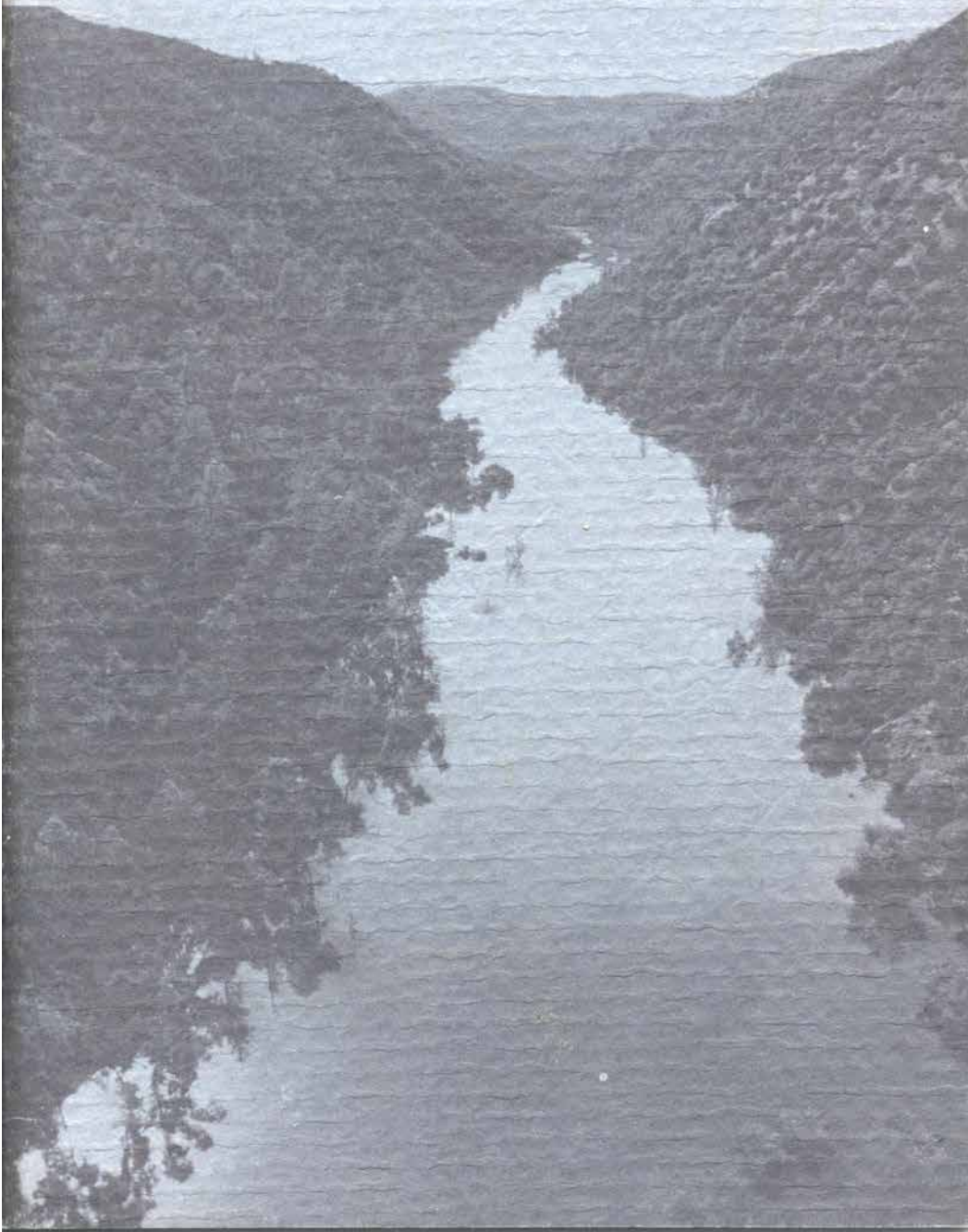


**SCENIC
DROWNING**



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DROWNING**

Robert and Barbara Sommer

Grey Cats Press

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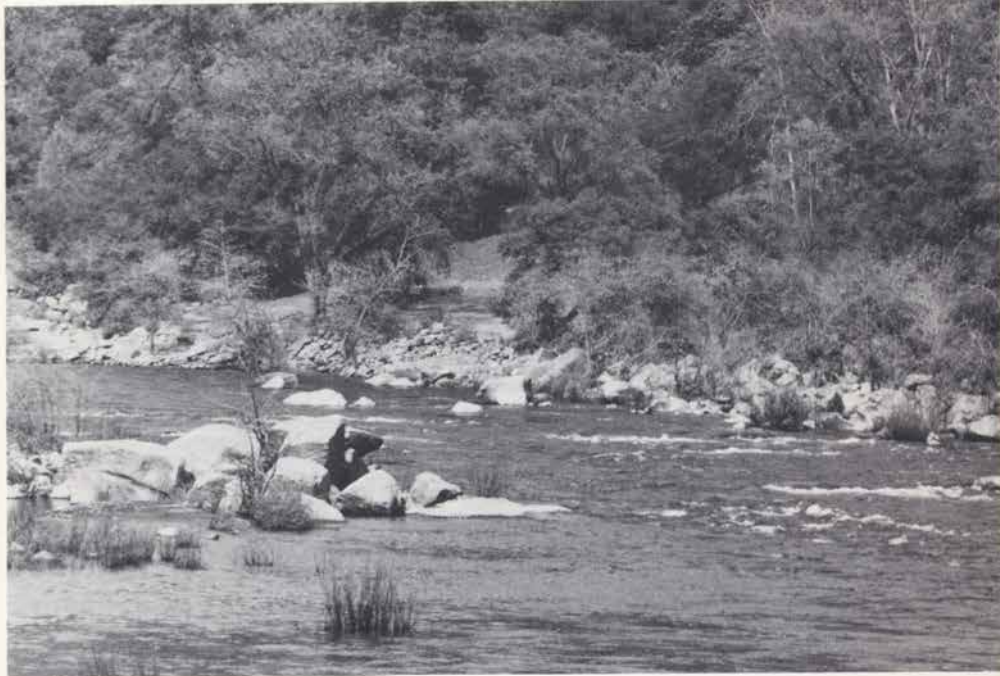
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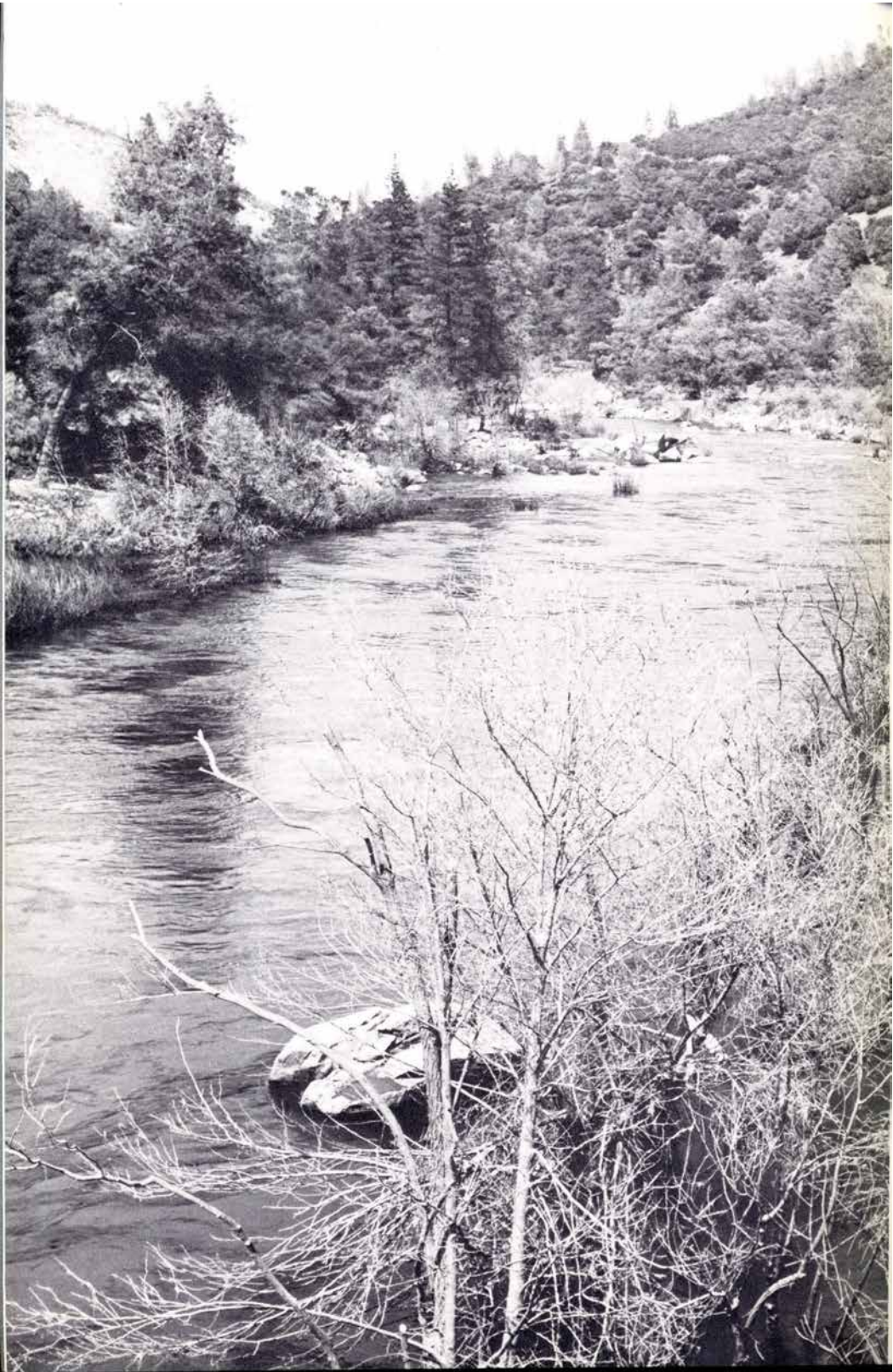
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FORWARD

