

Lovell resident to speak, screen footage from last Big Horn River float trip before Yellowtail Dam

A river revisited

By RUFFIN PREVOST - The Billings Gazette | Posted: Friday, January 22, 2010 12:15 am



Three unidentified men from a 1965 float trip navigate swift water on the Big Horn River shortly before it was changed into Bighorn Lake by the completion of Yellowtail Dam. (Courtesy/National Park Service)

Two short films offering a historic look at the Big Horn River before completion of the Yellowtail Dam will screen at 7 p.m. Jan. 28 at the Cal Taggart Visitor Center in Lovell. Call 307-548-5406 for more information.

CODY -- As the Yellowtail Dam neared completion in August 1965, a section of the Big Horn River as it had existed for thousands of years was about to disappear. Rising waters would soon tame its rapids and hide its banks beneath a manmade lake.

Wes Meeker, of Lovell, was one of the last people to traverse the waters in their natural state. But the frozen turkey was his wife's doing.

"Bless her heart, she baked me a big turkey and had it frozen," said Meeker, 81, who was the cook for a three-day excursion with 29 men who floated in six rafts from near Lovell to Black Canyon, where they were extracted by helicopter.

Meeker delivered a grand dinner the first night on the river by allowing the turkey to thaw as the group spent a hot summer day on the river.

"I brought some folding stoves ... and we had a hot turkey dinner with cranberries and dinner rolls, everything. They couldn't believe what they were eating," Meeker said.

An amateur film buff, he also took along an 8 mm home movie camera. Meeker, a retired Realtor, will share his footage from the trip and answer questions next week at the Cal Taggart Visitor Center in Lovell.

Though Bighorn Canyon perhaps was not quite as treacherous by boat as many believe, "you kind of had to be a bit of an adventurer to make the trip," said Christy Fleming, and interpretive ranger at Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area.

Fleming will present Meeker's color film, which includes narration and music he dubbed in after the trip, as well as footage from a 1949 float trip made by five Big Horn Basin men.

"The cool thing about both of these movies is that they really do show the landscape before there was a lake," Fleming said.

The 1965 trip included Lovell Mayor Cal Taggart, Billings Mayor Willard Fraser, members of the news media and representatives from the Crow Tribe and the National Park Service.

Also on board were many men working for game and fish agencies in Wyoming and Montana, including a friend of Meeker's who asked him to come along as the cook.

Though the group had prepared for the worst, they encountered only a short stretch of severe rapids, Meeker said.

That was not the case on the 1949 trip, when one wooden boat was smashed into a canyon wall and badly damaged. Broken oars, a busted motor and an injured oarsman were all casualties of the swift rapids during that excursion.

The men on that trip also filmed the remains of a grizzly bear lying next to the skeleton of an apparent mountain man who had a rifle from the early 1800s, Fleming said.

The 1949 film also has footage of Chain Canyon, named for a chain strung across the narrow draw, put there by horse thieves to slow their mounted pursuers, she said.