

BRYCE WHITMORE (Stanislaus River pioneer)

By Dick Linford (2018) – from his book, “Halfway to Halfway and Back”, available on Amazon Books

If Bryce Whitmore were a boastful man, he could claim to be the father of river running in California. There were a few other crazies kayaking California rivers with Bryce in the 1950s, but they’re all dead. And there is no question Bryce pioneered whitewater rafting. He was offering rafting trips before people knew they wanted them, and with rafts that he designed and made himself because no one else was making them.

Bryce was born in a small town in Ohio in 1926. Upon graduation from high school he was drafted, and spent his Army career on a hospital ship in San Francisco Bay. While his fellow soldiers were plying the bars and fleshpots of the Bay Area, Bryce got out of town. He loved the California countryside.

When he was discharged from the Army he returned to Ohio. It was February and freezing. He lasted a few days and headed back to California. With no training or education in the field, he got a job as a chemist at a paint factory in Berkeley, across the Bay from San Francisco. At first he spent his free time skating and sailing. Then he discovered car racing. He found himself spending most of his spare time driving racecars at various race tracks in northern California. He bought a Panhard, a French two-cylinder vehicle that was ahead of its time. It could actually hit 90 miles an hour, and had front-wheel steering. He won a lot of races. He was actually arrested for speeding on the freeway. Unable to pay the fine he was sentenced to a week in jail.

Even though he was winning races with his French car, Bryce was frustrated that America wasn't producing anything that could compete with the foreign cars made by Porche, Panhard, Ferrari, etc. He decided to change this by building his own car in his garage.

But then his life took a new turn. A neighbor invited him on a river kayak trip. The river bug doesn't bite everybody, and some who are bitten aren't affected strongly. Bruce was not only bitten. He was smitten. He had found his true love. He threw himself into kayaking and soon joined The River Touring Section of the Sierra Club.

Several members of the Club had just returned from Europe, where they had found out about kayaks. Europeans at the time were using kayaks made on the Inuit model, but where the Inuits made their frames of whalebone and stretched animal skins over the frames to make them water-tight, the Europeans made their frames out of wood and their "skins" out of canvas. One company, aptly named Foldboat, made a boat that could be folded up for easy carrying. Foldboat is still around and still making boats.

The one problem with these boats was that they were fragile. Bryce bought one, hit a rock head-on on his first trip, and destroyed it. He decided to make a boat that could handle whitewater and take at least a minor beating. He applied the technical smarts and quiet self-confidence he had been applying to building a better racecar to building a better kayak. After studying both boat design and materials for some time, he decided that the best boats should be made of fiberglass. He built a mold and made himself a boat.

History gets fuzzy here, and again Bryce –Mr. Modest-- won't make the claim. But this could well have been the first fiberglass kayak in the world. If there is evidence to the contrary, I would like to see it. Bryce still has the first boat.

When he tried it, it worked so well that several of his kayaking buddies asked him to build them one. He built twelve. At the time, the life jackets available were too bulky for kayaking. Bryce and his friends got a surf shop owner to make them special short-sleeved wetsuit tops that provided both flotation and warmth. The shop owner was so impressed with the fiberglass kayaks that he asked Bryce if he buy the mold to make more. Bryce convinced him that the kayak market was saturated, and he threw the mold away. While this might seem short-sighted now, remember that this was 1956 and kayaking was limited to a very few crazies. It would take another fifteen to twenty years for kayaking to really catch on. But building the kayaks filled both his time and his garage, so he sold the parts of the car he was building to make room for his new venture.

From then on, all of Bruce's spare time was spent kayaking. He and his friends started doing multi-day trips, packing their gear into their boats. He had a black lab, Charlie Brown, would sit in his lap. Charlie especially enjoyed it when Bryce rolled his boat. In 1959 they ran the Rogue River in southwest Oregon. They ran the forty-five or so miles from Galice to Agnes, and Bryce and Charlie both loved it.

1960 was a pivotal year. First, Bryce took first place in a down-river race at an international kayak event held on the Arkansas River near Salida, Colorado. Later, he and friends did the first descent of the Upper Kings River in the California Sierras. But most important, when he returned home after that trip, he found that his house had burned to the ground. Only the garage had survived.

