

# NO RIVER FOR OLD MEN

BY JOHN MANUEL

WHEN CHRIS WENT DOWN WITH A BROKEN LEG halfway through the portage, I started doing the numbers—25 miles against a strong current back to the put-in, then God knows how long a hike to the nearest home. No way. The takeout was 52 miles downstream, through a dozen named rapids we'd never seen. That would take four days at the rate we were moving. I stared up at the sheer rock walls that towered 1,000 feet above the river. Forget it.







"The loneliest river in the lower 48 states." That's how one guidebook describes the East Fork of the Owyhee River in southwestern Idaho. Despite the river's unparalleled beauty, few people are willing to run it due to its remote location in the high sagebrush desert. Not to mention the difficult quarter-mile portage around Owyhee Falls. Even without a critically injured team member, the portage takes several hours. We'd been here close to six.

I glanced at my nine tripmates, strung out along the steep slope of tufted grass and scree that swept hundreds of feet down to the falls. Lynn, 69, nursed a bad ankle and a persistent cough. Bob and Martha, both in their mid-60s, slumped beside their packs. Burt and I were both 59, me with a bad shoulder. If we pushed too hard, we risked another injury.

One number could have saved us: 911. Burt had a satellite phone, but didn't know if he could establish a signal down in a thousand-foot-deep canyon. He spotted a nub of rock that stuck 50 feet out from the slope, giving him a marginally better window. "I'll climb up there and start calling," he said. "Let's hope we get lucky."

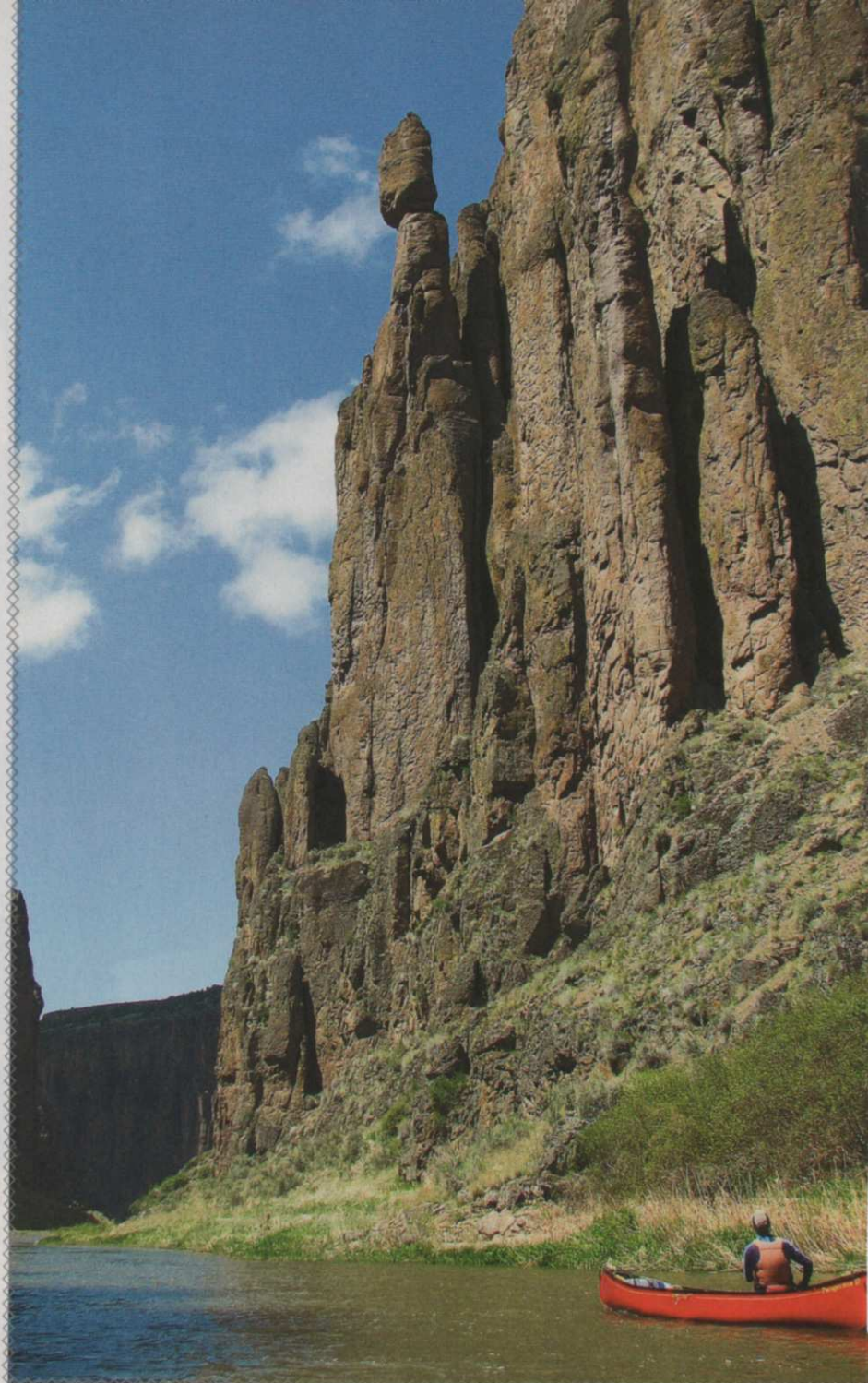
None of us talked about what would happen if we didn't get lucky. If we had to paddle Chris out four days in the bottom of a canoe, we were looking at an amputee, or, if complications set in, possibly a dead man.

