

SUMMARY – A Short, Preliminary History of ARTA, 1970-1974

Larry Orman, August, 2021

ARTA as ARTA started running California trips from the early sixties on. These were high-energy, low tech trips, with very young (often teenage) guides. By the early 1970s, things were just beginning to evolve – here's a brief summary of those dynamic years, from my personal experience.

1970

Mark Dubois recalls a weekend in 1970, as new guide, being on the last of 4 ARTA trips totaling at least 110 people (ARTA was running 3-4 trips per weekend at that point). We had to patch military surplus rafts at Camp 9, and at the last trip of the weekend most of us didn't have spare oars, and some had to manage with one 10' and one 9' oar – a great way to learn more interesting rowing skills.

At the end of 1970s, when the outfitters begrudgingly came together, ARTA could still easily run 3 or 4 trips per weekend; other companies had a challenging getting a trip of a dozen folks. With the newly organized Stanislaus River Recreation Association (SRRA), they all agreed to limit trips to 25 persons per trip. ARTA and one other company advocated 30 persons per trip knowing that improved the economics. SRRA ended up constraining ARTA and others to two trip launches per weekend day.

1971

I was part of the dozen guides chosen and trained in three (very cold, rainy) weekends in April (cut-off jean shorts freeze overnight have to be thawed with hot water to get on...). The trainees were: Bob Melville, Bernd Kutzscher, John Cassidy, Larry Orman, Dave Thomas, Doug & Steve Hoxmeier, Steve Perryman, Dan Marshall, Steve Shepard (doesn't go on with ARTA), Joe Daly, and Mike Bronson. See the end for notes on those three training trips.

Starting in May, Stanislaus trips were run on Saturdays and Sundays (in summer, almost always two a day starts on those days), and some Fri-Sat trips, plus a few So Fork American trips (far away, difficult logistics, Camp Lotus was a pit – way before Bill and Robin made it wonderful). Trips in 1971 were mostly oar boats, but usually had one paddle boat. Guides were paid \$20/day, plus left over trip food and covered their costs getting up and back, as no one lived up there.

These Stanislaus trips were run by using the Vallecito General Store for food and guest meeting, and the Murphy's storage building (a late 1800s bank building, just a stone box, no lights) for gear.

The first ARTA Tuolumne exploratory was in May (Bryce Whitmore had done a trip the year before), followed later by the first Tuolumne 3-day trips. Rob Elliott led the exploratory trip, aided by Dick Sunderland and Jerry Meral, early kayak pioneers on the river. (it's possible Rob did an Outward Bound trip the year before..?) We had the very generalized USGS topo quad maps as a broad guide, and Dick and Jerry to help scout individual rapids.

As we started commercial trips, all of us knew this was the most cutting edge (and dangerous) river any of us had ever run. Dick head guided the first commercial trip, and gave such a serious safety talk, offering refunds to anyone who didn't want to go, that five passengers took him up on his offer. Mark Dubois led the next trip and made the same offer, but also required everyone who still wanted to go - at 8am before the sun hit the canyon - to jump off a 7 foot rock into foaming whitewater in the 30' rapid at the head of Meral's Pool. No more folks took a refund, and, that year, every passenger did that baptismal rapid swim. No one ever fell out of the raft that year.

During this time, we had to lift rafts over the framing work for the new Ward's Ferry Bridge, but we got to float all the way to site of old Jacksonville, making it 23 miles over three days.

Mark Dubois managed ARTA during weekdays in the spring (including negotiating South Fork American camping and logistics, as well as Tuolumne trips), while Dick Linford was still teaching; in the summer, Dick managed full time, then handed it over to Steve Perryman at end of season (Dick goes on to start Echo River Trips with Joe Daly at the end of the 1971 season).

Overnight ARTA camps on the Stanislaus are Chinese, Mother, Razorback, Duck Bar and others. All trips carry full camping gear, though finally some kitchen gear is stashed.

