

# LAST YEAR ON THE STANISLAUS

*The days are numbered for rafters on this California river as a dam threatens to destroy one of the most popular stretches of whitewater in the world*

*by Christian Kallen*

The first series of rapids downstream from here are the best we'll encounter." Regina, the woman leading our overnight rafting trip, began to list their names with obvious relish. "There's Cadillac Charlie, Devil's Staircase, Widow Maker, and Death Rock." The river itself seemed to catch its breath, and a dozen strangers exchanged uneasy glances.

We were standing in the shadow of a bridge at Camp Nine, far up canyon along California's Stanislaus River. Regina, a surprisingly small person for a boatman, continued to give last minute instructions. "The river's still running pretty high—about 5,000 cubic feet a second—so don't take anything for granted. If you fall out of the raft, float with your feet downriver so you can fend off rocks." We stirred uneasily and adjusted our bulky life jackets. Most of us hadn't counted on being washed out of the boats: it just hadn't been stressed in the trip brochure.

Three rafts were outfitted to carry us 14 miles down to Robinson's Ferry—two of them oared by the boatmen and the third paddled by six of the clients. Despite some trepidation at linking my fate with five other novices, I decided to ride in the paddle boat. We rehearsed the calls and appropriate strokes for a few minutes until the crew could follow orders well, bound together by a common interest—staying afloat. Despite the relative calm of the waters at the put-in site, we could feel the strong, steady pull of the current.

Ken, the 17-year-old guide who steered our paddle boat from the stern, decided we were ready to go and guided us to mid-stream. The Stanislaus took over, pulling the raft quickly toward a rock named Death a few hundred yards ahead. The river drowned out all other noise, and I comforted myself with statistics.

The Stanislaus has been Cali-

---

*Christian Kallen is Associate Editor of Adventure Travel.*

fornia's most popular whitewater river for years. In 1978, it attracted more than 45,000 people on commercial trips and almost as many private rafters, kayakers and even swimmers. Just a three-hour drive from San Francisco, and five from Los Angeles, the river has a classic blend of Sierra foothills terrain, exciting rapids, quiet stretches and a length perfect for either quick one-day trips or more leisurely overnights. But all this is threatened, and 1978 may have been the last year of the familiar 14-mile whitewater run from Camp Nine to Robinson's Ferry, due to the New Melones Dam.

A project of the Army Corps of Engineers, the dam was designed to create a lake stretching all the way up the canyon to Camp Nine. Its waters might generate power to irrigate far-off lands for cattle grazing and flushing out pollution downriver caused by crop chemicals. The lake could also be used for recreation: speedboating, water-skiing and family boating. Opponents of the project pointed out that there were already many under-utilized reservoirs in the area—the Stanislaus watershed alone has been dammed no fewer than 13 times—and emphasized the irreplaceable attributes of the area. But a state initiative to "Save the Stanislaus" narrowly failed in 1974—due, many feel, to a misleading and possibly illegal campaign against it—and the Corps of Engineers began construction.

But Friends of the River, the Sacramento-based public interest group which promoted the initiative, intensified their efforts to protect the whitewater, the canyon and the wildlife within it. The dam was finished in October of 1978, but as of this writing, not a single contractor has been found to use the water supply it creates. Although California won the right to limit the dam to partial filling, under current state plans even this would inundate many archaeological sites, animal habitats,

nearly all of the rapids and the ghost town of Melones.

The doomed future of the Stanislaus was part of the reason I chose to raft it in 1978, but as I looked down the canyon ahead of us, it wasn't the river's future that concerned me. Leaning from the waist, I dug my paddle into the choppy water, following the rhythm of the man ahead of me. We gained speed, racing toward the smooth green water gushing over a submerged boulder at the head of the rapid. Beyond it, a standing wave curled and broke three times as we approached. We pitched directly into the hole.

"Keep paddling!" Ken shouted above the roar of the river, and even though a few blades had nothing to paddle except the emptiness of the hole, we rose up the wave and dropped over its other side. Time and again Ken seemed to steer us for the largest hole he could see, and I suddenly heard my own voice joining in the shouts of unleashed nervous energy: paddle boats are the loudest non-motorized craft on a river.

