

CHAINED TO THE STANISLAUS

by

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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 camp-ground 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} ~~honeycombed~~ 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.

It was now Memorial Day weekend, for us, a suitable end to a week of memorable events that started on Monday, May 21, 1979, the day Mark introduced civil disobedience (or civil responsibility, as he saw it) as a first in an environmental fight against a dam.

Mark had already sent letters to Colonel Donald O'Shei, his long time rival but respected New Melones Dam district head of the Army Corps of Engineers. In them, a sincere Mark informed O'Shei of his intentions to enter his life as a final negotiation to save the river because "The life of the 9 million-year-old Stanislaus River Canyon is far more significant than my short

tenure on this planet." He said that by Monday morning he would be locked and well hidden. He also wished O'Shei: "Good luck on doing what you most believe is right."

The results were quick. O'Shei, well aware of Mark's integrity and commitment, called an immediate halt to the flooding and initiated a wide air, ground, water search for him. However, hidden in a small, well covered cave which allowed him to observe his searchers; Mark was never found. Later, he would comment ~~to a friend~~: "You know, it's amazing how fast their boats ^{CAN} go."

On Wednesday, the search was called off with strong suggestion that the whole thing was nothing more than a hoax. But a friend, concerned about the rumor, secretly floated in a reporter and camera crew under the cover of night to document Mark's vigil and credibility.

And on the Friday night news broadcast, national TV illuminated Mark -- chain and all -- smiling from under a beautiful buckeye tree, politely stating his position to an audience from coast to coast.

By this time, political machinery had been well thrown into gear. On Wednesday, Governor Brown sent a telegram to President Carter informing him that the Stanislaus "is a priceless asset to the people of California and to the people of this nation", and urging him to call a halt to the flooding: "The beauty of the Stanislaus River and the life of Mark Dubois demand

your personal intervention."

And on Friday, Congressman Don Edwards (Dem. San Jose) introduced House Resolution¹⁰⁴ Bill 4223 which, if passed, would permanently protect the Stanislaus under the National Wild and Scenic River System.

It had been an incredible five days for environmentalists. But at this point there was still no firm commitment from Col. O'Shei to not continue the flooding once Mark left his vigil. The drama was at a standoff.

It was Friday before I managed to loosen myself from classes and other responsibilities in Lake County where I had lived for community college employment and country living. I had anxiously followed the weeks events, and now started on the long trip to the Stanislaus.

My mind went to Mark Dubois and our long friendship. I figured it had to be at least nine years since we had first met on the river.

Having lived the first four years of my life in the old mining town of Melones and spending most of my childhood in Tuolumne County, I had literally enjoyed the river all of my life, but mostly the lower canyon. Mark's rapture for exploring and spelunking had gradually given him an unmatched knowledge of both upper and lower canyons. Consequently he introduced me to a river I hadn't even known existed, and I was forever grateful.

Back then, we were both rooting and doing volunteer work for the Environmental Defense Fund's efforts to save the river. Mark's zeal and natural ability as a leader committed him to total involvement, and he eventually founded Friends of the River, the main environmental lobby opposing the dam. I continued part-time political work, writing and photography for the river.

Mutual friends told me he had broken his toe on the way into his site, but that he was doing fine and was well prepared to enjoy the natural habitat as long as necessary. However, I was still concerned about his safety. To be shackled between the river's rapidly rising run-off and a newly constructed dam seemed a double risk to me. Too much could go wrong.

My thoughts also went to another friend, Alexander Gaguine, a longtime Friends of the River organizer and leader. I was told he had formed a group called the Parrotts Ferry Non-Violent Action Coalition, and that he and several others had chained themselves to a boulder just above the dam's flood at Parrotts Ferry. Their action was in support of Mark's stance, but I suspected they could use some moral and physical support of their own.

It was ^{NEAR}~~almost~~ dusk when I finally caught sight of the familiar winding ribbon of light separating Tuolumne and Calaveras counties. I dropped down into the canyon and was surprised at the change that had taken place in just the month since I had

been there. New roads blocked old, a new ten million dollar bridge had been opened for use, and I had trouble finding my way to Parrotts.

