

A Special Guest

In the summer of 1981, a staffer at Friends of the River called to ask if I would be a volunteer guide on a trip meant to sweeten a mail list exchange with California politician Tom Hayden. “He might bring a special guest with him.” The staffer dangled the enticing carrot, daring me to refuse.

Hayden was married to Jane Fonda, whose academy award- winning movie *On Golden Pond* had just wrapped up filming. “Is he going to bring his wife?” I asked. If so, we’d be hosting the Hollywood A-list actress on the two-day Stanislaus River trip. Her advocacy might help us save the river from being destroyed by a proposed Army Corps of Engineers dam project.

“You can’t say a word about this to anyone, or Hayden might cancel. We won’t know if she’ll come until they arrive.”

I enthusiastically agreed to be one of five guides to host the trip. On the morning of the trip, on August 8, 1981, we held our breath, hearts pounding, as Hayden and 25 of his campaign leaders piled out of their vans. With no mob of paparazzi to avoid, nor any red carpet to stroll, an ordinary woman climbed out of the van and extended her hand, “Hello, I’m Jane.”

Our first stop that day was at Rose Creek, a rapid with gentle roller coaster waves rafters could safely float down through. Accompanied by a guide, Jane plunged into the river to give it a try setting an example for the others. Not once, but three times she frolicked in the playful waves that carried her a short distance downstream! Afterward, by herself, she swam to the opposite shore of the river, climbed up on a ledge, and stretched out with her face toward the sun for a moment of meditation.

At lunch, she recalled her experience of working with her father on his last film and how much she’d learned about acting and life from Katherine Hepburn. She’d refused to use a stunt double for the scene that required she do a difficult backflip into the lake, preferring to perfect it herself after hours of practice.

At camp that night, Jane joined us in the kitchen to peel and chop vegetables. She questioned us about life as a river guide, what we enjoyed and what was tough. Friendly and down to earth, she wanted us to think of her as just one of the gang.

On the second day, as we walked together up a side stream to a small cascade, she confessed how rarely she had the chance to escape her hectic celebrity life to enjoy nature and just be herself. She craved more outings, like our rafting trip. I explained soon we might lose our magnificent river forever by the half-constructed dam downstream.

By the end of the trip, I no longer thought of her as Barbarella, Hanoi Jane or any of her public personas. The bear hug and effusive thanks I got came from the heart of the real Jane.

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