

A GRANDMOTHER'S WHITEWATER ADVENTURES

by Jean Stephenson

When I was sixty five I was fortunate to be of one of ten women who became close friends thru tennis playing at a country club we all belonged to. And every summer for a number of years, one of us, Sara, invited us to stay with her for a week at her summer place at Lake Tahoe. "Ladies Week" she always called it, and it was just that. Our retired husbands happily stayed home and played golf while we ladies would frolic like so many teen agers freed after final exams when we got together..

And we all responded with enthusiasm when one summer our Tahoe hostess suggested a two day adventure to the South Fork of the American River....for whitewater rafting.. Sleeping bags outdoors in the woods overnite, campfires, floating down the river enjoying the beautiful scenery. Why it would be like our scout leader days, years ago! Uh huh.

Thus a couple of days after we arrived for our week at Tahoe, the ten of us set out for our adventure in two cars. On the way we visited the historic site of Donner Park, where an unfortunate band of pioneers perished while trying to get thru the mountains to California. It had been wintertime, and they had ignored warnings to wait till spring. And when the inevitable snows came they all froze to death. People should always pay attention to warning signs, we said to each other knowingly.

Since we were to meet up with the rafting company at 8 a.m and Tahoe was four hours away, we spent the night before at a charming B and B located five minutes away from our destination. So the first night of our adventure was wonderfully peaceful, with ducks quacking and lambs bleating underneath our windows. Our hosts served us a luxuriously caloric breakfast at dawn and we headed for the river. Driving into the campsite we were a bit surprised to see that the rest of the group that had signed up for the trip were ten-year-old girl scouts, and that they had already pitched their tents and had merit badges pinned to them.

Then another surprise....we had nineteen year-old girls for our guides! Where were the tanned, muscular young men who would paddle us to safety thru the perils of the river? In all fairness I will add that the guides'eyes widened a bit whrn they saw ten grandmothers climbing out of cars and trotting towards them.

We all gathered at the rivers' edge for a briefing. "Very important" the head guide told us,"to obey instantly any orders your leader will give you... so that nobody gets killed or injured or anything." she said. This was our first inkling that this trip wasn't for marshmallows.

We fastened our life vests around our bodies carefully. I decided to wear only one contact lens so in case I got hit with a big splash knocking it out I would have the other one as a spare back at the campsite.

After we scrambled ourselves into the two rafts assigned to us, our leaders taught us how to paddle forward and backward on command. We were five to a side, and the commands were “left paddle, right paddle, back paddle, forward paddle”. Simple enough. “The first day is the easiest”, my leader, Bree, said. “We will be practicing for the second day, where the rapids are rougher.” She said to sit on the raft with one knee at the bottom, rather like riding a horse sidesaddle. And that if we felt ourselves about to fall overboard we should just hurl our bodies into the center of the raft. We all assumed our positions, grabbed our paddles and still reasonably confident, shoved off.

(to be continued)

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