Finally a half closed gate led me to an open country road and the old 40 year old bridge appearing a natural part of the environment. It still arched the roaring river below, but now only lead to a barricade of dirt and rock on the other side.

A young, slight girl seemed to pay no attention to this reduced function. Instead, she dilligently finished painting a section of the bridge's rails in the dim light. Knowing she had to be a friend of the river, I asked where Alexander was located.

"Who are you?" she asked, half smiling, but looking at my forty one years suspicially and wondering.

"Ron Pickup," I said, "an old friend."

She laughed at that, but assuming someone with a name like mine couldn't be all bad, she pointed a painted finger downstream and said "they're about a half mile down on the Tuolumne side. Five of them now. Alexander and David Lynch chained up Wednesday, and now there's Doris Grimm, Matthew Lawson and Marjene Olsen. Do you know them?"

"No, just Alexander," I answered. "Do they need anything?"

"No, I don,t think so. I'm going to check on them later."

"Good. How's Mark doing?"

"Ok, I hear. But I can't tell you where he is," she said, her face wondering again, "I'm not sure myself."

"That's ok, I don't need to know. Tell Alexander hello for me, and that I'll drop in on him tomorrow morning."

"Ok -- Ron Pickup, right?" she laughed again.

"Right," I said, "by the way, who are you?"

"Chris," she smiled.

"See you later Chris, I've got some folks to look in on."

Concerned about my parents' health, I wanted to visit them before settling into the river, as I sensed I might be there awhile. I assured them I wouldn't do anything foolhardy, but was planning to go down and support the group's needs, whatever they may be. I also called my wife to let her know of my arrival and intentions, and early the next day I was on my way.

That morning Parrotts Ferry looked like it contained a good fraction of the river's 100,000 yearly visitors. The long years of controversy exposed the river to ever more use.

The main camping area and beach resembled some kind of colorful circus. The multi-colored myraid of cars, tents, rafts, men, women, children, dogs, rocks, trees, water, and sun caught my head in a swirl. I stuffed my backpack with gear and provisions, eager to find Alexander's group.

They were not hard to find. Just off the main

activity they were clustered under a blue makeshift canopy. They looked like any number of campers until closely approached. Only then, was the strange pattern of crisscrossed chains and locks noticed, and then they too blended into the comic carnavaile atmosphere of the day.

I found Alexander perched on the boulder he was anchored to, busily writing out his next press release -- his chain looped around a wool sock collar on his ankle, keeping irritated skin from rubbing raw.

"How ya doing Alexander?" I asked.

"Great!" he said, looking up and beaming, the energy behind his smile irradiating me along with himself. I could tell he was enjoying himself, although physically he looked very tired. After being educated in Quaker schools, graduating with a B.A. in psychology from Washington University, and having attended several non-violent workshops in Santa Cruz, Friends of the River had provided a good proving ground for him.

"How are you?" he retaliated, honest and sincere, his tone demanding some quick reflection.

"Not bad," I said, just thought I'd check you out, take some pictures, and hang around for awhile."

"Good!" he said, "Glad to have you."

"What's the Parrotts Ferry Non-Violent Action Coalition all about?" I asked.

"Well it's actually just a needed compliment to F.O.R.

which has become pretty limited in identifying itself strictly as a lobby, club, and information group. Mark is acting independently, and we are here to support his effort and to perhaps raise a few issues of our own as we see fit."

It sounded good to me. I looked at the other participants. Half in and out of the sun they also looked tired. Alexander introduced them to me. Matthew Lawson and Doris Grimm, lying on the only flat surface without rocks, looked like they had been trying to nap some fresh energy into aching joints; David Lynch, his long body curved around small boulders, was reading the latest account of the weeks protest; and Marjene Olsen sat lightly singing behind her guitar. Through their weariness, here too I caught a glimpse of that brightness so apparent in Alexander. It felt good talking to them. I always marvelled at the individual emotion and conviction the river stirred.

