

# The Stanislaus River by Thomas Atkins

Thirty Years of Enlightenment about Rivers and Dams - Revisiting the Mother Lode's Flooded Treasure

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ABOVE: The new bridge spans high above Melones Reservoir

Over the last century many battles have been fought to keep rivers flowing free, but none hits closer to home than the struggle for the Stanislaus River, a once pristine stretch of water slicing between Calaveras and Tuolumne Counties from the old town of Melones to the powerhouse at Camp Nine. This 15-mile span of river was like a second home to many of the county's residents and was a refuge to hikers, anglers and rafters who could always be found within its welcoming canyon walls. This was especially true of the upper canyon, the second most-floated whitewater in the West. This nine-mile joyride from Camp Nine to Parrott's Ferry Bridge was composed of class III rapids twisting beneath soaring limestone cliffs. The canyon also had other perks,

including caves that rivaled those of any other riverscape, unique vegetation including a fig tree that was possibly the country's largest, and hundreds of historic and archaeological sites.

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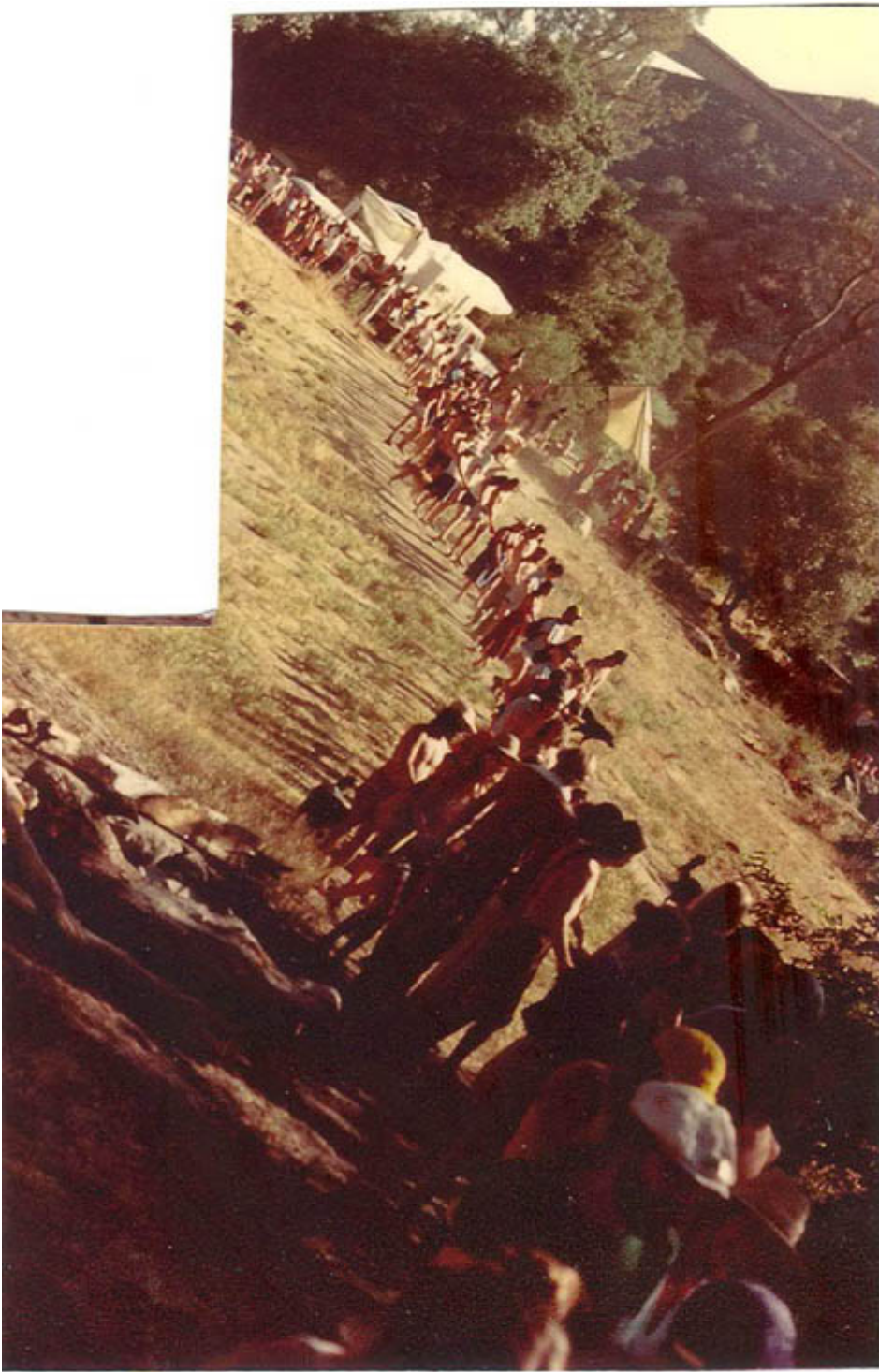