1972

Friends of the River started – Jerry Meral, Rob Caughlan and ARTA's David Kay are deeply involved, along with Tom Graff of EDF and others.

Large trainee group (15+) – last of the dedicated spring training classes (replaced by Whitewater School). ARTA is the first company to hire (and train) women (Laurel Nesbitt, Christy Sinclair, Judy Pace, Jackie Smithson), challenges in attitudes (passengers and guides) early on but it really takes hold. Stan trips now tend to have two paddle rafts, three oar.

Epic Tuolumne training trip that spring – 35-40' enclosed moving truck is only option after regular truck breaks, barely clears overhands on Lumsden Road. That trip names Phil's Folly, Chickenshot and a couple other rapids). Mostly all oar on Tuolumne (and everyone runs left at Clavey, thinking the right side drop is too dangerous – until a few guides go rogue and show it's way better that way!)

Many more Stan trips running, plus T trips and So Fork (long travel over to So Fork). New trip added: "Mother Lode Special", a five day Stan/Tuolumne Trip, of which 3 or 4 are run in 1972.

Perryman starts as manager, Larry Orman takes over mid-year. All trip planning runs out of 1016 Jackson St. ARTA offices (Lou's old print shop), while logistics are based out of the Martinez warehouse for Elliot River Tours (who hires all the guides, runs all the trips – nonprofit ARTA is marketing and booking and outreach/education).

Bill Center volunteers repeatedly for the unpopular duty of running So Fork American trips – what's with that?? But, great, sure solves a management headache. He's spending a lot of time over there, wonder why..? We all know the answer to that one, and it's a great one, at that!

First month-long Whitewater School? Epic adventure, all over northern Calif., Oregon and Idaho. G

Mark, Fred, Ron start Etcera, using old ARTA basket boats and Mark's red pickup.

In July, the film, "Deliverance" comes out and interest in river running skyrockets (can you hum the banjo tune?)

ARTA has first California passenger death on the Klamath, freak accident in a simple rapid.

Toward the end of the season, a town meeting is called in Vallecito, and about 80+ attendees express widespread aggravation about rafters not being respectful (sleeping in yards, loud loading noise late at night – and they were right). Rob promises ARTA will secure a location out of town.

Result is the Vallecito house (south of town, right at intersection of Parrott's Ferry Rd. and Camp Nine Road) – 10 hilly acres, old and small house, large chicken coop for a warehouse.

1973

(No spring training this year, as Whitewater School and the previous guide pool, plus others, fills needs).

Non-rafting area manager for Calif. chosen by ARTA (MBA with some recreation background – "we're going to professionalize ARTA...").

Very busy year trip-wise, same portfolio of trips. Overall, rafting on the Stanislaus just explodes – from about eight companies, the mix goes to above 30 at one point. Much congestion on the Stan, at put-in in particular. Private use also builds and with it near-constant rescues of ill-equipped people (think inner tubes with six-packs roped on) on weekends.

Process for guide certification starts – guides have to get tested (written, on-river) and are given licenses. It doesn't last long.

During the spring, in a high water weekend, the first commercial death occurs after major mishaps at Death Rapid. ARTA trip has same issues (due another company's rescue rope not being flagged upriver) and has flipped boats and long swimmers. All trips pull out, guides push looking for passengers – eventually all ok, but roughest day ever on Stan.

Operations and morale at the ARTA house hit a low point by late June - in July, the guides call a meeting at the Vallecito house, and the manager takes a lot of criticism. Several guides move to take over operational management – just get it done! Discussions occur about making it great for next season.

1974

Winter – discussion moves forward among several guides and ARTA about a better management approach. Larry Orman, John Tichenor and Bernd Kutzscher put together plan for troika management. Lou resists but finally agrees. Things get going in March and with lots of guides coming into the mix the ARTA house becomes the center for a great operation – which is needed because this is a big year, trip wise and politically.

The guide pool stands at about 30, two trips a day Friday and Saturday out of Vallecito, 2-4 other trips during week in summer. Tuolumne trips sent over every week and So Fork American trips weekly as well (no base there yet).