Matt and David were both guides for local outfitters. They had come here two years ago after completing training back east. At 19 and 20, they thought it was about time they did something for the river. "I really expected to be hauled off to jail the first day we were here. But instead, the sheriff's department just warned us about the dangers of the run-off and left us alone. It's been four days now. We might be here a long time." David explained.

Doris was a 27 year old anthropologist for the U.S.

Forest Service and a river kyacker. She said she had gotten hooked on the river about five years ago: "I think it's time people were made aware of what they're losing with projects like New Melones, and I think Mark found the answer."

Shy and almost apologetic, Marjene nevertheless made her position quite clear. "Mark's action will work because it's so honest. But it's really just him, you know, and well I didn't want him to feel like the Lone Ranger." Looking much younger than her 25 years, she was a guide for Environmental Traveling Companions, an organization that Mark helped form to provide free river trips for the handicapped and disadvantaged.

I felt in good company. I looked and listened to the familiar lapping of water grinding granite to fine sand -- thought of the many years and good times I had enjoyed here -- and then heard myself impulsively asking, "Well, you got an extra length of chain handy?"

Alexander laughed. "Did you come up here to get chained?"

"I guess I did," I laughed back, "but I had better take some pictures of you before I lose my perspective."

"You also better take a swim and cool off first. It gets pretty hot." Alexander suggested.

"Yeah, and you better try and have yourself a good bowel movement, too," David offered, "I haven't since I came here."

We all exploded with laughter at his misfortune. But I took their advice. And walking back from an ice cold swim, I wondered just how they were handling their waste problem. I soon found out.

There they were, all huddled together atop the largest boulder behind the canopy now serving as curtain. Their heads bobbed in unison while each took their turn jockeying into position behind the rock for elimination into double strength hefty bags, which were stored in a sealed G.I. footlocker until removed by a support person to someone's compost pile or otherwise disposed of.

Alexander smiled from behind the curtain and asked that I stand "guard" while they finished. "We've grown quite accustomed to this ritual," he explained, "but just as soon outsiders not be spectators."

I assured him I understood, but watched myself. They looked like an inverse puppet show with human heads manipulated by mechanical bodies. I had to hold back laughing at their antics.

Once they were done and settled, we found an extra 6 foot length of chain. I locked it to the anchor chain they were all attached to, wrapped the other end around my ankle, slipped a padlock through the two ends and locked it. I was now committed to the group, there was no turning back. And I tried to make myself as comfortable as possible within the few feet of movement allowed.

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 move 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.

But then I had no idea how long we would be there. I thought of my classes next week, of an endangered lake I had to finish photographing. Did these commitments just have to wait? For how long?

"Hey, you guys getting hungry? Ready for some lunch?" Doris said, bringing me back, as if sensing my tension, manoeuvring herself over to our ice chest.

She got a strong ^{AGREEMENT} affirmation, and we all moved her way -- chains in hand to keep them from dragging on sore ankles -- to within reach of her offering. And while we munched on

peanutbutter spread on bread like it was some gourmet delight, I resolved to forget my anxiety and accept whatever would come.

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 non-existent. The whole had ^{INDEED} become greater than the sum of its parts.

Our liaison with Mark came through his younger brother Gar. Gar had become somewhat of a river legend by spending much of his time living in a tree house in the upper canyon, but now found himself reversing roles with his politically active brother. With Mark chained to the river, Gar felt his place was in Sacramento acting as spokesperson for his brother. It was an unlikely role for him, but one he was handling quite well.

He appeared in the afternoon, carrying an ancient fiberglass kayak with a collage finish of multiple layers of worn paint. He was much shorter than Mark but had very similar features and presence, and like his brother, was very personable.

Gar told us that he hadn't seen Mark for awhile, but was planning to float in tonight. He said Col. O'Shei had now made a written commitment to the state to not flood above Parrotts Ferry or approximately 808 feet elevation for turbine testing this year, but reserved freedom to do so if he felt stream conditions below the dam warranted it to prevent "unacceptable damage." Gar felt Mark wouldn't go for it because of vagueness and built in loopholes, but wondered how we felt.

