

# REPORT FROM CAMP 9: THE LATE GREAT RIVER STANISLAUS

by Micby Michael Harami

I'm sitting here atop this rock wall separating the old Camp 9 road from the beach and river. Four unexposed frames of kodachrome remain in my camera, as I await the departure of a huge orange RV-type of vehicle from the place I need to document. After all, I've come here to take a picture of old friends, not strangers. My patience monitor indicates that I can survive the wait, so I ~~wait~~  
~~wait~~ cheap beer-and observe the party of folks associated with the orange thing. They don't look local, and a half dozen or so of them are walking about as if on some sort of mission. I see no fishing poles, picnic lunches or related things, so their purpose evades me at this point. No matter, as they're no doubt gawking back at me and wondering the same.

I take in the rest of the scene. Upstream is the old Camp 9 bridge, an early 1900s wood and steel structure ideal for bonzai leaps on hot summer days. From where I sit, the trestle frames a small weir, equally antique, just upstream. Over the weir tumbles the main fork Stanislaus River at a healthy clip of 3000 cubic-feet-per-second. It crashes over a crop of car-size boulders, foams under the bridge and flattens out into a broad pool-like stretch. A couple hundred yards later, the calm water ends directly in front of me. Then gravity beckons and the water speeds and turns white again: first, there's "Put In" rapid, then a bigger drop that goes by the name of "Cadillac Charley." From there, the river appears to meander uninhabited on its westward trek to the San Joaquin and the Pacific.

The RVers finally go on their way, so I trod a few yards downstream to finish up this photography stuff. Perched out precariously on some rocks below "Charley"--named for an old hombre who used to watch river floaters while leaning on his Cadillac--I click off the last of the film. Freed from technological duties, I again sit down to take in the view. Above, the whitewater rolls down gloriously, almost coming down on top of me before abruptly curving around the peninsula of granite beneath my butt. The Stanislaus glides over a few ripples and slows down. And stops.

We've come to New Melones reservoir now--hushing the river, stifling the river, squelching the river. Killing the river and all around it. Expanding outward as it climbs upstream, this stagnant cesspool has already drowned a portion of the road. The river-line trees are pretty much leafless now in their winter state, and if they sprout new foilage come Spring, we'll never know about it--they'll be forty feet under. Standing deserted are the quaint BLM outhouses, dressing stalls, a registration box for "ALL FLOAT TRIPS" and an attention-demanding sign compliments of Flintkote Cement, warning of canyon top blasting a few miles downstream.

I gaze for many moments at the river as it bounces and flows through its as yet untouched channel, and I realize the eons of time it took for this canyon to be shaped into the incredible beauty that is all around me. The idea of anything, especially a human-made item 25 miles away, destroying it so fast seems impossible. Then my eyes shift downstream again, and reality comes flooding in. Within a week, the ground I'm standing on will be underwater. Soon after, the bridge and weir will be swallowed up. The late afternoon wind drives eastward with its usual sincerity. There's something, I think, that won't ever change--at least not for a while.

I climb aboard my tired old Chevy, crank up the six banger powerplant, and begin the voyage back home. (Home? But is this not home right here? No more.) I am fatigued, and nothing taken in visually offers any new energy. I'm travelling on the new road now, approaching the new bridge, a big concrete slab propped high above the water. But hell, it'll keep the motorboaters in one piece, anyhow, unlike the ancient suspension bridge which used to dangle just below. They ripped that out last week, by the way, denying the old codger the dignity of slipping beneath the waves in one piece and taking its place amongst all the ghostly relics awaiting their day of reemergence.

I am forced to traverse the new Camp 9 bridge for the first time and begin winding back up the canyon. I stop up the road a ways and walk to a point offering a good view of Rose Creek, a tributary approaching from the southeast. But the view is not good. Like the worst kind of cancer, the reservoir has limbed its way into the Rose's own sacred canyon, reeking its horrible death there. The diving rocks, the clear pools and natural waterslides, the laughing children and laughing grownups--no more. I look west at what used to be one grand vista of the Stanislaus River

Canyon. Nothing grand about it now. Hmmm, used to be one helluva nice meadow way down there. Now it looks like an ideal location for a reservoir-catering fast food franchise--plenty of free parking, folks, compliments of the Army Engineers of Corpses and the Bureau of Wrecklamation (New Melones was a team project). Along with the flatwater comes the gasoline film, broken styrofoam, Pepsi and Coors cans, and other foul debris. Not needed, not wanted, but here anyway.