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ABOVE: Parrott's Ferry Bridge in 1979 (Photo by Ron Pickup)

However, after the completion of the New Melones Dam in 1978, this magical landscape was drastically transformed, and all of this was lost. After 12 years of choking up Iron Canyon with sixteen million cubic yards of dirt and rock (enough to fill 2 million dump trucks), the 1.2 billion dollar project was completed, resulting in a 625-foot high (the sixth highest in the U.S.) and 1,560-foot wide dam. Before its completion there were already at least five small dams and eleven major ones on the Stanislaus and its three forks, but nothing compared to this. After the gauge gates slammed shut and the river was impounded behind the concrete vault, friends of the river watched in horror as the flood-formed reservoir reached far into the canyons heart, submerging the wilderness river. With a capacity to hold 2.4 million acre-feet of water, the reservoir is the fourth largest in the state. Today motorboats roar across the silent stillness of this massive lake, but those who remember what once lay beneath can still hear the splashing and laughing sounds that resonated through the canyon...and do their best to keep them alive.

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ABOVE: Friends of the river hold hands around Parrott's Ferry Bridge during the Stanislaus River rally on June 2, 1979. Photo courtesy of Martin Blake.

This process is often done through presentations and exhibits and those who never had a chance to witness the river before its demise will have the opportunity to see the beauty beneath the backwaters of New Melones Dam on September 12th through an exhibition called "Timepiece: The Struggle to Save the Stanislaus River." This free video presentation will be held at 8 p.m. at the Ironhorse Amphitheater at the Glory Hole Recreation Area at New Melones

Lake, and chronicles the struggle to save the Stanislaus River in 1979. Headed by award winning photographer and writer Ron Pickup and Stanislaus River filmmaker and archivist Martin Blake, this evening will be filled with pictures, video, poetry and stories and all are invited to attend (for more information, call 536-9543).

Like the river had done to so many people in the past, it was the love for the Stanislaus that united Ron and Martin, and for over a decade the duo has been putting on presentations about this beloved river in hopes to remind people of its beauty, the lessons learned and to help save other rivers.

“It seemed like a natural partnership,” said Martin. “Ron was a great photographer and poet and had so much of the natural beauty of the river expressed through his photos and writings, and I had dedicated my life to being an archivist of the Stanislaus so I had all the response that people made to the damming of the river and the whole controversy.”

Thanks to their rich history, knowledge and documentation of the river, Ron and Martin’s displays have been showcased all over the state.

“We had a three-month showing at the New Melones visitor center called “Remembering the Stanislaus”, and thousands of people came to see that,” said Ron. “These shows are designed to let those who knew her, see her again, and for those who didn’t have that blessing, to see some of what was lost.”

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ABOVE: Ron Pickup (left) and Martin Blake at New Melones Visitors center in front of their 2006 exhibit, "Remembering the Stanislaus." Photo courtesy of Martin Blake.

Their upcoming presentation is not one to be missed.

"This year is the 30th anniversary of the flooding of the canyon and it's a good time to look back at what took place," said Martin. "Our goal is to continue the saga of the Stanislaus...to keep its memory alive and its lessons alive and to use that to save other rivers."

This upcoming presentation will focus on Richard Close, a former Columbia College instructor who created an archeological timepiece of the Stanislaus River in the college ceramics class in the late 70s.