It seemed to us that downstream farmers who had hastily moved into natural flood plain lands may now be putting pressure on O'Shei to keep the dam's water release below normal flows. Thus we all thought the elevation level needed to be more specific, but had varying opinions regarding values. I pointed out that the Corps had always designated 808 plus or minus 5 feet as the level needed for testing, and therefore saw no reason for flooding beyond the present level of 803 feet. I wanted as much of Parrotts Ferry spared as possible. Alexander and the others felt that since 808 feet had long been an agreed on value for all parties, we should probably stick with it.

On the other hand, Alexander did have serious reservations with allowing the turbines to be tested. Perhaps we should hold out for the lower water level, and demand that instead of testing, the turbines be converted to low water head design for maximum energy production. This would remove temptation to eventually fill the dam to its full capacity. With a familiar gleam he half jokingly suggested organizing "turbine bake sales" across the country to pay the Corps' modification cost. This brought much laughter,

~~laughter,~~ but I could tell by his excitement he was dead serious, and for all I knew could probably pull it off.

But at this point I couldn't help but wonder if the sun wasn't getting to all of us, and felt Doris' idea of taking a dip was the best I had heard all day. The more dexterous of our group, she demonstrated her finesse at threading her clothing down her chain like a clothesline to keep it dry while she dropped her body into the freezing but reviving Stanislaus.

I felt better just watching her, but settled for a wade up to my waist as the cold water numbed a lower back ache from a twenty year old injury that wasn't used to taking much abuse. I wondered how long it would hold out before making me immobile as it often had in the past.

Shortly after Gar had left with our communique to Mark (a hand scratched letter of personal greetings woven in and around individual political concerns that I hoped he could read with a clearer mind than mine), we were visited by a reporter from a valley newspaper.

According to the others, it was the first media contact for some time. Alexander and Dave had been bombarded their first day out, but the frequency of visits had drastically reduced. Had the public gotten bored? Perhaps we had become just one more bizarre, desensitizing agent of the age, soon to be forgotten.

But this reporter obviously aimed to pump new life into her coverage. She was after character profiles -- wanted to know who and what we were. She asked if we were willing to die for the river as Mark Dubois said he was. She zoomed in on me. Perhaps my longevity might prove more sensible.

I gave it some thought, then anonymously (on behalf of my mother's blood pressure) told her I would have to wait until the water was up around my neck before I could honestly answer that question. My friends gave similar answers, and she left knowing at least as much as we did about the extent of our action.

But later, I kept wondering about it while resting in the late afternoon shade, and watching a speedboat roar out of the backwater and stage challenge to the river; its bow jumping and slapping the whitecapped run-off.

"Sure are anxious, aren't they?" came from Fred Rinne, a consistent backup person and supporter during the long weekend. Fred had the curious ability to make a contrived statement with such humor and honesty, that one just knew the integrity of the man was inversely proportional to his superficial words. For example when one asked: "Hey Fred, would you mind taking care of this bag of compost (human feces) for us?" He would glibly announce in almost, but not quite theatrical tone, so that you never were sure or not if he was putting you on:

"Why sure, why not? I mean I, m here to serve you.

I mean, what the hell, what else better do I have to do?"
And he would amble off to properly dispose of the package.

And now, watching the boat slowly win its way upstream, he said: "You know, I think it's just a matter of life style."

"What's that Fred?" I asked.

"Well I mean that guy out there really relies on that powerful boat to make his life worthwhile on long weekends after working his ass off maybe 8 - 16 hours a day at something he could care less about. And you know, that's really aside from the fact that the boat is a guzzling polluter that somehow justifies more flatwater recreation that you and I ~~feel~~^{know} is wrong."

Because it was typical Fred, I heard it real loud, and sensed the strong symbolic truth behind it. The polarity between the boat and us was staggering. But I also knew the time had come to stand by what we believed.