Onward, away from the carnage. Up the narrow bumpy road, past the huge cement plant operation gouging steadily at the top of the canyon. What the hell, take it all, boys--grab what ya can when ya can. The victim will never testify. Continuing on, I pass the dirt road that used to lead to a little locality known as Duck Bar, a nice place to raise your kids. No more. I go on, passing through an unspoiled stretch of Table Mountain country, utilized at present by a few cows, turkey vultures, jack-rabbits and various reptilian types. The recent depression has stayed off the real estate sharks for the time being. But how long will it be before the litter of survey stakes is strewn here and there, followed by "Melones Lake Estates": ranchettes, tract homes and condos linked by streets bearing rustic Spanish names such as "Rio de Serena"? Hopefully a very long time.

The peaceful community of Vallecito surrounds me now. As I pull into Dinkelspiel's store for a catch of groceries. Business is poor since the Stanislaus and her fans were washed away a few wet months ago. All the Army Corps promises of prosperity for the locals never pan out once the votes are counted, the project is firmly in place, and the all-knowing fatherly Colonel is long gone to another corner of the world. But heck, we just can't think of ourselves. They need that water down there in the Great Valley to flood the roads and feed the global masses with almonds, pistachios, kiwis and wine grapes. They need the energy to light up car lots, shopping centers and porn houses at three in the morning. The greater need for the greater number, and selfish minorities be damned! And if you don't like it, then just shut up; otherwise, we'll be forced to kick your head in while you sleep.

The car is moving again, now pointed south to Columbia town. On the way, the late great River Stanislaus is to be crossed once more, this time at the watery grave of Parrotts Ferry. We're ten miles downriver from Camp 9

here, where the limestone canyon gives way to a wider gorge of foothills. Hence, the new Parrotts Ferry bridge is higher and wider than the new one at Camp 9. Further down, closer to the dam, is yet another high bridge that dwarfs this one. So much for simple crossings.

I park the car at the "Scenic-Overlook" (a lie) and walk across the behemoth span until I reach exact center. After the last potential witnesses have driven by, I begin jumping up and down, no doubt severely weakening the concrete and iron molecules within. Very quickly now, this thing will moan a monster's death, buckle in agony and plummet into the water. Spectacular undercurrents will be triggered by the huge wake, gaining momentum as they travel the depths of the reservoir to the big dam itself. The gargantuan plug will be uplifted from its foundation, fragment like a child's mudcake, and finally succumb to the millions of tons of water backed up behind. The cesspool will be gone, and the Stanislaus River will again snake along its natural course like a shiny blue ribbon through this golden land.

I hoist my body in the air one final time and deliver what'll surely be the death blow. I wait a long while, but nothing happens--no part of my promise evolves into scribable history. Ignoring the stares of a newly-arrived tourist flock, I carry my drooping head back to the car. I suppose there's consolation in saying something like: "well, at least I tried," but I'm tired to death of exhausted cliches. Words and more words (mere words). This is but one tiny segment of a large, possibly unrecordable story--one paragraph in one volume amidst rows and rows of the suckers. I can only speak for myself.

My eyes drift downward to the silent mass of water. There are many hearts and souls buried alive in all those murky fathoms, much more alive than the metabolisms they've been detached from. I'm tempted briefly to join them, even in raising a foot to the top of the railing. But no, folks tend to misinterpret such doings, so let's defer on that one. The reservoir is nearly full now, and an ominously huge snowpack still looms up in the Sierra Nevada. Not far away, a volcano called Mammoth Mountain has begun stirring to ancient callings, triggering significant seismic activity. Below the dam is the San Joaquin Valley and Delta, with its rich farmland and thousands of people. I wish no calamity on them, and perhaps the dam can be disposed of without unleashing a destructive

wall of water. For example, the fault located directly beneath the reservoir could open up, sucking in most of the wet stuff and dispensing it into outlying water tables. Something like that, anyway.

So, in light of all the possibilities, I'll continue to plod onward and stumble along with the more menial matters of subsistence. I'll stay nearby, my los compadres, do what I do, and await that slim opportunity down the road aways. That one last chance to go home again.

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