

# Prodigal River

by Rebecca Lawton

The river emerging from a dam is not the same river that entered its reservoir.

—*Dams and Rivers: The Downstream Effects of Dams*

A sprig of dried plant lies on my kitchen table. Sent to me by my sister, Jen, the specimen has five sky-blue blossoms pressed flat and dried in a fold of paper towel. Leaves the color of green tea branch like monkey arms from the flower's pewter-gray, four-inch long stems. Desiccated, mahogany-brown roots mass in a jumble at the base of the stems. The specimen is a wildflower, *Nemophila menziesii*, or baby blue eyes. Jen collected it more than twenty years ago in the Sierran foothills for her college Botany 103 class. In a letter she reminds me that I was with her the day she picked and pressed the flower: "We decided to take a walk up the north bank of the Stanislaus River. Remember? The water was low and the rocks exposed out in the river. But we weren't looking for rapids that day, we wanted wildflowers."

Despite the age of the parched specimen, it's clearly baby blue eyes. Petals of pale sapphire fade at the base, joined together mid flower in a central white eye. It's a lyrical plant with a lovely, cup-shaped corolla. When alive, the flower turned generously upward. It caught dew, offered itself to insects, and bared its delicate, shivery stamens to breezes. Jen's notes from our walk say that the hills above the Stanislaus were covered with the blossoms. "The flowers favor 40-degree slopes in sandy loam with surrounding live oak and gray pine forest." Among hundreds of such places, we chose one, and my sister set out a 20- by 50foot test plot.

What had appeared at first glance to be a homogeneous patch of hillside among "classic yellow pine forest" in fact proved quite diverse. In the shade of oaks, we found ethereal surprises: fairy lantern and brightly colored fiesta flower. Ferns and saxifrage huddled in moist soil at the base of granite boulders. Out on the sunny slopes, lupine and grasses grew among popcorn flower and fiddleneck. Jen noted "a mottled mosaic of yellow and white."

Her test plot startled us both in its variety and wealth, like hidden treasure. She collected individuals of twenty different species of wildflowers from inside the plot and thirty more from nearby. She archived the fifty specimens as "a sample flora from the Stanislaus River near Parrott's Ferry Bridge." Recently, during a move, Jen came across the specimens and mailed the baby blue eyes to me with a letter: "I thought this might make you smile. Because of that hike so long ago, baby blue eyes always remind me of the river."

During my first trip on the Stan in 1972, while I sat with a group of guides and passengers in a cool, huge limestone cave near Chinese Camp, I learned of New Melones Dam. It was the latest U. S. Army Corps of Engineers' dambuilding project. New Melones had by that time been in preconstruction for six years, situated dozens of miles downstream

at the historic Old Melones townsite. The dam was to be 625 vertical feet of rock with an earthen core, a design like a jelly doughnut—dense material with a soft center. If filled to the brim, New Melones would back up nine miles behind the dam, creating California’s fourth largest reservoir, with a surface area of 20 square miles and 100 miles of fluctuating shoreline.

I received this news in utter blackness in the Chinese Camp cave. “But what will happen to this canyon?” I asked.

Whoever replied had a broken voice. “Flooded. Completely gone.”

No way, I thought. No one would deliberately destroy Eden. California seemed to have more than enough dams, and even as a teenager I had a sense of what we’d lose. There were just no other rivers as lovely and accessible as the Stan. By the early 1970s, its upstream whitewater run had become the most popular in the state. The project seemed as inconceivable as building the Pyramids in the middle of Main Street.

But time went by and work progressed on the dam, deep in a downstream canyon. Men with hardhats scraped hillsides clean with bulldozer blades. They diverted the river through tunnels in bedrock and dug footings with backhoes. My colleagues and I began to accept the building of the dam as inevitable, but we still hoped for a compromise with the Corps: a filling plan that allowed for water storage only as far upstream as the Parrott’s Ferry bridge. This “build-it-but-don’t-fill-it” strategy seemed acceptable to us—better than ruining the entire canyon. And it would meet the Corps’ professed need for water, power, and flood control. The reservoir wouldn’t be half empty, it would be half full.

The river hung in the balance as debate fumed over New Melones. A group known as Friends of the River materialized in a grassroots groundswell and led an effort to limit filling the reservoir. As a guide on the Stan, I took part. Each trip through the canyon assumed not only a bittersweet feeling but also a political charge. In our ammo boxes, we guides carried pencils and petitions to the state legislature, collecting signatures from California-registered voters at the take-out for river trips. On our days off from boating, we sat with our petitions at card tables in front of grocery stores in Sonora and Columbia. Or we traveled to San Francisco to stand on city streets and beg signatures from passersby. We must have looked a bit backwoods, young men and women in blue jeans and T-shirts. But we were effective. We needed 300,000 signatures to get on the ballot. We collected 500,000.

