

A Short, Preliminary History of ARTA California, 1970-74, and 1975-83

Larry Orman, Revised - June 2024

ARTA started running California trips from the mid-1960s on – initially with Bryce Whitmore, the first pioneer, then on its own. 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 and notes from many others.

1970

Mark Dubois, as a brand new ARTA guide, recalls a weekend in 1970, being on the last of four 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.

Dick Linford (who also started in 1970) remembers that many of the old surplus assault rafts that were commonly used in 1960s and early 1970s came with rubber cones to stick into bullet holes; and, of course, there were the basket boats, which were designed as U.S. Navy life rafts for airplanes and were very flimsy - they kind of undulated down the river, especially when paddled (and they had almost no d-rings for tie-downs, and some even still had the inflatable tubes that arched across the middles, to support the raft cover).

1971

Mark Dubois started out as Area Manager in 1971 (where he helped negotiate camping opportunities with the Bocci family on the South Fork American), then co-managed when Dick Linford arrived after his high school teaching ended in Spring. Both had exactly one season of rowing experience!

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). Mark Dubois negotiated with the Bocci's for camping on their land (how many overnight pack trips did we do in 1971, vs. just camping at Lotus?)

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.

The 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. Mark Dubois, Dick Linford and 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 seven 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 on Bocci's land and other logistics, as well as leading Tuolumne trips), while Dick Linford was still teaching; in the late spring, Dick managed full time, then handed it over to Steve Perryman near the end of season (Dick went 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

Steve Perryman starts as California Area Manager, Larry Orman takes over mid-year when Perryman leaves (to study for bar exam?). All trip planning runs out of 1016 Jackson St., the Oakland 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).

A large trainee group (15+) was brought in in April 1972 – this was the 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 – Larry leads it and we have to rent a 35-40' enclosed moving truck as the only option after the regular truck (Blackie) breaks. That van truck barely (by inches) clears overhangs on Lumsden Road. That trip names Phil's Folly (Phil Town tries twice to muscle through middle slot, gets stuck both times), Chickenshot, Rinseaway 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.

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 is held in summer 1972 – an epic adventure, all over northern Calif., Oregon and Idaho.

Mark, Fred, Ron start etcera (etc), using old ARTA basket boats and Mark's red pickup, to take disabled kids down the river.

Throughout 1972, a major effort is made to get signatures on a Save the Stanislaus petition, in a campaign led by Jerry Meral and David Kay – over 100,000 signatures are gathered, mostly by guides, but President Nixon refuses to accept them.

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 Elliott (Larry also attended) 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

Early in 1973, Friends of the River is started by Jerry Meral, Rob Caughlan and ARTA's David Kay, along with Tom Graff of EDF and others.

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

Dick Atkinson is chosen by ARTA Lou/Rob to manage California. He has zero river experience, some lifeguarding and an MBA with some recreation background – “we’re going to professionalize ARTA...” what could possibly go wrong? See below.

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. Perhaps 40-50,000 people per year are going down the river now.

Outfitters form Pacific River Outfitters Association in response to push from BLM for certification. Marty McDonnell leads this process, involving a written test and then an on-river test of rowing and paddle skills. Paper licenses are issued, but the process doesn't last long – too subjective and cumbersome.

ARTA house has been used over the winter by several people, some guides (and including a horse); season starts with things not in tip top shape at the house, and bad energy around it.

During the spring, in a high water weekend, the first commercial death on the Stanislaus River occurs after major mishaps at Death Rapid. The following ARTA trip has a near miss, as another company's boat is wrapped at Death and they don't send a warning person upstream to the landing area – the ARTA rafts just turn the corner into Death and see a rope is blocking the entire right side run, forcing an impossible effort to row left of Death. At least one boat hits Death and flips (Desmond Johnson rowing), with swimmers getting pushed way downstream; Desmond nearly drowns, stuck in right side rocks). Rest of ARTA trip holds above Death, they and other trips confer and agree to pull out there, while one raft of guides (Dubois, Orman, others) goes downriver looking for Desmond's crew. Eventually found, very cold and shaken. Roughest day ever on the Stan.

Operations and morale at the ARTA house hit a low point by late June, due to terrible management by Dick Atkinson (who doesn't live there). In July, the guides call a meeting at the Vallecito house, Rob Elliott comes up from Oakland and Atkinson takes a load of sharp criticism. Several guides (Ferguson, others) take over operational management – just get it done! Atkinson is basically let go. Discussions start to occur about making it great for next season (John Tichenor, Larry Orman, Bernd Kutzscher).

