

TRANSCRIPT OF JERRY MERAL INTERVIEW

October 25, 2023 at Inverness

Conducted by Larry Orman

INTRODUCTION

This interview was conducted with Jerry Meral, allowing him to reflect on his involvement with the Stanislaus River and the various campaigns to try to save it. [See all materials relating to Jerry, including video of the interview at StanislausRiver.org.](#)

There are four parts to the interview – 1) Jerry’s involvement in whitewater canoeing and boating on the Stanislaus; 2) the formation of Friends of the River; 3) the Proposition 17 campaign in 1974; and 4) general reflections of his overall experience with the Stanislaus River.

Jerry Meral came out to California in 1967 for graduate school and quickly became a whitewater pioneer (a number of major first descents to his name) – and fully immersed in issues affecting the fate of those rivers. He became a Ph.D. scientist who started with the Environmental Defense Fund’s California office in 1969, and later became California’s Deputy Director of Water Resources, then the executive director of the Planning and Conservation League where he pioneered highly effective approaches to passing statewide park bonds, among many other accomplishments. He remains an active whitewater boater, is on numerous nonprofit boards and lives in Inverness, California.

Larry Orman conducted the interview which lasted approximately an hour. His friendship with Jerry goes back to 1970, with connections all along the 50 years since. Larry is the manager of the StanislausRiver.org archive site, and a former guide and area manager for the American River Touring Association, then later the executive director of first Greenbelt Alliance and then GreenInfo Network.

The following transcript has been edited for clarity and conciseness, and several explanatory notes have been added.

PART 1: EARLY WHITEWATER AND INTRODUCTION TO THE STANISLAUS RIVER

Larry: So, Jerry, how did you end up in the C1 (one person whitewater canoe)?

Jerry: Well, I did a lot of canoeing in Michigan where, when I was growing up and starting to paddle, there were really very few, if any kayaks. Everybody used Grumman canoes. And so you'd go to a river, the Rifle River, the Au Sable, whatever, you'd rent a canoe. Go down the river, they shuttle you and so on, that's the way it was done, it was all in Grummans, as there were no fiberglass canoes. When I went to Penn State, same deal, the Penn State Outing Club had, I think, 20 or 30 Grumman canoes. And, they'd go on outings and everybody would take the club canoes, put them in a car, in a carrier, whatever.

There were a few kayakers who were viewed as strange people. I mean, like, really? You kayak? Now, one of them was Les Bechtel, who went on to be a super kayaker and also started a raft company up in Idaho. But he was an oddball. I mean, you know, who would go in a kayak when you could go in a canoe?

Then, of course, people at Penn State began to get into whitewater canoes (before I got there). These were open canoes. People then got into the fiberglass whitewater canoes - those are closed deck, C1s, C2s (one and two person decked canoes). Those became more popular just before I got there.

You'd have to build your own boat. The club had molds, and you would lay up the fiberglass in the mold, and seam it, and seal it, and you had your own canoe. Those were pretty popular at Penn State. When I came out to California, I had switched from my own Grumman.

Larry: Which one canoe did you come out with to California?

Jerry: It was in 1967. At Penn State, I had my own Grumman. It had a metal deck that weighed about a hundred pounds total. And I could run Class 4 rapids in it. It had a little spray deck and everything. But when I came out here, I knew I had to convert over to a fiberglass boat.

Nobody would know what a Grumman was out here except Trowbridge up on the Russian River. So, I made a fiberglass boat. I tested it out. I ran some class 4, a little bit of 5 back east. And then came out here. And the first weekend I got here... the Sierra Club had a river touring section, so I looked that up, and I got here on a Thursday and made some calls, and by Saturday [I was out on the Stanislaus River](#) on a trip led by Scott Fleming, who was a well-known whitewater leader and kayaker.

But Scott kept saying, you're going to be boating in a what? Nobody paddled a C1 out in California. I mean, like, nobody. (Larry: your C-1 was the only one I ever saw) There were a few and there still are a few, but very few.

In 2003, I eventually gave up the C1 because of leg circulation problems. C1s are pretty cramped (you kneel in them). So, I switched over to a kayak.

Larry: When you first got out to California, do you have any recollection of the Stanislaus River?

Jerry: Oh yeah! It was the first river I ran when I got to California and it was just right. I mean it was a great Class 3 river. I could run harder stuff than that, but it was just nice, it had lots of good rapids, great scenery, lots of people went up there. I knew the people the rapids were named after, (like) [Bailey Falls](#), named after [Elsa Bailey](#). She was on the first trip I went on the Stanislaus.

