

David Gill.

Perhaps the most foolish of many foolish things I did in my first 5 years of paddling was to put-in with David Gill on the Stanislaus at 7,000 cubic feet per second [cfs - the standard measure of rate of flow in the US] one Spring. Normal summer flow was a bit under a thousand cfs. David was one of my best high school friends, and I only had a few. It was a year after high school and he had just moved up there to Angel's Camp. I was living up there already.

The river was sparkling. The sky was blue. Spring was in the air. We must have run the shuttle ourselves. It was just the two of us, a weekday in Spring. I was by then an expert paddler. David was a raw beginner. He could paddle in a straight line. In no world did he belong on that river. But hey! we had driven to the put-in! Here we were! It looked beautiful. Full and powerful and sparkling and wide. Enticing. I needed to be on the river, in the high flow, on this glorious day. David saw the river and still wanted to paddle down it. Okay! We're going.

I was really being incredibly irresponsible, and continued to be irresponsible until we nearly drowned my future wife by taking her down the Russian River at a similarly high flow.

Miraculously, David made it through the first half-mile or so of rapids. I remember thinking, as we passed the big hole at Suspension Bridge, "Wow! He seems to be a natural! Maybe this is going to work after all!" But soon after that he flipped. Needless to say, he did not have the eskimo roll.

At that kind of flow, the first half of the Stan, down to about Rose Creek, was essentially one rapid. David took a long cold swim. Very long. His life did not flash before him, rather he remembers seeing a small newspaper clipping: "Boy drowns on Stanislaus" as he swam in the snow-melt, often unable to breathe due to the turbulent water and many large waves in the rapids. I was somehow able to drag David out of the water, and later his boat. David rode out on the back of my boat, his boat in tow.

I have a story, not so different from that one, involving my little brother Peter, at 9 years old, on the Lower Stanislaus. Peter never wanted to go paddling after that.

Years later I would have deep regrets over how I treated Peter, who never wanted to get in the water with me again. For whatever reason, my regrets did not extend to David. Sorry David! - I am really glad you are alive!

What is dead now, is the Stanislaus, drowned by the New Melones dam. All these memories, the bright water, the canyon wrens, the fig tree, the play spots, the grass knolls, Rose Creek, ducking into shadow behind the canyon and pulling out of the eddy into the blinding Sierra Foothill light are often so alive in me, sometimes more alive than this foggy climate where I now reside. And David's young self, valiantly swimming down the wide rapids, and making it out alive!