

**COME,
ENJOY!**

**WHITEWATER
RIVER TRIPS
FOR KIDS 6-86!**

**Tuolumne, Merced,
Stanislaus, and
Carson Rivers.**

call for information.

**209 533-1401
1-800 359-9790**

AHWAHNEE
WHITEWATER EXPEDITIONS

**P.O. BOX 1161,
COLUMBIA, CA
95310**



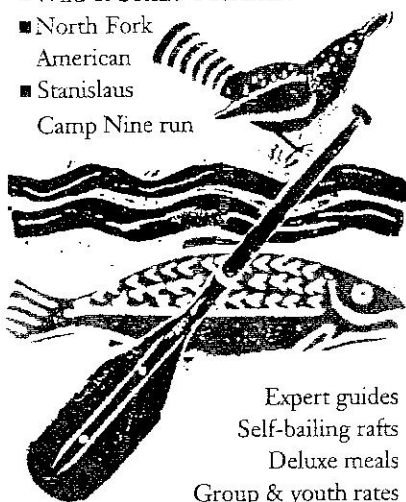
Circle 35 on Reader Service Card

SIERRA MAC RIVER TRIPS

Since 1965

Beginning to advanced trips on:

- Wild & Scenic Tuolumne
- North Fork
American
- Stanislaus
Camp Nine run



Expert guides
Self-bailing rafts
Deluxe meals
Group & youth rates

MARTY McDONNELL

(209) 532-1327

(800) 457-2580

P.O. Box 366 SONORA, CA 95370

18 Circle 36 on Reader Service Card

1984

The River

In its recreational heyday--the decades of the 1960s, 70s and early 80s--the main stretch of the Stanislaus River from Camp Nine to Melones became one of the most popular rivers in the country. Its combination of class IV white water rapids, placid pools and riparian beauty flowing through a magnificent thousand foot canyon hollowed with limestone caverns and etched with wild little tributaries the likes of Stony, Knight, Rose and Coyote Creeks, all laced with gold rush ruins and prehistoric sites, was irresistible to tens of thousands of visitors every year. On any given day of the spring, summer or fall, literally hundreds of river runners, sunbathers and swimmers at Parrotts, "Manhattan" and other beaches, cave spelunkers, modern day prospectors, history buffs and trout fishermen enjoyed its offerings with almost religious fervor.

Then in the spring of 1981, the completed New Melones Dam began covering the river's magic. And with the heavy rains in 1982, most of the Stanislaus slowly vanished into the debris laded backwaters of New Melones. Twelve years of bitter controversy were finally silenced. A well organized environmental battle generating two Congressional bills, a state bill and a popular referendum to "Save the Stanislaus" had all failed. Final acts of civil disobedience had been successful only in stopping the flooding for a year. In the end, the absolute thirst for more water downstream had won the war. And that Stanislaus that so many knew, slowly faded into just another era of its rich history.

River History

In its past life, some 10 million years ago, an ancient Stanislaus flowed perpendicular to the present Stanislaus' southwesterly flow, then became a river of fire when a great upheaval of the earth quaked and tilted the Sierra Crest westward, and huge volcanic eruptions filled the ancestral river channel with molten lava flowing from the high Sierra to Knights Ferry. Prominent remains of this fossil river, left in high relief as the softer surrounding earth has eroded away, can presently be seen in the high country's Dardanelle Cones above Donnell's Reservoir, lava bluffs bisecting the Stanislaus River Canyon near Parrotts Ferry, and the long meandering run of Table Mountain in the western foothills of Tuolumne County.

Early Native American peoples, ancestors of the Yokuts, Paiute and Miwoks, were the first humans to enjoy the fruits of the Stanislaus around eight thousand years ago. Many encampments, burial sites and prehistoric rock art (petroglyphs) can be found from Melones to Camp Nine. The Horseshoe Bend area, probably once a large Miwok site, has an abundance of bedrock mortar holes used for grinding acorns. Runs of king salmon and steelhead trout and great herds of deer, elk and antelope, coupled with abundant natural resources, must have provided an idyllic setting for these peaceful people.

The first white men to see the Stanislaus were probably members of Spanish exploratory parties led by Gabriel Morago in the early 1800s, looking for suitable mission sites and native populations to convert to Christianity. Not finding any eager converts among the contented Miwoks now enjoying large settlements along the river's banks, meadows and canyons (and overlooking the rich gold deposits of the Sierra), they soon left, only to return years later to chase young coastal Indian "neophytes" who were fleeing the harshness of Spanish Missions.

