

The series of storms was wet, warm, and seriously misplaced. Ceaseless rain dumped on the Mother Lode country for five solid days. Next to the Sonora shopping center, the straight, cement banks of Woods Creek filled with racing brown water. In the parking lot, bag boys in hooded slickers dodged flowing rapids on the pavement. Traffic thinned; the town battened down as if under siege.

Battened down, that is, except for those of us who had to go look at the river. Six miles from Sonora are ten unspoiled river miles of lush and living wilderness: the Stanislaus Canyon. We were acquainted with the lofty, quartz-veined cliffs, the dripping ferns, the waterfalls and wilderness, but now the rumor grew that a dragon of magnificent proportions had invaded our familiar garden. We went down to Parrotts Ferry at the lower end of the canyon to see just how big the trouble was.

Graffiti and colorful paintings on retaining walls spoke of the threat of New Melones Dam and the struggle to save the Stanislaus. On the Parrotts Ferry Bridge, one lone slogan on an otherwise white railing demanded "Wild River Status Now!" Beneath the bridge, rising, growling, bigger by the hour, the Stanislaus River had begun, without the help of friends, to claim a wild river status all its own.

Whatever line there is between the fast, high-water stage of a river and a flat-out natural disaster, the Stanislaus had crossed it. Huge, muddy standing waves with dirty-white lather crests were everywhere. Brown water crashed over boulders as big as buildings and dug deep holes where soaked logs whirled like matchsticks. The river's sound dominated the cliffs and resounded from the hills, and it was hard to believe that the awesome wild river was contained in its own space - that it would not at any moment leap out to contain everything else. The most terrifying aspect of the flood, however, was that we could read it.

The eyes of river guides saw order amidst the chaos: a navigable chute by each devastating hole, a pass of clear current for each wicked tangle of trees. The chilly brown torrent that shot beneath us was compelling beyond description. It was wilder than a bobcat, wilder than the look in a coyote's eye, and - clear as boldface print across paper - a path marked the top if it. We packed the boats and set out for Camp 9.

Sheets of rain pounded the Camp 9 "put-in;" the muddy river lapped at the side of the road and churned violently upstream in a spot that marked the now-submerged after bay weir. Three groups of people rigged 14 inflated boats in preparation for the ride through the canyon.

Many were veterans of big water. Almost all were experienced Stanislaus guides. People circulated from group to group, sharing wisdom and advice.

"Run flip lines under the boat. That way, if you flip and enough people can get back on, you could all grab the line and pull the boat back over again."

Word was out that the flow had been fifteen thousand cubic feet per second the day before - fifteen thousand on a river where high water danger cancels all commercial trips at eight thousand. People from the OARS river company were rowing out of the swirling eddy that had once been the Camp 9 beach as a powerhouse employee stopped his pickup to talk to the remaining boaters. As the truck drove away, the guides ran toward the river. "It's twenty thousand and rising!" they hollered, but the boats from OARS had already slammed out of the eddy and disappeared downstream.

On the river, the people immediately got wet and scared. The shore whipped by in a kaleidoscope of uprooted trees, flash flooding side creeks, and cliff formations cut by bright red waterfalls. Oars hit ten-foot floating logs instead of water. Passengers hurled their weight to whichever edge of the boat rose to the danger point,

throwing arms and legs over outside tubes. In the few seconds between crises, everyone tried to bail. The familiar rapids called Suspension and Death Rock had grown to vast proportions, but falls equally large had emerged at unexpected places. The rafts tossed in the water like corks and barely skirted trees and massive holes. Oars moved without a break, pushing and pulling while rafts climbed 15-foot waves, and sometimes a boat would climb nearly to the top of a wave, slow, stop, and fall slowly sideways to crash through the center of the standing wall of water.

Ten minutes and four miles out of Camp 9, they approached the Rose Creek confluence with everyone still on board. They expected a respite. Instead, they saw Rose Creek flowing dirty white, as big as the normal flow of the entire Stanislaus. The creek met the river at the biggest rapids yet. The people braced and bounced; the rafts hurled forward, avoiding through sheer luck a pit that would have swallowed all of them, then rose from the froth to face more mayhem in the water ahead. The exhausted oarsmen could barely navigate.

Rick McCann's boat was almost straight as it hit a twisted wave, but not straight enough. The raft flipped. Rick came up in the air pocket underneath, got out and up onto the flipped raft, and reached into the water for his two passengers. His long reach brought them out of the water and back on board.

The three of them grabbed the flip line, stood, and hauled until the boat went over again. They kept their grips on the line and pulled themselves onto the righted boat, finding the oars miraculously still in place. Within two minutes of the flip Rick pulled into an eddy by the shore: the first eddy they had seen since Camp 9.

