



Water war of yore still resonates with New Melones protester

By Jeff Jardine

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SONORA — Mark DuBois did the impossible for five days in May 1979.

With boats and helicopters combing the Stanislaus River canyon searching for him, the rising water of New Melones Reservoir practically lapping at his feet and chained to a rock in the canyon, DuBois hid beneath a small ledge to avoid detection and possible arrest.



Photo by Jeff Jardine, Modesto Bee

Mark Dubois looks at a photo of himself chained to a rock in the Stanislaus River canyon below Parrotts Ferry as he tried to stop the filling of New Melones Reservoir in May 1979. He spent more than four days hiding from the authorities until the water stopped rising and he knew that it wouldn't reach the 808-ft elevation (above sea level) that year. The reservoir filled three years later, though, and a stretch of river popular with whitewater rafters and nature enthusiasts disappeared, except in years like 2015, when the old Parrot's Ferry Bridge is out of the water due to the drought and other factors. Dubois is pictured on July 14, 2015, at the Stanislaus River Archive Museum in Sonora.

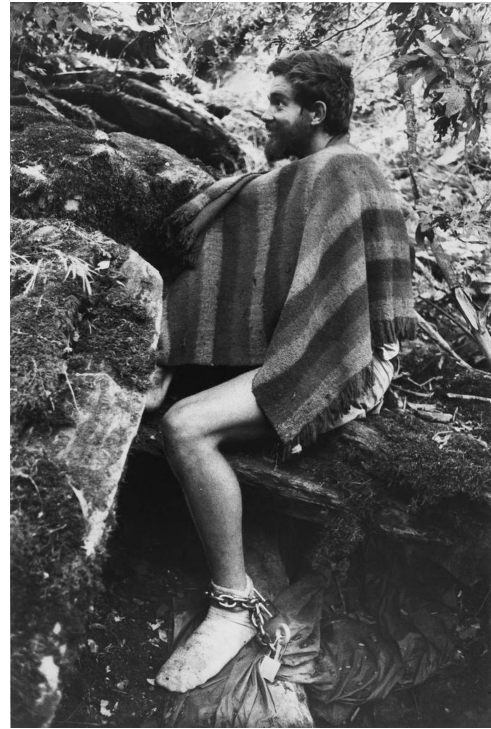
It seemed pretty impressive because he wanted authorities – including federal government officials in charge of building New Melones Dam – to know he was there to defy them, chained to that rock and willing to die to keep the water from drowning the canyon and its spectacular whitewater stretches near Camp 9 upstream from the old Parrotts Ferry bridge.

It was perhaps even more impressive when you consider that a guy who, at 6 feet 8 inches, was taller than a couple of NBA centers of the day could remain out of sight. Yet DuBois did.

Then he unshackled himself and walked out on his own terms when a combination of dwindling Sierra snowmelt runoff, the start of the irrigation season that drained water from the reservoir and perhaps government officials blinking convinced him the water had stopped rising for the time being.

Thus ended the vigil that thrust an otherwise shy young man into the national spotlight. Walter Cronkite mentioned him on the “CBS Evening News.” The environmental movement hailed him a hero. The dam’s proponents branded him a kook.

The irony is that 36 years later, people are still fighting over the water in New Melones Reservoir. Only now, the fight isn’t over how much it can hold. The fight is over how little is left after four years of drought, the nonsensical dumping of water for nonexistent fish, with the battles being fought more in Sacramento instead of the deep chasm separating Tuolumne and Calaveras counties. The House passed a bill Thursday that, if it survived the Senate and a promised veto by President Obama, would shift the ownership of New Melones Dam to local water districts.



Thorne Gray, Modesto Bee file photo
Mark DuBois, then executive director of Friends of the River, chained himself to a rock in 1979

The reservoir’s water level is dropping rapidly, now only 20 feet higher than the 808-foot elevation (above sea level) where DuBois and his Friends of the River friends wanted it to stop. It’s the level where the reservoir would have pooled just west of the old Parrotts Ferry Bridge, which is now out 10 feet out of the water again as the lake recedes. And had it reached that level in spring 1979, DuBois might have been seeing eye to eye with a large rainbow trout rather than arguing with the pro-dam crowd and government officials.

It was a time when protesters defined their causes, and for DuBois and the Friends of the River group he co-founded, the Stanislaus was theirs.

“It does seem like Americans were beginning to find their voice back then,” DuBois said when we talked this week at the Stanislaus River Archive Center Museum in Sonora. “The civil rights movement, the absurdity of the (Vietnam) war ... the environmental movement.”

Events in the 1960s and early 1970s created a generation of people willing to get involved, to speak up against what they considered social wrongs and overreaching government. DuBois believed flooding so much of the Stanislaus River canyon with water behind New Melones Dam was morally wrong and a huge waste of money, time and nature, built to feed the greed of Wall Street moguls who stood to profit at the taxpayers’ expense.

“I spent so much of my life there,” he said. “It was the place where I came of age. I fell in love with the beauty and magic. Playing down on the river, the intimacy and connection grew me as deeply as I’ve ever grown. The river brought out a joy and connection I’d never seen.”

Growing demands for surface water by agriculture, along with development in cities throughout the state, led authorities to create more storage, including building New Don Pedro in the late 1960s and New Melones in the 1970s. New Melones, approved in 1944, drew litigation that went all the way to the Supreme Court. Opponents also tried Proposition 17, a statewide ballot measure, to stop the dam. It failed at the polls in 1974, overcome by deep-pocket dam proponents. Pro- and anti-dam forces faced off and argued frequently in the canyon.

“I knew we were not building the dam because we needed it,” DuBois said. “We were building it because of old ideas that no longer served a purpose.”