I knew a lot of the people in Sierra Club River Touring section, who were just getting going. They had not explored a whole lot of rivers. They ran the American, the Stanislaus, stuff like that. When I got here, to my knowledge, the Tuolumne had never been run; the North Fork (American), I think, had been run the year before I got here, or something like that.

Dick Sunderland, who was a kayaker from back east that I knew. He came out the same time I did, and we said, well, let's go check things out. I read about the Tuolumne, and of course we were like, "well, we gotta go do that!" There's a lot of good stories about that, but anyway, we explored that in 1968. As far as Dick and I knew, we were the first ones to run the Tuolumne from Lumsden to Wards Ferry.

But, there was a rumor that Noel deBord, a sort of legendary kayaker, who boated with a helmet that had Viking horns sticking out of it, might have maybe run the Tuolumne. And if you read the history of the Tuolumne, you know, Melvin Belli ran it in a raft in 1928. You know, so people have been down it a little bit.

But as far as we knew we were the first ones to kayak it. Dick and I were definitely the first ones to run from, Holm Powerhouse down to Lumsden: the, the Cherry Creek section (major Class V run). We did both (runs) the same year, 1968. There's a very long story I could tell you, which I've written up for American Whitewater, about the first run on Cherry Creek. We only used topos (USGS maps) in those days to try to plot the gradients. I estimated that the steepest part was 100 feet a mile, which in those days was really a lot.

When we got up to the river after a very difficult all-night effort because there were landslides and stuff, I discovered that the map I was using actually was 100 feet per interval instead of 50 feet. So the river actually gets to be 200 feet a mile on the steepest part, which we thought was, oh my god, what are we doing here?

It took us two days to go the six miles. We had to hike up the river bank because we ran out of light, because, brilliant explorers that we were, we decided to run the first run in late November, and so there was like no light whatsoever. It got dark at five o'clock or something, so we had to hike out. We made a lot of first runs in those days.

PART 2: THE ORIGINS OF FRIENDS OF THE RIVER

Larry: I'm back talking with Jerry Meral and we're going to shift now to the whole question of the Stanislaus and how Jerry's involvement came about with Friends of the River and the effort to try to protect the river from being dammed. So, you first boated the Stanislaus in 1967 with the Sierra Club River Touring Section.

Jerry: Everyone knew about the [New Melones Dam](#) and in 1967 it was already [under construction](#).

I didn't know much about water. So, I got very involved with the Sierra Club, Northern California Regional Conservation Committee, which had a water committee that was chaired by a guy named Ed Royce, and then by Jake Miller, and had a number of very knowledgeable people. But the main educator of that committee was a guy named Ken Turner, who was very active in the Sierra Club, and happened to work for the Department of Water Resources.

(You were studying for your Ph. D. then?) Right, I was a graduate student at UC Berkeley in biology. So, I joined this committee. We began to learn about what the deal was with the Bureau of Reclamation, their plans for rivers throughout the state.

You know that was an era of very active dam building. A lot was going on and we had to learn about why this was happening. What it turned out was that one of the goals of the Sierra Club was to protect the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta by keeping water quality good. Ed Royce, who was not into river conservation, felt that the New Melones, Auburn, and Marysville dams, which were three big Bureau of Reclamation dams being planned, would help keep the Delta pure.

The Sierra Club in the early days was not opposed to any of those dams. In fact, the Water Committee did not oppose these dams, even though they were connected to the East Side Division, which was going to export all the water down to the lower Central Valley. We met every month in Oakland and educated ourselves and gradually had the big picture come into view of what's going on around the state.

The Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation were going to dam up the Eel, the Trinity, and the Klamath rivers. This was the beginning of the effort to save those north coast rivers as well. Gradually it seemed like there were flaws in the New Melones Dam plan. It was primarily driven by flood control interests, in the lower Stanislaus River, by John Hertel and others, and also by this larger plan to export the water from Northern to Southern California.

Eventually, I and Scott Fleming and others, worked up a report on the Stanislaus River. Scott was a very senior executive at Kaiser Health. In fact, he actually invented the Kaiser Health Plan with Edgar Kaiser in Hawaii. He had a secretary and that was very helpful because she would type up our reports and put them in a nice condition - I don't know if Kaiser knew about that! We published a report on why the Stanislaus wasn't a good idea and offered an alternative which was raising Tulloch Reservoir because it could have had just about as much water - but it would not have inundated the Stanislaus River. That was pretty instrumental in the effort to stop the dam, because you have to have an alternative. You've got a dam under construction, so you better have an alternative.