Next came public meetings, a push to get out the vote, and a whirlwind publicity campaign in support of our initiative, Proposition 17. Friends of the River drew on \$238,000 in contributed funds to run a media campaign that consisted largely of radio spots. We were opposed, however, by a powerful, deep-pocketed coalition. They spared no expense. They saw our 200 grand and doubled it, funding such propaganda as a mammoth billboard at the San Francisco approach to the Bay Bridge that read, incredibly, SAVE THE RIVER, VOTE NO ON 17.

How shocking it was to see such deliberate humbug plastered across the landscape. Voting YES on 17 would actually save the living river. A NO vote favored New Melones,

meaning the end of life in the river canyon as surely as if Noah's flood were to wash through. It floored me. Our opponents were lying—the evidence of it was clear even to my teenaged eyes.

Baby blue eyes. They not only grew like weeds on the slopes of the Stanislaus, but they graced the banks of some of the other rivers Jen and I came to know. We found them on our visits to the American, Merced, Tuolumne, and Yuba. We found them on southern Oregon rivers, the Rogue and Illinois. Our time spent outdoors led us to train and hire out as boatmen for commercial trips. We became like human otter, spending all day every day on or near the water. Rivers held our full attention and devotion for years.

A diminutive woman determined to handle big boats, Jen was able to guide using a foot brace to raise herself on the rowing seats. It worked beautifully, as if she'd been born to it. She rafted high and wild water on canyon rivers in Utah and held her own on crews of rowdy boatmen, even leading trips for many years. Eventually we both guided in the Grand Canyon, well into our thirties, long after our family and friends had given up hoping we'd live productive lives. We were goners, tuned to rivers and seasons. Summer brought its hot, full trips scheduled back to back. Fall became a time of poignant separations and endings. Winter offered cold, long months in which we waited for the rivers to flow again. Then, each spring, ready to cast off our landlocked lives, we converged on the river. Often we began with an inaugural trip down the Stan, when it flowed strong and cold and the hills were draped in wildflowers, a voiceless constituency waiting to be counted.

Unfortunately, reservoirs with all their benefits come at a great price. A dam changes everything about a river, flooding essential habitat for animals, inundating prehistoric rock paintings, submerging historical townsites. Trees drown where they stand. River silt and sand collect in oversized catch-alls, starving the downstream river of necessary surges of constructive sediment. Fish populations cannot tolerate the drops in water temperature that occur downstream of reservoirs, with disastrous results.

Californians can speak from hard experience. Here, dams are held responsible for decimating half of our native fish species and fully 95 percent of our wild salmon. With unstoppable drive, we've leashed water to the tune of 1,400 dams throughout the state. For decades, the undammed river was considered profligate, untamed—a wasted stream, with falls begging to be harnessed for hydroelectricity, channels waiting to be fitted with locks for ships. Only the dammed river was considered a working river.

Turns out, the wild river is the champion of working rivers. It feeds a myriad of lives, from insects to ouzels to beaver, all part of an important creature community. It waters the floodplain, replaces depleted soil. It builds the very land we inhabit, depositing deltas inch by hard-won inch at the edges of continents. It flushes marshes and slices sloughs. Flowing into the ocean, the river creates a freshwater wedge that pushes into saltwater, nourishing the lifegiving water chemistry at the end of the stream. Only rivers can carve out the deep, green

world of estuaries and provide the safety of harbors. The river's glorious, generously given water flows to the ocean, replenishing the very fluid that balances our delicately balanced system of earthly life, as important to maintaining equilibrium on earth as the mountains that rise from the mantle.

Nothing in a free-flowing river ever goes to waste.

Those of us who battled against New Melones will never forget it. Until the defeat of Proposition 17, I'd never really considered that liars could win. My mother always said that cheaters never prosper, and I'd believed her. So what had happened? *We* were the guys in the white hats. *We* were telling the truth about the place. In spite of our honest effort, or perhaps because of it, we lost the night of the election. Unbelievably, the returns came in against the Stan, so fast that those of us watching didn't even have to stay up late to watch the outcome on television.

After the election, the environmental battle raged on. Over more than a decade, river lovers tried everything. Led by Mark Dubois and Friends of the River, we appealed to President Nixon to halt construction. We brought a lawsuit against the Corps for its flimsy Environmental Impact Report. Finally we petitioned for a re-vote on Proposition 17. The ultimate act became the civil disobedience conducted at the eleventh hour, as waters rose behind the dam. Defying the laws that had cleared the reservoir footprint for inundation, Mark handcuffed himself to a boulder at the rising river's edge. He spent critical days and nights chained in a secret place in the canyon as his messengers disseminated word that filling had to stop or Mark would drown. The nation held its breath until the Corps stopped the filling, then breathed a sigh of relief as Mark chose to leave the canyon.