Our involvement in the Stanislaus River is not easy to explain. We are neither river people nor political by temperament or practice. This book comes too late to influence the controversy over the New Melones Dam. The nine-mile stretch of rapids below Parrott's Ferry, so heavily used by whitewater rafters, now lies beneath 300 feet of water. It was the murals that first caught our interest. We have documented wall art across the country. As examples of guerilla art, the murals at Parrott's Ferry are noteworthy. Ostensibly painted to help the campaign to save the river, the wall art served instead as a memorial to the river and a lost cause.

The battle of the Stanislaus was but one more of the age-old struggles between individuals and the power of the government. The ancient art of native petroglyphs and the newer art of the murals merged into metaphors for that struggle. This book is about the connections between the old art and the new, whitewater river and lake, oil lamps and oil paints, petroglyphs and concrete, walls and weeds, and murals and graffiti. In our search, we came across the boulder TUO 271/272 resting unmarked under a pine tree on the San Francisco State University campus. We heard about Colonel Donald O'Shei, whose effigy once strung from the bridge now is a resident scarecrow in a Gold Country garden. We met Coyote, who adroitly moves through all the scenes in this drama.

PARROTT'S FERRY, 1980

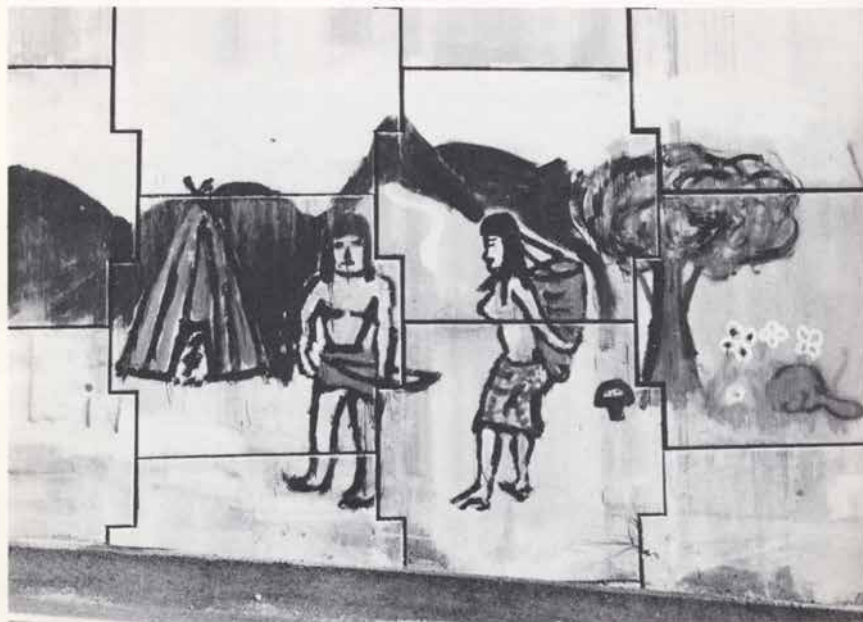
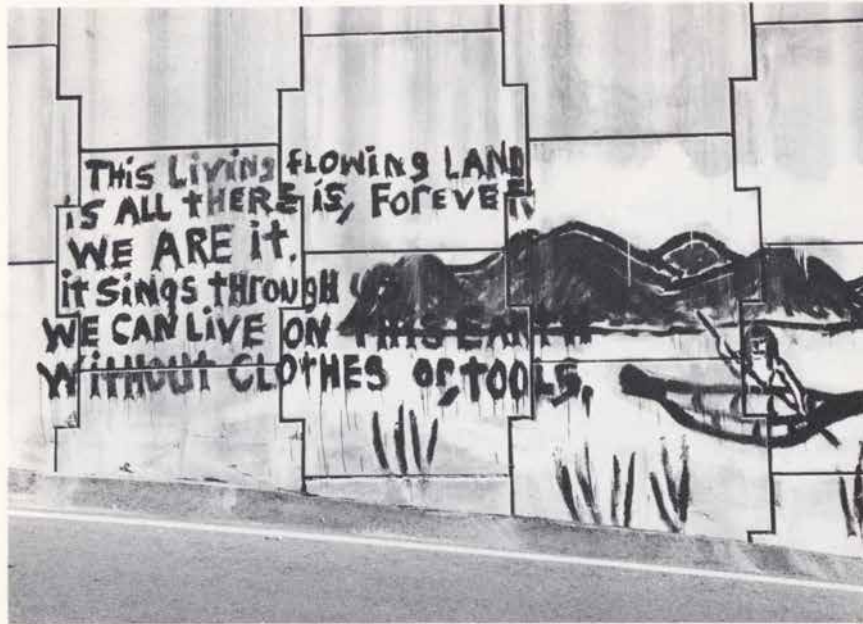
"Scenic Drowning ¼-mile ahead" announced the highway marker. The image was discordant, jarring, puzzling. We were on the Parrott's Ferry Road in Calaveras County, California, in the historic Gold Country. The road ran along the old Mark Twain-Bret Harte trail leading to a ferry crossing built in 1860 by Thomas H. Parrott. The trail connected the mining towns of Vallecitos and Tuttletown. Something unusual had occurred at the site of the bridge which has replaced Parrott's flat-bottomed boat propelled by heavy cables. A row of highway reflectors, painted in Burma-Shave style, read "DON'T FILL ABOVE PARROTT'S FERRY." The retaining wall along the roadway was emblazoned with a brightly-colored mural. The year was 1980 and we were at the scene of the several-year struggle by environmental groups and whitewater rafters to prevent the damming of the Stanislaus River at Melones. A dam had already been built, and the environmentalists and rafters, organized into Friends of the River, were trying to prevent the filling of the reservoir behind it.

