May-June 1923. They had a hot July trip with some excitement, but not too much:

In a minute or two we are pulled magically into the tossing, brilliant, bewildering water; and, on veering off to the left [all] of a sudden the sweep is knocked out of the captain's hands and far out to one side, clear of the boat. I didn't suppose a man weighing well over two hundred could move so fast.

Guleke springs down from the bridge, yells for us to lie down flat out of the danger of the swinging sweeps, and the next we know, on tentatively raising our heads, we are stuck fast on the rocks, seemingly high and dry.

None of us appreciated the danger at the time; for there we rested comfortably, while the water divided about us and rushed on smooth and green very fast. And just below, in the dazzling sunshine romped and played the whitecaps. How long, in that terrific current, could our little shield of boards and nails hold out against the strain? Within a few minutes, pried loose again, the scow veered around, first stern on, into deeper water. The rapids are wilder, more brilliant, more bewildering. The boat slaps down on the white-crested waves, amazingly steady and the spray splashes mockingly over us, soaking us all to the skin.

We stand at the bow and laugh and shout, excited, but not really afraid.

Pine Creek rapids caused no problem:

To be honest, the falls are not as sensational as I expected. We two women stand in the front of the boat. Arthur and Ben at the rear to balance; and off we skim, down the mighty, slipping sheet of glassy water. Slap! The spray flies in a blinding sheet. Slap, and slap again! The whole boat lands easily, one can't judge how or when, for the bewildering douce of foam and dazzling, rim-shot, churning water. We've dropped twelve feet, but certainly without emphatic shock. Now the prow lifts to a big wave, and on they come, short and choppy, swiftly succeeding, and each one splashing clear over our heads.

The whole scare, if scare there is, comes in avoiding the rocks. Sometimes in the narrows there's not six inches leeway on either side. Of course smaller boats than ours have another problem to face; the treacherous undercurrent and swirling eddies pounce sometimes upon them catlike, spin them around, turn them over at one stroke and suck them under and out of sight.

Another well-publicized trip followed in 1925, when Jerry J. Griffin and J. William Johnson of Chicago accompanied a Pocatello party from Salmon to Lewiston August 1-10. Griffin reported that his trip was full of thrills from beginning to end

It would be possible to talk for half a day and still not tell half of the thrills of shooting those rapids and waterfalls. I have traveled considerable

over the scenic wonders of the world and never yet have I found anything that equals the trip we just completed. I have been on an ocean liner in one of the worst storms the Atlantic is capable, when it seems every minute the boat would be broken in two; when we pitched a hundred feet or more, but I got no such thrill as I did when we dropped over Snow hole, one of the treacherous rapids and falls of the lower Salmon.

Under the safe guidance of Captain Guleke we headed straight for this rapid, thinking it just another of the numerous rapids we had negotiated during our long ride down the gorge. Two giant boulders lay directly ahead of us. Merely to miss these I thought to be our only trouble. Down the beginning of the rapids we sped, Mr. Hinkley and myself in the bow of the scow. Once past the rocks we thought we were done.

But not so in the Snow hole. We were only starting, for just before us was a waterfall, said to be a sheer drop of 12 feet. This was no rapid; it was a waterfall. Over this we shot, and I thought sure we would be dashed to pieces on the rocks which bounded on every side.

Just as we hit the falls Captain Guleke fell on the floor of the scow with his oar under him, lifting the paddle end out of the water. Bang we hit that falls and Hinkley and I were showered with giant waves; the scow wreaked and weaved about in the rapids and soon we were past what is declared the most difficult rapid to negotiate in all rough river riding. I never had such a thrill in my life and never expect another like it.

How that little scow, which was constructed of one-inch boards and two by sixes, ever stood the shock is more than I can tell. To look at the frail boat or scow the casual observer would say it would not negotiate the merest rapid without being torn to pieces. But Captain Guleke knows how to build these boats so they will give. The scow seems to wriggle through those giant rapids just like an eel, giving where [there] is need to and remaining intact all the way.

I don't believe there is a trip like this in all the United States. We took numerous pictures, but it is my regret that we were not able to get a motion picture camera as we had planned, to get some of the action pictures along the route. We saw almost every wild animal that lives in the mountains of Idaho along the route. We actually saw everything but cougar. There were bear, deer, elk, coon, otter, and I don't remember what all, and fishing--we caught the limit

every day. . . .

More than one wary cougar very likely watched Griffin's party, but they almost always keep out of sight.

A decade later, a National Geographic and United States Geological Survey party brought still more notice to Guleke's river traffic. Congressman (and later senator) D. Worth Clark joined geologists Philip J. Shenon of Salmon, John C. Reed, and A. W. Farenwald and forester Howard R. Flint in an expedition reported in July 1936. Guleke was nearing retirement after a four-decade career, but Elmer Keith, who had joined him in 1930, was preserving his boating tradition. Keith developed a national reputation as a specialist in firearms as well as navigation, and Salmon River boating survived on an ever-growing scale.

Protection of a large central Idaho wilderness region, in which cougar and other wildlife could retain a territory free from roads and other encroachment, helped preserve much of the Salmon River's integrity. In 1930, Senator William E. Borah and Governor H. C. Baldrige requested Forest Service designation of a large Salmon River mountain primitive area, which was accomplished a year later through administrative action. Road-building projects below French Creek and above Corn Creek shortened a slowly decreasing gap in Idaho's forest road system, but a substantial segment of the canyon was finally reserved for boaters. That arrangement originated as a result of natural obstacles to road construction but finally was accepted as having positive value.

Important changes eventually transformed Salmon Canyon navigation after a half-century of one-way trips by river scow. In 1945, Don and Clyde Smith used an Army Engineers motor boat to go upstream to pick up surveyors whom they supplied with two scows on another river damsite investigation. Although they did not make a single upstream trip, they went upstream several times over their entire Salmon-Lewiston route. Then in 1947, Rogue River boatman Glen Wooldridge of Grants Pass built a plywood motor boat at Riggins and took it up to Salmon that summer. Soon jet boats made return trips much more practical, and the Salmon River canyon became a water highway.

Congressional approval of national wilderness legislation in 1964 and of wild and scenic rivers protection in 1968 also affected the Salmon River Gorge. Finally in 1980, additional federal statutory protection was provided specifically for the Salmon River. As a wilderness attraction, Salmon River navigation continued to expand. But rubber rafts and jet boats displaced Guleke's old freight scows. And channel improvement reduced a number of hazards that had confronted Guleke's early operations.

Information provided by Larry Jones

Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428