

# CHARLIE Sands

Celebrates **49 YEARS** in the **RIVER BUSINESS**

WORDS KRISTEN POPE | IMAGES LINDLEY RUST

In the summer of 1960, Charlie Sands hitchhiked from his home in New Hampshire out to Indiana where he met a friend who joined him on the journey out to Wyoming. When he arrived in Jackson, Sands got a job digging ditches at Jackson Lake Lodge for \$2 an hour.

Soon after his arrival, he turned his attention towards the river. His friend John Simms heard of an opportunity to start a river business and Sands drove him up to Flagg Ranch, near the southern entrance to Yellowstone National Park, to investigate. Sands walked into Jackson State Bank and borrowed \$600 on a handshake, bought a raft and was soon in the rafting business with Simms.

In 1975, Sands bought out Simms' share of the business and has been running Sands Whitewater ever since.

"As tourism grew in the valley, my business grew with it," Sands said. "And here I am today."

Jackson was a very different place when Sands originally came to town.

"In the '60s it was small and everyone knew everyone," Sands said. "I could go into the Wort and sit down and have a 30 cent beer with the locals, ranchers, fishermen. I was a laborer and everyone asked 'how you doing?' and was friendly. It was not status oriented at all. Back then you could borrow money on a handshake. The town's gotten bigger. When I came there was one cop and one blinking light. I miss the old days when things were more real. This town's been good to me."

The growth and changes in town caused some conflict among residents, especially when some residents were wary of newcomers.

"When I first came here in 1960, I got in a fight because I was wearing a button down shirt," Sands said.

"They said 'go back East'. Cowboys were cutting the hair of hippies. The cowboys would go out and find a long-haired hippie and cut his hair. That happened a few times."

This summer is Sands' 49th year in the river business. According to Sands, the biggest change over the decades is the equipment which he says has improved greatly over the years. He looks forward to this season.

"I'm looking forward to it," Sands said. "I enjoy showing people a good time and making a few bucks."

In the summer, Sands still works every day, though he doesn't spend much time on the river.

"We hire excellent guides," Sands said. "We enjoy giving good service to the guests. We take good care of people."

In addition to his river business, Sands is also locally famous for his skiing. S&S Couloir at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort is named after Sands and Simms.

"One day we went down to look at this chute we hadn't been in before and we decided to pop into it," Sands said. We made a blood oath never to tell who went first. For skiers today, that's old hat. They do things today skiing that are mind-boggling."

Over the years, Sands has spent time with a number of well-known individuals both in and out of Jackson, including the late Hunter S. Thompson.

"Hunter Thompson kept me out of jail in Aspen," Sands said. "The cops wanted to haul me away and Hunter Thompson said to leave me alone."

During his time in Jackson, Sands has also met a number of other well-known individuals, including sledding on Snow King with '60s counterculture icon Ken Kesey and having a two-hour conversation with football legend Johnny Unitas on the deck of Mountain High Pizza. He also met President Clinton and his family when they went rafting with Sands Whitewater in 1995.

"That's part of the fun of Jackson," Sands said. "I wouldn't have done that in Dubuque, Iowa." ■

*"We enjoy giving good service to the guests. We take good care of people."*

