



# HEADWATERS

Fall/Winter 2009

**Last River Lost?**



## It Has Been 30 Years Since We Lost the Stanislaus... So Why Celebrate?

By Paul Tebbel, Executive Director

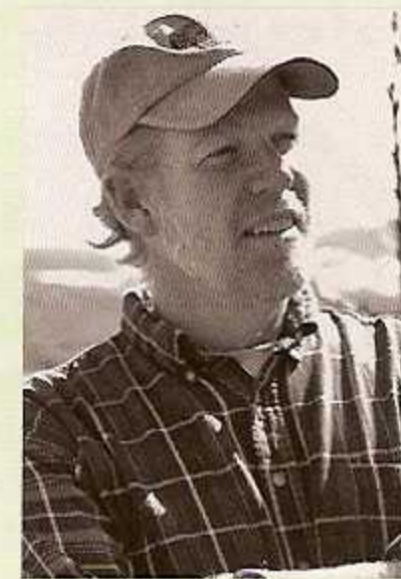
A brave community fought through the 1960s and 1970s to stop the building, then the filling, of New Melones Dam on the Stanislaus River. Thirty years ago this summer, when the dispute was at its most intense point, a few members of a fledgling river conservation organization known then (and now) as "Friends of the River" chained themselves to rocks in an attempt to stop the Bureau of Reclamation from raising the reservoir level to where it would drown them and the river they loved. It worked and the filling stopped—but only temporarily. Eventually they failed and that section of river ceased to exist.

This community of people (now known as the "Stan Campaigners") had a powerful emotional connection to the Stanislaus River. Their fight was not simply about policy and legal matters—for many it was personal. They lobbied at the federal, state, and local levels. They fought blatant lies spread through the media and constructed their own information campaign. They researched every detail put forward by the opposition and worked with allies to scientifically refute statements. And some even put their lives on the line.

Did we actually lose? To many Stan Campaigners, the answer is "yes." But 30 years later, it is clear that through this loss the environmental community gained much more.

What did we win? During the last three decades, numerous major water supply dams were proposed, but none

were built—the Auburn Dam is a key example. Water users (irrigation districts primarily) did construct some medium and large dams, but the costs were borne by the beneficiaries, not taxpayers. There is no doubt that what we learned from the Stanislaus Campaign helped us save more rivers.



A quotation from *Scenic Drowning* (by Robert and Barbara Sommer, 1984) further describes the value of that campaign: "The public received an incredible bargain in environmental education. For decades, cheaply subsidized federal water projects encouraged wasteful agricultural practices and provided little incentive for needed conservation measures. The (Stanislaus) campaign exposed the nested interests of politicians, land and agribusiness. Public awareness of water politics in California increased by a quantum leap during the campaign for the Stanislaus."

Thus the Stan Campaigners can claim victory—they taught us all how to work to save rivers and how to win.

Now, 30 years later, FOR is one of the few environmental organizations publicly opposing bad dam projects (Sites, Temperance Flats, and the raising of Shasta Dam are current examples) being pushed by Governor Schwarzenegger and his attempt to stick the California taxpayers with the bill through billions in bonds. We've read the reports and done the math, and we know these projects don't make sense and need to be stopped.

With the teachings of the Stan Campaigners behind us, we will continue to oppose—and hopefully win.

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## Bringing the Stan Back to Life: An Interview with Christian Kallen

**Q.** How did you first learn about the fight to save the Stanislaus River?

**A.** I moved from California to Seattle to work for *Adventure Travel* magazine and soon I found myself drawn to whitewater rafting, where recreation and outdoor education can come together. Although the magazine had an international focus, I wanted to write about some destinations and activities in the United States for those who couldn't afford to go to Chile or wherever for vacation. After rafting a few times in Washington, I wanted to go somewhere warmer. I knew of the commercial company OARS through the magazine and I booked a trip on the Stanislaus in July 1978.