"It's a pretty interesting story because after his creation was fired, it was broken up into pieces and hauled to Parrott's Ferry and put back together for the Parrott's Ferry Day celebration on June 2, 1979," said Martin. "It was then taken apart and secretly put back together in the river canyon as a remembrance of what had occurred and for future generations to find...when eventually, the dam falls, and the river returns to its former state. We went out and found it again when the waters receded during a drought, and it had survived perfectly. Now it is once again covered by the reservoir."

Yet although the reservoir continues to cover the timepiece and the splendor of the river, the memories and stories of the river continue to float...and Ron and Martin have some interesting river tales of their own.

Ron, who currently resides in Soulsbyville, practically has Stanislaus water flowing through his veins and spent the first four years of his life in the river mining town of Melones.

"My father worked at a mill of one of the mines," recalled Ron, 71. "But after the mill burned down in 1942, we moved to the Bay Area with everybody else and my folks worked in the shipyards for the duration of the war."

When the family returned to the foothills, they settled in Soulsbyville where Ron and his siblings attended the local schools. During these years he and his family continued to visit the river at Parrott's Ferry Bridge, their favorite swimming hole.

"Parrott's Ferry was a very important place for my family," said Ron. "That's where I learned to swim. It was absolutely the finest place to swim in the county. Year after year we enjoyed that place along with many other families. It was a wonderful place to picnic, camp and swim...it was

just idyllic.”

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ABOVE: Rafter’s above Parrott’s Ferry Bridge in 1979 before the upper river was flooded. Photo by Ron Pickup.

It wasn’t until years later that he was introduced to the wonders of the upper stretches of the Stanislaus River by a river guide named Mark Dubois.

“I met Mark at Parrott’s Ferry around 1970 and at the time I was working with poetry and photography for my Masters in Creative Writing,” recalled Ron. “I was hoping just to document Parrott’s Ferry, but he opened me up to a whole other world in the upper river and my thesis actually ended up being a book called *The River Book: Poetry and Photography*, which covered the whole Stanislaus River system from the crest of the Sierra down to the San Joaquin River.”

Mark also introduced Ron to the dark secrets of the cave-riddled canyon.

“We would go spelunking up there,” said Ron. “McLean’s Cave was one of the most spectacular and had beautiful draperies.”

There was no end to the adventure the canyon provided and Ron spent countless hours getting to know its treasures.

“I discovered later that there were many places you could get down to the river without rafting, and I spent a lot of time hiking the canyon,” said Ron. “I probably hiked the whole canyon. Rafting down was a wonderful experience, but for me, to really feel the river I had hike down and camp by myself and spend time with it. It was just an amazing canyon...phenomenal.”

Everyone who experienced it agreed, and as word got out that the construction of the New Melones Dam was going to threaten this pristine sanctuary, people started to get organized. In 1974 Mark Dubois founded Friends of the River (FOR) and Ron quickly found himself doing writing, photography and giving slideshows to Congressmen as an FOR volunteer.

“It was probably the first, certainly the biggest, anti-dam crusade that had ever taken place in the country,” said Ron. “And it started by just a small grassroots effort.”



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ABOVE: Richard Close (left center) and his archeological timepiece at the Stanislaus River rally on June 2, 1979. Photo courtesy of Martin Blake.

By 1976 FOR was successful in stopping dams on the North Fork of the Stanislaus, but New Melones Dam continued to climb. It was during this year that Martin found himself involved in the river battle.

“I had been teaching film at the University of Southern California and I just decided leave L.A.,” said Martin, 64. “I moved to Columbia where I rafted the Stanislaus and I really enjoyed it. Once I started to realize what a unique treasure it was, and then to think that this treasure was threatened with extinction, it became kind of a passion for my life. I decided to bring my documentary filmmaking background to the struggle and battle to save the Stanislaus by presenting a fair overview of the economics and politics of water in California.”



Martin began collecting every newspaper and magazine article he could from the local, state and national level on water and dams and began filming and documenting every aspect of the Stanislaus River saga that was unfolding before his eyes.

