

We Run Widowmaker at Six Thousand CFS

or

Mutiny on the Stanislaus

By Melinda Wright

The first memorable event of the day is at the Camp 9 put-in, where I unexpectedly see two old friends: the orange Korean War raft jointly owned by Mark and Paul, and Mark himself.

When I first encountered Mark Cantor in Jazz Appreciation class at UCSB, I only knew him as "Mr. Cantor." The professor would reverently announce: "Mr. Cantor has brought us another selection from his remarkable Benny Goodman collection" and this curly-haired guy who looked like a slim, collegiate Harpo Marx would sprint up to the player and put on a record. Later, Mark was part of our "urban plunge" community in Isla Vista, and I got to know him and Paul Gassaway, see their home movie about searching for the perfect wave in L.A., and ride on their home-made whitewater raft.

I'd never seen Mark on the Stanislaus before, though. It had been Paul, when we were up in Sacramento at the U.C. Student Lobby, who asked, "do you want to run the river this weekend....?."

Now it is 6 years after that day when we boarded the bright orange surplus Korean War raft (that Mark and Paul had found cheap someplace), and Paul perched on the upholstered seat of the custom rowing frame (that Mark and Paul had welded together), and rowed us out into the rapids and down the river to my first encounter with the Stanislaus Canyon.

Now I have my own 16-foot Avon Pro with a standard slant-board rowing frame, but today we won't be putting the frame on. Today is to be a one-day paddle with the Avon, me as guide, and as paddlers Rick, Barranca, Chris Holman, Jeff Jones, Pam Murawski, and Pam Murawski's mother. And there at Camp 9, suddenly the old orange surplus raft, the creative rowing frame, and Mr. Mark Cantor! Big hug, then Mark and his passengers are off into the crashing whitewater.

Maybe it's crazy to go on such whitewater at all? High water cancels trips on the Stanislaus at eight thousand cubic feet per second. Today it is six thousand. I've only seen this level once, as a paddler on somebody else's training trip. What am I thinking?

Boat pumped up, lunch packed and secured, life jackets secured, safety talk, paddling instructions, adrenaline gut that will give me flashbacks for life, and (gulp) we are on the Stan. Beautiful day, hundreds of people rafting so a few or more boats always in sight upstream and down, big hulking waves in the still somewhat familiar, though bigger, rapids of Cadillac Charlie and Rock Garden. At Suspension the waves are over our heads, and at Death Rock all the familiar channels are gone, and there is fast scary whitewater where you have to avoid standing trees and probable death. We successfully navigate it all and stop to scout Bailey Falls with all hands still on board, no problem.

Well, a little bit of a problem if you count the guide (that would be me) being in constant terror and lacking confidence. I'm squatting on the rocky hill on river-right with Rick, overlooking Bailey, and all I see is this inescapable whirlpool right below us. The massive whitewater of Baily Falls does not really flow into this frightening morass, but in my mind we will take the main chute down the falls and get grabbed by that thing. I discuss this with Rick, who confidently reassures me that this won't happen, and of course he's right. Due to scouting, planning, and the laws of physics, we do a perfect run of Bailey.

Oh no, it isn't Bailey that makes the problem. The fact that all my passengers have by now picked up on the timidity of their guide, coupled with the fact that we ace the Bailey Run like the team of pros that we are not: that's what makes the problem.

Big, whompin' Bailey Falls is followed by Widowmaker, which is just far enough downstream that if you plan ahead, do a perfect run of Bailey, come out of Bailey ideally positioned with all paddlers in place, get exactly the right angle and start immediately or sooner, you can just catch a nice eddy on river left below Baily without being sucked downstream into Widowmaker. Then you can watch other boats go through the rapids. Two or three rafts have already done this hot-shot move and now rock happily in the shore-side waves. I don't really look at them because I am looking downstream and here is what I see:

The huge, standing boulder that usually divides the right and left runs of Widowmaker is completely under water. The vast, fast river goes right over the top of the boulder, making a huge hole. The hole is not visible from upstream but you know it is there because of the crashing white stuff that is shooting up from it, and the incredible roar.