It was hard to tell where one rapid ended and another began, but once the initial fear dropped away only exhilaration remained. Before we knew it, we were beyond Death Rock and pulling into the eddy at Rose Creek. We got out of the rafts shaking with excitement and began to make the short hike upstream to the swimming holes. Steep, slippery walls lined the tributary's route deep into the side of the canyon, and the swimming holes were crowded with the participants of half a dozen raft trips.

Rose Creek was one of two long layovers we took on the overnight trip—the other, at the limestone Coral Cave, came the second day—and after we returned to the river a new paddle crew was chosen to give everyone the opportunity to shovel the Stanislaus.

Soon, we pulled over for a lunch of sausages, guacamole, tortillas and





Christian Kallen

Above—Paddlers emerge from the whitewater of Chinese Dogleg, one of a series of rapids threatened by the controversial New Melones Reservoir project. Overleaf—As the oarsman shouts instructions, passengers paddle directly into the rapids which lie ahead. More than 40,000 people raft the Stanislaus every year, making it one of the world's most popular whitewater rivers. Photograph by Thomas Morse.

cheese. The first series of rapids, the layover at Rose Creek, and the dousing we all received at one point or another proved that water is the universal solvent; our inhibitions fell away as we talked about what had brought us to the river.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly. The temperature reached the nineties, and as we floated we scooped water from the river onto the sides of the raft to cool our seats. Rusted troughs and winches occasionally popped up on the shoreline, reminders of the river's appeal to gold-diggers of the last century. The archaeological evidence of the earlier inhabitants of the canyon, the Miwok Indians, could not be seen from the river, since all they had left behind were fire rings and a few petroglyphs carved in the limestone. Giant fig trees dipped their limbs into the water, unpruned since the Chinese laborers who planted them 100 years ago left the foothills. A golden eagle soared overhead, surveying his territory.

At Mother Rapids, a kayaker—his back straight, expression amused, his

paddle only rarely called into use—floated circles around us. I could not tell if he was going faster or slower than the current—he seemed to travel at a pace all his own, bobbing smoothly between standing waves, turning effortlessly in the midst of a thunderous whirlpool, catching the unseen eddies to float miraculously upstream in the rapid itself. I watched him with envy as he pivoted once more, then sped downstream.

The days are long in the Sierras in midsummer, and both before and after dinner plenty of opportunities arise to drift off on your own to the bank and stare at the motion of the current as it floats westward. It is akin to falling asleep—one thought leads downstream to another, almost intelligible voices erupt from the burble and chirp of the river, a new idea begins to take form but bursts before it coheres. If you spend enough time on a river, you begin to know it as you know good friends, and each river begins to exhibit its own character. The Snake is not like the Salmon, the Tuolumne is not like the Klamath, the Stanislaus is like no other. Each river is its own, unique and inviolate.

Which is not, apparently, how the Army Corps of Engineers views them, nor is it how many in business, agriculture, or urban planning do. And rivers are frequently violated, though not by such natural catastrophes as flooding, landslides or

even drought. Such events are as much a part of a river's character as a jumping salmon or a Class IV rapid, and to "protect" it by damming is an absurdity. The issue is economics versus environment, and the ruling ethic seems to be business before pleasure.

There are currently more than 1,200 dams on California rivers, streams and creeks. In fact, every major river system in the state except one—the Smith out of the Siskiyou Mountains on the north coast—has been dammed for flood control, agricultural resources, power generation, a distant city's drinking supply, or, it sometimes seems, just to be dammed. And more dams are proposed almost every year, including 3 new ones on California's best whitewater run, the Tuolumne.

Many of these arguments came out around the campfire after dinner. The river outfitters of the Stanislaus—and other threatened rivers as well—have their own interests to protect and can point to the immediate surroundings as proof of their point of view. And inevitably, the guides speak to an audience already under the river's spell.

As the stars multiplied, the conversation turned more personal—tales of death on the river, near misses that all the guides shared, and holes they all knew by name in rapids on the Colorado, the Salmon and the Snake.

The eastern sky brightened as the moon rose behind the canyon walls; red and white lights far away traced the path of a transcontinental jet; the fire flickered, diminished, and died; the conversation followed suit. In the background, the Stanislaus continued to speak its own language all through the night.