The problem, was, this idea wasn't on the radar screen for the Bureau of Reclamation. You know, they never even considered it. So, in 1971, I joined the Environmental Defense Fund where (with Tom Graff) we filed a lawsuit that was against the New Melones Dam.

But there were also political efforts going on (Note: including many postcards being solicited by river guides and sent during 1971 to Ike Livermore, the California Resources Secretary). We did a big petition drive in 1972. to, try to convince the federal government not to dam up the Stanislaus. We gathered 100,000 signatures statewide. But the petition drive didn't convince (President) Nixon. I think it convinced Presidential Candidate George McGovern, but he didn't win that election. So, if it didn't convince Nixon, we said, well, how about going on the state level? And that's when the Proposition 17 concept got going. It was crucial to have the involvement of the rafting companies - and the kayaking and general rafting community, too.

Kayakers are a little quirky and individual, and some really dove in and really worked on it. And others were like, "I just want to go boating. "

Larry: So, when did you come across David Kay, who worked for ARTA? (and was a critical part of the entire early Stanislaus campaign)

Jerry: I can't remember what year, but quite early on. probably in the late 60s, I'm going to guess.

Larry: Do you have any idea of how you guys first met?

Jerry: I really can't remember. We all knew the raft operators, because when we went kayaking, we would see all these raft companies there. I do remember going down to meet David at ARTA headquarters (in Oakland, California), and talking to him, but I can't remember exactly when that was. (It was likely in 1969 or 1970). There were lots of effort to try to understand the (New Melones) dam and look at alternatives.

Larry: When did the idea of creating a grassroots organization come into focus?

Jerry: Well, I can give you the exact moment for that. We finished the Stanislaus petition campaign (In 1972) to the president, to the federal government, which was unsuccessful in creating action. But it produced 100,000 signatures (Note: [these were eventually sent to President Ford](#)). It's a lot. It said people are really willing to work on this. And so, I do remember exactly when the initiative idea came to me. In mid-1973, my wife Barbara and I went up to the Skunk Train (on the Northern California Coast). I get cluster headaches and I got one on the train. And I'm sort of lying back leaning on Barbara, and it suddenly occurred to me that we could do an initiative to try to save the Stanislaus!

The Coastal Initiative (which involved signature gathering) had just passed in 1972. I had worked on that a little bit while we were doing our Stanislaus petition campaign. I was impressed by how successful that was. There weren't any environmental initiatives before that one, that I can remember.

I was working for EDF (the Environmental Defense Fund), which meant that we couldn't officially work on it, because EDF is a 501c3 nonprofit and we didn't really, at that time, get involved in these ballot measure kind of campaigns. So, it was all kind of off the books.

We met with the raft companies and said, "Would you guys back this?" I loaned the campaign some of my own money to get it started. And then the raft companies got very involved. Volunteers just came out of the woodwork. We did have, a paid signature coordinator, a guy named Dennis Vieira, who, was great at organizing volunteers.

Larry: So, so let's pull back from Prop 17 for a second, because I want to cover that more specifically in the next segment. But, the 100,000 signature campaign, where did that idea even come from?

Jerry: Oh, I just thought we should do something. We did have a successful 100,000 signatures that were gathered to save Point Reyes National Seashore. We gathered a hundred thousand signatures under the leadership of (Marin supervisor and later state legislator) Peter Behr, who became the Wild River guru, too. We even had a march down Van Ness Blvd. in San Francisco. That was very successful and it went to Nixon (who eventually supported creating the seashore). We thought if Nixon responded to Point Reyes petitions, he might respond to Stanislaus petitions.

Larry: You and David Kay are known to have created the Friends of the River as an organization.

Jerry: Yes, we had to have an organization, but the key thing was we needed professional campaign managers. So, we used FOR as both organizing volunteers and also the official voice of the campaign.

Larry: Were there any other strategies or thoughts outside of where the signatures and the initiative led to?

Jerry: David Kay and I thought we should appeal to Governor Reagan. Governor Reagan canceled the Dos Rios Dam in 1969, and so we said, let's convince him to cancel new Melones, too.

This is, as I look back at it, a little bit of naivete on our parts, but we went to meet with Ike Livermore, who was the most wonderful guy - he was the Reagan's Resources Secretary. And a super conservationist. He had just saved the Redwoods, and had saved Mineral King in the Southern Sierra.