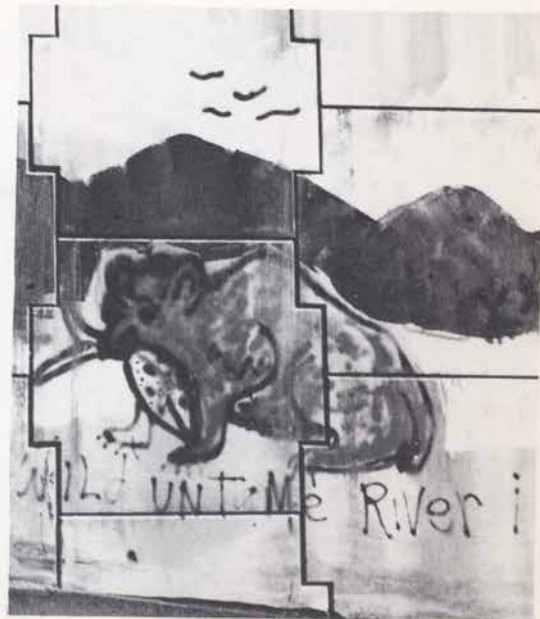
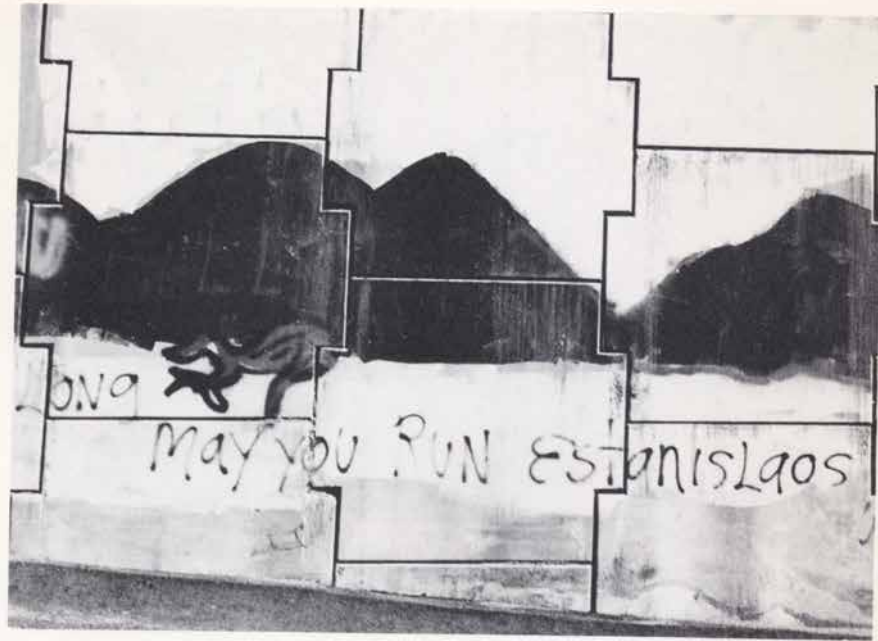


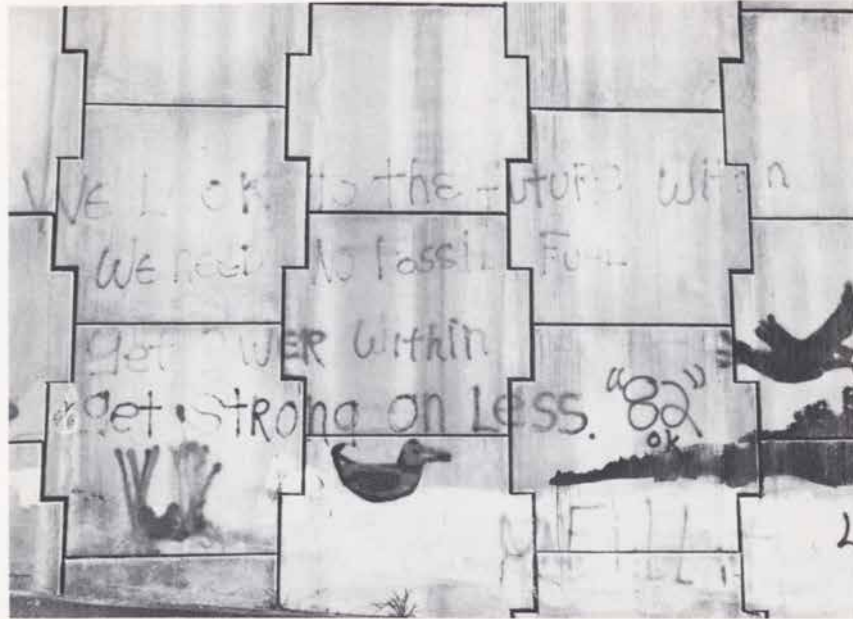


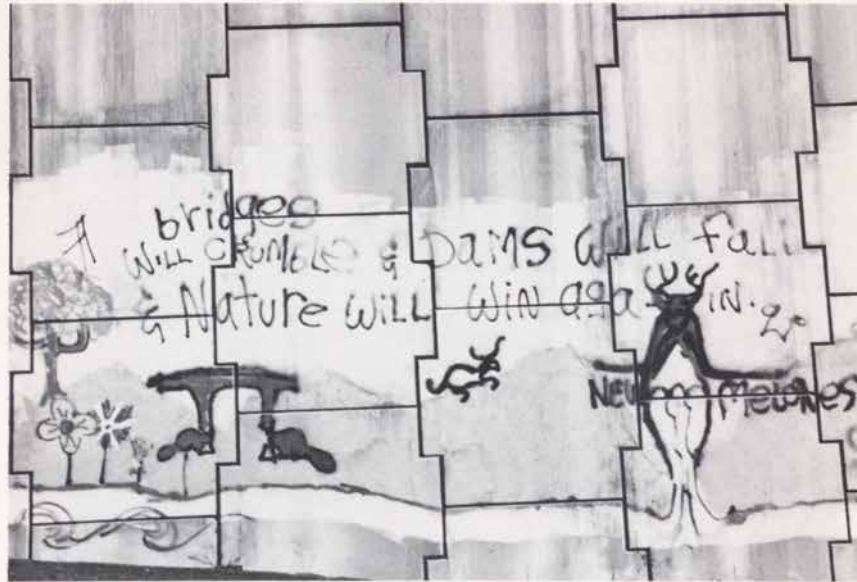
The themes of the mural were uplifting, celebrating the harmony of land, water and sky, and the communion of native peoples with the earth. There were lines from "Turtle Island" by Gary Snyder, a song "Keep your heart strong," lyrics from "Tell all the world you see, follow me" by the Doors, and segments of a speech by Native American activist, Dennis Banks. The artists had worked all night, in pairs, one person holding a flashlight while the other painted. Ancient cave artists worked that way -- one held a flame; the other painted.

We returned again and again to Parrott's Ferry recording the life of the mural. The paintings and names scribbled on the embankment became a record of river politics starting with the Indian Estanislau, who in 1827 led an escape of native peoples from Spanish subjugation, and ending with the graffiti autographs of local high school students. The wall tells the story of the controversy in a way that a litany of facts, figures, and political arguments cannot.