Most people would have seen this as a tragedy. Many people would have been scarred for life by such an event. Bryce saw it as an opportunity. When his insurance

company paid him a grand total of \$5,000, He figured he had enough to live on for at least a year, so he quit his job and dedicated all his time to boating.

Coincidentally, Lou Elliot, an Oakland printer and fellow Sierra Club boater, had just started a river running company. The company was to become The American River Touring Association, or ARTA, which at its peak was the largest company of its kind in the world. ARTA still exists, though somewhat diminished. Lou was a dreamer. He painted with a broad brush. He needed a nuts-and-bolts man, so he hired Bryce.

The summer of 1960 Lou, Bryce and some others took off and ran rivers around the West. Among others they ran the Rogue in Oregon, Middle Fork and Main Salmon in Idaho and the Columbia and Canoe Rivers in British Columbia. They finished the summer with a trip through Glen Canyon in Utah.

In 1954 the Sierra Club, with David Brower as executive director, had won a major battle against the U. S. Bureau of Reclamation, stopping a dam that would have flooded Echo Park, a beautiful canyon on the Green River in Colorado. Basically, to save Echo Park, Brower agreed that Reclamation could build a dam in Utah's Glen Canyon, a place he had never seen.

David Brower and nature photographer Eliot Porter went on the Glen Canyon with Bryce and Lou. Brower was stunned by the beauty of the place, and appalled at what he had traded away. Thereafter he referred to the trade-off as "America's Most Regretted Environmental Mistake". He and Porter published what was to be the first of many Sierra Club Books coffee table books, *The Place No one Knew*, a paean to the canyon, with Porter's photographs and Brower's text. The book became a classic and is still in print.

The Glen Canyon experience radicalized Brower. It gave him the outrage, the will, and the staying power to stop dams planned in the Grand Canyon. Brower became president of the Sierra Club, increased its membership tenfold in three years, and transformed it into the nation's premier advocate for the environment.

There is no whitewater in Glen Canyon, so to run these trips Lou used 20-foot aluminum skiffs with military surplus seaplane moors from World War II. Strapped on the outside. Each moor consisted of four 24-foot inflatable neoprene tubes welded together. They gave the skiff protection from rocks and additional floatation.

At the end of the 1960 season Bryce figured he wanted to have his own company. He bought a skiff, found two surplus moors in a surplus store and built a boat similar to Lou's. In 1961 he ran weekend trips on the Sacramento River below Redding. The trips were fun, but they lacked scenic beauty and whitewater excitement.

The Stanislaus River in the central Sierra foothills was the answer. It offered a wonderful two-day trip with solid Class III rapids, a beautiful canyon, great camping beaches and a lovely tributary. Bryce kayaked the river in 1962. He fell in love with it and saw its potential for commercial trips.

His first challenge was boats. His 24-foot pontoons were too long for a small, technical river like the Stanislaus. Nobody was making rafts in the 1960s. The only rafts available were military surplus. The best were assault rafts, 14 to 16 feet long, incredibly tough but also incredibly heavy and incredibly rare. People combed surplus stores and distributorships, looking for them. These assault rafts came with ribbed, rubber cone-shaped devises, to be plugged into bullet holes when they got shot. Pioneer outfitters on the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, a large, non-technical river, found that the

surplus 30-foot inflatable pontoons, shaped like elongated donuts, that the Army lashed together to make bridges, worked with motors.

The least satisfactory rafts were those made to be rescue rafts for planes crashing at sea. These were called basket-boats because they were made of two ovular tubes, one on top of the other. They were fairly available but very flimsy and, overly flexible. They folded like taco shells in small waves, and they tore if you looked at them hard. The floors were so loose that, when they filled with water, you could stand up yet still be submerged.

Bryce needed rafts, but all he could find was three basket-boats. To round out his fleet he bought more 24-foot seaplane moors, cut them in half, and had the world's first self-bailing raft. They were so maneuverable that Bryce dubbed them "Supersports." The only problem was that they tended to flip end-over-end. But they and the basket-boats got Bryce through his first season. Of course he had a grand total of 20 passengers that summer. It was 1962, and he named his company Wilderness Water Ways.

The number of passengers increased to 200 in 1964, and Martin Litton, who was travel editor for *Sunset Magazine* became one of his weekend boatmen. Bitten by the river bug, Litton would go on to found Grand Canyon Dories, the only Grand Canyon company to run with wooden boats, and become a major force in preventing dams in the Grand Canyon. By the time of his death at 97 years of age he had become one of the most eloquent environmentalists of his time. But he got his start with Bryce.