He had accomplished so much. So, we met with Ike. And he said, well, you want me to oppose New Melones Dam, but I need some support from local government. You've got to get me someone local down there.

So, we went and made an appearance before the Calaveras County Water District. We felt it was going to affect their ability to extract water from the Stanislaus, which it was, and they were not friendly to New Melones Dam. We just about got them to pass a resolution, but then they sort of got wishy washy, and my guess is their local congressman, John McFall, leaned on them and said, don't you dare, because he was very pro dam (Note: he was very powerful and known to be the "king of pork barrel" federal politics). And so... You know, we couldn't quite pull that off, but it was a political education experience.

There were a number of efforts like that to kind of destabilize New Melones Dam.

Larry: All of this is you sort of volunteering extra effort outside of your normal work at EDF?

Jerry: Well, no, because the, the Environmental Defense Fund did bring a lawsuit against the dam. And some of this could fall underneath that. Those kind of political efforts would be ok. Only the initiative itself could not be an official EDF project. Now it could be.

Larry: Any recollections of [David \(Kay\)](#)? He passed away a few years back (and his son recently, too – who had been working on alternatives for operating New Melones at a lower level).

Jerry: Yeah, his son, unfortunately... [Lou Elliott was the head of ARTA](#) - anyway, so Lou was, you know, great, but a little off the wall. Whereas David was like, calm, cool, collected, strategic. You know, he worked on fundraising with the outfitters. Just an indispensable partner. David's role is really, I think,

unique among the outfitters because he was essentially the marketing director for ARTA, which had been set up as a nonprofit.

Larry: ARTA contracted the actual river running to Elliott River Tours, which was the private company that Lou owned. So, it was really just a booking agent and an educational operation. David clearly had lots of influence on the messaging that ARTA put out, which was very strongly wrapped in conservation and serious, real values about why protect nature.

Jerry: But David was the only person in the outfitter world who was professionally also engaged directly in this political activity. Everybody else was kind of just on the edges. But the outfitters, they contributed in every possible way. I mean, publicity trips, endless publicity trips, organizing guides to do stuff, all the outfitters, just about all, I can't remember everyone, but Vladimir Kovalik, Dick Linford, Joe Daly, George Wendt, John Vail, Loren Smith, and many others (plus ARTA of course).

Larry: Were the outfitters organized in any way to do that?

Jerry: You know, they probably were internally the way the Tuolumne outfitters are now (Note: at the time they had formed the Pacific Rivers Outfitters Association, PROA), but I was not really part of that. I worked with them individually pretty much. But they would come to meetings and stuff like that. Of course, it was their livelihoods, at least those who were making any money on it.

So, the outfitters were engaged, they were pretty passionate about it. It seems like without that outfitter wing of the process that it just would have just about impossible. You could say that because of the volume of people going down the river and the guides' involvement and all of that.

It would have been interesting to see whether all this activity would have happened had there been no commercial rafting on the river. Then you would have had to rely totally on just general conservationists, river users, and so on. It would have been a lot harder. I can't say it would be impossible, but it would be a lot harder.

Larry: How many times have you run the Stanislaus?

Jerry: I don't know. I could look it up, but a lot. I don't think I've been on it since 1976 or something like that. Just, you know, too weird. But I ran it, you know, several times a year before that, so a lot.

Larry: Any impressions of the river that just stick with you?

Jerry: Well, the Stanislaus is sort of unique because of its limestone character. There's not a lot of limestone in California in general. So, it has a different aspect. You know, the cliffs are different, the rocks are different. You have the caves that are pretty unique. I mean, not many other rivers that I know of have caves right off the river.

That limestone probably affected the vegetation. We have a lot of gorgeous rivers in California, but the Stanislaus is different. There are some rivers like the Cache Creek, which has this weird and amazing geology that just they stand out from everything else because geologically they're different. You can see a lot of that in Tim Palmer's photographs.

END OF PART 2

PART 3: PROPOSITION 17

Larry: Okay, I'm back with Jerry Meral, and we're talking about early days on the Stanislaus River. We're now going to cover the Proposition 17 adventure ([see related photos and documents](#) at www.StanislausRiver.org). You went in the early 1970s from this massive petition gathering campaign that brought 100,000 signatures out. Clearly, the Stanislaus touched a nerve for people.

You were talking before about the idea of the initiative and where that came from. Tell us a little bit about what experience.