While researching the river, I learned about an ongoing effort of Friends of the River to keep the river flowing. The river itself seemed like a direct connection to the natural world. Unlike the Grand Canyon, the beauty and scale of the Stanislaus River was more approachable. Going down the river in 1978, amid the limestone walls and Rose Creek, I saw why many fought so long and hard to preserve it. After all I learned, I had to include the political angle in my article. This article came out in the spring of 1979 and was ultimately used by FOR in their advocacy efforts. I have to say I don't consider myself a Stan campaigner. I was associated with the Stanislaus campaign through the use of my article, though that was the extent of my involvement at that time. Nonetheless, I am happy to do what I can to make up for it now.

**Q.** You have written several environmental books with Richard Bangs. Tell us how this came about.

**A.** While at the *Adventure Travel* magazine, I received many articles from Richard Bangs promoting river trips for his company, Sobek. In 1982, at a party in Vermont, I met Joy Ungrich, a river guide from Sobek and she suggested I join their staff, writing catalog and brochure copy. From 1983 to 1987, I helped Richard and John Yost with marketing projects for Sobek while I lived in Angels Camp. A publisher read about our work at Sobek and encouraged Richard and me to begin writing together. As a result, we collaborated on four books, beginning with *Rivergods* which was based on many articles originally written by Richard, though I contributed a few chapters as well.

**Q.** You are currently working on a documentary about the Stanislaus campaign. Tell me what inspired this project.

**A.** There are so many stories, legends, and lore that need to be told and captured—I want to bring the Stan back to life through media and film. The documentary is intended to make the issue and place tangible. Some people's response to environmental issues is that there is always another river. In this documentary, we hope to show what has been tangibly lost and that it is not true anymore that there is just another river. I feel like I have a mission to share the stories while we still can. I don't think of myself as an

If you would like to tell your story, contact Christian at [ckallen@msn.com](mailto:ckallen@msn.com). For more information, visit [LastRiverLost.com](http://LastRiverLost.com).

activist or an organizer, but this project also inspired me to put on the Spirit of the Stanislaus event back in June. I have family in the area and knew some of the people involved in the campaign, and at the 30th anniversary of when Mark Dubois chained himself to the rock, I just wanted to bring everyone together.

**Q.** When can we look forward to seeing the documentary?

**A.** The working title is *Last River Lost* and updates on the progress of the film, as well as a trailer, are available at our website: [lastriverlost.com](http://lastriverlost.com). This summer, we have been doing interviews and collecting videotape on the river as it is today. Our plan is to have a rough cut of the film in the spring of 2010.

Photo: Michele Bashaw



*Last River Lost* film crew pictured here interviewing Mark Dubois at the site of the old Parrotts Ferry take out after he did a solo inflatable kayak trip down the Stanislaus on June 6, 2009. Left to right: Mark Dubois (seated), Miguel Tejada-Flores, Christian Kallen, and Didrik Johnck.

**Q.** Your son, Brian, is now a volunteer river guide for FOR. What do you think about that?

**A.** I took Brian rafting for the first time when he was a couple years old, on the East Fork of the Carson, and then again when he was five on the Snake River in Wyoming. For a long time I never thought my son would be interested in guiding—he was more into sailing—but I encouraged him sign up for the FOR guide training and he did this last spring. I am really pleased he is doing it with such enthusiasm—he is up there every weekend! If you see him, tell him to call his father.



# The Campaign to Save the Stanislaus River (1969 to 1982) and Its Historic Importance

By Alexander Gaguine, *Friends of the River* staff, 1976-1980

The fervent and historic campaign to save the Stanislaus River took place non-stop from about 1969 to 1982, with several peaks, particularly 1973-74 and 1979-1980. It was probably the biggest citizen effort to save a river and stop a dam in American history.