I stared at the ashen ribbon of water surging through the rocks below. "This is no river for old men," I said.

Burt scratched his gray beard. "Don't count us out yet, John."

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Wild places have a way of testing one's limits. When you travel into remote wilderness as part of a group, you not only have to trust your own experience and ability, but those of your partners as well. Paddling tandem canoes through whitewater only accentuates that challenge. Our group of adventurers was used to it.



“SEVEN DAYS THROUGH  
A SPECTACULAR  
CANYON, RUNNING CLASS  
III-IV RAPIDS AND PORTAG-  
ING 500 FEET UP AND DOWN  
THE SIDE OF THE GORGE.”



We call ourselves the Tarheel Canoe Club—an informal group of 20-odd people, mostly from North Carolina, united by a love of whitewater canoe tripping. In various combinations, we have tackled more than a dozen marquee wilderness rivers, including the Lower Canyons of the Rio Grande, the Lower Salmon, and the Mountain River in Canada's Northwest Territories. Most of us are over 50, half are in their 60s. Chris and his wife, Monica, both in their mid-30s, are the babies of the group. We pay no dues and avoid formal meetings. Instead, we receive invitations in the mail from our leader, Burt Kornegay, owner of Slickrock Expeditions in Cullowhee, N.C.

This year's letter outlined a long, challenging trip—seven days and 77 miles through a spectacular canyon, running half-a-dozen Class III-IV rapids and portaging 500 feet up and down the side of the gorge. The water temperature in May would be in the 40s, the air temperature in the canyon could range from the 30s to the 90s. "Pack accordingly," Burt wrote.

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Some months later, on a cool, cloudy morning, we rumbled in a four-wheel-drive shuttle vehicle down an eroded track to the put-in at Garat Crossing. The East Fork of the Owyhee looked harmless, a shallow stream running through a sage-brush meadow. We unloaded our tandem canoes, donned our paddling gear, and sat down for a quick lunch.

Just as the shuttle driver disappeared over the horizon, the clouds unleashed a fusillade of hail. I crouched in the sage, wish-

ing I'd spent the extra \$20 for an insulated helmet liner. In keeping with Burt's edict, I'd purchased more than \$500 worth of gear, including Hydroskin baselayers and matching "semi-dry" paddling jacket and pants. They were not enough to keep away the chill.

Even the rocks proved hazardous. Leaning backward in the sage, I brushed my hand across a piece of razor-sharp basalt and split open two of my fingers. I dug into the medical kit and eventually staunched the flow of blood, but for the rest of the trip, I would have difficulty gripping my paddle.

When the hail finally abated, we paired up, launched our canoes, and rode the swift current into the canyon. Dark columns of basalt, formed eons ago from rapidly cooling lava, rose straight up from the riverbed. Tim, my bowman, spotted a herd of bighorn sheep on a narrow ledge.

"Not bad for our first afternoon," Tim said.

Then, the headwinds began. What started out as intermittent puffs rippling the surface turned into withering blasts that stopped the canoes dead in the water.

