

# The Amazing Story of Mark Dubois' Broken Neck on the Stanislaus River

August 20, 1971

Michael Bronson for  
American River Touring Assn.  
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REPORT ON THE INJURY OF MARK DUBOIS

This report is a description of the events surrounding the injury of Mark Dubois on August 15, 1971 on the Stanislaus River. Its purpose is to provide complete information concerning Mark's welfare, the evacuation procedures, and individuals involved in the episode.

On the weekend of the accident Mark was Head Boatman for a Friday-Saturday, Sunday-Monday ARTA trip schedule on the Stanislaus. The boatmen under Mark were Dan Russell, Craig Robertson, Jim Dumrill, Bob Spade, and Mike Bronson. Two girls, Debbie and Jackie, from Colusa, J. C., met the trip at Chinese Camp (also called Duck Bar on the right) on Sunday afternoon hoping to get a ride down the last half of the river. They were not friends of any of the boatmen or passengers. Mike Jackson, a boatman, arrived at Chinese Camp on foot Sunday afternoon alap to get a ride down the river.

On Sunday night both the passengers and boatmen used a sweat house. Craig and Jim had built the house of willow branches and tarps on Friday night, at which time it was used by both passengers and boatmen. On Sunday night after dinner some of the passengers took turns in using the sauna, rowing down a sandy bank, and jumping into the river. Later in the evening (around 10:00 p.m.) some of the boatmen continued using the sauna. Mark, Craig, Jim, Mike Jackson, Dan and Jackie were in the sauna for a few minutes then they all ran down to the river and dove in. Mike Bronson, Bob and Debbie were at the campfire near the sauna and 30 feet from the river.

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*Mike Bronson trip report page, text follows*



*Mark in his "cage" to support healing his broken neck*

By Michael Bronson for  
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### **REPORT ON THE INJURY OF MARK DUBOIS**

This report is a description of the events surrounding the injury of Mark Dubois on August 15-16, 1971 on the Stanislaus River. Its purpose is to provide complete information concerning Mark's welfare, the evacuation procedures, and individuals involved in the episode.

On the weekend of the accident Mark was Head Boatman for a Friday-Saturday, Sunday-Monday ARTA trip schedule on the Stanislaus. The boatmen under Mark were Dan Marshall, Craig Patterson, Jim Dummitt, Bob Spade, and Mike Bronson. Two girls, Debbie and Jacqueline (Smithson), from Columbia J. C. met the trip at Duck Bar on the right on Sunday afternoon hoping to get a ride down the last half of the river; they came onto our rafts for very short run to Chinese Camp. They were not friends any of the boatmen or passengers ([read Jacqueline's story here](#)). Mike Jackson, a boatman, arrived at Chinese Camp on foot Sunday afternoon also to get a ride down the river.

On Sunday night both the passengers and boatmen used a sweat house. Craig and Jim had built the house of willow branches and tarps on Friday night (the trip before), at which time it was used by both passengers and boatmen. On Sunday night after dinner some of the passengers took turns in using the sauna, running down a sandy bank and jumping into the river. Later in the evening (around 10:00 pm) some of the boatmen continued using the sauna. Mark, Craig, Jim, Mike Jackson, Dan and Jackie were in the sauna for a few minutes then they all ran down to the river and dove in. Bronson, Bob and Debbie were at the campfire near the sauna and 30 feet from the river.

Mark struck his head on the river bottom during his dive. To the best of my understanding from Mark, he 1) left the ground too far from the edge of the water, and 2) did not realize that the water level had dropped that night. Upon striking the bottom he blacked out for an instant but did not swallow water. He stood up in the water and the others in the river, seeing that he was hurt, helped him walk toward the campfire. On the shore he doubled over and urinated, and said he was dizzy.

Once we had gotten Mark onto the bank, we had the problem of caring for him. He was first lain prone on a tarp on the sand as we looked for signs of injury. But finding none we soon turned him on his back, covered him with a sleeping bag and supported his head with a life jacket. During this time Mark was in pain but coherent and able to describe the injury well. He said the base of his neck hurt badly. His shoulder muscles were tight and uncoordinated. He could move his arms only with difficulty. There was a numb or tingling feeling in his hands. And he could move his head only with difficulty and pain. He had no problems moving his face and lower body.

At this point the boatmen discussed plans of action. We decided that Mark should not be moved until a doctor had examined him, and that the doctor should be gotten as soon as possible. Mark then told Mike Bronson his symptoms as described above.