The campaign's strength and intensity was a product of several factors. Most important was the river itself. There were numerous dams already on the river, from near the headwaters at the Sierra Nevada crest to the Central Valley. Having multiple dams is the reality for rivers all over California. But a 13-mile stretch of the Stanislaus still flowed unimpeded through the foothills, from an old dam construction staging area called Camp Nine to the defunct mining town of Melones. The Stanislaus with its canyon was a place of great beauty. It was unique. People with an appreciation for rivers and wild lands readily understand that all rivers are unique, and all rivers are beautiful. Regardless, the Stanislaus, with its tall limestone cliffs, gorgeous spring wildflower displays, derelict Gold Rush machinery, caves to explore, and the distinctive flora and fauna of the foothills, was special.

Another reason this 13 miles of river was special was because it was accessible by whitewater rafts and kayaks. The sport of river running was in its infancy in the 1960s, as American leisure time increased and new technologies were used to create boats that were designed for rivers that were swift and/or rocky. The Stanislaus could be both, with exciting rapids, which, however, were not extremely difficult or dangerous to navigate. Except at high flows, the rapids were "Class III," and many people with an adventuresome streak learned to navigate them after a few weeks of practice on gentler rivers or with an instructor. Many more people traveled down the river with professional guides, and generally found the experience exhilarating rather than terrifying.

Running the river was a great social experience for people. The Sierra foothill climate is generally mild, the river was cool and clear, the scenery much more dramatic than people expected, and they fell in love with the experience of river running and with the Stanislaus.

By the early 1970s, both the activity of whitewater boating and visitation to the Stanislaus, were exploding. The river ran through public land, so it was open to all, and people came for hiking, fishing, and camping as well. Largely because of existing dams, a great many of California's rivers were no longer accessible, but instead submerged under reservoirs. For topographical reasons this was particularly true of Class III whitewater stretches; big dams with big reservoirs could often

be located in those areas. The Stanislaus was one of the few remaining Class III rivers in California.

But simultaneously, the long-proposed New Melones Dam was also moving forward with huge political momentum. The stated purposes for this 600-foot high wedge of rock and earth were water supply, hydroelectricity, flood protection, recreation, and construction jobs. The dam's supporters cared not a whit for the river the project would destroy.

A community of people formed around the river. Often young, and with a love for the outdoors and each other, they couldn't understand why the Stanislaus was slated for destruction, destined literally for burial and disappearance. Many, but by no means all of these people were river runners. With the idealism of the 1960s and 70s, they readily picked up on the activism of the new environmental movement. Questions about the true costs and benefits of large dams were being raised everywhere, and the answers were not favorable for dam proponents. Early efforts to halt New Melones were embraced by waves of new people year after year as they visited the Stanislaus, culminating first in the grassroots effort to pass Proposition 17 in 1973-1974. The statewide campaign organization for the ballot initiative was given the name "Friends of the River," and this hopeful effort pulled in a great number of energetic people. But faced with a well-funded and deceptive campaign, the initiative fell short, receiving only 47 percent of the vote. It was a tremendous blow to the river's idealistic supporters. The building of the dam continued.

The charisma of the Stanislaus was then joined to a charisma of a different type: the personal charisma of Mark Dubois. Mark was one of a very small group of people who, after the loss of Prop 17, decided that the fight must be continued. The river still flowed, despite the fate being prepared for it.

At six-foot-eight, Mark had high visibility, but had been forced to overcome considerable personal shyness to assume leadership roles. He had already helped found a group that took poor kids rafting and camping on the Stanislaus for free. He had been a foot soldier for Prop 17. His personal commitment and energy were huge. He made a point of touching, and if possible, hugging, everyone he met. Mark later made a very public name for himself when he took a courageous action in 1979 to stop the flooding of the canyon by the dam. But for those who knew him (and he developed personal relationships with hundreds and hundreds of people), what was more impressive was his ceaseless activity year in and year out on behalf of the Stanislaus. A great many people continued to be drawn into the campaign—by the place, by the stark choice between living river and dead reservoir, and by Mark and his passion for the cause. Lots of energetic and talented people got involved. Mark was not always the campaign's chief strategist or most articulate advocate. But it is accurate to say that at almost





any time between 1975 and 1982, if Mark had dropped out, the campaign would have soon foundered. He was the glue that held us together.