“I immersed myself in the economics of the building of dams and the economics and politics of water,” he said. “Because I realized that the Stanislaus River issue was really a microcosm for river and water struggles in the country and around the world...which remains so to this day.”

While Ron and Martin both pitched in their talents to try to save this precious resource, the dam was nearing completion.

In 1978 the dam was completed and on April 1, 1979 the gauge gates were shut inside the dam and the Sierra snowmelt began to flood the lower canyon. Although old Melones dam (constructed in 1926) had previously backed water up toward the town of Melones, as a child Ron never dreamed that someday his home town and the rest of the river would be hundreds of feet under water. For Ron, it was a nightmare.

“My family mourned, but there was nothing that could be done,” said Ron. “There was a lot of history down there. The lower section wasn’t anything like the rapids above, but it was a great run for an inner tube and we used to float from Parrott’s Ferry to Melones.”

This journey would take them past Horseshoe Bend where prehistoric Mi-Wuk petroglyphs could be found engraved on boulders, past the beautiful Pendola Ranch, mining ruins, and ending at the historic ruins of Melones.

“There was a great deal that was lost between Parrott’s Ferry and Melones,” said Martin. “My favorite place was the old town of Melones. You could see both prehistoric and historic occupation of the canyon right there. The foundations of the stamp mills were amazing. It was like from some other world and you could recreate what happened in your own mind. It was an amazing place.”

While the reservoir worked its way up the canyon, FOR staff and volunteers still clung to hope and made a case for compromise...keep the reservoir below Parrott’s Ferry Bridge and save the magnificent nine-mile stretch of limestone canyon above. At this time Mark Dubois was quoted as saying, “There are already 13 dams on the Stanislaus; we’ve given up the lower canyon and we feel we’ve compromised enough. Parrott’s Ferry should be the limit.”



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ABOVE: Stanislaus River

This became the battleground and the battle cry became “808,” the elevation just below the Parrott’s Ferry Bridge.

“At that time the state had put a limit on how far the water could rise, which was 808, but there was some conflict between them and the feds, because they wanted it higher,” said Martin. “The Governor at the time, Jerry Brown, made a stand for 808...so there was quite a federal and state

battle.”

When it looked like the water level was going to be allowed to flood Parrott’s Ferry, Mark Dubois became desperate enough to use the one remaining tool left...his life. After sending a letter to the district engineer of the dam explaining what he would do, Mark hid himself near the rising waters and chained himself to a rock with no key to free himself, giving the corps two options: stop filling, or drown him. Mark’s action may have sparked more media coverage than any other episode in dam-fighting history, and although a 20-man search party scoured the area on foot and in helicopters and motorboats, he couldn’t be found. It was during this time that Ron decided to join in on the last stand to save his cherished Parrott’s Ferry.

“That was quite an interesting time,” recalled Ron. “When Mark chained himself, another FOR member organized a little group that I was involved in...a civil disobedience activity at Parrott’s Ferry. About six of us chained ourselves right near the 808 elevation to a big boulder with “808” spray-painted on it in red.

Known as the ‘chain gang’, Ron, who at the time was 41, was the oldest of the group.

“We were sort of acting as decoys to bring all the media away from Mark, and it allowed us to communicate with the media about why the river should be saved,” said Ron. “I was determined to keep the water off of Parrott’s Ferry and I was determined to stay there. It was a scary experience and I can’t imagine what Mark went through down there by himself.”

As the water would fluctuate the committed group would often find themselves wet.

“We had to keep building higher and higher planks to keep our legs dry,” recalled Ron. “But many times during the night we were half flooded.”

However, Mark and the ‘chain gang’ wouldn’t budge.

“We were there for about a week,” said Ron. “That was how determined people were about saving the river. It was like losing a family member or losing part of yourself and that is why Mark went down there. He didn’t care, really, if it came to losing his life for the sake of the river. He was prepared to do that. I don’t know if we were prepared to do that but we were pretty serious to keep it off Parrott’s Ferry.”

The chaining tactic worked, and for the next year the upper canyon was protected and the water level stayed at 808. A few days after the chaining, to celebrate, a crowd of over 500 people partook in a Stanislaus River rally on June 2 at Parrott’s Ferry. A similar celebration was held earlier this June in Angel’s Camp Utica Park where Ron was able to reunite with Mark and the rest of the early FOR gang.