By the middle of 1973, Proposition 17 is drafted and ready for signature gathering.

1974

Winter – discussion moves forward about a better management approach. Larry Orman, John Tichenor and Bernd Kutzscher put together a plan for troika management. Lou resists but finally agrees. Things get going in March, and with lots of new (prior whitewater school) 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 are sent over there every week and So Fork American trips weekly as well (no base there yet).

ARTA house gets a makeover early in the year (March-May), with guide-run rebuild of warehouse, food shed and a huge garden - goats (April, Yoghurt) are 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 ("Peplemover"); buses come later in the year.

Proposition 17 has qualified for the November 1974 ballot and the campaign (to prevent filling of New Melones dam, which will destroy the Stanislaus) is underway - 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 (key are Sarge Preston, Carol Nelson; then John Cassidy) 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 1977 limited operations severely, and the eventual flooding of the river in the mid-1980s ended ARTA's presence on the Stanislaus. John Cassidy (1975), then Sparky Kramer (1976) and then Fred Dennis (1977-80ish?) continue great management during these years, though the drought of 1976-77 causes limited operations then.

1975 Cassidy manages?

1976 Sparky manages?? Drought year by mid-summer, shuts off trips

1977 Who manages? Fred Dennis? – this is big time drought year, very few trips run...

1978 Drought ends with huge rains. Fred Dennis manages?

1979 Fred Dennis manages?

Huge year for Mark and other chaining and other protests, big efforts to get federal and state bills; inundation of lower canyon starts; Witness & Encampment takes place.

1980

Who manages?

Federal Wild & Scenic bills fail

1981

Last year of trips year round on the Stanislaus River. Federal court actions, many bills. Protests take place over clear cutting and flooding above Parrott's; Water Reform Alliance takes lead on civil disobedience protests.

1982

Final year for the Stan, Proposition 13 initiative; driven by huge rains, reservoir almost floods fully up to Camp Nine in June. Few commercial trips this year??

1983

New Melones fully fills in June 1983.

FROM SPARKY:

My memories, as I remember them. They may conflict with some of Cass's, whose memory is more porous than mine, and more prone to exaggeration.

During the 74-75 off season, I visited 1016 Jackson Street and talked to Bill Center, who was operations manager, about managing Vallecito, as it was up for grabs, as you, John, and Bernd were rumored not to be returning. I had followed what you 3 had done to get things set up and figured it wouldn't take much to keep it rolling. Bill and I had a good mutual respect relationship, but I, being somewhat of a newbie to ARTA, Bill wanted someone with more name recognition in the organization, that being Cass. So management in Vallecito that year was Cassidy for spring and summer, myself for summer and fall, and Peter Wynn for the busy summer months. This worked great for me, as I was able to work the spring Tuolumne trips. I also knew Peter from being on the 1973 Whitewater School that he ran, with Bill Center as one of the instructors.

Being the one to close things up that fall also gave me time for insight into what could work better in future seasons.

My recollection was that 1975 was a pretty good water year and we missed several Tuolumne trips due to the USFS cut off at 4000 cfs. I recall borrowing some RAFT Avons so Gab and I could run a private at 6000 cfs.

Though trips ran smoothly that year, there was one incident I recall, where Coral Linford and Moira (now Magnuson) came off of a whitewater school and were to row a baggage boat as trainees on the Stan. It was a busy time, all of the boats were in use, and somebody (seriously, I don't recall who) pulled a retired Rogue River raft out from under the boat rack for them to row.

It was retired because 3 diaphragms were blown making this a one chamber boat with thwarts.

Coral hit the wall at Bailey Falls, tore a tube, and the boat proceeded to sink. Coral felt horrible.

On a side note, many years later (early nineties) while rowing a commercial Rogue trip for Jimmy Katz, I saw who I thought was Coral at an Echo camp, so pulled over to say hi. I couldn't believe how well she had aged, didn't look a year older than I remembered. Turns out that Dick had remarried and had another daughter, much younger than Coral, who looked just like her. I think her name was Rachel.

Also, on another private trip on the Rogue years later, I met Will Cowens son, working commercially, and looking just like Will.

At this most recent Seder (2024) I asked Moira about that sinking boat trip with Coral, which she confirmed, but she also recalled a later trip where she ripped, or wrapped a raft on the Stan, and totally lost it, crying and having a freakout, and told me that I recommended not rehiring her because of that meltdown. I don't recall any of that, but, selective memory may play a part here, or maybe someone else advised against hiring her.

Marion Hall was still our main shuttle driver in 1975, and we added his younger brother George, to drive when trips overlapped, which primarily happened with Tuolumne put-ins and take-outs.

