

## The Fig Tree

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1 November 2010

In honor of my youngest daughter Anna's birth, I planted a fig tree. It is now over 20 feet tall. There are black figs way up there at the top, but you cannot climb up to get them because the tree's branches are still too spindly. Picking the low-lying figs this late fall morning, the memory of being in the great Fig Tree on the Stanislaus came flooding back.

That huge Fig was my favorite lunch spot those summers I worked on the Stanislaus river. The place where it grew was called Duck Bar, there on river right. The tree was huge, some branches thicker than two men, spreading out vast along the rocky banks of the river. It had good water to drink all year long, so close to the river, deep roots, and plenty sun. I remember the sting of its sap against my bare arms and legs as I climbed up and up. It was planted by Chinese coolies during the Gold Rush, over a hundred years ago.

Figs bear their fruit in the Spring and Fall, Fall being the big crop. That Fig bore enough fruit to supply many families. My friend Gar dried figs all Fall and then stored them in large mason jars hidden in a storage area in the floor of his tree house. No one else lived along that section of canyon. The only way in to his place was floating down the river, or walking over Table Mountain. Gar had brought the materials to build his house in by raft. He built it in a tree within a thicket of medium sized trees, about 30 feet up. Gar's tree was hidden a bit away from the river, as the canyon started its climb away from the river, at the lower end of Chinese Camp, with the Fig at Duck Bar, 3/4 mile upstream.

Gar would walk in to his place barefoot. It was about a 3 mile walk, with no trails, and Table Mountain was littered with volcanic rock, varying in size from pebbles to cars. Gar and I had a mutual admiration club. I learned from Gar how to walk seriously barefoot. Walking in country with volcanic rock in bare feet, you go slow and you watch every step. You spend a lot of time looking at the ground. I remember walking up on Table Mountain with Stu Smith, a geologist. I had barefeet. Stu had heavy boots. He was a geologist, and stoned, and would wander about in that moonscape staring up at the sky. He would stumble into those rocks, kicking them with his boots, and think nothing of it! I remember the feel of righteous judgemental indignation rising up in me like a black poison at the sheer gall of a person callous enough to go stumbling around up there in that serious spiritual landscape so inattentive of their own feet, so mindless that they could repeatedly kick rocks, and not even blink! And I remember more that a little bit of hidden jealousy and envy for Stu's boots! Gar and I always carried a roll of duct tape with us so we could make "little houses for the toes" after inadvertently kicking those sharp rocks.

When Gar showed me how to walk in to his place, he carefully pointed out signposts along the way. "Between those two Digger pines, see that rock shaped

like a head? With the Toyon Berry right in front? That's where we start dropping down into the canyon."

One day in winter, I walked to Gar's treehouse by myself. It had snowed the night before. My feet were cold and sore when I climbed up into his tree house. He had a fire going in his woodstove and I quickly warmed up. After chatting for awhile, Gar opened up the trapdoor built into the floor of his tiny house. He reached down pulled up some mason jars. Some jars were full of figs, others with raisins and walnuts. We ate fig after fig, leaving little nubbins from the stems.

Gar had a reputation as a top-notch rafter. He had spent years rowing on the Grand Canyon. In his first year guiding raft trips, on the Middle Fork of the Salmon in Idaho, an oar snagged a rock and slammed him in the face, knocking out his two front teeth. As a result, he spoke with a kind of whistle.

As I write, now, I also suddenly remember Gar's knee. It had had a head-on with a car, while Gar was running shuttle on the Stan in a motorcycle. He basically did not have a kneecap.

One afternoon, while working trips in the Canyon, years before, Gar had been walking up a side canyon by himself, away from camp. "Something exploded in my chest. I felt this huge sadness, a darkness inside. I felt so alone and in so much pain. I cried and cried, curled up in a ball on the trail. I thought my heart was going to break. I called out for God, or anything.' Gar whistled out this story of his spiritual nadir, of how this bottom had turned him into a hermit and a spiritual seeker. "I need to know what happened to me. "

Gar lived rather in the shadow of his older brother Mark, then at the center of the campaign to stop the dam on the Stanislaus. "What good am I, living here? I should be doing something like my brother, trying to save this place!" I told Gar that snowy day: " You are making the river even more worth saving, by living here, by witnessing it day-to-day". I believed that his example of simple living next to the river might help people know what this river was really like, and help us all see the need for the work ahead. There is a misguided ethos among many environmentalists that humans do not belong in the wilderness. To the contrary, we need people living in the wilderness, relearning or reminding us how to do so in harmony.

