

# ARIZONA RAFT ADVENTURES

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## Rowing Wooden Dories | By Brad Dimock

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### Rowing Wooden Dories Backward, But Moving Forward

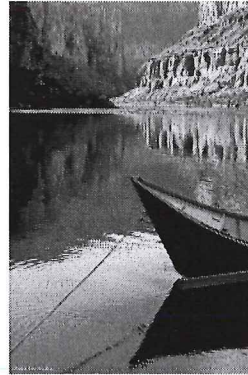
By Brad Dimock

Attentive observers sometimes ask us why, when boating through Grand Canyon, we row backwards? Especially when we are rowing wooden dories. It's a good question.

Traditionally a rowboat has a square end and a pointy end, and the oarsman sits with his or her back to the pointy end, pulling on the oars, and propelling the boat, pointy end first, backward through the water. We don't do that. The reason why is a bit convoluted.

The first people to boat through Grand Canyon did row in a more traditional style—Major John Wesley Powell's 1869 crew rowed with their backs downstream, pulling hard, and hitting the waves pointy end first. A third man stood in the stern with a tiller, steering as best as he could. Which wasn't always that good, and consequently they portaged most of the major rapids.

In the 1890s a new style of running rapids was evolving in the west. In northern Utah on the Green River and southern Utah on the San Juan River, prospectors and trappers began turning their boats around, facing downstream and pulling upstream in the rapids. This had the effect of slowing the boats down and giving the oarsman increased maneuverability to miss the rocks and bigger waves. This revolutionized river running and we face downstream in nearly all rapids to this day. But that's only part of the story.



Dory Boat in the Grand



Rowing Forward

In Oregon in the 1930s fishermen were rowing wooden boats in this new style, but still sitting with the pointy end behind them and the broad stern out in front, hitting the waves. Legend has it that one boatbuilder, Woody Hindman, got spun around in a rapid one day, turned around in his boat and ran the rest of the rapid pointy end first. It worked better. But rather than just turn the seat around, he eliminated the flat stern, building instead a high prow. This boat worked better in waves, but now had nowhere to mount a motor for flat water. So he sawed off the lower, pointy bow behind him and built a small transom. In effect, step-by-step, he began building the boat backward. This became the classic Oregon Drift Boat.

In the 1960s conservationist Martin Litton brought these boats to Grand Canyon, decked them over, rechristened them wooden "dories" after the similar-looking Grand Banks fishing boats, and began running commercial river trips in them. The worked great; it caught on. But there's one more chapter.

By the late 1970s wooden dories and rowing rafts were increasingly popular in Grand Canyon, but the old style of pulling upstream in the big water of Grand Canyon was causing boats to stall or flip in big waves. We started pushing downstream instead, like a motorboat or a kayak. Once again, it worked better and once again, it caught on.

And that's why we row backward.

In April of 2015, Arizona Raft Adventures will be running a Grand Canyon rafting trip with four traditional dories rowed by four traditional boatman, rowing backward, moving forward. The crew is especially well versed in storytelling, making music, wooden dories, explaining geology, and having an especially good time. It just doesn't get any better than this. Sign on before it's full. **Can't make it this year?** You might want to look into the Dories and Stories trip which is offered each Spring. The 2015 trip is on sale!

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- February 2015 (4)
- December 2014 (1)
- November 2014 (1)
- September 2014 (1)
- April 2014 (2)
- March 2014 (1)
- February 2014 (4)
- October 2013 (7)
- September 2013 (2)
- August 2013 (2)
- June 2013 (1)
- May 2013 (3)
- April 2013 (2)
- Book of the Month (6)
- February 2013 (2)
- General info (43)
- January 2013 (1)
- Grand Canyon Natural History (4)
- December 2012 (2)
- Hiking Highlights (1)
- November 2012 (3)
- News (1)
- October 2012 (1)
- September 2012 (3)

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