"Paddle, woman!" Bob called to Martha.

"I'm paddling as hard as I can!" Martha snapped.

It was the first time in a decade of canoeing I'd heard her use that tone of voice.

Everyone's patience was wearing thin, and by the end of a second wind-ripped day, we were thoroughly beat. We dragged our canoes onto a gravel bar, sagged against the "couch" (a pair of overturned canoes) and downed shots of whiskey. Lynn coughed uncontrollably. I rubbed my aching shoulder. As

darkness fell, I retired to my tent and inflated my coveted air mattress, hoping to get a good night's sleep before facing the portage around Owyhee Falls. But sleep wouldn't come.

Muscle aches are a normal part of a hard day on the water and, with the help of a couple of Ibuprofen, they usually disappear overnight. But my shoulder pain wouldn't quit. The condition I suffered from, swimmer's shoulder, felt like a meat hook lodged in my trapezius muscle. Every time I took a forward stroke or rolled onto my side, the hook dug in. I lay there in the dark, wondering if I could go on another five days.

The question was moot, of course. The only way out was forward, so the next morning I swallowed more Advil and pressed on. We reached the portage just before noon. We could neither hear nor see the waterfall that necessitated our diversion, but Burt's map assured us this was the place. A faint path led from the river's edge straight up a steep slope of tufted grass and loose rock.

I strapped on a 70-pound food pack and started up the trail. The incline was so steep that I could touch the trail ahead with an outstretched hand. Just when I thought I couldn't go another yard, the trail leveled out and ran along the base of a sheer cliff. I caught a glimpse of Owyhee Falls far below. The trail started down.

In my early teens, at a canoe camp in Canada, I portaged many rocky trails and learned the importance of looking before planting my feet. As I labored down the side of the gorge, I recited a mantra: "See the rock, step on the rock." I dumped my pack at the river and headed back for another load. Lynn





passed me coming down, his face gone white.

"Bad news," he said. "Chris slipped on a loose rock. His leg is broken."

When I reached him, Chris lay on his back at the highest point of the portage. His foot was turned at a right angle, the tibia and fibula protruding beneath the skin. Monica cradled his 220-pound frame from behind, while Perry, a family physician, removed his boot and ran a finger over his arch.

"Can you feel that?" Perry asked.

Chris nodded yes.

That was the good news. The rest was bad. A broken leg, Perry explained, can swell in a matter of hours, cutting off blood flow and nerve sensation. Not setting the bone within a day or two can lead to amputation and, if the patient goes into shock, even death. But an improperly set leg can also be dangerous, damaging blood vessels and nerves. We had to get him to a hospital.

Chris took the news with amazing calm, but the pain had yet to set in. We had nothing to give him but over-the-counter medications. What would happen—to him, to us—if he had to endure another four or five days in the canyon?

The six of us who were not otherwise injured or occupied set about portaging the remaining gear. Ordinarily, I would carry a canoe overhead, but on this steep trail with the wind whipping through the gorge, that was out of the question. Dropping to all fours, I clawed my way up the

bank, dragging the 17-foot-long Mad River Explorer behind. The others did the same, until all five canoes and the attendant gear were transported around the waterfall.

On our last foray, Burt announced he had made contact with a 911 operator. An hour later, a single-engine plane arrived and circled overhead. A helicopter followed, hovering just above the canyon rim, but refusing to drop any lower.

Afternoon stretched into evening. The chopper flew off, followed by the spotter plane. We watched with dismay as our would-be rescuers disappeared. Burt pulled out his topographic map. "We need to head downstream and find some flat ground," he said. "There's no way anyone can rescue us here."

Our first challenge was to get Chris down to the river. "Let's tie all our throw ropes together," he said. "We'll put Chris in a canoe, tie the ropes to one end, and lower him down."

Using a splint from the medical kit, Burt and Perry stabilized Chris's leg, then hefted him into the canoe. The rest of us positioned ourselves at intervals down the slope, which dropped at a 60-degree slope to the boulder-strewn shore to just below the falls, 300 feet below. Anchoring himself against a rock and wrapping the rope around his life jacket, Burt began to lower his precious cargo. The canoe scraped and groaned over the rocks, ending up cantilevered over a boulder, 10 feet above the river.