“Mark is alive and well and is involved in international environmental activities,” said Ron. “About 150 people showed up and it was a great time of reminiscing.”

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ABOVE: The McCaffrey family (publisher Tim McCaffrey, second down on left.) rafting the “Stan” in 1979 (photo courtesy Michael McCaffrey)

However, 30 years earlier, the joyous Parrott’s Ferry group didn’t know that a new storm was on the horizon. Although the amazing grassroots effort continued to campaign and circulate

petitions, a year and three months after the chaining and after the Stanislaus Wild River Bill was introduced, it lost. In 1980 the National Wild River Bill was defeated in the congressional committee, and although more civil disobedience acts took place, the water began to rise above Parrott's Ferry.

"There was all sorts of hope that something would intervene and stop the flooding of Parrott's Ferry, but it just didn't work out in the end," said Ron. "A whole bunch of people had devoted all their lives at that time to the river struggle and put everything else on hold for years, but once it started flooding...it went fast. It was a horror to go down there and see the nightmare scenario after it was flooded...it was a gut wrenching experience. To see that beautiful area flooded and to know that the rest of the river was going to look like that, it was just a real crime to have it all under water."

Ron pauses to reflect on some of the upper canyon's beauty.

"There were wonderful places in the upper canyon," he said. "Each rapid had its own charm and they were all named after rafters. A very tranquil pool called Dubois Pool was named after Mark, and then there were others like Cadillac Charlie and Mother's Rapid. It was like old friends you'd see every year...all year, because people used to raft it year round. There were so many lovely places its hard to focus on just one. It was all good."

This goodness was just out of reach to be tasted by future generations.

"It came very close to being saved," said Martin. "Very, very close."

"We probably would've made it, but the opponents of Prop 17, which was a California initiative to stop the water at Parrott's Ferry, was defeated by all the agri-business and engineering interests and people who stood to make a lot of money from it," said Ron. "They hired the slickest PR firms that they could find and were successful at confusing people at the last minute into thinking that to save the river you had to vote against 17 (which was to protect it). They had all this distorted propaganda out there and a lot of river supporters thought that by voting against 17 they were voting against the dam...everything was turned upside down. That was the final tactic they used. Those people were zealots."

After a wet year, by 1982 the reservoir had reached its full capacity and the river (along with 30 caves) was flooded all the way up to Camp Nine. But not all was lost.

"Even though we had lost the battle after many initiatives and humungous efforts, it did forge us into better river warriors and protectors to know how to counter the opposition in the next battle," said Ron. "And that knowledge was fruitful in saving the Tuolumne River in 1984, by getting it protected with Wild and Scenic river status. The battle was a national effort and we

did a photo exhibit called “Condemned Rivers of the Mother Lode: the Stanislaus, Tuolumne and the American” that went all the way back to the Smithsonian Institute. Two of these rivers are still going strong – so we only lost one of the three, which was a big loss, but at least the American is still flowing. That was threatened by many dams.”

“In fact, New Melones was the last great dam to be built in California and no major dams have been built since,” added Martin. “Largely due to the enormous opposition to that dam.”

By the time the Stanislaus struggle was over Martin had gathered enough of data and evidence to make a strong case against dams for his presentations and displays.

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ABOVE: Rafter's on Baily's Rapid in 1979 before the upper river was flooded (photo by Ron Pickup)

“I have a list of six things that I learned about dams from the Stanislaus River struggle,” he said. “#1. When you build a dam, many times what you are destroying are rivers, ecosystems, wildlife, and unique vegetations. #2. You are destroying the history of both Native American

and Gold Rush. #3. You are destroying the impetus to create new technologies – new water conserving technologies that would make the building of dams unnecessary. #4. You are continuing a poor economic model because farmers end up getting water paid for by the tax payer at one tenth the real price of that water, and too often that water is not used to grow food, but to grow cotton or wine grapes which tend to destroy those industries in other parts of the world. #5. People and communities are displaced. And #6. There is no new impetus to grow food in new ways through organic farming or smaller farms because dams are built for big agriculture. They are for the benefit of big agriculture, which tends to grow food in very unhealthy ways with pesticides and herbicides.”