People still loved the beauty of the place and loved to gather with their friends there. For many of the river runners, the Stanislaus was the center of our lives. We could not easily accept that it should be taken away from us. There had probably never been a wild place visited by so many people that was still slated for destruction. And people throughout the state who had never seen the river were still moved by its plight and joined in the campaign to save it.

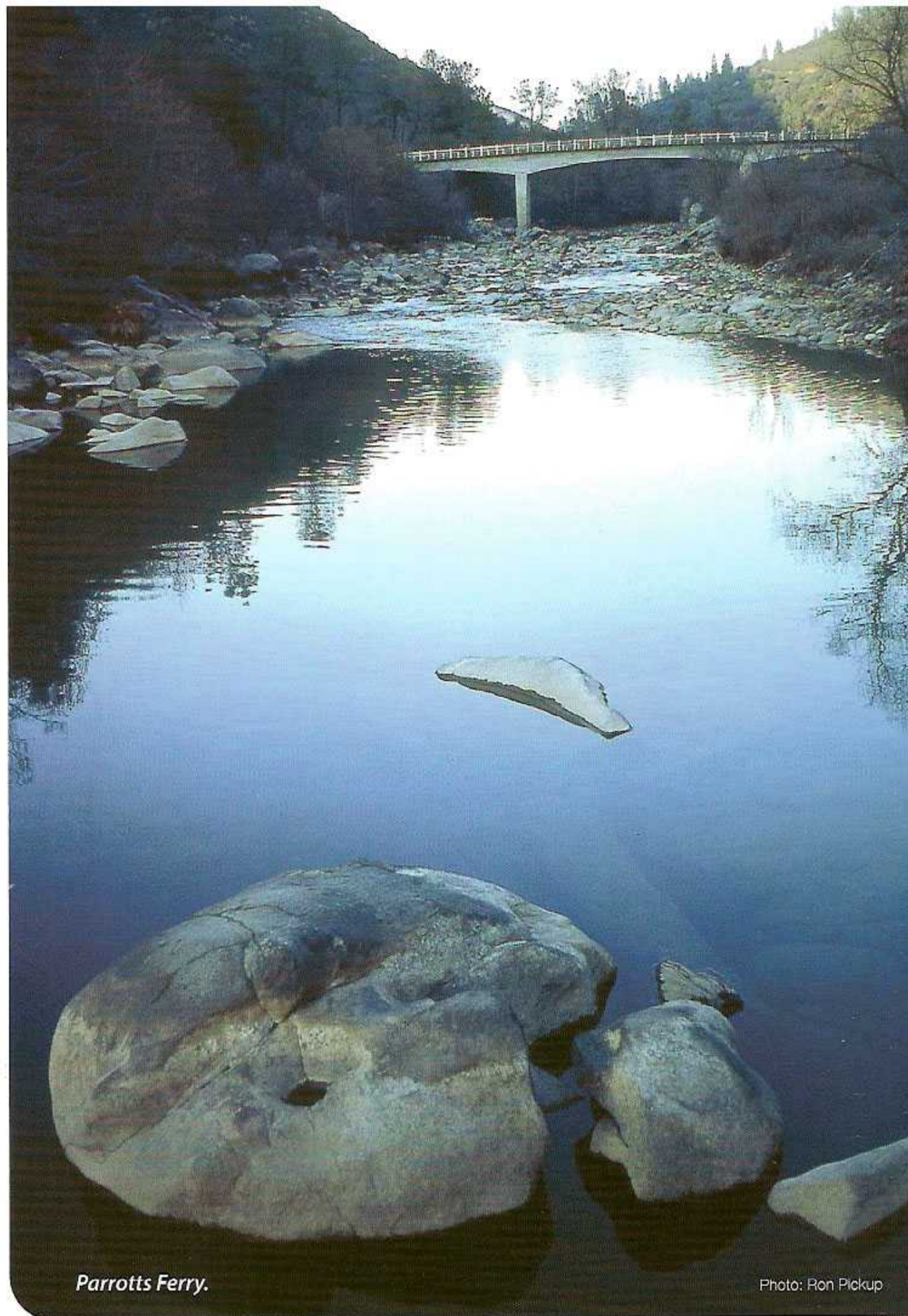
Many thousands of people were mobilized for lobbying, letter writing, signature gathering, hearings and demonstrations, not once, but several times over more than a decade. Petitions had been sent to government leaders going back to President Nixon. One of the nation's first Environmental Impact Statement challenges concerning the dam was carried all the way to the Supreme Court. There was Prop 17. There was a large mobilization to pass state legislation. Many media and VIPs were taken down the river. The supposed benefits of the dam had long been discredited.