In 1964 Litton published a four-page article about Bryce's trips on the Stanislaus in *Sunset Magazine*, and Bryce's numbers rose to 564. They peaked at 715 in 1968. To get these numbers Bryce needed a second fleet of boats, so he could run overlapping

trips. He was tired of the basket-boats tearing and the Supersports flipping. He needed a better boat.

Coincidentally, Rubber Fabricators, the Maryland based company that made the sea plane moors and other military inflatables, was in hurting. Their military contracts had dried up. They had somehow seen what Bryce was doing, and asked if they could build a boat for him. Bryce asked if they could built 14-foot versions of the sea plane moors. They said they could. These new boats, two feet longer than the Supersports, could carry a lot of gear and people, and they didn't flip end-over-end. Plus they were maneuverable and bombproof. Bryce named them "Huck Finns." Marty McDonnell, who went to work for Bryce when he was 15 and later bought his California operation, used these original Huck Finns until 2010. And he never wrapped one, even on the Tuolumne, a river that flips and wraps a lot of boats. In retrospect it's amazing the boats didn't become really popular, but only Bryce and Marty used them.

Actually, what happened was Rubber Fabricators, hungry and sensing demand, came out with three rafts modeled after the assault rafts: The Green River was a tank of a boat, maybe 17 feet long. The Yampa was 15 feet long and made of lighter neoprene. The Salmon River was 17 feet long and with bigger tubes. The year was 1971. In 1973 Avon, an English tire company soon followed, with the 16- foot Professional, and then the 18-foot Spirit. These boats opened the doors for exponential growth in river running. Without them the Huck Finn might have become the raft of choice.

While his bread and butter business was on the Stanislaus, Bryce had time to explore other rivers, and was the first person to run commercial trips on the Klamath, Eel, Trinity, East Fork of the Carson, South Fork of the American, Illinois, and Tuolumne.

In the 1970s rafting was quickly moving from an esoteric sport for the lunatic fringe to a mainstream recreation. Explosion is not too strong a word. For example, in 1961 around 100 people ran the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. In 1965 around 500 ran it. In 1969 that number was 1,000 and in 1972 the number was *17,000!* The Park Service capped use at 23,000, but has now increased the cap to 29,000.

In California there were eight river outfitters in 1972. By 1982 there were 74 outfitters on the American River alone.

Many of the new companies expanded fast and offered trips on rivers all over the West. Bryce chose to focus on California and Oregon, and to remain small. He wanted to run rivers, and not be tied to a desk. His second wife ran his office for a while, and when they divorced his mother retired from her Post Office job in Ohio and moved to California. Bryce built her a house in Port Costa, an artsy town on San Francisco Bay. She ran his office from there.

As far as Bryce was concerned, eight outfitters on the Stanislaus was seven too many. He felt crowded. He sold his California business to his long-time employee, Marty McDonnell, who is still operating, under the name Sierra Mac. Bryce concentrated on the Rogue River in southwest Oregon.

The river was among the eight “Charter Rivers” declared Wild and Scenic by Congress in 1968, and people were just discovering what a summer rafting trip the Rogue provided. It had long been known as a great salmon and steelhead river, but was virtually unknown as a rafting river until 1970. There are a few rustic lodges in the canyon, but they opened only for fall and winter salmon and steelhead fishing. Bryce convinced two of them to stay open in the summer, so he could run three-day trips where people stayed

in lodges at night. With the crowding of California rivers in mind, he also started pressuring the U. S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to limit use. In the fall 1972 BLM did just that, limiting the number of outfitters, the number of trips each could run, and the number of people that could be on any given trip. Each outfitter's allocation was determined by the number of trips he had run that year.

Under the new allocation Bryce was allowed to run three trips a week, with starts on Saturday, Sunday and Wednesday. This made him by far the largest outfitter on the river. To start trips on both Saturday and Sunday he needed a second crew and set of equipment. From 1973 until 1986 he personally ran the Saturday and Wednesday trips. He was on the water Saturday through Monday, and Wednesday through Friday. On Tuesday, his only day off the river, he bought and packed food, repaired equipment, ran errands, etc. That's seven work-days a week, and river days are at least 14 hours long. A brutal pace by any normal standard, but he loved being on the water, and he was far from normal.