Jerry: The idea (for the initiative) came up on a ride on the skunk train (see above for the story), sort of early or mid-1973. Just because the Coastal Initiative had been so successful. Since I was working for the Environmental Defense Fund, I had to do all that initiative stuff pretty much in my own time. I wouldn't say I never thought about it at the office. Tom Graff and I (did) put our heads together at times.

The petition timeline had to be followed. You had to file a certain statement with the state to say you're going to gather signatures and get title and summary. One of the things that helped was that Tom's good friend Dan Lowenstein was at the Secretary of State's office with some guy named Jerry Brown (who was Secretary of State at the time). We got good cooperation from the Secretary's office in terms of our title and summary, and some adventures we had with misspellings, and stuff like that.

So anyway, we got our [title and summary](#) and [had to go out and collect signatures](#). That was a big mobilization effort of course, the river guides, and the Sierra Club, and just all kinds of people, and Dennis Vierra, our signature coordinator who tried to keep them all together, herding river guides, you can imagine.

We did have a little bit of paid signature gathering because we really didn't know if we could do it, but we ended up pretty much doing it without any paid signature gathering.

There are so many stories about that [signature campaign](#). In those days, you had to put down the precinct number of each voter, next to their signature, name and address. That was abolished by an initiative called Prop. 9 later on, that Jerry Brown actually ran with Ed Coupal. River outfitter Loren Smith was a high school teacher, so he brought busloads of high school kids to Los Angeles to sit around the pool of one of our supporters and hand write in all of the precinct numbers for all these various thousands and thousands of signatures (over 500,000), and it was just a huge volunteer effort. It was just astounding - people would just go out and spend hours and hours and hours. (Note: This checking was also done at a lot of different locations).

A lot of the people that we know now got involved too, Mark Dubois, Graciela Rossi, and so on, got involved even before that, but especially during the campaign.

Larry: When did Rob Coughlin, David Oke and Roanoke (their company) come in? Once the initiative qualified?

Jerry: Oh no, we brought them in quite early because we knew we needed some professional help on campaign. They had a relatively new company called Roanoake, get it? Ro (Rob) and Oke (David Oake). You'd see at the bottom of a teacup when you get the cup. So, we brought them in.

Larry: How did you even come across them?

Jerry: I can't remember. Rob might be able to tell you. Someone referred us to them because we knew we needed their help. In those days, there were very few professional campaigns. Whitaker and Baxter ran the campaign against the Coastal Initiative, but we weren't going to hire them. We didn't have the money anyway. And these guys, Rob and Dave, they were pretty hungry and wanted to do a campaign. They did a professional job.

(NOTE: Rob Caughlan tells his full story of FOR and Proposition 17 [here in his book](#), and [in a 2020 interview](#))

Overall, it was so much different than what we do today. I don't want to say amateurish. For the day, it was relatively professional. But today, you look back and go, "You did what?"

Larry: Well, when we talk about the campaign, I recall, and there are pictures of this on the StanislausRiver.org website, of making [bed sheet posters out of with spray paint and stencils](#) and [hanging them over freeway overpasses](#).

Jerry: Oh, absolutely. And, and one of the things we did, which I love to do, is sniping. That is, you take your campaign poster, "[Yes on 17](#)", and you go out in the dead of night and go post it up somewhere. And so, I and someone else, we were out sniping one night, out near Kaiser in Oakland, actually. We had a ladder and we were putting it up on telephone poles. And the cops came by and busted us. "What are you guys doing? Oh, yeah, and take that down and get the hell out of here".

Larry: There's another story about that that happened in L. A. They were doing the same thing. The cops came by and they go, uh-oh, we've been busted. But the cops just want to know "Which way is which?" (yes on 17 to stop the dam, no on 17 keep the dam), then they just left them alone, and they went on putting up signs. (Note: the initiative petition written to be a bit vague about stopping the dam. The reason the measure was written to put the river in the State Wild and Scenic River System is that we could not under state law directly order the federal government to stop building the dam. But we thought Congress might defer to a state law which prevented dam construction on wild and scenic rivers.)

Jerry: One of the things we did during the campaign was, about [the opposition's "the Wild River hoax" ploy](#) – it was done to confuse the issue. I wanted a bill put into the legislation, or at least a resolution, denouncing the other side's campaign. With a lot of effort, we got Senator John Nejedly to actually do a press conference denouncing the other side for running such a deceptive campaign. This was the No on 17, claiming to save the river by just confusing everybody. They said it was a "wild river hoax" - they had pictures of the power plant at Camp 9 to "prove" their point: "It's not really a wild river, you know". Another problem was that you had to vote "yes" to save the river whereas no would mean stopping the dam. Undoubtedly some people voted "no" to try to stop the dam. (See information on StanislausRiver.org [about the pro-dam campaign](#))

In 1973 Jerry Brown decided he was running for governor, and he was going to come out and endorse Prop 17.