A few years from that winter afternoon Mark would chain himself to a rock as the waters behind the New Melones Dam rose to drown the canyon in the Spring melt. Mark offered his body to stop the insane murder of the Stanislaus canyon. Mark stayed in the canyon a week, at the water's edge, and so delayed the filling of the dam for a year.

Gar's tree house is now under water. So is the Fig Tree. The shouts of joy coming from commercial raft passengers trips floating down the Stan no longer ring off the canyon walls. The songs of the cliff swallows on the limestone canyons are gone.

Picking figs this morning, thinking of that old Fig, I wonder amazed at the

foresight of those Chinese Coolies. As a young man, working the river, I had imagined a kind of Utopian colony of Chinese, hiding out, living for generations down by the river. This morning, in my 50s, I realize they must have been down there in the Canyon only a few years, towards the end of the Gold Rush, virtual slave labor, forced to dig rock out of rock, rock out of river, in the feverish search for gold. One of them planted a fig. He or she tended the tiny tree for its first few years, a reminder of gracious bounty to come, a sprig of hope amidst days of grueling work. Then the colony was gone. The Fig made it on its own, grew huge, and blessed passersbys on the river in the late summer with its fruit and its shade. And now the Fig is drowned, drowned through the work of more men moving rocks about, this time not in search of gold, but still for money: the money to be made from building dams and in so doing drowning 18 miles of a living river canyon.

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This story wended its way to Gar, through email and common friends. Gar then wrote me. He lives in Maine now, with his partner and their 14 year old boy. He works as a carpenter. We have begun rekindling our friendship after a 30 plus year hiatus. Here are some memories of his, of that time, in the few years before the dam was finished and the reservoir filled.

“...Although my first season of Stanislaus River living (beginning December of 1973) was partly in sight of the fig tree, the bulk of my stay was not. I lived for the first few weeks in the mouth of that small cave at the base of the limestone cliff, on the downstream side of the Duck Bar fig tree. Being rather damp, dark, and dreary, I was not thrilled with the accommodations. One day I climbed from tree-top to tree-top in a stretch of interwoven live oaks on the lower end of Chinese Camp (about a half mile downstream from Duck Bar). That was where the river was very placid and made that sharp right hand, then immediate left hand turn at the end of the gravel bar. I was resting in a tree about ten feet above the ground, looking out on that bend in the river, when I became aware of two large branches parallel to one another and nearly level at my feet. In a moment of inspiration I saw them as the foundation beams for a tree house. I then remembered all the wood and metal roofing in the collapsed mining ruins up near the fig tree and knew I’d have a new “home” soon. So I proceeded to carry on my back, travelling that narrow bluff-trail between the two gravel bars of Duck Bar and Chinese Camp, enough materials for my first tree house. Late that spring I chose to tear down this first tree house and hide the materials downstream. I returned to the river canyon in August, began collecting figs of course, and started looking for a new and permanent location for a tree house. That’s when I found the tree and site that you were familiar with. That site was slightly upstream of the small rapid that drained the quiet waters of Chinese Camp. That same fall I made many more trips up to Duck Bar and the moldering miners buildings and schlepped materials on my back to the new location. I hiked out of the canyon and hitched to Mildred and Bob’s and bought a few well used wooden framed windows and hitched back to Vallecito and carried them in

on my back once again. I felt part squirrel and part pack-mule in those days.

The only building materials that I remember ever bringing in on a raft were a sheet of plywood and a few windows for building an addition (my “bedroom”) at the beginning of my third year in the canyon. I also borrowed an ETC raft each fall to bring in hundreds of pounds of apples and walnuts gleaned from abandoned trees. The figs I picked daily to eat fresh and of course many for drying and storing.

I also lived barefoot year round for about ten years.

As for the “little toe houses”....I think you, living in the “high-tech-civilized world” of the Confluence had access to Duct tape for your toe’s injuries. Although I made a few of Duct tape I generally carried an old bandanna specifically for tearing strips from when the need arose after a moment of inattention on Table Top or elsewhere. Duct tape was too expensive for me in those days. ”