Mike hiked out of the canyon to get a doctor. He took a flashlight at 11:00 PM and followed the deer trail from Chinese Camp to Duck Bar, then hiked up Duck Bar Road for about 2 miles to Camp Nine Road. From there he drove Jacqueline's car, parked at the top of the road (Note: a remarkable coincidence, [see Smithson's story about this](#)), to John Gaarde's in Murphy's. He awakened John Gaarde at 1:00 AM Monday. Diane Gaarde phoned Dr. Milton Benjamin Smith of Murphys (209-723-xxxx) who immediately came to the house. Mike phoned a number of medical centers and hospitals in Sacramento searching for a helicopter medical evacuation service. Following a few leads, he found that there was no helicopter service in Sacramento. When the Calaveras County Sheriff's Office in San Andreas (209-754-xxxx) was contacted to find a helicopter in the locality, they failed to answer the question regarding the helicopter, but took it upon themselves to begin a rescue operation. After an hour and a half of delays on their part, we finally met a deputy sheriff at Vallecito's general store. Thomas Grammer, the deputy sheriff, Dr. Smith, John Gaarde, Harry, and Bronson rode down to Duck Bar in the deputy's 4-wheel drive Scout with a litter basket. Mike had insisted a number of times that it would be impossible to take Mark out of Chinese Camp by foot. But the deputy responded that he was "checking it out". The group arrived at Chinese Camp at 4:00 AM.

As Dr. Smith examined Mark, we discussed evacuation. Dr. Smith said, in effect, that he thought Mark had broken his neck. The alternative of taking Mark out by foot was immediately discarded as very dangerous. However, there was a debate between the possibility of evacuation by helicopter and evacuation by boat. Dan Marshall and Mike were adamantly for helicopter evacuation. They maintained that the increase in safety with the helicopter was well worth the cost of the operation. Mark and the deputy, on the other hand, wanted evacuation by boat. According to Mark, the boat method would be cheaper and simpler. The deputy, without seeing the (landing) site, thought it impossible for a helicopter to land. Mike suggested that it would be worthwhile to make a brave attempt at landing in the morning. If the helicopter failed to land, we could take Mark out by boat. At this point Dr. Smith said boat evacuation would be sufficient. Finally, Mark and Dr. Smith's opinion prevailed over Mike's and he agreed to row Mark out as Mark probably wanted. Dr. Smith gave Mark a shot, probably a sedative. Then three of the men hiked back to the Scout, and Mike Bronson and Dr. Smith went to bed. Dan Marshall slept next to Mark, assisting him during the night.

Before dawn we prepared Mark and Mike Bronson's boat for evacuation. Mark told Dan that Craig was to be Head Boatman. Dan directed the boatmen as they lifted Mark onto a litter made of a borrowed air mattress and boat deck, and placed him across the boat. His head was stabilized by a life vest, and a tie-line strap across his forehead. He was covered by a blanket for warmth and a tarp for water-proofing. Besides Mark and Mike, the boat carried Dr. Smith, and Jacqueline and Debbie.

Craig managed the remainder of the trip smoothly. When the passengers awoke, he told them of the accident. Mike Jackson rowed Mark's boat out.

The Yampa raft made the 5 miles to Parrott's Ferry take out point without incident. The doctor and girls held Mark steady in the rapids. Mark even slept a little on the trip. At 8:30 Monday morning we met John and Diane Gaarde with their van at take-out. The three men present and another gentleman carried Mark on the deck to the van. We dismantled the boat and took it ashore. Then John drove the

doctor and two girls to Murphys. John, Mark and Mike drove 80 miles to Sacramento, stopping first at Gene and Sharon Ryerson's store in Vallecito for a visit and food.

Mark arrived at the emergency ward of Mercy General Hospital (916-456-xxxx) 4001 J St., Sacramento, 95819 at 11: 15 AM. John Gaarde, Mike Bronson, a doctor, and a passer-by lifted the litter onto a gurney. John and Mike wheeled him into ward. Mr. Noel Patter Dubois had been informed of Mark's trouble by John Gaarde earlier in the morning, and Mr. Dubois had told the hospital of Mark's coming. X-rays of his neck were taken immediately. Dr. Morris arrived and examined Mark and the X-rays. Dr. Morris found that Mark's neck was dislocated and that one vertebra was broken. After signing three forms Mark was officially admitted. Mr. Dubois arrived soon after. John Gaarde and Mike Bronson left the hospital at 3:30 PM after Mark had been taken to the intensive care ward.

Detailed information about the events at the hospital should not be given here, but can be gotten at Mercy General Hospital.

From this accident, ARTA will hopefully acquire some wisdom. It may be advantageous for ARTA and all head boatmen on all rivers to know the location and means of contact of a helicopter evacuation service for their rivers. Furthermore, it should be noted that, according to Mark's doctor, the first aid given to Mark by the boatmen a critical factor in his survival.

Signed,

Michael Bronson

8/20/71