Larry: How did that come about?

Jerry: when Jerry Brown decided to run, Tom Graff was asked to organize a group of environmentalists to brief Jerry Brown on environmental policy. And that was because Dan Lowenstein, his friend from Harvard law school was working for Jerry Brown. This was organized at Tom Graff's house up in Oakland. Brown showed up with Lowenstein, and I was asked to do the water briefing. Bob Vandenbosch from UC Berkeley, a famous professor, was asked to do pesticides.

We also had someone on air quality, a total of four or five people. I was asked to go first and start talking about water. That was a terrible mistake, because Jerry Brown had this huge family legacy of the State Water Project, and he had seen the whole water project develop during his younger years. His father, the previous governor, had been instrumental in the State Water Project - Pat Brown had pushed the State Water Project. And Jerry Brown remembered sitting up at night with Pat Brown in 1960, waiting to see if the thing had passed. It passed by like one percent.

We had two or three hours reserved, but most of the time was spent on water. This was very frustrating to the other four briefers who were sitting around going, "Do we ever get to talk?" I wanted to stop, but Brown would not shut up. And so we spent half the time or more talking about water.

And of course, we talked about the Stanislaus River. Brown had gone on a Stanislaus trip a year earlier with ARTA. We invited him to go on a raft trip, led by Larry (Orman).

It was in May of 1974 and we had a great trip ([see photos here](#)). We had about 5,000 CFS, which was fairly high. Brown went down the river as part of a tour of the gold country. This was during the campaign. His campaign showed up in a big bus and we arranged for him to go down the river. The paddling crew was me and Rob Caughlin in front, Jerry Brown and Bill Boyarsky, the famous political reporter for the L.A. Times and Larry guiding in back. And, let's just say their paddling abilities at one point became less than desirable, and Larry almost got sucked back into a hole that he never would have gotten out of. But it was a great trip. (Note: after the incident around the hole, Jerry Brown stopped paddling, even as Larry was paddle prodding him in the back of his lifejacket to paddle, as we needed the power with the water that high...).

At the end of the trip, Brown, we're at Parrott's Ferry Bridge. And Brown gets off the river, he's wearing shorts and a paddling jacket. There's a bunch of Hell's Angels there. He goes up to the Hell's Angels and immediately says, "Hi, I'm Jerry Brown. I'm running for governor." Then he goes off to an old time political event in Jackson with a bunch of old cigar smoking pols. And Boyarsky (the reporter) writes it up as the new politics on the river, the old politics in the Democratic Hall in Jackson.

Larry: It was just a great event. The back story, which we'll do as a separate piece at some point) on that whole river trip story was, ARTA had been managing all the raft trips for the campaign and press trips and all, and we had heard from Jerry Brown that he wanted to go down in two hours. And we said, we can't do that (normally took 2 days, but one day trips were sometimes done).

Some of the guides said, well, we think we can do it. So, we sent them down with a boat and a frame tied on backwards. They rode down full power the whole way through. They got down in two hours and we gave them a six pack, said, okay, you guys did it. We still weren't convinced that we could do it. And then he, Jerry Brown, of course, at the put in talked himself onto the paddle raft, which I was supposed to run as color for the photographers (Jerry Brown was supposed to be in a safer oar powered raft).

You, Jerry Meral, were up on the bank, waving your hands NO! when Jerry (Brown) walked down, saying, "Who's going in here?" (the paddle raft) and then he just got in the raft. And anyway, it was quite the story. But he did stop paddling during the trip, and was mostly interested in talking to the LA Times reporter (about nothing related to the Stanislaus River). It was a surreal trip.

Larry: Any other kind of recollections about [the Proposition 17 campaign](#)?

We were remarkably outspent (NOTE: most of the FOR funding had gone to the petition campaign, with limited funds available for the election). I think if people had understood exactly what it did (NOTE: a post-Prop. 17 poll was done show that most people did want to save the river from flooding), it would have passed. They were confused by the campaign.