One particularly rebellious and crafty Indian leader, who refused to be captured after escaping the Santa Clara Mission, was Chief Estanislao, named after the Polish Saint and great humanist, Stanislaus, by the Spanish missionaries. Some time after the Mexican in-

JOHN SENSER



Prehistoric rock art (petroglyphs) can be found at sites from Melones to Camp Nine.

Revisited

dependence from Spain in 1821, Estanislao and his men successfully fought off at least three attempts by the Mexican army to capture him on the tangled, bushy banks and steep canyons of the Stanislaus. The last effort included 107 Mexican soldiers and canon commanded by Vallejo, but Estanislao escaped. His bravery elevated his notoriety to the ranks of Chiefs Geronimo and Pontiac, eventually influencing California's famous pioneer and explorer John C. Fremont to name the Stanislaus River after the Chief in Anglicized refashion of his Christian name.

The famous mountain man and fur trapper Jedediah Smith was actually the first American to explore the Stanislaus. He trapped golden beaver on the river from the valley floor up to the North Fork where he eventually found his way over the Sierra Crest in the vicinity of Ebbetts Pass, becoming the first white man to successfully cross the Sierra in 1827. In 1841, the first emigrant party, lead by John Bidwell, struggled their way from the east over the same route and finally down into the rugged Clark Fork canyon and the headwaters of the Stanislaus, opening the way for settlers to the foothills and great valley. Then came Fremont's explorations and mapping in 1845; James Marshall's discovery of gold on the American River in the spring of 1848; and soon, the invasion of the Sierra Foothills by gold seekers from around the world.

Serious mining activity on the Stanislaus began with Mexican Argonauts and the placer mining of "free" or surface gold by washing away the dirt and gravel concealing the precious metal in stream beds and banks. Soon miners of all nationalities wielding picks and shovels, gyrating gold pans and shaking "rockers," "sluices" and "long toms" covered the Stanislaus' banks from Knights Ferry to Camp Nine, and well up into the river's forks and tributaries. As the gold diggings grew, camps turned into towns, and as the surface gold dwindled, placer mining evolved into hardrock or "lode mining." Great shafts were sunk and tunnels driven to find the elusive gold bearing quartz veins which were drilled and blasted to



Suspension bridge looms over rapids near Camp Nine - 1978

and uncovering the largest gold nugget ever found in the United States in 1854. Its hillsides rapidly grew into the largest mining camp in the Motherlode with a population of at least 3,000 rough and ready miners. The barge-like ferry, operated by suspended cable angled against the river's current, earned \$10,000 in just six weeks by ferrying miners and visitors across the Stanislaus. Included were such newcomer dudes as Bret Harte, who called Melones "Roaring Camp," and Mark Twain on his way from Jackass Hill to Angels Camp and "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Melones, named by Mexican miners for its plentiful melon seed-like nuggets and "Slumgullion" by its muddy miners, knew many booms



The author's hometown of Melones in the 1930s



The Pendola Ranch, which supplied Melones' families with "truck garden" vegetables in the late 30's, early 40's.

ore, crushed by arrasters and stamp mills, washed and amalgamated with Mercury, then smelted to pure gold.

The Carson Hill Mine, 1200 feet above the Stanislaus and Robinson Ferry--later named Melones--became the richest of the Southern Mines, yielding \$2,800,000 in less than a year

and busts while at least four different major mining operations prospered and decayed in its ninety-four year mining history.

This writer was fortunate enough to have enjoyed the first years of his childhood in the old town while his father toiled in the last stamp mill of Melones' final mining days in the late 1930s and early 40s. I have fond memories of my mother pull

ing me in my little red wagon up the old Main (and only) Street--running parallel with the river--to the old historic Ceccenello store where Clara Ceccenello, the last proprietor, would always have a candy treat hidden deep in her pockets. We would pass by the strange huge storage and surge tanks of the mine's "cyanide plant" which squeezed out the last of the gold from murky mill tailings (in which my sister once lost one-half of her favorite shoes while cleaning them on the mill's wooden flume) before flushing the bleached dead earth up to the white mountain grave rising three million tons high above the river's bank. Here the road curved toward Coyote Creek and the one room school house equipped with multiple privies, including one reserved for Mrs. Ora Chapin, the town's beloved teacher. And then on up to the Pendola Ranch where Vergil Ghiglieri, whose father had married a "Pendola girl," sold us good fresh vegetables from his "truck garden," and carried on the fine one hundred year traditions of the old pioneer ranch perched above the verdant fertile meadows of Coyote Creek.