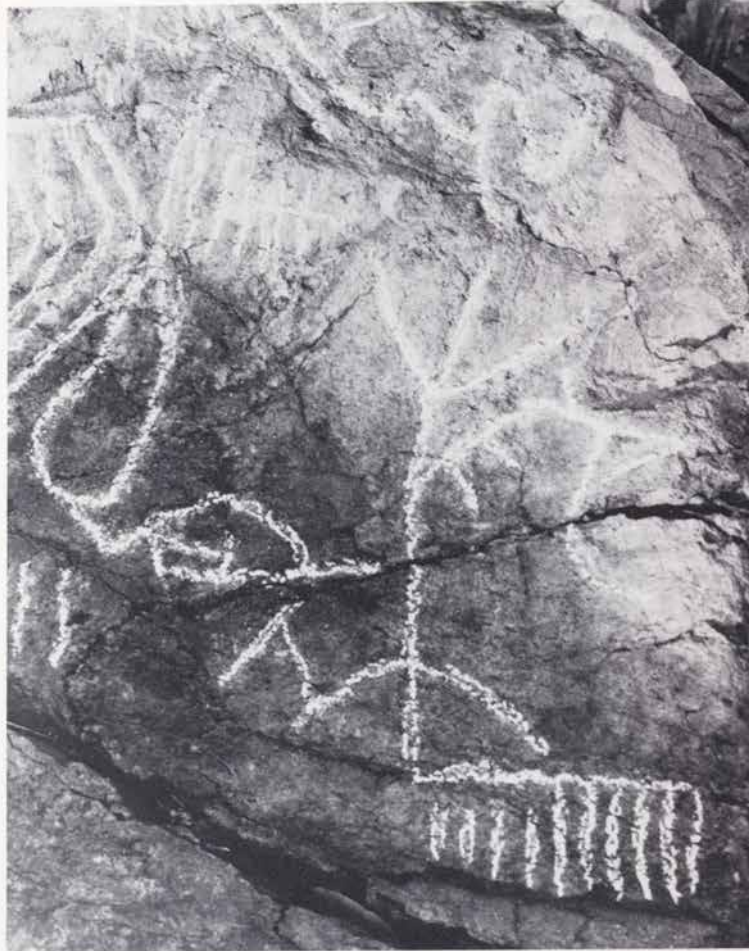


ART OF THE MIWOKS

The deep limestone canyons along the riverbank were honeycombed with caves used by Miwok Indians and their ancestors for thousands of years. The rocks were etched with their petroglyphs. These carvings were considered especially valuable artifacts since so little was known about the original people who were displaced during the Gold Rush and the subsequent mining activity. The petroglyphs had been studied by archaeologists who believed the designs to be connected to fishing rituals at the river.

The petroglyphs protected the flowing river for a time. Environmentalists and archaeologists obtained court orders preventing the filing of the canyon behind the New Melones dam until the native art could be examined and catalogued. The rock carvings shown here were found at a site near the old Robinson's Ferry on the Stanislaus River in Calaveras County.¹ According to archaeologist, Michael Moratto, the designs are prehistoric, probably made by pre-Miwok peoples.



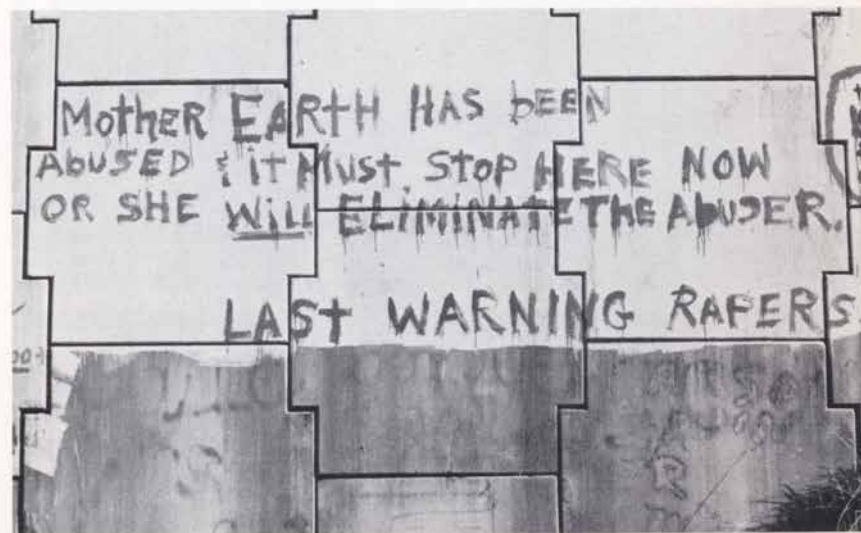
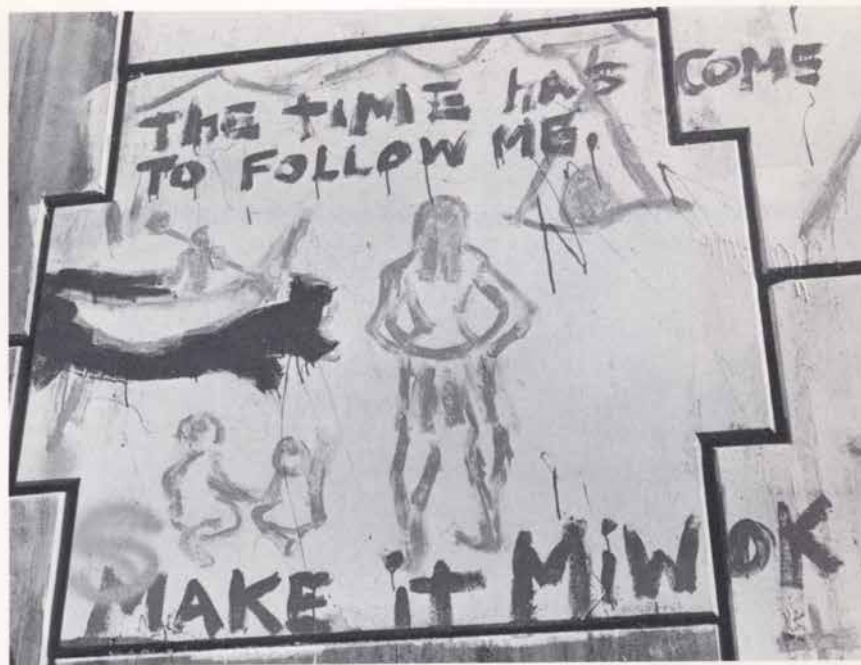


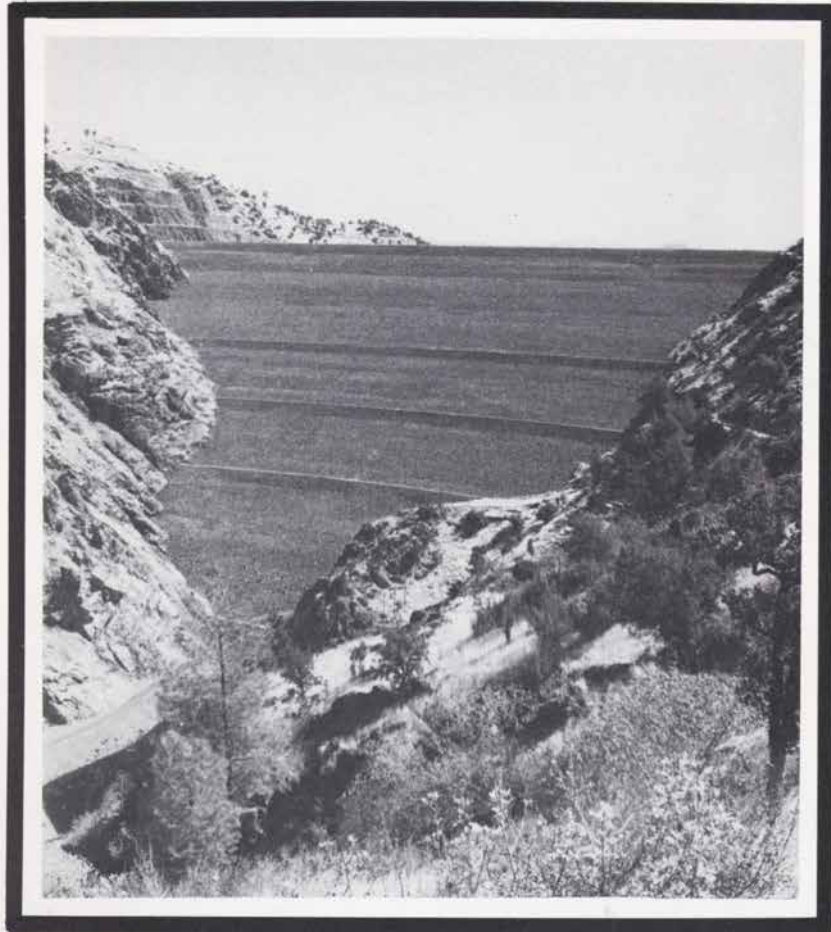
Photographs by Science Applications, courtesy of the National Park Service

SECOND MURAL

The struggle to save the river was going badly. The statewide initiative to protect the river had failed. A second mural was begun whose content showed a new bitterness. Celebration of nature was replaced by threats against those who would abuse her. Painters standing atop a pickup truck vented the anger and frustration of those committed to a losing cause.