By the time we got back on the river the next morning, rafts were already passing our campsite from overnight stops farther upstream. We didn't run a single mile of the river without seeing other rafts, either on shore or queued up at the head of a rapid, awaiting their turn. We took our time this second day, stopping first at Coral Caves for a short hike, and later at a high rock 30 feet up the cliff, where four rafters lined up for a dive—which almost cost a life.

The river was quite deep where they dove, but the current was stronger than anyone suspected. Three of the four divers were swept downstream through a small, unnamed rapids. Just before they disappeared around the bend, a





# go a fly boat

It's the boat from the "Tote-A-Boat" people, Klepper America. It folds into two packbags which you can carry onto a plane and fly to anywhere in the world. Or you can take it with you on a train, or toss it into the trunk of a car.

You'll enjoy the fine crafted Klepper folding boats for cruising, fishing, sailing, expeditions, and white water sport. When not in use, just hide it in a closet.

Find out more about these boats. Write for our free illustrated brochure and pick the boat to suit your needs.



**KLEPPER  
AMERICA**  
Tote-A-Boat Anywhere

folding boats,  
kayaks

35 Union Square West,  
New York, N.Y. 10003

Kindly send information on:

folding  rigid kayaks  accessories

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_

Zip \_\_\_\_\_

deep-throated, desperate "Help!" filled the canyon. Fortunately all three were rescued by a guide waiting downriver, but we were all shaken—none more so than the three unwilling rapids swimmers and the guides. Yet there was something else: it was real, it was unanticipated, it would never happen at an amusement park. It was, in a sense, why we were there.

The rest of the trip was anticlimactic. We paddled into the section of the river where the unfinished New Melones Dam had already slowed the current. We passed under a busy bridge construction project at Parrot's Ferry, the compromise waterfill mark supported by Friends of the River. For the next hour, we watched the banks drift by, where the California live oaks, digger pines, manzanitas and laurels spread up the side of the canyon. Sunbathers were stretched naked on the rocks enjoying a timeless peace. When the dam is filled, loggers will cut down the trees in the valley—submerged logs are dangerous to speedboats.

Take-out at the ghost town of Melones was within sight of an enormous bridge 200 feet above the river, at the level of the proposed high-water mark for the filled dam. As we loaded onto the bus that was to take us back to our cars, hugs between the participants and the guides ended the journey. We were all river runners now, who had shared the Stanislaus for the last 30 hours.

Our guides linked arms and did an impromptu goodbye cancan.

Through the dusty window of an old GM bus, I watched them as we pulled away. They broke up and began to deflate the rafts, the tamed waters of a stilled Stanislaus in shadow behind them. □

The New Melones Dam was completed in late October, 1978, but filling of the reservoir was halted until an archaeological survey of the lower canyon could be completed. As of this writing, April 1 is the deadline for the survey, after which the Corps of Engineers intends to fill to a level of 808 feet to test the dam's power turbines. Legal and political maneuvering is expected to continue for some time as environmental groups try to hold the reservoir's level to Parrot's Ferry. In this case, river running can be continued. Friends of the River (401 San Miguel Way, Sacramento, CA 95819, USA; phone (916)541-9955) is working to maintain the river and canyon as a natural resource, and urges the public to direct their comments to congressional leaders, the Department of the Interior, Governor Jerry Brown of California and President Carter.

## Trip Advisory: Stanislaus River

As the most popular rafting river in California, the Stanislaus offers an exciting run through a granite and limestone canyon in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. The following companies run daily trips on the Stanislaus from the first week in April to the end of October.

Adventours—Wet and Wild, Inc., Box B, Woodland, CA 95695, USA; phone (916)662-6824. Member, American Adventurers Association.

### 5 REASONS WHY

# NOVURANIA

WILL BE AMERICA'S LEADER IN HIGH SPEED INFLATABLE BOATS

1. Constructed of heavy-duty polyester calendered with DuPont hypalon. Will not stretch like nylon & is more resistant to sunlight.
2. 2 pc. wooden keel & deep V-hull is preferred for water skiing, high speed turning, & rough water.
3. Available in eye-catching colors of tangerine orange, sunset yellow, & marine grey.
4. 11 models to choose from in sizes from 8'5" to 16'4".
5. The best quality & design with the best pricing.

**PROKO INTERNATIONAL**  
12511 Beatrice Street  
Los Angeles, Calif. 90066

Dealer Inquiries Invited