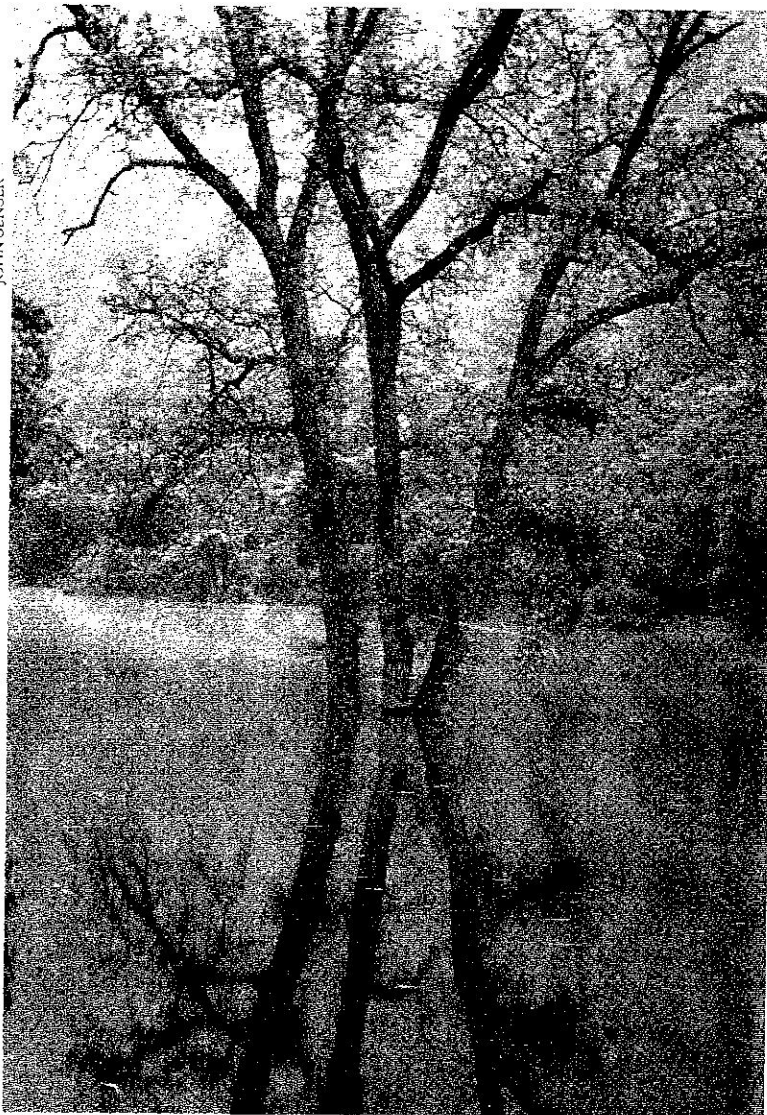
At the other end of town, past our little company house, was the post office and Woods' store and station, catching the traffic on the corner of Highway 49 and Main Street. Here Persey Woods ran the store as efficiently as he, and his father Harvey before him, had run the Woods' Ferry for forty-eight years before it was replaced by a classic arched bridge connecting Tulumne and Calaveras Counties. I have etched memories of contentedly playing in the fine white sand under that bridge where my big brother deposited me while he enjoyed more adventurous activities such as exploring abandoned mine shafts, riding pine logs down the river's runoff, or catching bull frogs for an old Frenchman.

The bridge was a favorite gathering place for the town's families to fish during the spring and summer months when old Melones Dam (built in 1926) backed water up to the arched trusses. Many strings of crappie and trophy-sized bass graced proud family pictures of those idyllic summers. When not perched on the bridge's weather-worn wall watching my father fish, I would occupy myself for hours by rolling small pebbles down the insatiable drain holes of the old bridge which somehow refused to ever fill up.

A last and frightening memory of old Melones is huddling with my family and other townspeople near the bridge in cold night air, watching the multi-tiered mill building burn high up the hillside, igniting bullpines into exploding torches. The mill had curiously caught fire in May of 1942, a few months after Pearl Harbor, and before the U.S. Government issued a war order closing all gold mines and other non-essential industries. Thus ended the town's last mining activity and the beginning of a fast decay as families left to find work in the shipyards of the Bay Area.