The other boats joined them; the group walked along shore to the next rapid. They saw large trees being knocked into the water by logs. The trees bent into the river and did not resurface. In awe, they realized that what they had witnessed was only the beginning; the already-swollen river was now going into flash flood.

Everyone back at Camp 9 had second thoughts, but no one expressed them. The rain poured, the river rose, and Marty Macdonnell's big black "Huck Finn" rafts were ready to go. Marty's group had seven people with over fifty collective years of experience. There was encouragement in numbers: a lot of boats, a lot of good people. No one believed that disaster would happen to them.

The Sierra Mac group fought their way out of the growling eddy and the remaining boaters watched them go, worrying that almost no boat is easier to flip than the high-riding row of tubes called a "Huck Finn."

The remaining group included some of the best Stanislaus veterans. The lead boat belonged to Marty Booth of ARTA, one of the most experienced guides from the oldest company on the river. The fifth and sweep boat was rowed by Mark Dubois, a man whose fifteen-year acquaintance with the Stanislaus had sent him to the halls of the State Capitol to lead the battle for the river's life. Without Mark, the raging Stanislaus might already have been buried beneath the murky water of New Melones Reservoir. His passenger, Jackie Smithson, had been one of the first women ever to take the oars and tackle the Stanislaus whitewater.

The boats they rowed were flat-floored Avons: big, rugged boats that shrank to insignificance against the river they now entered. The current gripped them one by one, and the waves closed in.

Brian Malo was at the oars of the third boat out, and Adventurer model Avon that was smaller than the rest. His only passenger, Janet Hoover, had high-sided only a few waves when the water surged to a high point as the boat slapped the top of a crest. The Adventurer stood on end. Brian watched in disbelief from his receding seat as the bow blocked out the rainy sky and came over on top of him, then he and Janet plummeted head first into the flood.

Brian came up within reach of a line and clenched the drenching flat hoopie. He pulled himself up on the overturned floor.

"Help me up!" Janet yelled, as if it weren't obvious, and Brian grabbed her arm. Only for a second. The bottom dropped out of the river and a new wave hit like a well-directed fire hose. Janet still hung on, and somehow his arm was around her lifejacket and she scrambled on board to the safety of the flip line. They shared a wonderful second of relief before they remembered Suspension, and the fact that their oars were now carefully rigged to the underside of the boat.

They saw the raft ahead setting up for Suspension. the boatman, Don Harriman, faced upstream and saw them coming - they saw the double-take cross his face when they got close. The navigable route was on the left of the river where Don was going. Janet and Brian surged with the water to the right, and saw exactly what the flood was going to do to them.

The entire right side of the river dropped into a scene of total destruction. Logs churned, water crashed back on itself, dirty froth came flying from the morass. Downstream of the hole, the current whipped fast and deep through the bending branches of the trees.

"Trees are where people get killed." Brian tried to measure their chances of staying away from them.

"Do you think we should jump?"

"No!" Janet yelled. "Stay with the boat."

The tossing and churning stopped suddenly as the raft plunged down the glassy brown entrance to the hole. The fall left their stomachs behind. The Adventurer hit the core of the hole at an angle and shot up the traveling wall of water on the other side. It caught the angle of the wave, lurched crazily to the left, and rode the water like a surfboard. They surfed the crest of the hole all the way across the river.

"All right!" They were screaming. "All right! All right!" They high-sided more drops and waves as they were spit out downstream. It had been the ride of a lifetime, but they had other things on their minds.

Don was near them, almost close enough to jump. Both boats hit a wave; they were sucked in opposite directions. Janet and Brian swept ahead. They thought of using the flip line to right the boat, but there was no chance in the midst of the waves. It was everything they could do just to hang on.

A deafening roar on their right announced the presence of Death Rock Hole. A brown mound of water poured into a boiling chasm that could have covered ten rafts. Even as they saw it, they were by it! They had missed it by a few short feet! They plunged into the next set of violent waves believing that, after all, they had a chance.

They saw Marty Booth's lead boat up ahead. It was on the wrong side of the river for them, and they passed it at a distance. Janet and Brian on their overturned raft had become the lead boat in the expedition.

The cold air whipped by in the pouring rain, and it didn't matter that they were soaked through and dead tired, the river's energy was endless. Janet felt it first.

"My hands are stiff. They're too cold to hang on."

Brian tried to hold her down with his arms and legs. "This is crazy," he thought. "It's like something out of 'True Adventure.' I'm fighting this battle for my life against this incredible force, trying to keep the woman I love from being swept away - is this really happening?"