Late that night -- like almost out of the pages of a detective novel -- we were visited by one Charlie Bloodgood. Charlie was a friend and attorney who came to inform us of a pending civil injunction suit against us by downstream farmers. He said we hadn't been arrested yet because we weren't breaking any criminal statutes, but if the suit was successful, we could be arrested under civil law.

We thanked him for the clarification, but assured

him we were prepared to go to jail if that proved necessary.

But now it was time for bed. 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.

Morning saw the water recede, and the Memorial Day weekend crowd at its peak. Curious folks would drop by to see if what they had heard was actually true. Expecting to find a Devil's Island scene, they always seemed surprised to see a picnic setting very similar to their own. With the exception of chains -- always stared at almost as though they were a physical deformity -- we appeared quite ordinary: sharing

fruit that morning for breakfast, chatting, writing letters, singing to someone's guitar playing, and generally feeling more and more like a tight knit family.

Gar came by later in the morning with an unusual worry on his face. He told us that Mark was still in good spirits, but his broken toe in conjunction with ankle irritation had swollen his leg to the point where he would probably have to be floated out once he was willing to leave. And as expected, he wasn't satisfied with O'Shei's conditions for holding flood level at Parrotts, or with the undefined location of elevation 808' O'Shei intended to flood to. He felt the risk of flooding past Parrotts this year was still too great for him to leave.

Gray Davis, Governor Brown's chief of staff, also felt O'Shei's commitment needed more specifics, and was in process of working these out with him. But it was anyone's guess when things would be resolved to Mark's satisfaction.

We wondered how long Mark could, and should hold out. He had now been chained for six days, in isolation and with injury. We felt a strange ~~dilemma~~^{mixture} of emotion for him.

Being this close to victory, we naturally felt the urge to encourage him to hold on. But our affection feared his pushing himself into martyrdom. Of course it was really Mark's choice, and we felt no right in advising him either way. We did join hands, close eyes, and try to convert the energy of our anxiety into channeled healing for him. And we hoped it

helped him as much as it did us.

That night our usual discussion evolved into an open forum for river supporters who were congregating from all over the country. The mood and attitude ran the gamut from paranoia to confidence. There were rumors that Mark's location was suspected, a new and intensive search was under way, and that his life may be in danger. Some felt a substitute for Mark was in order, but no one knew one.

I was inclined to agree with Tim Palmer, an expert on endangered rivers out from Pennsylvania, who felt we really had no choice but to give the Corps the benefit of a doubt, and hope that Mark could survive his ordeal. In the event Mark had to leave, we could always stay chained in holdout for his demands until they removed us.

The crowd had grown with too many unfamiliar faces, and we felt it was time to ask people to leave so we could sleep. Then, just as we made our request, an elated Gar appeared with a letter to us and Mark from Gray Davis.

It stated that the Corps had agreed to council with the state before any flooding past Parrotts Ferry for any reason; the state would survey and mark the exact location of elevation 808' which the Corps would not back water past; and the state would closely monitor water level to assure compliance by the Corps.

It was now a clear victory, and pretty strong reason

for Mark to end his vigil. Gar would deliver the communique to him later that night. Our relief was enormous. ^{IT WAS} An incredible close to a anxious day.

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 -- like Mark -- 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} ~~stated~~ 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.

The End

Today, the River struggle continues. This year an unusually heavy snow pack, coupled with pro-dam politics, flooded past Parrotts Ferry to a water level of 824 feet in spite of inadequate mitigation of archaeological ruins, environmental law suits to hold water at elevation 808, and state suits to maintain control of Stanislaus resources.

At one point this spring, River supporters stood, then floated in icy waters, acting as "human markers" to protest and illustrate the rising flood. When their lives were threatened by speed boats buzzing within a few feet of their vigil, they were forced to dry land.

HR-4223, has now evolved into the Phillip Burton Obus Wild and Scenic River Bill now before Congress, as the Stanislaus' only hope for preservation. But on individual efforts and letters to local Congressmen will insure its success in saving this very important res.