

## THE STANISLAUS STORY

She is born 10,000 feet in the sky, sucking the snow breast of the Sierra Nevada Crest into icy veins feeding her arteries flowing to the great heart of the San Joaquin Valley. She's the Stanislaus: one of the last free flowing rivers left in California not yet damned into total servility, and the second most popular white water recreation river in America -- yet, she is scheduled to die.

Her grandest canyon, etched over a million years of erosion by the combined craft of her three forks -- a shrine of thousand foot cliffs carved and hollowed by crystaled caves, and riparian gardens rich with American Indian and Gold Rush Era ruins and lore -- may be lost forever under backwaters and shoreline sediment of the New Melones Dam, the fourth largest earth filled dam in the world.

The Federal Government, builders of the dam, would like to fill it to full capacity for continued water subsidies to corporate owned agribusiness in the Central Valley at the going rate of \$10 per acre foot (325,000 gallons), with the tax payers picking up the tab as usual. The state would like a partially filled dam for enhanced flood protection, and to preserve the Stanislaus until there is a more substantial, real need for additional water to be sold at more realistic prices in order to curb water waste and abuse.

As the two fight their long legal battle from one appellate court to another, the Stanislaus continues to die a slow death. Since its completion in 1979, the filling dam has destroyed six miles of the River's lower canyon. Each spring its backwaters reach further upstream, drowning more and more trees and vegetation. Then with summer, the waters recede, exposing the rotting snag remains of a once beautiful

oak and pine forest. Also gone under is the historic gold mining town of Melones, where I lived the first years of my life. Its activity in the 1800's inspired Mark Twain's Roughing It series, and Bret Harte's The Luck of Roaring Camp. Hundreds of Native American Indian burial grounds, camps and petroglyphs estimated to be at least 10,000 years old, have also been flooded.

A more hopeful and positive side to the drama is that over the past twelve years the state's position has been largely augmented by the indefatigable spirit of thousands of River lovers who refuse to let the Stanislaus drown. Each of us have found a spiritual strength through the River's uniqueness that transcends and refuses the ultimate frustration that too often leads one to bow to apathy and the established order's destruction of our planet, or worse, to the anger that lashes out, creating and perpetuating its own destruction.

Over the years, we have lost many more battles than we've won, and with each major loss for the River we've all felt a part of ourselves die. But somehow, after a brief retreat, we return stronger than ever, with even more determination and energy. And as the commitment grows, we believe the River will somehow survive.

Our individual efforts were first united into an organization called Friends of the River back in the early 70's by Mark DuBois -- a man of extraordinary zeal and natural leadership who has devoted <sup>his life</sup> to the cause. With Mark as the backbone, FOR continues to be the major lobby, club and information group fighting for the preservation of the Stanislaus and other threatened rivers in California. It has approximately 10,000 members now reaching across the states and abroad.

FOR's first major campaign to save the Stanislaus was waged in 1974 when 34,000 volunteers made grass roots history by collecting

480,000 signatures in a successful initiative to put the issue on the ballot as a statewide proposition calling for a smaller dam. But in spite of a seemingly successful campaign, the proposition was narrowly defeated. In the last weeks before the election, big dollars blitzed the media with distorted propoganda to confuse the issue, and convince even many river supporters into voting for no, against the proposition, when they thought they were voting no, against the full sized dam. The list of contributors who donated the nearly half-million dollars to win the election reels like a stockholder's dream portfolio -- a fine cross-section of big business that is ever exercising its power over this state and country.

Later efforts to save the River came in the form of state legislative bills to place the Stanislaus under protected Wild and Scenic River Status. But here too, once it looked like they had a good chance of passing, special interest managed to quickly put them to rest via stepped up lobbying.

Then came the spring of '79, and the newly completed New Melones Dam starting to back up the river runoff. The long dreaded, nightmarish thought of the River's destruction <sup>was</sup> becoming reality. After much deliberation, Mark DuBois, active <sup>no</sup> independently of FOR, decided to enter his life as final negotiation to save the river because "The life of the 9 million-year-old Stanislaus River Canyon is far more significant than my short tenure on this planet." He politely informed Colonel Donald O'Shei, the New Melones District Head of the Army Corps of Engineers, of his intentions to seclude and shackle himself to a boulder along the river banks until guaranteed that flooding would not exceed Parrotts Ferry, a compromised mid-point on the River we had always held for. He also wished O'Shei: "Good luck on doing what you most believe is right."

The results were quick. O'Shei, well aware of Mark's integrity and commitment, called an immediate halt to the flooding and initiated a wide air, ground, and water search for him. However, hidden in a small, well covered cave which allowed him to observe his searchers, Mark was never found. Meanwhile, six of us chained ourselves to a boulder at Parrotts Ferry in support of Mark's heroic effort. Within a week the action had received national TV exposure; Governor Brown had sent a telegram to President Carter informing him that the Stanislaus "is a priceless asset to the people of California and to the people of this nation"; and urged him to call a permanent halt to the flooding; Congressman Don Edwards introduced a congressional bill to protect the Stanislaus under the National Wild and Scenic River System; and the Corps of Engineers officially agreed to not flood past Parrotts Ferry.

It was a great victory for the year, even though new battles were sure to come. The enlightening experience of Mark's confinement, coupled with ours and all the support people who made it possible, was invaluable. Being forced to share immediate space, movement and basic needs with each other, curiously became very liberating. And the irony of being chained in order to keep the river free put us all in touch with the strength of peaceful simplicity so inherent in non-violent action.

The following spring (1980) saw an unusually heavy snow pack, coupled with pro-dam politics, flood water about two miles above Parrotts in spite of inadequate mitigation of archeological ruins and environmental suits to hold water at a lower level. For weeks River supporters acted as "human markers" by standing, then floating in icy waters to protest and illustrate the rising flood. When their

lives were threatened by speed boats buzzing within three feet of their vigil, they were forced to dry land. And that fall, the Edward's bill was finally defeated by one vote. It was a hard year.

Early this year a group of disabled River supporters (the Stanislaus is unique in offering wilderness accessibility to the disabled) gained national media coverage and stopped the flood by chaining themselves in seclusion along the River's banks in an attempt to persuade President Carter to support a Stanislaus National Monument proposal before he left office. He refused. Later, in the spring, seven people were arrested, with four serving jail sentences, for non-violent sit-downs and blockades in an effort to stop illegal forest clearcutting and flooding above the state's authorized maximum level.

And so goes the River struggle -- on several fronts, with Friends of the River continuing its legislative efforts (funds are now being raised for a new Initiative Campaign) and non-violent direct action by independent demonstrators taking place as it becomes necessary.

At date, over eight miles of the River's beautiful upper canyon remains untouched, and with God's will, so it will remain. Water has always been spiritual and transforming for man. It is the life-giver, both literally and metaphorically, and we must always let it run free if we are to remain free. For a stagnant body of back water covering trees can only make the mind stagnate and the spirit to die. We believe that can never happen to the Stanislaus River.

The end