

Human Water Markers at Parrotts Ferry July 1980

By Melinda Wirght, March 2018

After the huge winter storms of January 1980, the Army Corps allowed early summer snowmelt to back up in the canyon above Parrotts Ferry in spite of court injunctions. People decided to stand at the side of the backed-up reservoir at the point where it should legally have been unflooded river. There is a newspaper photo of Jim and Salli Kenrick standing at the legal filling limit, shivering because so much of their bodies are in the water.

I had worked hard with Doris Grimm (now Grinn) and many others to lead the Mother Lode FOR chapter, and that May I had moved up to Crystal Falls, was still working part time at Columbia College through the summer, and wanted badly to back off a bit. I was thrilled that seven people replaced me at the letter writing table, and much to my surprise and delight a woman named Annie showed up with new, fresh energy and enthusiasm that easily filled the leadership space I had temporarily abandoned.

Annie worked with Kevin and Alexander to co-ordinate the “human water marker” protest. What was involved: realizing that the water was so cold that everyone would need wetsuits, and getting the wetsuits; realizing that as the Army Corps broke the law further and further, we would floating over the legal fill point instead of standing, and therefore anchoring big inner tubes for people to hold onto; scheduling people to cover the daylight hours, so that whenever the press came to Parrotts Ferry, there would be human water markers there, and of course contacting and dealing with the press.

Annie, Kevin, Alexander, and others handled the details. That’s partly why being a human water marker is my favorite action of the Stan Campaign. For me it involved putting on a wetsuit and floating an hour at a time with one other person. There was nothing to do but be in the water at Parrotts Ferry, float, and visit. No phones, no paperwork, no agenda, no pressure, just an hour to float on the still-beautiful river and visit with Jim Kenrick. With Linda Conklin. With Linda Cloud. With Dave Conklin. With Salli Kenrick. Hard to beat that!

At this time, HR 4223 lobbying was in full swing in DC, and I think Betty, Shortcutt, Jenny, and Catherine were there in DC, while Brad, Dick R-C, Tom Huntington and others held down the Fort (Mason) in San Francisco and at Sacramento FOR. Around the end of July Annie sent a letter to FOR asking “where are the women?” and pointing out that FOR was male-dominated from Parrotts Ferry to the city offices. Brad read the letter and said “Huh? Where are the women! They’re in Washington DC telling us what to do!!” And that was absolutely, 100% true. What I loved was that I had never once thought about who was what gender in FOR because it was so full of strong women and strong men.

I don’t remember Annie’s last name. I wish I could apologize to her for standing aside and letting her take point and get the wrong impression of FOR. She was a powerful woman who led an amazing action.

Timeline (from FOR Action alert July 13, 1980)

July 1-8: "Human water markers" stand at Parrotts Ferry in the reservoir at elevation 820' – the court injunction level.

July 8: reservoir stabilizes at elevation 827". There will be considerable damage to the life along the river for a mile above Parrotts Ferry, but the spring runoff flows in the river are over and the reservoir will soon begin to drop again.