

Whale
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Curtis Hansen came to Hatch River Expeditions in the late '60s and became both a boatman and an institution. During one wild run of Upset Rapid, portly Curt—who had hiked in to join the trip at Deer Creek on a hot summer day and quenched his thirst with whiskey—tumbled overboard and washed ashore comatose. And someone said "Look—a beached whale." From that time on, few ever heard the name Curt Hansen again—he was Whale. Of course some say it happened in Deubendorf. He was wearing, as the story goes, a poncho. No life jacket. Some say he was naked...

Wild events seemed to drift through the universe waiting to encounter Whale so they could happen. Whale's river trip burned to the ground at Diamond Creek one day. Whale and his motor rig were both extricated from Whale's rock at Hance not once, but twice. Whale was the cover boy on the one and only issue of Bush League magazine—flipping end for end backwards at Lava Falls in a Wilderness World boat with a quadriplegic passenger in the back seat. His car was stolen in Flagstaff and its trashed remains appeared later on the reservation—a landmark on the put-in drive for some time. His waterline froze while he was out of town, leaving him with a destroyed house and an astronomical water bill. For weeks, one of his red oars waved merrily from the rock island below Crystal Rapid after a calamitous run. Whale stories. There's a million of 'em. The details vary but surprisingly many are true.

He was one of the main men on the River for twenty-five years and ran for more outfits than anyone can quite remember. And, Whale being Whale, got fired from more outfits than he was hired by. But he was always back—somebody always had a trip for the Whaler. Because he was good. Damned good. Folks loved to ride with Whale.

Yes, he had vices—he smoked, he drank, his weight fluctuated from the trim Killer Whale to the giant Sperm Whale. From a boyhood in southern Idaho potato country, Whale had gone to Vietnam and served as a door-gunner on a helicopter. Demons that climbed on his back over there would resurface throughout his life. He had ulcers and his health was sometimes a concern to his friends. And there were many, many friends. No matter how much he might irritate you at times, you could not help but love the man.

Because he had so much love in him. He loved his garden, his goldfish, his friends, and, most especially, the ladies. His big heart had a big lap and a big shoulder nearby. Few ever heard him say a bad word about anyone.

You didn't have to know him too long, though, before you realized he was a heavy hitter. He was capable of anything. And one thing was certain—Whale didn't do anything he didn't want to do. He was his own man and no one—no one—made his decisions for him.

Late in the summer of 1995, Whale decided to clean up his act, take care of his health, get a real job, and become a 90s kind of guy. But a rock none of his friends ever saw got in the way of his run. As August was ending, Whale went to the woods and laid himself to rest. He left without a goodbye and left more shocked and saddened friends than can be counted. Although we will all miss his physical presence dearly for a long time, his spirit and soul live on, permeating the Canyon, the Mountain, and his friends.

Whale, thanks for your time with us, your love, and the sparkle in your eye.
Rest now, Whaler. Rest in peace.