Winters were easier. He was still busy, but in a different way. He liked real estate. He was always on the lookout for an empty lot or a fixer-upper. He built five houses from scratch over the years, and fixed up at least that number. He would do all the work himself, including plumbing and electricity. He would live in each for a while, and then sell it. He also bought acreage in what is now downtown Grants Pass. He made good money and he didn't spend it foolishly. Some would say he was more than frugal.

He sold his Rogue River business in 1986. He was 59 years old. He bought a house on 50 acres outside of Talent, Oregon, and went back to enjoying what he did before running rivers: Skating, sailing, and working on cars.

He rollerskated several hours a day. He built a skating rink on the second floor of his barn, and earned several certificates of achievement. One day, while skating, he realized that his sense of balance was gone and his skating days were over. He was in his 80s.

He bought a small sail boat and sailed on the lakes in southern Oregon. That ended when he capsized and nearly drowned his fourth wife.

Bryce is now 91 years old. He lives in his house, on his 50 acres, with his two dogs, Georgia and Raven, who adore him. When he goes to sit in his easy chair Georgia gets there first and lies across the back so that Bryce can lean on her. His only heat is a wood stove and he cuts his own firewood. He drives to town less than once a week. He is a contented man. He lives modestly, and is in good shape physically, mentally, and financially.

He has never borrowed money or bought anything on time. He paid cash for all his vehicles, his river equipment, and his many houses. He never insured his houses and never had collision insurance on his vehicles. He figures that insurance companies have it figured out so that they always win. He has no credit record because of never borrowing, so when he tried to get a satellite dish the company refused him. His daughter had to put the dish in her name.

He is good company. He is also very generous. When he recently heard that the Medford, Oregon Humane Society was going to close because of lack of funds, he wrote them a check for \$75,000.

He never had trouble attracting women. He was less successful maintaining relationships. As he says, "Outfitters don't seem to make good husbands." He met his

first wife, Betty June Currier, at a skating rink when he was 21. She was still in high school. That marriage lasted about three years. In 1960 a teacher named Mary Ellen Brody came on a Middle Fork trip when Bryce was working for Lou. She was smitten both by the river and by Bryce, and immediately signed up for the following Main Salmon trip. Bryce married her the following March. When he started his own company she ran his office until they divorced. The marriage lasted ten years.

In the early 1970s a woman named Kathy Eicher came on a Rogue trip with her doctor ex-husband and son. Sparks flew and Bryce invited her on another trip. She came without her doctor and son. She and Bryce were together for a few years. In 1986 he met Caroline Bach at a singles club in Ashland. They were soon married. That marriage lasted fourteen years.

His love of cars remains. He buys old ones, re-builds them, and sells them as classics. He has a hoist, and can pull engines for major work. Not too long ago he had 15 old cars. He is now down to five.

Bryce doesn't fear death, but he worries about what will happen to his dogs. He has a dog door set with a timing device to open once a day. When I asked him about this he told me, "I plan to die up here. Hopefully in my sleep. I often go a week to ten days without contact with the outside world. I don't want the dogs trapped in the house with me. First, the poor things would drink the toilets dry. Then, after a few days then they would probably start gnawing on old Bryce here. They wouldn't like that. Neither would I." When my business partner Joe Daly called him recently Bryce said he was out cutting fire wood for this winter, and was wondering how much to cut. No sense in cutting more than he can use before he dies.

His favorite car is a 1953 MG TD. British Racing Green green and in mint condition. When he dies he wants someone to come up with a backhoe, dig a hole big enough for the car, put him in the driver's seat, put the car on the hole, and bury it.

Bryce is a man of deeds more than a man of words, but in my short time with him recently he got off some great one-liners. Here are the ones I recall:

“Woman guides? Heck (Bryce doesn't swear) women shouldn't even be allowed to drive. Put that in your book.” (Bryce actually had two woman guides. That ended when one of them had a river accident in which someone was killed.)

“Dick, you're 75? Heck, that's not old. I was just starting on my fourth wife when I turned 75.”

“When you can't pee in your driveway, it's time to move.”

“If you can't make it a tax write-off, it's not worth buying.”