Marion aged out later that season, as ARTA's insurance company would not insure drivers over 65 years old. George Hall became the full-time driver as the 1975 season wound down, and for the 1976 season.

Moving ahead to the 1976 season, I did manage that year, and hired separate food and equipment managers. Favoritism played a part here, and I hired Barry Wasserman's friend Jeff Golden to maintain equipment, and my current girlfriend's sister, Cathy Schifferle, to take care of food buying and packing, and some meal planning. She had worked in the cafeteria at UC Davis and had some experience with food, but definitely had a learning curve for river meals, wanting to try meals that the guides felt were too complicated for a camp situation. It all eventually worked out, and she and Jeff also became kayakers, lovers, spouses, parents, and ex-spouses as the years passed. So a bit part for me as Cupid.

Although the media billed 1976 as a drought year and trip numbers were down, there was actually enough water stored in upstream reservoirs to run a full season of Stanislaus trips, although without the spring high-water, and low water trips being the norm. I think it may have been nicer though for the guides and passengers to have had these smaller, more intimate trips. Even if they didn't know it at the time.

The Tuolumne was another story. Although the early season had enough water for trips, releases soon were too low for loaded Avons and Yampas. Marty McDonnell meanwhile was partially deflating his companies Huck Finn rafts so they could slither over and between the rocks, and was continuing to run trips. He approached ARTA (and maybe others) about running their T trips, so I went along on one of their trips to check it out, rowing a cataraft of Marty's design, and watching the rest of the rafts slither their way downstream. ARTA ended up subcontracting their T trips to Marty, but the feed back on the low water trips was not good from people expecting thrills and excitement.

With the continuing drought into 1977, there was no river season on the Stanislaus, to my recollection. Guides who wanted to work were offered some trips in other areas that were still running trips, both to give them some work and to maintain a guide base for when water returned to the rivers. The guides in other areas weren't too keen on losing trips to a surplus of guides, but got with the program. I was offered management of the Southern Utah operation, which I took. Drifter worked behind the scenes to bring this about, as he was probably the most qualified to run this operation, having already worked a few seasons there, but he wanted to guide, not manage. So he pitched me to Bill Center, who offered me the position.

That's another story, for another time.

I don't know if Fred managed in 1978, 79, or 80, but he was managing in 1981 when Margene Olsen was driving a loaded shuttle bus up from Parrots Ferry and the engine started knocking real bad. She found a place to pull over and the bus was towed back to Vallecito.

I had recently cut a deal with Bill C. to buy one of the small Ford buses from a Utah operation, paid for in labor as he needed to the tune of \$1000. This bus had a new engine in it.

Bill sheepishly asked if we could renege on our deal so he could use the engine from it in the larger bus with a now bad engine. I said yes, if you'll give me the small bus and the bad engine in exchange for switching out the engines. So that was the deal and I did that at the Vallecito house while Fred was manager.

I then pulled the pan on the bad engine, replaced all of the main and rod bearings, and the bus ran fine for as long as I had it. Eventually, when I moved to Truckee, I sold that bus to a couple who were moving to Alaska.

PERSONAL STORIES

1970 (Dick Linford): When I trained with ARTA in 1970, we started with a meeting of fifty prospects and were divided into two groups of 25, to train on consecutive weekends. After the first weekend we were to be cut down to 25. I was on the first weekend, which was led by Alan Deubner, who was heading Grand Canyon trips when he was 18. By the time we got through Cadillac Charlie, I was hooked, even though I almost froze to death. I slept under my backpacking poncho (not at all waterproof) and my down sleeping bag was soaked. Still, I loved it. When I got home, I told my wife, Suzie, that I didn't know if I made the cut. I was 8 or so years older, and out of my element. The following Wednesday Alan called and told me they were short a trainer and would I be interested in the job. That is when I realized that we weren't talking about rocket science.

1971 Training Trips (Larry Orman notes): Twelve young men were selected for guide training by Rob Elliott, out of over one hundred applying (they learned from 1971 that it was better not to have cut-throat competition for places, so they chose just the number they needed). 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!

1971 (Dan Marshall): My primary memory of the Stanislaus is pulling into an eddy where there was lots of Scotch broom growing out over the river. I cut off pieces and all the passengers made crowns from the Scotch broom. We felt like we looked like Romans.

I recall buying cucumbers from a farm stand for 5 cents each during a drive from Davis, where I was going to school, to the Stanislaus on a Friday. We learned that cucumbers are not very filling or sustaining.

I also remember being astonished every time I made it through Death without flipping.