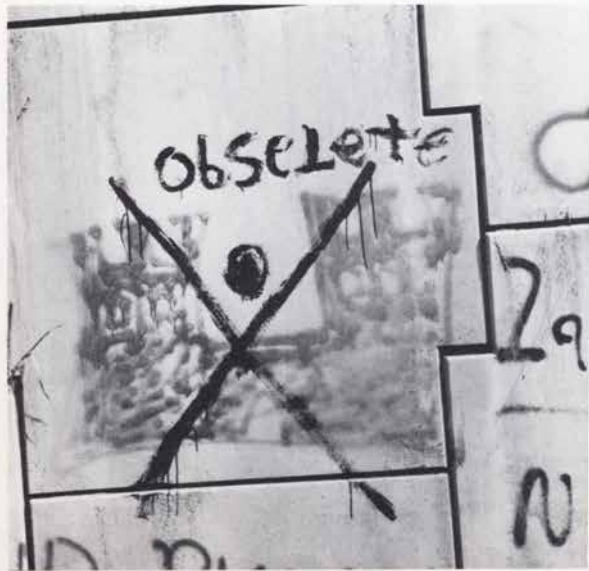
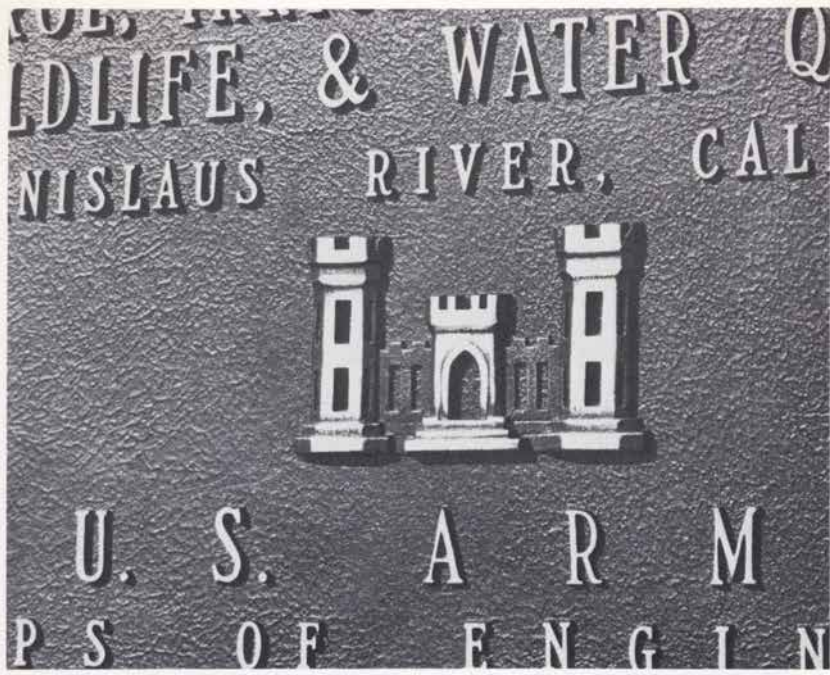




ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

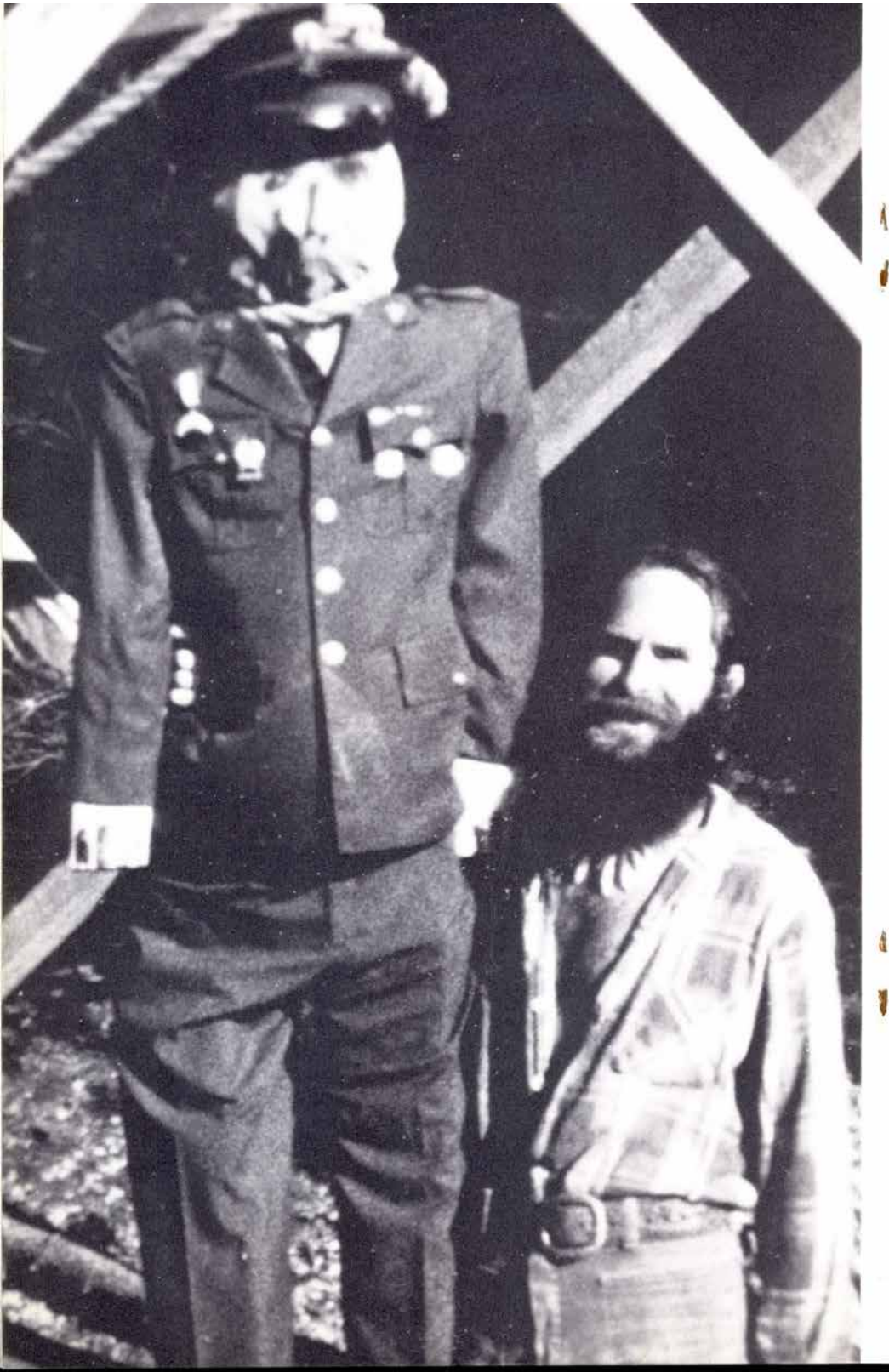
River supporters saw their immediate opponent as the Army Corps of Engineers, the powerful and tremendously efficient dam building apparatus of the U.S. Government and western water interests. Spokespeople for the Corps maintained that they were following the will of Congress. River supporters countered that the Corps had the power and resources to influence public policy and that its extensive lobbying efforts in Washington has considerable impact on Congress.







Point man for the Corps in the battle for the Stanislaus was Colonel Donald O'Shei, depicted in a diorama constructed on Mother's Day 1979 across the river from Horseshoe Bend. The plywood figure was lost in the filling of the reservoir. Colonel O'Shei also became a stuffed dummy hung in effigy from the new bridge. The dummy eventually became a scarecrow in a garden a few miles from the river. After four years in the garden the thriftstore uniform, faded and tattered, was replaced with levis, blue-collar shirt, jacket, and stocking cap. Still in the garden, the Colonel today resembles an aging hippie.



