

A GRANDMOTHER'S WHITEWATER ADVENTURES

by Jean Stephenson

When I was sixty five I was fortunate to be of one of eight 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 eight 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, but not without resorting to cannibalism. Horrible story. 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 already pinned to them.

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

We 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. After we scrambled 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. Just always sit with one knee at the bottom of the raft, 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 a paddle and still reasonably confident, shoved off.

The water was still and beautiful, and we all loved our adventure immediately, smiling self satisfied that Sara had suggested this. What wasn't there to love? Fantastic scenery, nature at its best. Our group of eight was divided into two rafts with a guide on each to direct us. My raft was in the lead, followed by two girl scout rafts. We had paddled along peacefully for about fifteen minutes when our leader, Bree, commented that she had just gotten back the night before from Oregon, where she had trained for four months on one of their rivers. "This river sure looks different from when I left," she remarked, it's so much lower due to the lack of rain.sure are a lot more rocks to watch for than when I left." Then she told us that although all of the other guides had been "dumped" from time to time, she never had. "This can happen when an underwater rock suddenly hits the bottom of the raft right in the spot where the passenger is sitting.....in which case that person gets projected up in the air and into the water".

Seconds later Bree went flying unexpectedly out of the raft into the water landing several feet away from us and we all became leaders, everyone shouting orders at once. "Paddle backward....left paddle, no, right paddle,not so hard...not so hard, we're going in circles...oh God....Marilyn you're rowing with your paddle out of the water! Lookout, rapids ahead!...".

The once docile river was propelling us forward relentlessly no matter what we did. I think God had begun to laugh at us because just seconds before we hit the rapid Bree caught up with us and we pulled her on board. All our arms and legs and paddles were mixed together while we struggled to stay in the raft as it bounced happily unguided thru the turbulent explosion of water. Next, as suddenly as it arrived, it was blessedly calm. But then two more of us catapulted into the water without warning. Bree being back to tutor us we pulled them back into the raft easily.

Now we were approaching another rapid. "You have to control the rapid", Bree warned us, "and not let it control you".

And so at the next rapid we all fell into the raft on top of each other and got right back into our positions again. "Left paddle three forward," Bree sang happily. "Right paddle back paddle two. You're doing just great, ladies. One thing I should tell you though. Under no circumstances do we want to wrap a rock."

"Of course not" we answered. And then, "What's 'wrap a rock?'

"That's when you allow the raft to go sideways through the rapids and it catches on a rock and is held there by the force of the water."

"And you're stuck in the middle of a rapid?"

“Uh huh”. She smiled. “Don’t look so horrified! That doesn’t happen often if we’re careful enough. Here’s the next rapid coming up now. Heads up! Left and right sides both paddle hard forward. Harder! HARDER!”

“I think this is what she meant by wrapping a rock” I yelled at the person I was lying on top of. I was struggling to stay on the raft as it bounced repeatedly against a high boulder that was right in the eye of the rapid. We weren’t going anywhere but the water sure did, on both sides of us as it raced and swirled around us merrily.

“Now what do we do?” I screamed above the thrashing water at Bree for directions.

“Nothing. We wait to be rescued.”

“Wait here?”

“Where else would you suggest? You can’t swim thru the rapids!”

Now the rules of the river are that if one raft is in trouble the next one along must stop and give assistance. Our other rafters were now way up ahead of us ahead of us, but the 10 year-old girl scouts (I promise to buy their cookies by the hundreds from now on) were right behind and immediately pulled over to the edge of the river before the rapid began and scrambled up the bank. Their leader had them get out into the quiet water at the edge, make a living chain and tie themselves with a rope to a tree..then, hanging onto the rope, their leader waded out close to the rapid and extended a paddle to Bree. She in turn grabbed onto the other end and carefully maneuvered herself up onto the rock. She extended the paddle to us and in single line we followed her lead to the rock and lurched and slid over it to grab onto the human chain of rope and the angelic Girl Scouts and scramble up the slippery muddy bank.

Well, talk about high drama! Next the friendly river police arrived in their raft, young men dressed only in swim trunks with police badges attached and shiny stainless steel revolvers hung from their hips. We suggested they just shoot the raft and put us all out of misery but they somehow freed the raft and towed it to a quiet area downriver and tied it to the edge of the bank. There being no horses, bikes, cars, roller skates or other means of transportation to take us back to the city, any city, we slogged along the muddy bank and shakily climbed back aboard the raft, uttering a few words I’m ashamed of about the quality of our vacation.

On the way again we set out for the place where our picnic lunch had been sent out by other guides.. On this leg of the adventure we learned another technique...how to paddle and bail concurrently. The rock had torn holes in our raft and it kept threatening to sink, but we got thru the remaining rapids, even though with each one we were taking on another 10 inches of river.

Once we floated to the food it was delicious. Poor Sara couldn’t eat any because she’d developed a migraine and was busy throwing up in the bushes. Gloria’s hearing aid was ringing angrily in her ear, and Beth had a sprained knee from everyone falling on top of her during the first rapid. But aside from that.... After lunch we had to pile back into our

leaky raft to make our way to the campsite by late afternoon, bailing, bailing, more bailing and as much paddling as we could manage between emptying buckets.

Dinner was even better than lunch, with barbequed chicken and beans and yup, the promised cherry cobbler.

By 8 p.m. we were headed for bed, no energy left for ghost stories. We took cold showers, curled our hair, disinfected contact lenses, blew up airmats and hunkered down in our sleeping bags. Not the Hyatt, but what the heck. We weren't attacked by rattlesnakes, chiggers, ants, ticks, raccoons or poison ivy. We were almost ready to attack our final day's rafting schedule. For the passengers in our second raft there was no question, they would continue. This second day was billed to be the toughest rapids and they were eager to try it. But then they weren't in my leaky raft.

Do you remember our visit to the Donner tragedy?" One of us from the ill-fated raft muttered the question from the cozy depths of her sleeping bag. "Do you think this was a warning to just skip the second day's rafting and drive back to Tahoe tomorrow by way of the gold country and some antique shopping?" Everyone else but me was sound asleep " Let's just see how we feel in the morning," I muttered.

Daybreak came and we ate another great breakfast of pancakes and bacon and fruit and our accident raftful of people piled into one of our cars and headed for finds in bunches of remote little antique shops, then arrived back in Tahoe to martinis, a great casserole from the freezer and hours of playing Mexican Train .

The next day, we deserters headed out for some tennis while we awaited the return of our other rafters. I managed a rotten forward swing and hit myself in the mouth, cracking open my lip, blood all over the place. You can bet I took a lot of teasing when the second group arrived and got sight of my Ubangi style swollen lip. They had spent that ideallic extra day with the rapids with no mishaps, not even a scratch, and all their egos intact.

If there's a moral to this adventure I I think it may be somewhere in the midst of the Donner story, but I can't quite make it fit.

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