On the bright side, the river to the left of the hole has grown much wider and is now a long series of beautiful haystack waves. These standing waves are all big enough to flip the boat, it's true, but if we hit them straight on with some momentum, it will be the ride of a lifetime.

Ohhhh yeah!

"Left turn!" I command, seeing everything I just described as we come out of Bailey. The paddlers respond as a well-oiled team.

"Forward!" I yell, and the boat practically springs over to the left side of the river. We are golden!

"Stop!" I command.

They keep paddling.

They look back at me and say "That's okay, we can make it!"

Huh?

"No, really, stop!"

I see happy sparkles in several eyes as my exhilarated paddlers glance back at me over their shoulders.

"That's okay, we can make it!"

They keep paddling.

I realize they have seen the boats eddied out on the left and decided to join them. They just thought their captain was wimping out and giving up too soon. By now they have moved our boat all the way over, and we have bumped the left shore.

"No, no!" I coax, knowing that we are not in the eddy.

"We can do it," they cry, and proceed to grab the rocks and tall grass at the edge of the deceptively smooth shore-side water.

While smooth on top, in truth the water is moving at a terrific speed, right downstream into Widowmaker. For an instant we are held in place by Rick's strong grip on a big bunch of the tall, reedy grass. As the boat slips out from under Rick's feet, the grass gracefully bends all the way down to river level. Rick goes plop like a frog into the Stanislaus. There is a panicky struggle as Rick and the crew set the all-time record for getting a swimmer back into a boat, and then...

Slam! Uh-oh, guess where we already are....

The first wave of Widowmaker knocks every single paddler onto the floor of the boat. It fills the boat up with water. Okay, the boat won't flip because weighted down with all those people and all that water it will crash through the waves like a tank. I use my guide paddle and keep the boat straight into the next wave. (I have to look up to see the top of the wave. Way up.)

Slam! I look down in front of me and see a seething mass of arms, heads, paddles, lifejackets, legs, kicking tennis shoes, and churning water in the boat. Above the tremendous roar of the hole, which is now immediately to our right, I can hear screams and sputtering cries.

Slam! More writhing and screaming. Slam! Again and again. I am the only one with my fanny on the edge of the raft. I am having no problem keeping the boat straight.

"That's okay," I am thinking. "We can make it."

On river left, just below Widowmaker, there is an eddy that you don't have to catch because it catches you. We arrive there and discover that all are undrowned and uninjured. We can look upstream and see the bottom of Widowmaker, which means we have made it into the heart of the canyon. (I am always so terrified and gut-wrenched at the put-in, then every time, looking back at Widowmaker from downstream, the same thought comes: "I want to do this every day of my life!" Today is no exception.)

We proceed down to Rose Creek, eat lunch, drift rather more swiftly than we would like by the marble and limestone cliffs near Marty's Camp, and make

the climb to Coral Cave. We crawl under the cave decorations, turning our flashlights off to experience the complete darkness. We listen a bit to the dripping cave sounds, and then Jeff says "Oooooohm." Ah, yes, another day on the Stanislaus.

Taking out at Parrotts Ferry, we meet Mark Cantor, who now looks like a wet, sunburned, shirtless, frazzled Harpo Marx.

"We flipped in Widowmaker hole!" he gasps.

"Everything went completely under, and all the people came up thank God, and the boat came up, but the frame wasn't on the boat anymore! It was just gone. Widowmaker ate the frame!"

Mark's crew had to borrow paddles to get down the river. They'd had quite a day.

A week or so after our trip, Pam got a letter from her Mom.

"We nearly perished in Widowmaker Rapids," she was telling all her friends. She's right, too. I have always heard you easily can drown in 2 inches of water, but there were close to two feet of water in the bottom of that boat!