FULL BIRD

*You are in the garden now, Colonel O'Shei
Protecting the tomatoes and bell peppers
You have traded Indian signs for Indian corn
Mazes for maize
A colonel for the kernels
Assigned to repel the predatory birds*

*You failed to do this on the Stanislaus
Attracted the vultures
Allowed them to feed on the life of the river
It wasn't dead when you arrived
I hope you are a better scarecrow in the garden
Than you were at Horseshoe Bend.*

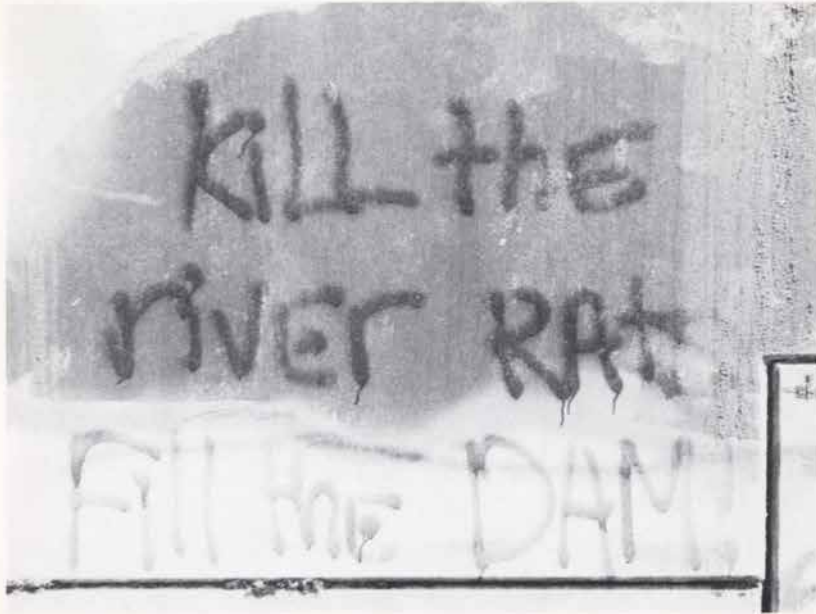


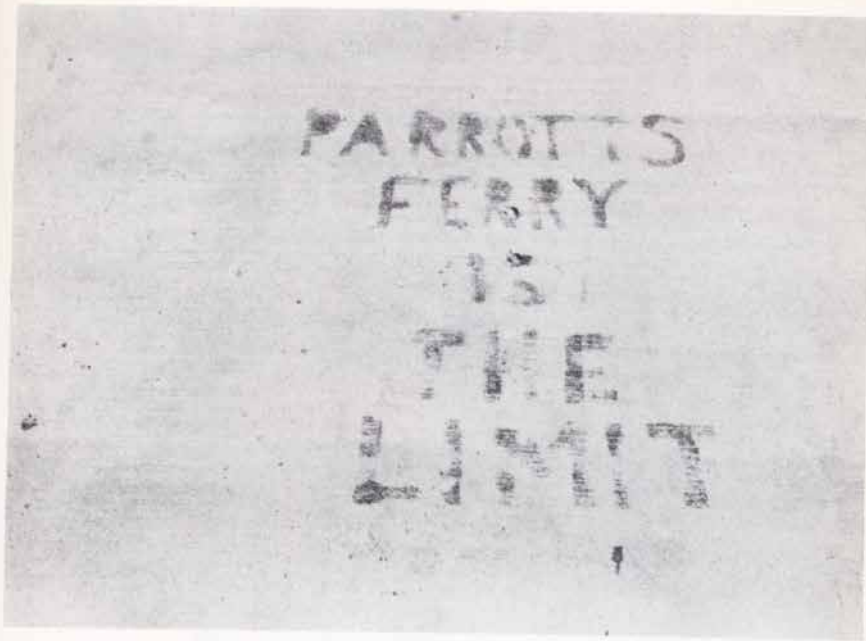


"PARROTT'S FERRY IS THE LIMIT"

The struggle to save the river was mercifully free of violence. One protester had been kicked around by local residents as he lay in his sleeping bag near the riverbank, but that was all. Those protesters who had chained themselves to boulders near the river escaped unscathed. The struggle was fought bombastically through graffiti messages on the new bridge. One side of the bridge was used by the river people and the other by the dam people. The old bridge contained an elegaic to other rivers dammed and gone.



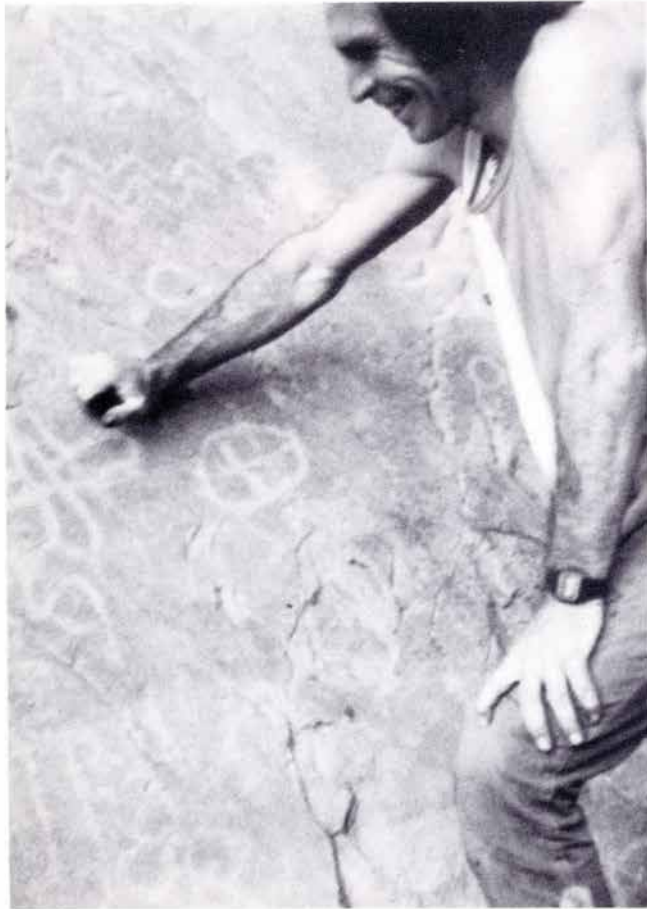




DON'T LET THEM DO IT !!

DISCOVERY ON THE LAST DAY

December 1981. Overcast and rainy days increased the sense of gloom among river supporters. The struggle seemed lost as the water level rose behind the new dam. Someone told Coyote that the Horseshoe Bend petroglyphs were almost under water. Never having seen them, Coyote wanted to look before they disappeared forever. The riverbank looked eerie and magical with its profusion of Jimson weed in the drizzle. Suddenly, between where he and his son were standing, was a petroglyph. They found others. Coyote took photographs and then sketched on paper when the film was spent. When he returned a few hours later, many of the petroglyphs were immersed.



*I SEE THE WRITING ON THE WALL
(Petroglyphs at Horseshoe Bend)*

*Here the lake rises
the river's song cannot
be heard*

*The boulders
big as houses
shout to me*

*Look warrior
and try to see
the thunder*

*The circles
worlds
games
hunts
changes*

*The arrows
the way
through
beyond*

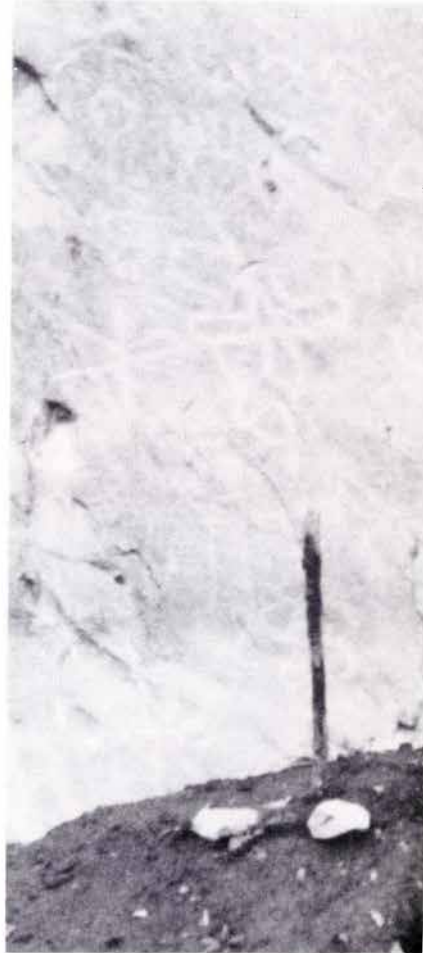
*Many paths
mapped out
some lead to the river
some lead to the sun*