Jerry: The audacious nerve of the campaign is what really impresses anyone who reads about it. Here is a dam that's about half constructed. In today's dollars they've already invested like a billion today dollars, right? This thing is gigantic. The LA Times put a huge photo of the construction in the paper. And we're gonna talk the federal government into abandoning it, tearing it down, (because you couldn't just leave it there), and making it a wild river. You look at it now and you wonder, how could that even work? Also, the Corps of Engineers, when asked, would you agree if this passed to stop working on the dam, would not say yes.

They wouldn't exactly say no. They didn't want to look too arrogant. But the bottom line is Congress had ordered them to do it, and nothing the State of California could do in law could overturn a congressional decision. Congress would have had to intervene. (However, there is debate on this.¹)

This may sound like a bizarre thing to say, but even though it was terrible to lose the campaign, very disappointing, because we came pretty close, we got 47 percent or something like that, you know, so it was remarkable.

But, had it passed, and had the federal government refused to stop building the dam, which they could have done, I think it would have been devastating to the volunteers, and probably would have undermined or even forestalled the whole campaign to save the Tuolumne.

People might have thought, why should I work on trying to save the Tuolumne when we passed this initiative on Proposition 17 and then it didn't work. So, who knows what the benefits or costs are and whether, in fact, the dam would have stopped. However, I don't know that we could have saved the Tuolumne had Prop. 17 passed and they kept building the dam.

Who knows? Also, losing causes sometimes are more inspirational. People are always happy to win, but they remember the Stanislaus campaign (even now!). In 1976, David Gaines told me he started the Mono Lake Committee because of the Friends of the River Stanislaus campaign, (Note: a source says

¹ Under Ron Robie's leadership at the State Water Resources Control Board, where he was vice chair during the latter part of the Reagan administration, EDF played a major role in the water rights hearing regarding New Melones Dam. In [Decision 1422](#), the Board ruled that the dam could not be filled until the need for water beyond an elevation of 808' (about Parrott's Ferry) could be demonstrated – this case was litigated [all the way up to the Supreme Court, which agreed the State](#) (which controlled water rights) indeed had the right to tell the Bureau of Reclamation and Corps of Engineers not to fill the dam. Unfortunately, a huge water year in 1982 resulted in the dam being filled anyway. The efforts – including Proposition 17 and 13 - to limit reservoir filling to 808' all hinged on this critical court case.

that Gaines came out of an FOR “Confluence” meeting saying, “if they can do this to stop a dam, I can do it to save Mono Lake from Los Angeles!”). And I've had other people come up and say, oh, we did this because of Prop 17. A lot of people came out of the Prop 17 campaign into very key environmental positions.

Larry: I mean, my own role (running an environmental nonprofit), frankly, was very influenced by that, lots of others as well.

Jerry: Right. It had a legacy effect. Far beyond the specifics of what happened there. That was 1974, so we're coming up on the 50th anniversary, and look, we're still talking about it.

END PART 3

PART 4: REFLECTIONS AFTER PROPOSITION 17

Larry: We're back talking to Jerry Meral about the Stanislaus River in the early 1970s campaigns. After the failure of Proposition 17, what was your next step and how did you feel about the situation?

Jerry: November 1974 was same election that had Proposition 17 on the ballot and Jerry Brown, of course, was running for governor and narrowly beat Houston Flournoy, from a famous family from Modoc County. Flournoy was the State Controller and Brown was the Secretary of State.

Fairly quickly on, because I had worked with him a lot during the campaign and, he liked my briefing, I guess, he asked me to be part of the administration. At the time, the California legislature had just created the California Energy Commission. Ronald Reagan signed that bill, even though he was asked not to. So, the Energy Commission was created, but Reagan didn't make any of the appointments because it didn't go into effect until Brown became governor. I was nominated by the Sierra Club for the environmentalist position on the California Energy Commission.

I wanted to do it, obviously. However, Brown knew me as a water person and said, "I want you to go work at DWR". And he named Ron Robie as the Director of Water Resources, who was an environmentalist. Ron was an experienced government person who was the Vice Chair of the State Water Board.

So, I became the Deputy Director of the Department of Water Resources and became responsible for things like planning and energy. So, I couldn't really work on the continuing effort on the Stanislaus in an overt way. I could advise, but I couldn't represent the administration.