The river opened down into another huge flushing hole, but they didn't miss this one. The raft poured in and casually slapped end over end. Brian still held one arm around Janet as they traveled down the slippery floor into the solid, freezing water.

They came up under the neoprene floor where there was no air pocket and no light. In panic, they struggled out from under, made desperate grabs for the slick tubes and secure line, and in a moment too fleeting for the horror of it to register, were both swept irretrievably away from the boat.

Only a few feet separated them, but that made all the difference. Brian went straight downstream in the main current; Janet went into the trees on the left shore. She saw them coming and tried to fight back to the center of the river. It was a ridiculous effort.

"Trees are where people get killed" she remembered as the half-submerged branches closed in. Her body contracted involuntarily into a fetal position. "I'm in a ball! What a good idea!"

Boulders caught beneath her and branches scraped above. Time slowed. A wave of regret and protest sprang from her, encompassing all the things she was leaving behind, the nephew she would not watch grow, even the classes she would not finish. "It isn't fair! Why me? Why now?"

The trees around her were alders. Their droplet-strewn leaves made patterns against the rain-filtered light of the sky. She took it all in.

She tore through the vicious, tangled world to a clearing where a tall tree offered sturdy limbs instead of sharp branches. She got a hold with one hand; no use. The current ripped her away. A half-submerged rock somersaulted her into a murky pool that was protected from the current. She struggled to the surface in a daze and looked incredulously at the shore a few feet away. With a quickness born of survival instinct, she sloshed through the shallows and clung to the slick bushes on the steep, rain-drenched shore, seeing the mosses, ferns, and mushrooms in the forest as startling proof of life still shared. But did Brian still share it, too?

By the time Janet climbed out, Brian was so near death that he survived on sheer will. He got short, inadequate gulps of air between waves, but when he miss-timed his breaths he swallowed mud, solid water, and debris. He choked and vomited into the waves.

Instead of riding the standing waves like a raft, he crashed through their centers. The defogging wax over his heavy prescription glasses allowed him an occasional glimpse of what was coming. He saw the tossing foam of a giant hole, just before he felt himself falling into it.

The hole held an unexpected blessing. As he slid down the steep wall of water, he had the better part of a second to breathe. It was wonderful. He held the breath and waited to get trashed, remembering not to struggle but to "go with the flow." The under water silence closed in as he sank to the solid bottom current. It took too long, but it finally shoved him downstream.

A log floated near and he got to it. His body still functioned surprisingly well. He clung to the log, even got up on it a bit, and breathed.

His wool underwear, socks, and sweater were soaked beneath his slicker, rain pants, and sneakers. His body grew sluggish. He heard a tremendous roar ahead, and saw more brownish water playing above the surface of the flood. The log would massacre him inside the hole. He pushed it as far away as he could. This time he anticipated the chance for a deep breath as he went in. He sank and was spat out.

Rose Creek. How far was it to Rose? If he could just hold out to Rose Creek, the rapids might stop. But it had been too long already - had he passed Rose? Glimpses of shore told him nothing. Was it like this all the way down? The fight for breath continued.

His glasses finally fogged. They were elaborately tied to his rainbow suspenders by a string that went down his neck and inside his lifejacket and slicker. He tried to decide - push them down? Up? Either way they could catch on something. He pushed them down, so that they circled his neck. The heaving river blurred.

He breathed in more debris. His legs dangled in the water; he couldn't lift them. He tried to focus his mind as he felt his body grow colder. "I'm not going to die. I'm not going to die." He crashed through another hole and emerged into smooth, fast current instead of more waves. Elation coursed through him.

"I made it.!"

Gratefulness welled up as he saw a large eddy on the right. He stroked for the blurry shore. His arms fell back into the water like limp rope. His body was no longer at his command. Hopelessness soaked through him again with the realization that he was hypothermic, and that there was going to be no way out of the speeding river. The eddy was already far behind.

Without the adversity of the waves his will to fight weakened. He floated helplessly, unable to struggle, as the cold ate his life away. "This is like some story where the guy goes right to the brink of death and lives to tell about it. I've got to think that way - tell myself over and over, I'm not going to die. I'm not going to die."

Had Janet drowned in the same water he was feeling?

The speed was terrific. It was like being flushed down a toilet. Everything was a blur - quick passing banks, submerged trees miraculously missed, eddies that he had no chance to catch, the black bulk of the Huck Finns beached on river-left at the edge of the flood....