*I saw the first man
going down the river*

*I saw the last man
going to the sky*

*The datura
on the sandy shore
roots growing deep
to bring up mysteries*

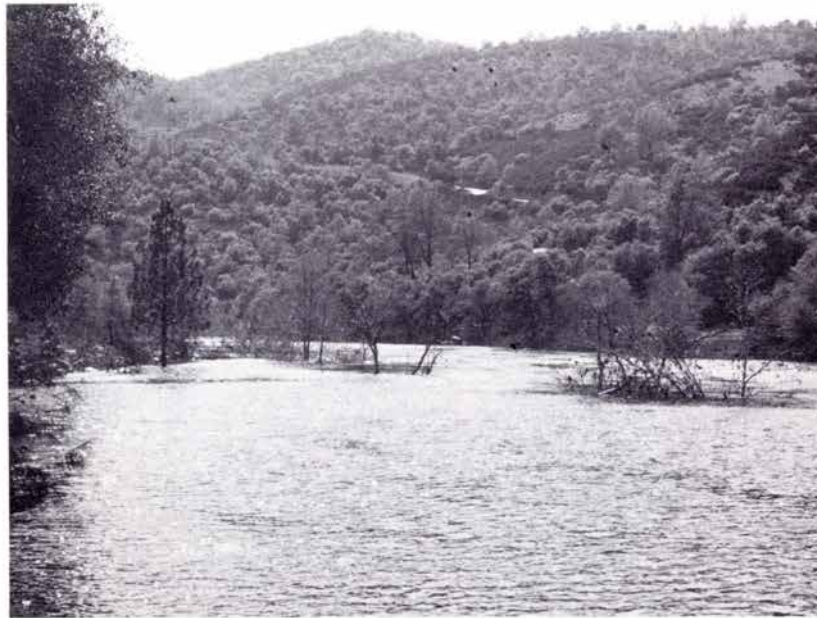
*The lake is rising
but the dream cannot end.*

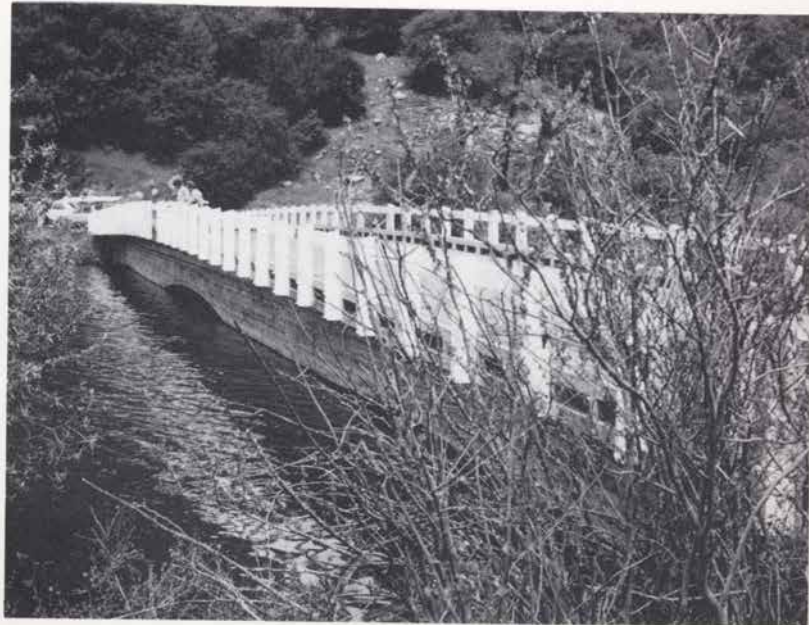


Hukiki of the Siakumne by Coyote 1980

THE WATERS CAME

1982. Court orders could no longer postpone the inevitable. The dam must be used. The swift-flowing river became quiet. The half-filled dam proved to be a blessing during the heavy rains of 1982 and 1983. New Melones was the only reservoir on the western slopes of the Sierra with excess storage capacity. Heavy flooding during the spring runoff was averted. Bookstores removed rafting guides of the Stanislaus River from the shelves. In October 1983 we drove on Camp Nine Road to hunt for remnants of the struggle to save the river. Camp Nine had been the former put-in spot for rafting expeditions. Next to the official sign, "Caution road enters water" were a few remaining "Parrott's Ferry in the limit" stencils, and a faded "Flatlanders go home" on the bridge leading to the PG&E powerhouse. A flooded river isn't very interesting to observe. The rapids indicated on the old rafting map -- Widow Maker, Devil's Staircase, Death Rock, and Chicken Falls -- lie buried beneath several hundred feet of water. Beer cans litter the roadside. A few motor boaters cruise by; some take potshots with a rifle at anything still standing along the river-bank. The slick gray dead trees stand as sentinels along the quiet shoreline.



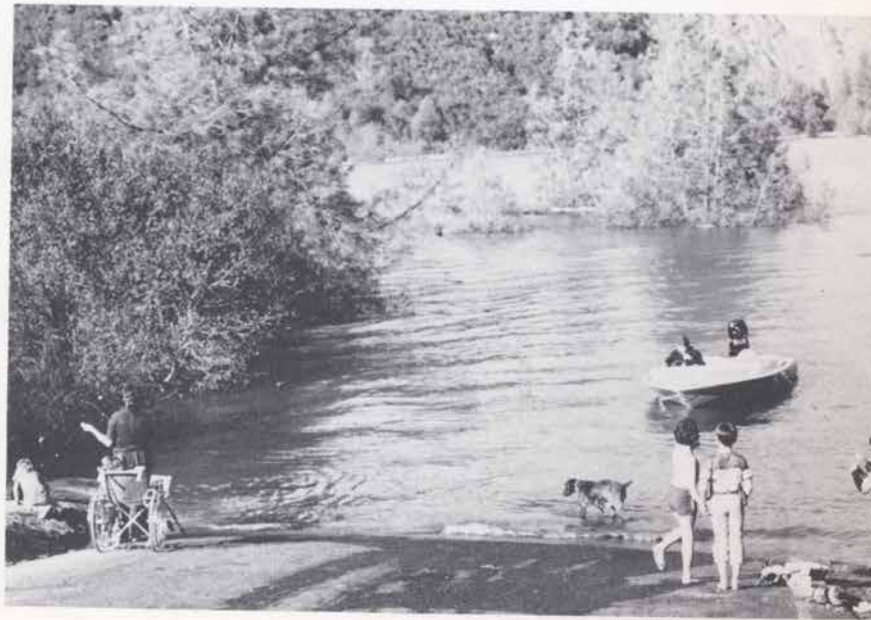




RIVER HAS BEEN CONDEMNED



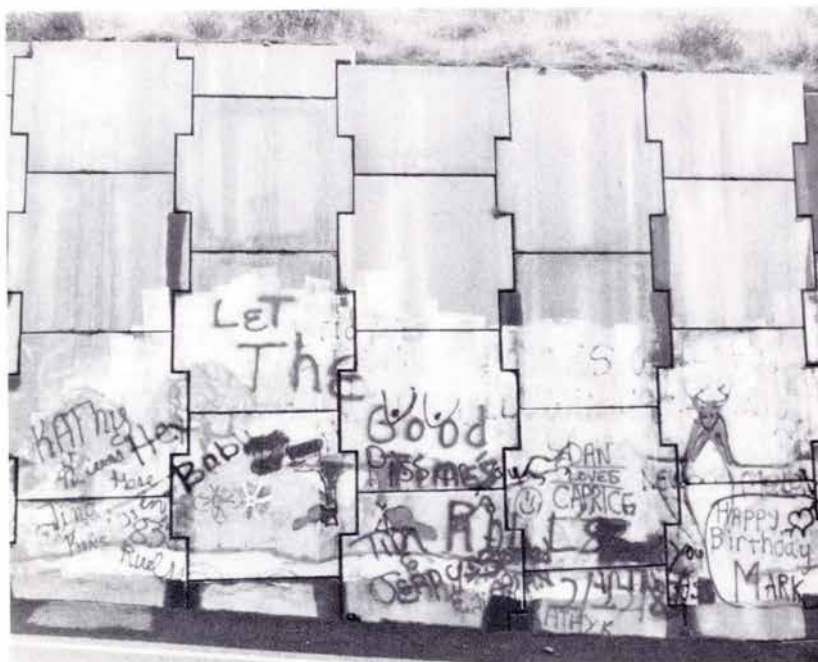
THE LAND TO RISE UP



WAVE OF WORDS

The first mural was destroyed, not by water as we had supposed, but by graffiti. The mural had lost its purpose, like a bumper sticker from a political campaign already forgotten. In all probability the wall writers acted more from boredom than malice. Their comments and spray names were mostly self-advertising. Craig, Kathy, and the other graffitiists have their place in the overall plan of things.