"That's all the rope I have," Burt called down.

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Bob and I scrambled to lower the canoe from underneath. "We've got him!"

Our celebration was short-lived. Though Chris was down, the sun had dropped below the canyon walls. And we were still 52 miles from the van. We set off downriver, calling out the rocks as they loomed from the deepening shadows. After about a mile and a half, paddling in near darkness, the canyon walls began to recede. We rounded a bend and there on the bank stood the helicopter.

The pilot and a nurse hustled a stretcher down to the river. "We couldn't land where you guys were at. The canyon walls were too narrow and the wind gusts were too high. They could have blown us right into the wall," said the pilot, Brian. "But we could see you all coming along. We weren't going to leave you."

Monica approached the pilot. "I'm Chris's fiancée. Can I go with him?"

Brian shook his head. "We dropped two rescue people at the top of the gorge. There isn't room."

Monica fought back the tears. "I'll see you in Boise, baby."

When the chopper disappeared, we stripped off our sweat-soaked clothing and dug out flasks of whiskey. I helped Monica set up her tent. Burt cooked his "Texas Two-Step," a mixture of black beans, rice, corn, Mexican tomatoes, and chili peppers, topped with picante sauce and grated cheese. As I downed the first mouthful, I noticed a funny thing. My shoulder had stopped hurting. Whether it was the adrenaline from the long portage and rescue or the shoulder straps of the packs stretching my back muscles into proper alignment, I didn't know. But for the first time on the trip, I felt good. Elated.

But the Owyhee never allowed us to fully relax. We awoke each morning to near-freezing temperatures and struggled into our clammy paddling jackets. One mile, the river would be calm, the next it would surge through a dangerous, rock-filled passage. At House Rock rapid, Lynn and I capsized and endured a lengthy swim. As the 40-degree water soaked through the Velcro cuffs of my paddling jacket and pants, I learned what the manufacturer meant by "semi-dry."

Late on the fifth day, we pulled up to Cabin rapid, a dizzying maze of boulder-strewn whitewater that ran for more than a quarter of a mile. We hiked the rocky shoreline, studying the rapid from every angle. Burt suggested only the best paddlers should attempt this rapid, run-

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ning the canoes through one at a time.

"Who's volunteering?" he asked.

Perry, Tim, and Jon raised their hands. I didn't lift mine. I had always been one of the first to volunteer, but something told me to hold back.

"I'll take a throw rope and wait at the bottom," I said.

Burt looked surprised. "Okay, John. I need a good rope man."

A hundred yards into the rapid, Burt and Tim dumped. Swimming with one hand and pulling the canoe with the other, they struggled to keep their waterlogged boats from jamming against the rocks. They made it ashore, visibly shaken, and trudged upstream to get the next canoe.

Over the next hour, Burt, Tim, Jon, and Perry paddled all five canoes to a sheltered pool midway through the rapid. With the light fading, we called the operation to a halt, pitching our tents in the dark on a narrow ledge.

At dinner, the group was subdued. Monica announced she'd lost her appetite. I followed her back to her tent.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

In the moonlight, I could see the desperation in her eyes.

"I just want to get off this river," she said.

I gave her a big hug. "We'll get off," I said. "I promise."

In books and movies, one person always quits when a group gets in trouble. This makes for a good story, but it also reflects reality. Most of us are not conditioned to handle prolonged stress. The natural tendency is to give up, or worse, to stage a mutiny. Instead, our group, seasoned by age and experience, pulled together.

As if to reward us, the Owyhee unveiled its finest treasures. Hoodoos, pillars of rock shaped like giant totem poles, loomed around every other bend. We discovered a pioneer cabin with log rafters and sod roof still intact. On the last day, we rounded a bend to see the sunlight shining like a beacon off the windshield of Burt's van. I gave Monica a high-five. "We made it!"

As we drove back to Boise, gray heads nodding on the seat rests, I marveled at how this group had responded to the challenge. We might not have the strength we used to, but each person contributed what they were best at, whether that was paddling a canoe or helping pitch a tent. When we arrived at the motel, Chris was waiting in the lobby in a wheelchair. Monica ran forward and hugged him.

"Have you been on a trip?" the desk clerk asked me.

"Oh, yeah," I answered.

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