Martin finds this list to ring true in dam projects all over the world.

“You see dams being built in third world countries like China and they go through the same process: destroying nature, displacing people and cultures, and spending billions of dollars – most of it by huge dam building company’s from the U.S. that can no longer build dams here,” he said. “This just isn’t necessary in many ways.”

“In the old days we didn’t have this kind of knowledge,” said Ron. “We just knew that they were going to put in New Melones Dam and flood out the whole river. I remember my relatives mourned the thought that it would happen, but at that time it was believed that it was for the good of the society. We didn’t have any alternative understanding of what we were going to do for new water so we could have more houses and grow more crops. It was just taken as a given that this had to be done. As Martin has pointed out, there are definite alternatives to dams and destroying rivers...there are many other things that can be done and we try to illustrate the lessons and knowledge learned through the displays we put up. We point out that even though we lost that battle, we have gone on and used the wisdom to educate people. So the New Melones Dam and the Stanislaus River effort really enlightened a lot of people. And now we are taking that energy into trying to get some type of Wild and Scenic status for the Clavey River, which is the last river we have in the Central Sierra that isn’t dammed.”

Running completely free, this liquid gem is worth saving as a reminder of what rivers once looked like.

“We have to save what’s left because so much has been lost,” said Ron. “It’s so important to maintain whatever we have left. The forest service has recommended the Clavey for Wild and Scenic status for decades, but until it has defined protection, there will always be someone who will want to do something with it.”

As he once immersed himself into the Stanislaus, Ron’s new project is the Clavey, and he is heavily engaged in photographing its wild beauty.



“What is beautiful about the Clavey is that it’s the only un-dammed river we have, and it’s the only place you can see what a true river looks like as it evolves through the seasons,” said Ron. “It turns into a grandiose creek in the late fall and you can see the stream beds and the geology, and in the spring it’s a raging torrent. You can’t see a natural stream anywhere else like that in the Central Sierra. Being unregulated it’s quite an educational experience to visit during anytime of year because its constantly changing and it’s constantly beautiful through its different complexions.”

This changing beauty can be witnessed in Ron’s Clavey photo exhibit.

“I put together an exhibit on the Clavey River which is currently circulating through museums and galleries in the Valley,” said Ron. “I’m trying to reach people down there to let them see the aesthetics of the river that could be destroyed just for utilitarian reasons.”

Working on this project helps Ron to get over the fact that the Stanislaus is no longer with us.

“Taking pictures of the Clavey makes up some of the void of losing the Stanislaus,” he said. “Occasionally I’ll raft the Tuolumne and go to its different forks, but the Clavey has always had a soft spot in my heart and I put in most of my focus on it these days. Every time I go up there I see people who are enjoying the Clavey just like they did the Stanislaus.”

Amazingly, enjoying the Stanislaus is still possible from time to time. During a drought in the early 90s people had an unexpected chance to once again witness a glimpse of the rivers former glory.

“During this long drawn out drought the river actually started flowing again and people actually started rafting and swimming again,” said Ron. “My whole family went down and looked at Melones and reminisced at what was here and what was there. It was interesting to see at how fast nature had restored itself. In just a matter of a few years the currents had eroded away the built up sand silt and the channels and rapids were actually reemerging. It was restoring itself to its original state and there were alder and willow trees and cottonwood that were already 12 feet tall and going strong. It just goes to show how fast nature recovers.”



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ABOVE: Rafter's above Parrott's Ferry Bridge in 1979 before the upper river was flooded. Photo by Ron Pickup.

A glimmer of hope even resurfaced for a while.

“We even started thinking, ‘well maybe we can convince them to hold the water at Parrott’s Ferry again,” said Ron. “There was a small effort to do that but we started having heavy rains again and it went back up before we had a chance to gain any ground.”

Yet Ron, Martin and other friends of the river take comfort in knowing that someday, in the

future, the Stanislaus will flow once again.

“Someday that river will be flowing again, no doubt,” smiled Ron. “After man does whatever it does, the river will return.”

### Links

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