

There Are a Million Whale stories and Most of Them Are True.

By Earl Perry

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*Whale stories, like Whale, come in many sizes. Some are almost too long to tell. Others, like this one, are really short—but to tell the story right, you've got to set the stage...*

In the days when the hole in Crystal was down near the mouth of Slate Creek, Hatch rigs had floors and a motor frame with an oak transom that hung from 2 x 12 “wings” that extended back off the tail of their 33' boats. These rigs turned fast (that long lever arm) and cruised slow (all that 33 crammed under water). They also snapped up and forward when you hit a hole or sharp wave, which is how many of the early Hatch boatmen collected those forehead scars—attempting to snatch a kiss from spare motor boxes or duffel loads that were determined to maintain their virtue.

Now, in those days the summer daily tide was about 10 feet, and it was downshifted in the spring, and further downshifted on weekends. You could end up with daily flows from 2000-8000 cfs, with as sharp a derivative as the dam could manage without triggering water hammer in the penstocks. So you dreaded launching Wednesday or Thursday in March, which we had done. The spring weekend water caught us at Hance. There might have been water, but there was not thought to be the skill to motor it, so we rowed. One of the boatmen lodged at the bottom right. Grua rowed over to bump him off, and achieved legal penetration (which in the state of Idaho, according to Jerry Hughes, is any penetration at all) with one of those motor wings, opening an L-shaped rip 45 by 40 inches.

When we were done patching—with those floors and those frames, some old Hatch boatmen had the equivalent of PhDs in boat patching—we headed for Phantom. It was getting late when I decided we would attempt the apocryphal extreme-low-water run on the far left of Grapevine. To his credit, my trainee, Jerry Morton, took one look, decided I was daft, strongly resisted this run, and had to be given a direct order to do it. As far as I am concerned, we established a definitive proof that 1) the run does not exist, and 2) only someone as stupid as me would try this run when his own eyes told him it didn't exist. Descending Grapevine on the far left took about 45 minutes and was as close as I ever came to flipping a pontoon downstream. It impinged in a dual rock situation: the boat started to drop broadside off one 9-foot rock and lodged on another immediately below, pinning sideways between the high rock upstream and the low one downstream, with the stern on a 90 degree angle and the nose bending off downriver. The ordeal ended when the boat had been partly deflated and had accumulated 36 inches of water (remember—these boats still had a floor in them). At long last it wallowed off.

At Phantom, Ray Herrington strutted down the beach, chest out, and ordered us in. “Right here, boys. Snap it up. Where the hell you been?” Now this was an unfortunate question

when you'd spent hours patching down by the asbestos mine and a good part of an hour in the rocks of the apocryphal extreme-low-water Grapevine run, while he spent an alcoholic afternoon at the Ranch. Herrington's military and highway patrol experience conferred authority on him that was somewhat disproportioned to his river experience: none. From our quite recent river experience, what we had was irritation and momentum. Ten yards out from the beach, Reznick cut the motor, broke the connection, and tilted the Mercury up. With an extra 7.5 tons of water in her that we hadn't bothered to bail, the boat continued toward the abrupt bank at Phantom with impressive velocity. Herrington continued to issue directives, stumping down the slope to catch the two bow D-rings. Actually, they caught him, about midway between chest and belly. He was ready to pull us in and ream us for being late and, in fact, it was darkening.

The boat continued to land; indeed, the boat had conceived a real passion for the land. Herrington folded around the bow. The boat began to mount the shore, a sand cliff rather than a beach. Herrington vented more authoritative noises, in particular orders to Stop The Boat. Now if we could have stopped the boat, such is the perversity of a boatman's heart that, in fact, we Might Not Have Done So. But of course we couldn't; stopping that boat was in the hands of God, Who would stop it when Good and Ready. Herrington's directives continued while the boat carried him backwards up the sand cliff. Soon his heels caught. The boat continued to hump up the shore. With his heels fixed, Herrington rapidly began to uncurl from the bow of the 33. First you could see his chest and head, then an instant later only his head. There was a moment when his face registered pure outrage; then abruptly as a reverse jack-in-the-box, his head vanished. The boat continued to grind up the sand cliff, but more slowly. When she finally lodged fast ashore, half her length canted up the 10-foot bank, a great tidal bore roared to the stern, erupted in a U-shaped tsunami around the floorboard, then settled into a steady lap-deep pourover, icing our groins for the evening. Deep under the floor, far beneath the boards, the voice of Herrington could still be heard, issuing his indefatigable directives, but muted now by tons of rubber. And with a tone of deepened indignation, for he had just learned the younger boatmen were Worse Than He Imagined. "What the Hell do you Sonsabitches think you're doing? Get this Goddamned boat off me, and I mean right now..."

