

CHAINED FOR THE STANISLAUS

The sun's shift pulled my eyes into blinking slits as I felt my burnt legs smart from the lost shade. Absent-mindedly I rolled my body out of the heat, and the logging chain locked to my ankle instantly reminded my body of its confinement.

I raised up and reviewed the strange scene: five others spread under a blue canopy, sharing my bonds; our short chains intersecting a common length, and it anchored to a huge boulder lying half-submerged in the melted snow water of the Stanislaus River run-off.

My glance caught smiles at my predicament, which I returned, and I marvelled at the warmth I felt for these three men and two women of whom four were strangers prior to our several-day confinement.

By now we could have well been at each other's throats. Instead, we found ourselves experiencing one of the most gratifying relationships of our lives.

We were chained at Parrotts Ferry, the main campground and rafting take-out area on the Stanislaus, where it wound through foothills vibrant with color from the California spring.

Just upstream was the main river canyon--a carved

wonder of steep cliffs laced with limestone caverns. A few hundred feet downstream, the backwater of New Melones Dam swelled over six miles of an oak and pine forest.

Somewhere, just above the flood water between Parrotts Ferry and the dam, was Mark Dubois. After seeing ten years of his political work fail to save the Stanislaus River Canyon, he had decided to shackle himself to a boulder along its banks until guaranteed that flooding would not exceed Parrotts Ferry this run-off. We were chained in support of his heroic efforts.

Once relaxed, the metallic weight of the chain and lock on my ankle actually provided a strange sense of security, and I half dozed in the sun. But a little later, growing restless as one does on the beach, I casually turned, and then felt shock as the pull of chain fully woke me.

I was chained. I couldn't get up, dive into the water and cool off. I couldn't even more full into the shade, or exercise my full body, or reach my pack, bathe, or do any major movement without disturbing the rest of the group.

I looked down at my lock and realized I didn't even know its combination. And I doubted if anyone else there did. It had come from one of the many support people passing through. I had no choice but to let loose of the

mounting surge of claustrophobia I was beginning to feel, and learn to cope with an entirely new experience. . . .

Gradually, being forced to share immediate space, movement and basic needs with these people became very liberating. I suppose it was learning that all the prior needs I considered very essential, really weren't. And the irony of being chained in order to keep the river free had put us all in touch with the strength of simplicity so inherent in non-violent action. We were clearly a nucleus depending on all its parts for survival, consequently we could afford no conflict, and there was none, for egotistic concerns became virtually nonexistent. The whole had indeed become greater than the sum of its parts. . . .

I got someone to hand me my sleeping bag, layed it out as far as my chain would let me, and settled in for what I hoped would be a good night sleep. Marjene, my partner in sharing the group's shortest chain, warned me that she had gotten "a little wet last night." I thanked her, but not knowing what to do about it, I simply hoped for the best.

Halfway through the night her omen proved true. A combination of rising run-off, and my body slowly inching down the sandy bank, concluded with my long legs floating in a sopping wet bag. I pulled myself out to my

ankles, but then reached the end of the chain. The water had risen at least two feet.

With little option other than panic, I meditated on my legs being baked in hot sand. Gradually it began to work. I caught a little sleep, and managed to escape with no more than a slight cold and sore throat. . . .

One thing left disturbing was the rate at which the water was rising. Breaking waves were already at Marjene's and my feet. We hoped it was greater run-off, and not back-water. Fortunately our support friends came to our rescue, and soon we found our legs high and dry on a created wharf of rock and old boards. They then wrapped our legs in plastic bags, and unless in for a full flood, we were set for the night.

Before daybreak, we were all very happily jarred awake by none other than giant bear hugs as only Mark Dubois could give them. There he was, big and as full of life as ever. His victory being fully rejuvenating, there was little sign of his week's ordeal other than a healthy limp.

It was a beautiful reunion. But then he was soon gone for a press conference in San Francisco. And we were left to prepare our final press release.

Pooling our thoughts, we wrote an acceptance of the

State's terms, strongly urged that New Melones Dam be used to produce hydroelectric power with low-head turbines not requiring filling past Parrotts Ferry, and announced our plans to free ourselves at 12 noon.

High noon saw us inundated with media and curiosity seekers gathered to catch our chain cutting ceremony. White shirts and ties behind cameras, recorders and mikes converted our little beach into an instant studio of media whirl. There were group pictures taken, pictures of chains taken, cut locks taken, and pictures of people taking pictures taken, in a grand climax of the strangest week Parrotts Ferry had probably ever seen.

But it was now all over, and we were very happy. Our victory tasted sweet, even with our foe just around the bend, and another year's battle sure to come.

We were ready to get on with postponed activities and commitments. Our enlightening confinement had given us new understanding of ourselves, others, and the social/political/environmental relationship so important to know, and we were eager to take that understanding into our lives.

--Ron Pickup