"Help!" His voice gurgled and screeched. He actually managed to wave one arm. Marty Mac and two others bounded onto a boat and pushed away from shore. A voice of reason inside Brian told him not to hope. It pointed out that he had just passed his last chance of rescue. If Don, up there by Suspension, hadn't caught an overturned raft from downstream, what chance did these people have to catch a swimmer with a head start? But Marty pulled the Huck Finn across the water so fast, so fast

"Swim left! Get away from the trees!" Brian squinted at the river in front of him as black poles with branches on them resolved from the blur. He thrashed the water, tried to get left. The trees whipped by.

The river was swift, but the Huck Finn gained. The high-riding raft left the water as the flat-floored Avons could never do. For a mile and more Brian fought the current, trying to force his sodden legs and heavy arms in an effort that seemed silly. The black boat was yards away; the inner voice still told him not to count on it.

They got close enough. Someone got a hand on him and a wonderful little light of hope turned itself on in his brain. His lifejacket caught on the rowing frame. "I'm doomed," he thought. They maneuvered and scrambled, and then Brian flopped onto the curving, inflated floor, babbling about how his boat had flipped, and there was another person in the water, and her name was Janet. It was at Echo Camp that the Huck Finn made shore. The camp usually sits in a meadow overlooking a sandy beach and a rocky bar, with a long view of the rapid called Razorback. Marty beached the boat directly on the meadow, where the water lapped at the rock ring of the campfire. There was no sign of beach, bar, or Razorback Rapid.

Brian stood motionless and stared at the river, hearing odd moaning sounds. He realized he was making the sounds with his breathing. Two boats from his group pulled into the meadow with news that Janet had been seen climbing out on shore. Another brought a stash of dry wool. More Huck Finns joined them, and Marty prepared to leave.

Brian came awake. "Thanks," he said. "Really! Thanks!"

"That's okay," Marty smiled, "I like to do it."

The Grand Canyon guides compared notes, deciding that the rapids at Rose had been the equal of Grapevine on the Grand in the worst water: one of the hairiest rapids in the world. High water on the Grand is twenty or thirty thousand, like the flow of the Stanislaus that day. As they talked, the rain came down harder and the flooding river grew.

Jackie and Mark arrived to take charge of Brian. They walked him around the camp, trying to get him to talk. He was one of the more voluble storytellers on the river, but as he walked between them he had nothing to say. They got him warm, then hurried to their boat. Mark rowed them into the frightening water.

Jackie thought about Brian's condition as she noticed a new set of waves on the water ahead. "We're almost to the end of it, and it's just as well if Brian doesn't get so wet. And they are beautiful big waves, as big as any we've passed. Straight, too. So, if the boats ahead make it through okay, well...."

She grabbed the bow line and stood on top of the front tubes, leaning back on the line to pull the bow higher as the raft traveled up the waves. Mark navigated with characteristic abandon, enjoying everything, playing with the river. Brian tried to unobtrusively throw himself on the front floor to high-side the waves. He couldn't get the picture of the flipping Adventurer out of his mind.

When Mark pulled into a seething eddy below Parrotts Ferry, he estimated that they had spent 45 minutes of river time to travel the nine miles from put-in. It was only at Parrotts Ferry that Brian's thoughts turned to his thousand dollar Avon that had been so casually swept away. He spent the next day finding it, paddling a kayak through reservoir muck, enjoying every moment. For days, there would be nothing in all the aspects of life on earth that would displease him.

That night the Stanislaus peaked at 43,600 cubic feet per second. As rain pelted the neon signs and sent gutters streaming in the little cities above, as people shut themselves inside to watch the expanded weather reports on television, the Stanislaus Canyon echoed with all the primeval fury of nature unleashed. It was a direct affront to a culture that insists that everything shall be safe and controlled, a reminder that the world's magnitude is of God, not man.

Brian was asked if he would do it again.

"Never! No way! Or if I did, I think I'd take a bigger boat, and maybe wear two lifejackets, and get a different rowing frame..." There was consensus among those who had faced the river that day. Why did we ride the Stanislaus at flood? To tell our grandchildren. To tell them about confronting wildness and not backing away, because the chance may never be there again. There was truth in it, and awesome beauty, and something greater than ourselves which we dare not lose.

As the flood continued, political maneuvers cut releases from New Melones dam into the river downstream to zero. Although legal compromises had limited the reservoir to Parrotts Ferry while the Wild and Scenic bill was considered in Congress, the water backed up. The Stanislaus Canyon above Parrotts Ferry began to be covered. In a wave of outrage and dismay, the Stanislaus battle was escalated - the battle for the life of the gentle canyon and its forgiving rapids. Perhaps an even greater battle should be waged for the monster that visited the canyon that winter day. Perhaps the most important task of all is to keep room in our world for the Stanislaus at flood.