ARTA house gets a makeover early in year (March-May), with guide-run rebuild of warehouse, food shed and a huge garden - goats (April, Yoghurt) added to mix. Tree houses, teepees and old buses on the 10 acre site house guides who aren't just camping. Great music all the time as 10-12 guides pitch in their talents. Trip organization is greatly revamped, with defined menus/food buying, and better shuttle system, including the first professional driver, Marion (Red) Hall (who's a local and very skeptical of working for the long-haired rafters, but comes to love it and be loved by the guides. Main truck is now an open bed affair with passenger benches and sides, buses come later.

The Proposition 17 campaign (to prevent filling of New Melones dam, which will destroy the Stanislaus) is underway and ARTA is the center for all the media trips. Big highlight is taking down Jerry Brown, then 36 and running for Governor, which he will win. We run a trip at high water that gets him down in 3 hours (normally at least a five-six hour one day). ARTA House is also the center for FOR organizing on the river, and for developing campaign forays down to LA to get votes (giant sheet-posters get made during the week in the parking lot). Huge amounts of education goes on with those on trips, all companies pitching in.

ARTA guides distinguish themselves as interpretive guides on the rivers – several of them create guidebooks, build natural science and history knowledge, engage passengers with a full experience.

After 1974, ARTA continued to be highly active on the Stanislaus, until the drought of 1976-77 limited operations severely, and the eventual flooding of the river in the mid-1980s ended ARTA's presence on the Stanislaus. John Cassidy and then Sparky Kramer continue great management during these years.

1971 Training Trips (Larry Orman notes)

Twelve men were selected guide training by Rob Elliott, out of over one hundred applying. On the first Friday of April, 1971, each of us made our way up to Vallecito to begin spring training. I had never seen a whitewater river before, and had no idea what it was like to be in a rubber raft floating down one - selection for training was clearly based on other factors!

Four of us rode up in Doug Hoxmeier's old VW van – Doug, me, Doug's brother Steve, and Jeff Fowler, who lived in the house we did next to UC Berkeley (he and I were students there) and who had evangelized us to apply, saying it was a great thing to do (Jeff was one of the original ARTA guides, rowing for Lou Elliott at age 16 in California and Oregon) - we all had no idea how great. At eight PM or so, we stopped on Parrott's Ferry Bridge, got out and peered into pitch black, straining to see the water we could hear rushing below.

When we got to the Gene's Vallecito General Store, Dick Linford came out and introduced himself, and gradually we all assembled. Blackie, the big Ford cab-over stakeside truck, was waiting with all the gear we'd need and we all piled in the back and drove down to put in, where we camped.

The morning was cold, with drizzle starting to fall. Dick said a few things and asked Scotty Imsland to give us the "currents and eddies" talk. Allan Duebner, Steve Dupuis, Jeff Fowler and Mark Dubois were the other trainers.

We did two trips a day on the Stanislaus for the first two weekends, rolling up rafts at Parrott's Ferry, and then packing everything back up to Camp Nine for the second run. My main memory of this was how cold and rainy it frequently was – I recall not being able to stand easily when we got out at Rose Creek because my feet were so cold. David Thomas had this amazing thing, a wetsuit top – the rest of us were in awe, with our cutoff blue jeans and thin nylon windbreakers. The poor trainers really had it bad, as they mostly had to sit and watch us blunder into waves and rocks as we learned to row.

Our third weekend, we met on the American River, at Camp Lotus (then just a rocky bar, ugly as could be) and ran the entire river from Chili Bar to Salmon Falls one day and then from Lotus to Salmon the second day. We had several paddle rafts (all paddle?) on this trip, which was our only instruction in paddling.

The fourth weekend, most of us showed up on the Stanislaus for our first commercial trip. The passengers were very interested in our experience – "how many trips have you done on the river?" The answer was a mumbled, "oh, a dozen or so" and a very quick change of subject... We were very green at the start of the season!