

Fear and Loathing in the Low Sierras

The Cherry Creek Run on the upper Tuolumne

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Well, this won't be easy, telling you about running the Cherry Creek section of the Tuolumne River in California. It's may be the peak of runnable whitewater in the United States, perhaps the world. It's intense, it's frightening and it's . . . gosh, I don't know of a word that works . . . "incredible" is very weak, "magnificent" doesn't really capture the adrenaline high, it is far more profound than "scary" . . . maybe "profound" itself is most appropriate. Profound in the sense that the experience focuses the mind on the issue of mortality at the same time it is intensifying the life experience to the maximum. Your relationship with the universe is simplified, nothing matters while you're running The Creek, except The Creek and surviving it. It is complete and pervasive. It is all. And yet, you are not alone, you are part of a team, a team without which you would be lost. The oarsman, your fellow paddlers, the boat, the river . . . these constitute your whole world on The Creek, it is your reality, your entire focus.

I was 1 day short of 50 when I had the privilege of participating in a Cherry Creek run. I've been running rivers for 8 years now, mostly large volume western rivers, trying to catch them at spring run-off. Cherry Creek is a low volume river, confined in a steep, narrow, rocky channel on the western slope of the Sierra's just below Yosemite Nat'l Park. I had been invited on the trip by my friend Bob, a world-class whitewater boatman, great guide and great person. Bob is the kind of person who I am glad to have on a trip when I'm running spring run-off water in Utah, when there are waves as big as houses and a river a half-mile wide.

On this trip I was a paddler on Bob's boat on a river that was barely 20 yards across at the widest point. But the river descended at 100 ft per mile in most places and, in one terrifying stretch called Miracle Mile, at over 200 ft per mile. For comparison, the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon descends 6 ft per mile. Wow!

I had been hiking in the Sierras near King's Canyon Nat'l Park for 4 days and had come to visit my friend David at his home near Columbia, CA. We were drinking beer and swapping backpacking stories when the invitation came in, room for 2 paddlers on a Friday Cherry Creek run, would David and Richard like to go? David declined. David is a Class V boater, not in the same league with Bob, but a strong whitewater boatman. So when David declined, an immediate red flag went up. But I had heard so much about "The Creek" that I couldn't pass up the opportunity, it was something I had looked forward to having a chance to see. I accepted and so did Matt, David's 18 year old son. Matt was young and strong and, like most 18 year-olds, considered himself immortal, but with great respect for Cherry Creek.

We stayed up 'til near midnight California time, 2 a.m. CST (my body clock time). Matt set his alarm for 5:30 a.m., I went to sleep in the back of my pick-up, drifting off to sleep watching the

brilliant stars in the California sky, wondering why fate had chosen a time when I'd had too much beer and too little sleep to present this opportunity that really required me to be at my best - no beer and plenty of sleep would have been my preference.

It was a short night. I heard Matt's alarm go off, stumbled up and started getting ready to go. I had my own equipment, I started going over what I needed - life jacket, wet suit, wool sweater, lace-up shoes for the river, water bottle, billed hat - I found everything but the billed hat, substituted a bandana for that, swilled a cup of coffee and off we went.

The ATM was closed, Matt couldn't get money, so I willingly financed the modest amount of gasoline he pumped into his truck and some Power Bars for snacks. Matt was a cool kid, easy to talk to and knowledgeable about Cherry Creek, he had done it 3 times already. I was honored to be going with Matt, chipping in for the trip was good Karma.

It was about an hours drive to where we were to meet Bob, the rest of the crew and the passengers on the trip. It was a combined commercial trip being run by two companies and it had a dual purpose. It was the first commercial trip of the year, the water level had just gotten down to runnable levels within the last few days. Both companies were also taking, in addition to the experienced Cherry creek boatmen, some less experienced crew. These less experienced crew were to be paddlers, taking the same positions on the boat as an inexperienced commercial passenger would. This made for a much safer trip, since fully half of the paddlers on this trip were really experienced boatmen who lacked Cherry Creek experience and the boatmen were all experienced Creek boaters who had run a scout trip just days before. It was as safe a Creek trip as you could put together, with the possible caveat being that it was only the second trip of the year for the boatmen and the first commercial descent of the year.

We arrived at the designated place, a lodge that doubled as a boat house and point of embarkation for the trips. A seemingly slightly built guy with a clip-board and a huge bushy beard was moving around talking to passengers, steering them to the gourmet breakfast buffet spread of bagels, fruit, salmon, cream cheese and orange juice spread out on a small table in the yard. Bob greeted us, Matt relayed the message that the food was for the passengers, we as trainee guides were the lowest of the low and of no consequence, therefore not deserving of the elegant repast. "No problem, dude, I'm just grateful to be here . . .", plus I'm really too nervous to eat. The stories I've heard about Cherry Creek make my stomach ache. I can't wait to see it.

Some banter with the passengers, one of them looks at me and asks questions as if he thinks I have answers. I assure him that, although I've run a few rivers, I know nothing more than he does about The Creek, except that Sierra Mac is one of the best outfitters around and my friend Bob is one of the best boatmen around. I was here to learn.