Despite efforts to end the filling permanently, it resumed. Homesteads slipped under the inky, oceanic quiet of the waters. The Old Melones townsite went under, as did canyon walls with hematite-paint pictographs dating back eight thousand years. Riverside limestone caves submerged, with their underground sanctuaries big enough for a crowd. The showcase stalactites and stalagmites we'd taken pains not to ruin with our touch went under the dissolving power of millions of gallons of water. Protesters formed a human chain across the lower river to mark an acceptable upstream limit for the floodwaters. The water rose above it. Soon it became too high for anyone to safely stand in, and all we could do was bear witness.

Death by drowning is never a pretty sight, and the Stanislaus River canyon was no exception. Swallows wheeled in panicked flight at the Old Melones Bridge as water engulfed their mud homes, still full of nestlings. Small mammals, stranded by the rising flood, clung to the tops of willows and had to be rescued by boat. Water, normally a wondrous, life-giving substance, oozed into every dry cove, onto each warm patch of sand, into the nooks in every living tree trunk. Jen's plot eventually flooded. Whole forests drowned with it.

Last week, remembering the Stan, I stopped in Santa Barbara, California, to visit a tree that survived the deluge. A gray pine, the tree was transplanted as a seedling from the Parrott's Ferry area of the Stan just before the filling of New Melones. One of the few pieces of riparian life to escape the flooding, it now stands at a roadside park a mile or so from Highway 101. Since its replanting around 1980, the pine has grown to about 30 feet tall.

One of several trees in an island park surrounded by suburban roads, the pine lives in a posh neighborhood. Its boughs reach toward the mountains, its needles catch the morning sun. No doubt its bark sometime glows red at sunset, as before. It may be the only gray pine from within the original Melones footprint that's still living and breathing. Like us, it's a refugee from the wild river.

I'd rather my daughter—and all the children—could see the Stan's grass-covered hills and the wildflowers and gray pines in their natural homes. I still reminisce about that rich place, back when my sister and I could barely count the numbers of plants and animals that lived there. Jen's notes from our collection day say, "Someday, when the Stanislaus River is nothing more than a silt-filled reservoir, someone will ask, 'What was it like before the lake?'" And we'll know.

We have the gray pine—and the baby blue eyes—to always remind us.

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**Author's note:** More than fifteen years have passed since the first, heady days of my publishing my first solo book, *Reading Water: Lessons from the River*. A few weeks after September 11, 2001, Capital Books in Sterling, Virginia, decided to publish these words about wild places in general and wild rivers in particular. "These places are needed," Capital's editor Kathleen Hughes said. "More than ever." It was a courageous decision by a mid-size press in the waning days of print publishing. The world of literature was changing, as was the world at large.

Since September 11, our nation and the world have experienced more wake-up calls and tragedies: the sinking reality of climate change, the mega storms following on the heels of melting polar ice, more international war, America's gun violence, and the worldwide extinction of species due to human impacts. There is still so much to either lose or gain on our planet, and our very lives hang in the balance. Our need to integrate with the natural world to heal both it and us has come into focus more clearly than it did in 2002.

As a naturalist and writer who studies human and wild nature, I've seen and felt the deep effects of society's disenfranchisement from the earth: loss of community, imagination, and resilience in our towns, rural areas, and wilderness. And so I returned to *Reading Water*, to offer it again to new audiences as balm for our souls.

In the original release, "Prodigal River" contained some misinformation, which Tim Palmer pointed out in 2002 after we'd gone to press. The corrected version printed here notes that Mark Dubois left the Stanislaus River on his own authority, after the filling of

New Melones reservoir had been halted because of his efforts. Mark was not removed by others.

I've learned from working in environmental science over four decades that hope for our planet is linked directly to our home watersheds. The rivers and streams that define us are critical refugia for diversity of biota and, therefore, genetic hardiness in a changing world. Each individual stream corridor is worth defending or restoring as we strive to protect ecosystems. Within our healthy aquatic communities, stream buffers, riparian habitat, and the very water column between the riverbanks, we find hope for the human race and our non-human counterparts.

In that spirit of hope, please dive into these lessons from the river—again, or for the first time—with optimism that it will endure.

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“Prodigal River” was first published in *Reading Water: Lessons from the River* (Capital Books). Copyright 2002, Rebecca Lawton. All rights reserved.

Author bio: Rebecca Lawton is a writer, fluvial geologist, and former Colorado River guide who has published in *Aeon*, *Audubon*, *Brevity*, *Hakai*, *Orion*, *Shenandoah*, *Sierra*, *THEMA*, *Undark*, and many other journals. She is the author and co-author of seven books, including the *San Francisco Chronicle* Bay Area Bestseller *Reading Water: Lessons from the River*. Her writing honors include a Fulbright Visiting Research Chair, the Ellen Meloy Award for Desert Writers, a WILLA for original softcover fiction, the Waterston Desert Writing Prize, three Pushcart nominations, a Best American Science and Nature Writing nomination, and residencies at Hedgebrook, The Island Institute, and Playa.