Eventually, opponents conceded they couldn’t stop construction of the dam and instead focused on trying to limit the amount of water it held. They wanted the lake to fill no further than Parrotts Ferry, 5 miles upstream from the new dam. As the reservoir began to fill, DuBois decided he’d risk his life in attempt to stop it.

“I didn’t have a choice,” he said. “Someone once said, ‘Be careful what you fall in love with.’”

He scouted out a place in the canyon near the 808-foot elevation. On May 22, 1979, he went down into the canyon and chained himself to the rock, hiding under the ledge and using the tree branch to hide when boats and helicopters searched for him.

“The water came up to within a foot and a half of me,” he said. “Then it stopped. I could barely reach the suzzy reservoir water.”

He’d taken along some Friends of the River paperwork to help pass the time.

“I was doing some homework and I thought, ‘What is that that next to my butt?’ ” he said. “Gopher snakes have the same coloration as rattlers. It was a 4-foot gopher snake. The rustling I’d hear was a little shrew. Every critter had its own place.”

That place, he knew, would eventually be underwater. But not that day, and not that year. When the level actually dropped a few inches, he unchained himself and hiked out of the canyon.

“What I knew was that it had completely filled (for the year),” he said. “The snowmelt had ended. They never found me. No one tried to arrest me.”

Soon after, Friends of the River summoned the press to meet with him at Fort Mason in San Francisco.

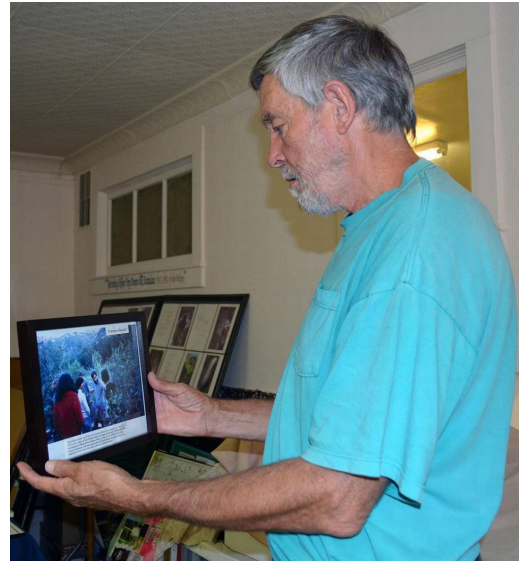


Photo by Jeff Jardine, Modesto Bee
Mark DuBois looks at a photo of himself Tuesday at the Stanislaus River Archive Center Museum in Sonora. The photo depicts him after emerging from the Stanislaus River Canyon in May 1979, where DuBois had chained himself to a rock below Parrotts Ferry as he tried to stop the filling of New Melones Reservoir in May 1979. He spent more than four days hiding from authorities before the water stopped rising and he knew it wouldn't reach the 808-ft (above sea level) elevation that year. The reservoir filled three years later, though, and a stretch of the river popular with whitewater rafters and nature enthusiasts disappeared, except in years like 2015, when the old Parrotts Ferry Bridge is out of the water due to drought and other factors.

“I thought, ‘Nobody’s going to come to this,’” he said. After all, they’d lost. “But the place was full.”

So was his mailbox. Calaveras County tried to charge him \$70,000 for search-and-rescue costs. He went to a board meeting to protest.

“I wasn’t lost,” he told them. “I knew exactly where I was.” They didn’t pursue payment.

By 1982, the reservoir filled to its non-flood elevation of about 1,100 feet. The rock where DuBois protested in 1979 was under nearly 290 feet of water.

True, DuBois failed to save the Stanislaus. But afterward, major dam building in the United States basically stopped. DuBois went on to travel abroad before becoming the coordinator for International Earth Day in 1990 and 2000. Ten times he organized lobbying efforts against the World Monetary Fund, and he founded WorldWise, a grass-roots organization aimed at international development bank reform. Now living in the Sacramento area, he speaks to environmental groups about river preservation, getting involved in causes and the development of the environmental movement internationally.



Photo by Jeff Jardine, Modesto Bee

Mark DuBois is pictured at the at the Stanislaus Canyon with both the old and not-so-old Parrotts Ferry Bridges in the background on Tuesday. Beyond the taller dam downstream, DuBois had chained himself to a rock below Parrotts Ferry as he tried to protest and prevent the filling of New Melones Reservoir in May 1979. He spent more than four days hiding from authorities before the water stopped rising and he knew it wouldn’t reach the 808-ft (above sea level) elevation that year. The reservoir filled three years later, though, and a stretch of the river popular with whitewater rafters and nature enthusiasts disappeared, except in years like 2015, when the old Parrotts Ferry Bridge is out of the water due to drought and other factors.

New Melones reservoir level is now at its lowest point since 1992, when the old Parrotts Ferry Bridge last emerged. At 66, DuBois remains in good shape. Last week, he returned to the canyon and hiked about a mile upstream to an old mine, the barren hillside a constant reminder of a cause lost. Kayakers and rafters are back in their element at Camp 9, where whitewater again flows 100 feet below the reservoir’s bathtub ring. But they know it’s temporary, lasting only until a strong winter or two drowns it again.

Environmentalists want to tear out the dams at Hetch Hetchy on the Tuolumne River and Glen Canyon on the Colorado. There's no similar will for New Melones, DuBois said.

"My sense is that people who loved the place, their hearts were broken so badly," he said. "We live in a democracy where money always wins."

Which brings us back to the irony that during the ongoing severe drought, this fight over New Melones isn't over too much water. It's over how little remains and who gets what's left.

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