And so, others picked it up – Mark and Jennifer and a whole bunch of other people, Alexander and a other Friends of the River activists. They kept Friends of the River going. They continued the effort to try to stop the New Melones Dam, which was going ahead with construction every day. (Note: Friends of the River had 30,000 members at this point, from the Proposition 17 campaign – [see here for all of those post-Prop. 17 efforts to save the Stanislaus.](#))

I was able to watch that, but I couldn't do much about it. I was in the State Government. However, when Mark decided he wanted to spend some quality time on the river ([chaining himself to a rock to stop the flooding of the river in May 1979](#)), I was able to work with Brown pretty directly on getting him to stop any more filling of the reservoir while Mark was down in the canyon, so that was good. I did work with Tim (Palmer) on his book about the Stanislaus. My wife Barbara actually suggested the name of the book: "Stanislaus, the Struggle for a River".

But basically, my main work with the State was in the Delta. Dealing with the then Peripheral Canal. We had three main wild river efforts at the Department of Water Resources. One was to place the state wild and scenic rivers, which were protected by Senator Peter Behr bill in 1972, into the federal system.

I and Ron Robie convinced Brown that he should do that as part of signing the Peripheral Canal legislation in Los Angeles on live state TV, which had almost never been done before. He didn't tell the water people he was going to do it until the night he signed the bill. They had a huge heart attack.

Until then, they were all thinking they were going to dam and divert the Eel, Trinity and Klamath rivers. The State and Federal governments worked together to get the environmental documentation done, led by Jonas Minton and Steve McCauley and Barbara McConnell and a number of other people,.

Fortunately, everything was done the last day of the Carter administration. The Secretary of Interior, Cecil Andrus, signed the papers necessary to put the California Wild Rivers into the federal system on the day Reagan was sworn in as President. That was an enormous accomplishment (Note: and very unusual, Andrus stayed in his office to the last minute). Probably one of the best environmental things the Brown Administration did.

Congress did not have to approve it – it was done by administrative action. That's what the law allows. The other two wild river efforts we got involved in were the Tuolumne and Auburn Dam. I had a lot of free hand in the Tuolumne effort. I organized the meeting that created the Tuolumne Trust in my living room. We hired John Amodio, and so I was able to spend a lot of time on that (I was known as “Deep Trout”).

We had people like Sharon Negri in the administration doing publications about how the Tuolumne should be saved. Eventually DWR became known to the conservation community as the Department of Wild Rivers. We also wanted to oppose the Auburn Dam. But Brown decided to run for president and since Jimmy Carter was against the Auburn Dam, he was for it, for a while, until he decided not to run anymore.

And then he said, who cares, go and oppose it. So, we ended up opposing the Auburn Dam as well. It was a great time for Wild Rivers for state policy.

Larry: Any final Stanislaus thoughts? You've talked about how the loss of Prop 17 in some ways, was a boost for other kinds of organizing efforts in, in perverse kind of ways, but understandable.

Jerry: You know, in those days, there was something called the Dam Fighters Conference, that was held every year in Washington, D. C., organized by Brent Blackwelder. And everybody would go back and compare notes about all the dams we were fighting around the country.

Fortunately, there's no longer a need for that conference. We're tearing them down now, instead of, instead of building (major) new ones. But the Stanislaus effort was very inspiring nationally to a lot of people around the country: You're going to have a statewide vote in California on a dam??! And that inspired a lot of people around the country, as well as in California.

And as you said, a lot of the people who did become active in that went on to careers in water, environmental equality, and things like that. So, I think that was ultimately the best outcome, you know, in a way, from the whole Prop 17 fight. I do think that it's sort of sad in a way that so much effort went into trying to stop the dam after the voters refused to do it.

In 1982, FOR and other groups put [Proposition 13 on the state ballot](#). It was an initiative for better water policy including provisions to save the Stanislaus. Prop. 13 was an early effort to implement the Governor's Commission on Water Rights, created by the Brown Administration. The initiative kept those issues before the public. But any outside observer could look at that and see that wasn't going to work. And I could never convince Mark Dubois, who was really the spark plug behind all of that, to divert some of that effort into other, maybe more productive activities like fighting Auburn Dam. I couldn't get

Friends of the River to fight Auburn Dam (then). Which now, of course, looking back, they're the ones that eventually killed it, in many ways. (Friends of the River ended up being very active in fighting Auburn Dam as well as working to protect other rivers).

They eventually did shift to doing that. Yeah, when Ron Stork came on, it wasn't all bound up in the Stanislaus. The (Stanislaus) effort kind of tailed off in a way that wasn't maybe all that productive. Prop. 13 was good, in that it focused on groundwater and overdraft and so on (instream rights, etc.), even though it ended up, you know, losing by a pretty substantial margin*.

END OF PART 4

*This despite seven of the 10 major newspaper editorial boards in favor of the measure.