

## White Water Days

It was in April, 1985, on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in Idaho that Curt Peterson first discovered the great pleasure of stepping onto a rubber raft and into another time. With his wristwatch stashed out of sight in a waterproof container, far from roads and phones, Curt, who had been invited on the rafting trip by business friends, felt like an explorer as he gave himself over to the natural rhythms of the day and rode the back of the river down the beautiful canyons it had carved through the wilderness over the ages. He was exhilarated by the freedom he found in "the wild and scenic " and thrilled by the adventure of traversing all the "primo" white water that the Middle Fork is noted for.



That first rewarding trip led to a second a year later, this time a journey down Oregon's Rogue River. Soon Curt's wife, Barney, wanted to get in on the fun, so in 1987 they bought their own 12½ foot boat and ran the Rogue again with their friends. The two worked as a team, Curt handling the oars and Barney holding the bow line, pulling on it at just the right time to avoid getting water in the boat and bailing with a five-gallon bucket when necessary. The ride went well until they got to a Class 5 rapids called Rainy Falls, which dropped 15 feet within a 10-foot distance. They had meant to go down the channel to the side of the falls, but Curt didn't line up just right for the slip run to the side of the river. It turned out, however, that he was lined up very well for the falls run, so he said to Barney "Hold on," and down they went. Says Curt, "I hit the tongue just right and Barney pulled on the bow rope at the perfect time, and we actually looked like we knew what the hell we were doing. Anyway, we made it, much to the surprise of the other boats behind us, because they had flipped in this spot before."

With both Curt and Barney now bitten by the rafting bug, they decided to include their four sons on the trips and make river-running an annual family vacation experience. Curt was able to get time off from his job with Sterling Entertainment, and Barney, an elementary school teacher in the Everett District, had summers free as well. They booked a commercial run on the Salmon with Aggipah Adventures. Curt became friends with the outfitter, who suggested that he work to get an Idaho guide's license. The requirements were rigorous. They included running, at least three times each, all the rivers on which the prospective guide would lead trips; passing an advanced first aid class; completing a certain number of hours in white water river rescue; taking a gear boat loaded with duffle and guests all the way down the river, about 110 miles in seven days, with help from no one (although a supervisor was present in case of emergency); and obtaining a signed statement from the outfitter attesting to the competency of the candidate. "When you think about it," Curt says, "the outfitter is saying 'I trust you' in getting his customers down



the river and making sure they have a good time." Curt earned his outfitter's trust, earned his license, and enjoyed summer after summer of exciting times, both guiding commercial trips and adventuring on private trips.

Like the time he got flipped into the river. Curt and Barney had just purchased a new 17-foot boat and were on a private day trip down the Middle Fork when the raft hit Pine Creek Rapids and Curt hit the water. He had come too close to a big underwater rock that had a forceful "pillow" coming off it. The Peterson front of the boat, where Barney was riding, went high in the air and Curt was flipped out in a tenth of a second. "The water was colder than I thought it would be and the shock was a real jolt," Curt says. He expected to float to the surface quickly, but discovered that his life preserver was of little help because "when you're in a rapid with all the bubbles they don't do a lot of good lifting you as it's all air, so I had to swim like mad for the surface. I figure I went down the river about 12 feet when I hit the surface." He had to strip down and put on poly pro to ward off hypothermia. Curt had discovered the truth of what his colleagues had told him: "There are two kinds of guides—those that have been flipped in and those that will be flipped in."

Like the time a woman in her late 60s, a repeat Aggipah Adventures customer who loved the river, got flipped. It was in June, with the river running hard and cold. "We tried like hell to catch up to her but the river was not cooperating," Curt says. They were unable to reach her until she had been in the water about 25 minutes. They got her to shore and immediately stripped her clothes off, grabbed two sleeping bags, zipped them together, and had her crawl in. "Her lips were real blue and she was shaking real bad," he says, so they had two buff young guides strip down to next to nothing and crawl in on each side of her to transfer as much body heat as possible. When her shivering slowed and she began to get her color back, Curt says, "We started asking if she was warm enough to get out of the bag yet, and for two or three times she said no. Finally we caught on: she was enjoying her cuddle and was going to work it for all it was worth!"

Like the time he and Barney rafted through a forest fire. In 2000, the two had their "most harrowing season," rafting in the midst of the huge forest fires that were ravaging the Frank Church Wilderness. They had previously planned a private trip on the main Salmon and didn't want to give it up. Getting the latest fire information and trusting that they "knew enough safety procedures to get us through," they decided to go for it. "We had a plan," Curt says. "If the flames became too intense we would jump in the water, one at each end of the boat, holding on to the bow and stern lines, and proceed downstream."



However, they hadn't considered how thick the smoke could be. They could see only about 10 feet in any direction. They also discovered that a forest fire creates a lot of its own weather. The fire sucked in the oxygen for fuel and created a strong wind which pushed them back upstream. He and Barney covered their faces with kerchiefs they had soaked in the river. "We faced off sitting across from each other. I was pulling and she was pushing on the oars—that's the only way we could make any downstream progress." The smoke was so thick that they feared they couldn't see rapids and read how to run them until it was too late. Not only that, but "We could hear big boulders that the fire had loosened rolling down the hillside and splashing into the river, never knowing how far away they were. A few logs rolled down, too." They battled for 45 minutes before coming out on the other side of the fire area, finally able to breathe easier.

Like observing an abundance of wildlife, including bears, moose, bighorn sheep, cougars, coyotes, beavers, otters, eagles, and ospreys. In fact, during the night that they camped alongside the river after rafting through the fire scene, Curt and Barney awoke to witness a large, antlered moose coming within three feet 2008 of other campers sleeping on the shore, apparently determined to enjoy a favorite feeding spot at river's edge, intruding humans or no intruding humans.

Like watching intently, as they floated along, for "strainers"—trees or logs that have fallen into the river and been carried downstream until snagging somewhere. New strainers appeared in different places every year, and Curt traveled with the knowledge that a fatality had occurred on the Salmon when a raft got tangled up with one.

Like making lasting friendships with customers and the other guides, at day's end enjoying, in pristine wilderness, happy-hour drinks, great meals cooked over camp fires, card games, and storytelling. Says Curt, "I believe this was the only job I ever had where I had no idea how much I was getting paid, because it was just fun. In the fall, after the season was over, we would receive a check for our services."

Curt and Barney made their last run in 2006. The Salmon is known by many as "The River of No Return," but Curt and Barney have a raft of pleasant memories to carry them back again and again.