The paint on the second mural is peeling. It will not be long before the scenes are unrecognizable. Visitors in campers hauling their motorboats to the reservoir will conclude that the remaining markings along the embankment, like nearby graffiti, were the work of local teenagers. Plants are pushing through the cracks in the retaining wall. Left alone, nature would reclaim the wall and transform the embankment into a riparian wood.







RESURRECTION OF THE GLYPHS

Wondering what to do with them, Coyote kept his photos and sketches of the petroglyphs. The original art of the native peoples had disappeared beneath the lake. He made cardboard models, then tried cement. Nothing worked; the process was wrong. Then visitors came and explained the secrets of concrete, of using clay, glue, and cement to make a material that would last a millenium. He trucked in more cement, creating boulders on which he etched the glyph designs using an antler bone. The new petroglyphs were the same size as the originals. He also built bird sculptures to lift his spirits when the work wasn't going well.



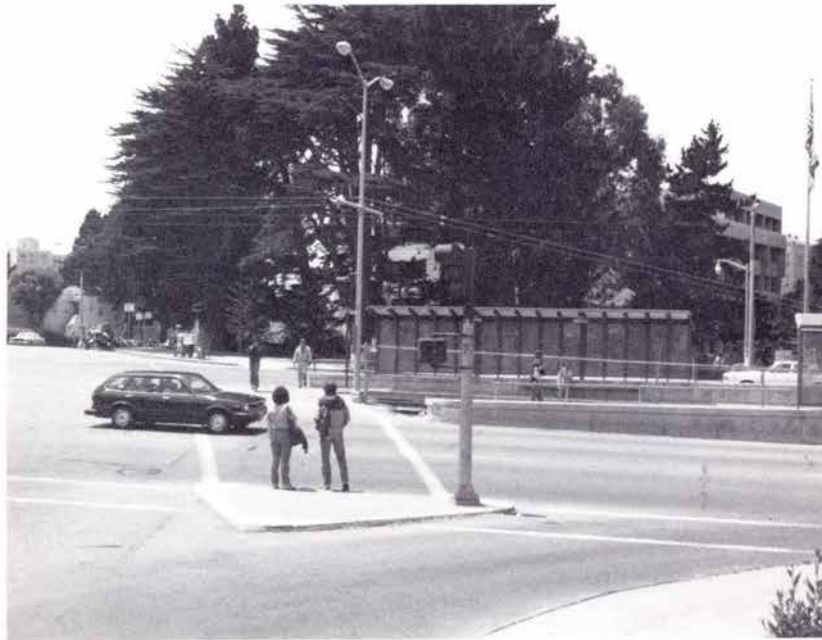
The symbolism of the river art had come full circle, from the petroglyphs to new concrete boulders etched by antler bone, Coyote and the Corps of Engineers, river to reservoir.



ONE ROCK IS SPARED

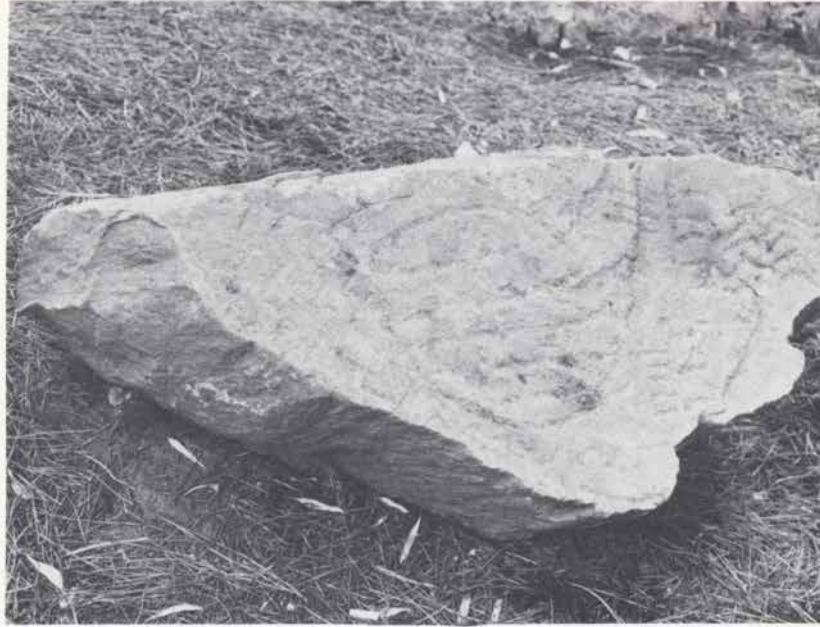
TUO 271/272 is a boulder weighing 300 pounds etched with zigzags, a circle with an interior grid, straight lines in series, and a straight line with short opposing lines. It was found by archaeologists along the banks of the Stanislaus River near Horseshoe Bend where it had been abandoned by vandals. The precise original site of the rock is unknown, and it was probably moved sometime during 1968, long before the environmentalists' protests.

Because the location made it vulnerable to further vandalism and eventual flooding, the rock was moved to San Francisco State University. The move was made without official sanction and created an awkward situation for the University. The rock had no papers, no proper identity. It was an alien in the detailed and carefully documented world of archaeological artifacts. Today it sits unmarked and ignored in the courtyard of the HHL Building on the campus.









TUO 271/272

O great boulder

Fish magic

Stolen by thieves

Abandoned at the river's edge

Saved from the deluge

Without legal papers

In the court of the academy

THE RIVER STILL, THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

Friends of the River lost, not because they were outspent in contributions to influential politicians or in advertising, or because they lacked political sophistication or because the public was confused, although all these reasons hindered their efforts. They lost because they came too late. In the end, timing was everything. The dam-building juggernaut once set into motion could not be stopped. Friends of the River succeeded in halting the project for several years, delays which cost the taxpayers millions of dollars in added construction costs, labor and interest expenses, and legal fees. The interval gave rafting companies a few more seasons, brought tens of thousands of new enthusiasts to the river, drained the energies of hundreds of young activists, created new environmental organizations, helped support two public relations firms, and was a minor concern to various politicians and government officials.

The public received an incredible bargain in environmental education. For decades, cheap subsidized federal water projects encouraged wasteful agricultural practices and provided little incentive for needed conservation measures. The campaign exposed the nested interests of politicians, land developers, and agribusiness. Public awareness of water politics in California increased by a quantum leap during the campaign for the Stanislaus. Other rivers and the taxpayers would be the ultimate beneficiaries of the campaign to save the river. Within California the action has now moved to the Tuolumne, where the drama is being replayed with many of the previous actors in their former roles. Their words are the same and everyone seems a little more tired.

Colorful abstract designs have begun to appear on the supports for the new bridge over the Stanislaus River. Painted at night from a small boat, the designs resemble native pictographs. The boat borrowed for the painting sank during the night and could not be retrieved until morning. Though submerged, the nautical light remained lit throughout the night. The colorful serpent is at the level of Colonel O'Shei's belly-button when he was hanged in effigy from the bridge.