By 1978 the dam was near completion, and the campaign changed theme, asking that the reservoir be only partially filled to no higher than Parrotts Ferry, five miles upstream of Melones, since there was no demonstrated need for the water from a larger pool. Demonstrations were held, especially around the time of the beginning of the filling of the reservoir, culminating in Mark Dubois chaining himself to a rock and challenging the Army Corps of Engineers to drown him if they continued filling (the Corps backed down). Federal legislation was carried by one of the environmental movement's greatest champions in Congress, and supported by President Carter. Finally, there was another statewide ballot initiative to not only save the river, but to mandate long overdue reforms to the entire way water was managed in California.

None of it was enough: the dam was filled, and the place is no more. People who had started out just wanting to save their beautiful river ended up playing in a very big league indeed, up against congressional pork-barrel leaders, agricultural interests, and water agencies that for decades had been used to having their way, and huge federal agencies doling out hundreds of millions of dollars to engineering and construction businesses.

A great many hearts were broken. Death comes to all people, but death is not supposed to be the fate of a river and canyon and all its life and human associations.

Nonetheless, an impressive roster of environmental leaders and activists developed out of the Stanislaus campaigns, going



Parrotts Ferry.

Photo: Ron Pickup

on to lead not only Friends of the River\* but also a great many other organizations and efforts.

And New Melones was one of the last big dams built in the U.S., after 60 years of dam-building frenzy. The Stanislaus was lost, but many other rivers in California and elsewhere, have been spared from dams and protected, in great part because of public efforts for their protection. Part of this was surely due to the example of the impassioned grassroots effort for the Stanislaus.

*\*In 1976, while still consumed by efforts for the Stanislaus, FOR decided to change from being the "Save the Stanislaus" organization, to one committed to protecting all rivers, lending its voice to efforts around the West, and even across the globe. FOR is still thriving and making a difference for California's rivers today.*





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## Remembering Parrotts Ferry

We climbed, jumped the  
Familiar shore upstream over  
Giant Speckled Boulders as  
Big as the energy that  
Rolled them then  
Waded hot burning feet into  
Icy water churning white under  
Parrotts Ferry Bridge

We glided bodies over  
Slick rounded stones and  
Dove into currents pulling  
Deep under to see  
Crystal water revealed riverbeds  
Where a rainbow trout  
Might glance an arm,  
A red willow fern  
May wave its color

We broke surface for  
Breath above frothy caps,  
Aimed toward rock  
Islands shining sun to  
Warm bellies and backs,  
Allowed minds to wonder/wander  
On the River's Song, its  
Cyclic metaphors of life,  
Till again too hot

And hands knifed cold rapids  
Between submerged giants,  
With legs kicking strong  
Through rock channels to reach  
Golden White Mica  
Sands

– Ron Pickup

## Become a Board Member

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If you think you have the qualities necessary to help guide Friends of the River—or know someone who does—contact board member Jim Genes at 209-201-2860 or email him at [riverchampion@gmail.com](mailto:riverchampion@gmail.com)

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