The next day we scouted Horn. We had, of course, long registered our opinions about those rapids which scared the piss out of you, as opposed to those which scared the other stuff out of you. Horn at this level appeared to require a new category—some of us (or at least I) considered throwing up. The run was obvious: the cut from far right to far left. Rather than try to make the run, some of the boatmen actually ski-jumped a bare, bone-dry rock on the left center—if a 33 can be said to "ski-jump" anything. They hit that rock full bore, pulling the motor as the rock began to slit the neoprene floor and gash a boat-length chingas into the floorboards. Here at Horn was demonstrated another peculiarity of the paleo-Hatch rigs. The pert rocker of the stern sections of a 33 was, as I mentioned, crushed under by the twin wings of the motor frame and their taut chains—but not completely. Those stern sections could still sun-pump... so that when I pulled out to the far right, my rig had achieved just enough tumescence to lift the prop. Only the prop-radius touched the river, mincing it into little water collops. I headed into the rapid broadside on the far right, motor howling, both stern valves unscrewed and whistling eerily until they went under, me bouncing on the motor casing to see if I could get the prop in and keep it in.

After Horn, Crystal evoked new depths of queasiness. Massey assembled us on the bank and announced that we would flip at least 4 of the 8 boats. He looked at the younger boatmen. We looked into the hole. You couldn't see very far into it. The hole was very large—from the left bank to within 12 feet of the right fan. As he told us what would happen to us, with that sunny savagery that was one of his hallmarks, the biggest boat most of us had ever seen lumbered down the tongue—a colossal Western Super-J, about 25 by 45 feet, with a bulge-casing Johnson 55 or 70 wailing back in the motor well. It plunged straight into the hole and disappeared.

Two seconds passed. The giant rig continued invisible. Two full seconds, all that apparatus and humanity in the Crystal Hole, somewhere. You had time to wonder. You could see nothing but water, blazing and backlit. That giant boat was in there, and you couldn't see it. You wondered more. Then, at last, standing on end, breaching, sheets of radiant water streaming from the snouts, like an apparition from the North Sea, she punched through, length on length of silver tube crawling up and out from that hole, rising, section by section, slow as a moon launch, finally breaking clear and slipping into the shadows against the cliff, bounding and thumping off down the left side of the island. We looked at each other. Nobody looked at Massey. Four out of eight.

It was clear that the 12-foot slot on the right would need to accommodate the 9-foot width of our rigs. So it did for most. You had to idle down the tongue, nose near the shore. So low was the river that the stern, even out in the middle, was still in water so shallow that you drifted along in neutral, listening to your prop pinging and clattering on the river bed and wondering how many of the blades would be available when you hung out broadside over the hole, chunked her in gear, and reached for power.

From the shore I got to watch Whale and Brick Wells try it, with Wells on the tiller. They almost made the cut, clipping the edge of the hole. Against the blackness of the Slate Creek cliffs, the rig stood out at close to 45 degrees, the front 18 feet clear of the water. As the nose dropped back to the river, the stern snapped up. Given a 2-point suspension between throttle and bucking strap, Brick could ride it. Whale had no such holds. He got the full ride straight out of the chute, with one cactus pad under his saddle blanket and one under his tail. He went into full reverse layout—and described a beautiful backwards swan up...up...up until his feet were vertical above his head and he looked like Peter crucified against the darkness rotating slowly back, downward, caroming off the frame and dropping between the wings, beside the cavitating prop, straight into Crystal Hole.

Wells, like Whale, one of the Idaho potato country boys that Jerry Hughes had brought to the river, was a big man. Whale was a bigger. With the boat still in danger of getting sucked back into the hole, Wells idled his Mercury down, reached a hand back and down, caught Whale in the froth and whipped him up out of the river, past the motor, into the motor well, stomped him down, pinned him solidly with a foot, reached for power, and Completed his run.

“I wasn't goin' to let him out again—he'd showed he couldn't pick a swimmin' hole fer shit.”