

Remembrances

The trips with Lars that sunk deepest into my bones are those few taken just with him, the two of us on fire with a shared mission to get down some remote-feeling river in one piece. Forest, rocks, water.

Sulphur Creek.

Big Sulphur Creek is a geographically unstable ferocious little stream gushing out of The Geysers and into the Russian River. We would usually run it around a 1,000 cfs or smaller. On this day, in the midst of a rare tropical storm coming up from the south, we were contemplating putting in at 7,000 - a huge level. I had forgotten my glasses straps and was peering downstream from the put-in bridge. There was a single eddy, far away downstream as the river turned the corner, the only stopping place in the stretch of river I could see below. I could see it with my glasses on. I could not see it with my glasses off. Wearing glasses became a necessity. In the trunk of the Datsun I had some old hose and wire and I fashioned glasses straps from quarter sections of the hose.

Scared rodent boating. That was Lars' pet phrase for the kind of boating we were engaged in. Hugging the shore, desperately looking for the next eddy as the maelstrom pulled us down. Gasping in the eddy, sussing out the next eddy down the line. Rarely entering the middle. Occasionally scouting, long walks to see eddyless sections. Sometimes a boof by a jumbled boulder to miss a monstrous hole just off to your right. A kind of certain knowledge that if you missed that boof and went into the hole and swam you would die.

I remember the fear, mixed up with the incredible joy at making it this far, in this driving warm rain. Hopping down the river, a scared-rodent team. Either him ahead, a clear path, through the grey-brown water flecked with white to that next eddy, or me leading with a certainty he was behind, safe since I had made it.

There is a nasty jumble of a water fall towards the end of the run which we always carried. The river picks up as you get close, gets steeper. Even at a 1,000 we would scout multiple times in this section leading to the falls. We got out at the beginning of this section and just hoofed it around the falls and took out.

Later that day, we put in on the Russian at the base of Squaw Rock, just at the start of the long rapid called the Graveyard. It was running 50,000. Redwood trees were coming down. There is a low water bridge across the Russian part way down. It made a phenomenal surf wave 4 to 6 feet, all the way across the river, access eddies on either side. The trick was to remember to always keep your eyes on the upstream debris. Huge logs were coming down. You would see one coming, a hundred meters upstream and surf left to dodge it, glance as the gnarly brown truck-eater went by, then surf back right, watching watching. You could surf that wave all day.

Adrenaline dissipating from Big Sulphur, the log dodge surfing felt like this incredible amusement, this unbelievable gift from the warm storm Gods. A man with his son saw us and came down with a camera. He peered through the trees and took photos.

Black Butte.

The Black Butte is a tributary of the Eel, and goes way up into the coast range. We were going to do the whole thing, 17 miles in a day. We started in on the shuttle the day before. It was between storms in the winter, February probably. Round Valley, near where the Black Butte joins the Eel, is an incredibly gorgeous isolated valley in the Eel drainage. We had dropped our boats off at the put-in, in the national forest and now parked Lars's van at the takeout which was on the Middle Eel. We were going to hitchhike back to the put-in. We grabbed a paper bag of food and two sleeping bags out of the car and started.

Our first ride was in the back of a rather beat-up Ford pick-up truck. The driver was an incredibly beautiful black haired local woman. She gave us a ride about 5 miles. We started walking. It was something like 20 miles to the put-in. No cars came.

As it got dark, we began to look for a place to hunker down for the night. We found a cow pasture and made a fire. We had nothing to cook our dru falafels on. We mixed them with the water the cows were walking in, and made them into tight little balls and put them right on the logs. We prayed the heat was enough to sterilize them, but instead had to rescue the balls before they burnt black and would eat them half cooked. These semi-dry falafel balls made us quite thirsty. We ended up drinking straight out of this creek that the cows were shitting in. We never got sick.

A light but persistent rain came on at about 3 in the morning and we retreated into an outhouse to

sleep. Lars recalls with great glee how, when I woke up, the sleeve of my paddling jacket was hanging down the hole.

In the morning we began our walk early. A car came soon - a VW bug driven by an enormously fat veterinarian and loaded up with cross country skis. He was headed to our put-in to ski! We crammed in and got to our boats by mid-morning.

I do not remember the run. Lots of forest. Lots of rapids you could just run on the fly. Easy 4 we told each other. We were off on our typical sprint, trying to make sure we got off the river before dark. I do remember Coal Mine Falls— after the Black Butte joined the Eel. I had never run that section and expected it to be easy. But these Falls intimidated and required care.

What sticks in my mind? The falafels on the logs. The enormous amusement we got out of our predicament, running a shuttle as if we were hobos, packing our gear in paper bags, drinking out of a creek cows were walking in. A little glimmer of the thought “am I going to be okay after this?” And being okay.

Lover’s Leap.

There was a period, maybe 1979, that for us, Chuck, Michael and I, this was the ultimate hard run, at over 100 feet per mile, often log-choked, high up on the south fork of the American. There was one section we had never done – the last bit into Kyburz where it gets even steeper and Lars and I decided to do it.

I was feeling at the peak of my ability. As the run amped up, I started to lead alot.

Towards the very end, there was one jumbled up mess of a rapid that ended in what seemed to be a seive. I saw a route through, I thought. I took it and crashed into several rocks just under the surface but made it through without getting pinned. Lars, in an eddy above, indicated with a gesture “what way?” I indicated the way I had gone.

He hit the same rocks, but worse. He got incredibly angry. I had threatened his life. I said sheepishly, “Well I made it. Okay” He told me I should have shrugged to indicate that I did not know. He said he could no longer trust me. That he would just have to make his own decisions.

I was mortified. Devastated. Here we had been this tight team and I had betrayed his trust.

We remained friends. We still boated hard rivers. We never talked about this incident again. The shame over this incident is beginning to dissipate, but I still feel it, as I write, 37 years afterwards, 8 years after the man died.