A favorite place of my family and others, long before and after our stay in Melones, was Parrotts Ferry and its lazy green currents flowing between fine white beaches where the old ferry had once traversed the Stanislaus. Here my grandmother and grandfather taught their children and their grandchildren to brave and love the cold river water, then how to swim in the shallow water near sandy bottomed beaches. Later we learned to expertly read and respect, but not fear, the fast whitecapped rapids above Parrotts as we dove into, bobbed

JOHN SENSER



Valley oak is flooded near Melones. 1979

above, and floated on the early summer runoff. Eventually we could swim across the highest river, knew every rock above and below its surface, every eddy to rest in, and every seasonal charm and personality of the river. And, as the years wore on, we would take delight in watching our heavier but buoyant grandmother gracefully float on her back down the summer currents while in her late sixties, and watching the next generation of our family--and other families who shared the Stanislaus tradition--learn to swim and love the river as we all did.

Back in those late 1940s and early 50s I remember once seeing one or two wooden dories float past Parrotts on the spring runoff, making me wonder what it might feel like to float through the steep limestone canyon only seen from a few vantage points on Camp Nine or Parrotts Ferry Roads. But the upper canyon's majesty largely remained a secret shared by only an adventurous few until the gradual advent of white water rafting in the 1960s. Once stories emerged of wild white rapids and green tranquil pools, water slides down side canyon streams with warm, naturally carved tubs, and excursions into cool coral caves all nestled deep within those thousand-foot cliffs, everyone who valued such things wanted to become part of the experience. Commercial rafting soon became a prosperous foothill industry, bringing with it thousands of curious other visitors who preferred not to raft, but to hike and fish and swim and drift into history via the river's special offering.

RON PICKUP



The moon rises over emerging ruins of Melones. 1992

The reservoir retreats and the river reveals itself in rebirth.

RON PICKUP



River Return

Probably not one of those 60,000 yearly visitors ever expected to see the Stanislaus or the town of Melones again once it vanished under 350 feet of New Melones' backwater. Yet, in the last two years of the six year drought, if one had the stomach and courage to see the aftermath of all that water over the river's beauty for the last ten, they could do just that. The receding waters have indeed exposed the river, allowing it to flow much as it did before, clear to Melones.

The return of the Stanislaus has been a mixed bag of experience and emotion for those who knew her. Many still haven't been able to brave the horror of seeing the canyon's destruction. Others have embraced the miracle of her return (perhaps the first dammed river ever to do so), and outfitters now regularly run the river once more.

Two summers ago the nightmare death at Parrotts Ferry was bold. It was much like descending into a grave to see every tree and shrub that had ever lived there standing in stark skeletal remains for hundreds of feet up the hillside to the dam's high water mark. Several feet of mud covered all of the once riparian beauty along its banks. Huge bars of sand and silt covered most of the familiar boulders and river channel, swelling the slow moving current high above. Yet, the river was again flowing. The unmistakable music of its flow rose above the devastation of its banks, and this last summer saw most of the silt washed away, exposing old rocks and rapids below shores now showing new signs of riparian life and swimmers and sunbathers beginning to again enjoy the river.

The river in the upper canyon, even longer exposed, has amazingly reclaimed all its rapids and falls. Dead timber is rapidly falling, nurturing new willow, alder, cottonwood and bay already ten and twelve feet high. New grasses and flowers thrive in the fertile silt loam of its banks, and deer break through dead trees to drink the river as though nothing had happened. The sheer cliffs rising in midcanyon now stand bleached white, casting a surreal beauty in twilight and moon-glow, nonexistent before the flood, offering some trade-off. |

At Melones, visitors have come from all over the state to see again its rich ruins bake in the sun, walk its street, imagine its glory days. But heavy rains this winter have already caused some covering of that history, and the fate of the river is left to the same forces that battled before.

The 623-foot dam's full promise lies fallow, but given the local counties' growing reliance on tourism, as the recession continues its bite on the building industries, the Stanislaus' multiple recreational resources may finally be appreciated. We also are now in a new era of water politics, usage and need. Agriculture in the Central Valley has met the challenge of the drought years with commendable water conservation practices while urban development continues to sprawl. New Federal legislation now mandates more water flows for the endangered Bay and Delta's fragile fisheries, and the Central Valley Project is undergoing a major overhaul. Some ways may yet be found for the Stanislaus to serve without drowning.

-Ron Pickup