

Jacqueline Smithson's Epic First River Trip (1971)

My cousin, Debbie, and I were staying with our grandma in Columbia, I was 20 she was 18. It was a hot summer day, and we were terribly bored. Debbie's mom said, "I hear there're raft trips on the Stanislaus River, why don't you drive up to Camp Nine and try to get on a trip?" We said, "Where's Camp Nine?"

So about 8:30 that evening we found Camp 9. No one was there, and in the fading light we stumbled over a rock wall down to a spit of sand where we laid out our sleeping bags and ate our box of crackers. And went to sleep - to be woken up early the next morning by a truck full of buff, tanned, hot young men, with their rafts, oars, and assorted gear. We got out of the way, and watched them do their put-in. Then we went up to one of the guides and asked him if we could have a ride down the river. He told us to check with the head boatman, someone named Mark Dubois. He said he couldn't add us to his trip, but suggested if we hiked down to Duck Bar, the trip could likely pick up some hitchhikers at that point and continue with the second day of rafting.

Cool, we were on an adventure!

After several false starts, we found Duck Bar Road, an old jeep track, and the only road access into the steep limestone canyon. We hiked down to Duck Bar and waited, and waited. The trip finally came along, picked us up, and we went around the corner to Chinese Camp. Gourmet dinner, campfire, handmade sauna, this was incredible! We helped chop vegetables for dinner, helped clean willow branches for the sauna, looked for rocks high above the waterline to heat up for the sauna. It was instant friendship and pure joy. A magical night, moonlight on the water, sweating in the sauna, jumping into the cold river, campfire, music. We sensed our lives would never be the same.

Then Mark came out of the sauna, dove into the water and broke his neck! ([read the full story here](#))

At the crack of dawn before the passengers got up (they didn't know anything yet about Mark's injury), Debbie and I rode out on the raft rowed by guide Mike Bronson, with Mark and a doctor, who had miraculously come in during the night, because I just happened to have a car at the top of Duck Bar road that could be used to get him! I remember putting my hand on Mark's feet and legs, then feeling like I was being too forward and taking my hand away. Mark said, "leave your hand there please, your touch helps so much," as we bounced through the rapids. Debbie and I wrote letters to Mark in the hospital.

After Mark got out of the hospital, he and a friend, Fred Dennis, drove up to the Stanislaus in Fred's convertible Karmann Ghia. Fred took the front seat out and put the top down to be able to fit Mark and his halo cast (for his neck), all 6'10" of him. They hiked down Duck Bar Road and camped out in a cave for a number of days. Mark's sleeping bag wouldn't go around his shoulders with all that headgear, a bit chilly in November. Their cave was dry until a couple of days after the rain quit, when it started dripping.

The following spring (1972), Nancy Magneson (now Nancy Cassidy) and I moved down to Parrott's Ferry on the Calaveras side of the river, and camped out for our last quarter at Columbia College. Mark and Fred had just moved down to Parrott's Ferry, camping out on the Tuolumne County side of the river to begin running free river trips with kids - the first days of 'Mark,Ron&Fred'/ETC/Environmental Traveling Companions. We paddled across the river to visit them in our yellow rubber ducky, and invited them to tamale dinners on our side of the river. They shared their lives and boats with us.

50+ years later Fred and I are still together, living in Columbia, three miles away from Parrott's Ferry on the Stanislaus, after raising four beautiful kids in Calaveras County.

All because of wanting to go on a rafting trip on a hot summer day.

Jacqueline Dennis, formerly Jackie Smithson, and Fred Dennis, former ETC