Bob was scurrying around getting equipment ready, he whizzed by to bring Matt and I a bagel, told us to do whatever Chris said to do, no matter what anybody else said. Chris was The Man. I pondered the name a moment, Chris was the seemingly slightly built guy with the bushy beard. I had heard stories of another fellow named Chris, Chris Condon, who had been among the first to

successfully negotiate the Cherry Creek run. This guy with the bushy graying beard certainly wasn't Chris Condon, Chris Condon was among the best boaters in California, if not the world. He was younger, bigger and much more macho, the fellow with the bushy beard was exceptionally quiet and soft-spoken. But he did have an air about him, so I scoped him out as the Sierra Mac location manager. He was so quiet that I wondered what kind of a guy he'd be to work for, but those thoughts didn't linger for long, my anxiety was growing. We boarded the bus and headed for the put-in.

Matt and I sat together on the bus, Chris passed out sheets that gave general information about the trip, a Class V run. Rocky rivers are classified by a I - VI rating system, I is very easy, VI is unrunnable. The Cherry Creek run had been considered a Class-VI run until Chris Condon and Marty McConnel, the owner of Sierra Mac, had run it back in the late 70's. A Class V test would be given to all passengers prior to embarking, if the passenger flunked the test they would be removed from the trip and refunded ½ their fee. General stuff on swimming rapids, some rescue tips, a quick overview of emergency techniques. Definitely worth reading, it made my anxiety drop a little, it was stuff I not only knew but had practiced on numerous occasions in guide school and a couple of swiftwater rescue programs I had gone through. This was no different than any other trip, just a little rougher whitewater, I'd be OK.

I had my safety knife with me, I asked Matt if I should take it or leave it. Some boatmen, myself included, don't like to have lots of knives running around the boat, if some bozo drops one it can make for a very bad hair day on the river. Matt said, "Sure, take it," he allowed as how he'd take his if he hadn't lost it. We arrived at the put-in, a dirty, rocky piece of sun-soaked dust about 20 ft higher than Cherry Creek and about a half-mile above the confluence with the upper Tuolumne. The Cherry Creek run of legend is actually the upper Tuolumne, but the put-in and first ½ mile of the run are actually on Cherry Creek, hence the name. Both of these drainages come out of the Yosemite area, the water is clear and cold.

The drill at this point was to wait until the passengers had selected their helmets then find something in the left-overs that fit, then hang until it was time to suit-up. Wetsuits keep you warm out of the water as well as in the water, it is a mistake to put them on too early.

Time passed, the boats were rigged and slid down the bank to the river and eventually we were suited up and ready for the Class V test. The first thing was a get-acquainted introduction. Right off the bat I found out I had already made one major mistake. Chris with the bushy beard was THE Chris Condon, boatman of legend and someone who Bob talked about in almost reverent tones. I was totally impressed. A world-class athlete, legend in his own time and yet, one of the most soft-spoken, quietest folks I had ever met in my life. I guess the "air about him" that I had noticed was supreme self-confidence emanating from having successfully run things like Cherry Creek. I was very impressed. Chris pointed out that the physical nature of the river we were running, i.e. steep, rocky and swift, made rescue difficult and that self-rescue was mandatory for a safe trip. The purpose of the Class V test was to allow the guides get to become familiar with the capabilities of the passengers and trainees, to aid in boat assignments. The guides introduced themselves, then the passengers. The passengers were all 30-something, maybe some in their

20's, possibly a couple in the low 40's, but if they were over 40 they were in really good shape. One woman, tall and athletic. One gentleman from Atlanta said he was on his first day of vacation and I thought "Wow!, what a start!" One fellow, John, had never been on a river trip of any kind before . . . Oh, Boy! Based on what I had heard, John was in for a serious thrill!

From the introduction phase we proceeded to an agility test. Commands were issued by selected boatmen and the passengers, already running in place, were expected to comply. "Simon Says" is what we called this in grade school, you were supposed to do what they said, not what they did. I was running a little on empty with the accumulated fatigue of 4-days of High Sierras hiking, too much fun and not enough sleep, all combined with high anxiety about what was to come. I hung in there the best I could, but I felt I was performing a little on the light side. Bob had already told me that Chris would check my pulse rate during the test because I was carrying so much "torso weight", a diplomatic way of saying I was overweight. Seemed reasonable to me.

The next test was a nasty little thing where you took a deep breath, held it and ran as far as you could. Presumably if you didn't get very far you were suspect for the trip. I filled my lungs, took off at as fast a pace as my over-long wetsuit would allow and proceeded forward. My shoulder straps kept falling down around me, I'd had them around my waist to avoid heat stroke at the put-in. The field quickly passed me, then I saw some stopping, I proceeded on, kept pushing, passed quite a few, actually, and then in a luscious rush exhausted my lungs and took a huge, wonderful gulp of fresh air. Air is good, I don't like to be without it for extended periods, this was about as long as I'd like . . . longer maybe. Chris rushed up to me, pulled my glasses off and peered into my eyes. "How do you feel?", "Fine . . . now!" He checked my carotid pulse while peering into my eyes, I don't know what he found, I didn't ask, I was busy breathing. It was wonderful.

We proceeded to the other side of Cherry Creek, over the vehicle bridge, for a safety and technique talk. Chris and the guides did a great job. They took their time, got into excellent detail and were very gentle. This was a class act, no doubt about it. I was still recovering from my marathon breath holding drill. My pulse and respiration were down, but I was having minor breathing anomalies, something I have regularly after hard exercise. I don't know what they are, they never affect me when I'm exercising, only afterwards. Uncomfortable but I guess nothing serious, I've not died from them yet.

As we broke up we were told there would be a swim test in an eddy at the confluence of Cherry Creek with the main Tuolumne, we would be asked to swim across the river, back across and under the boat. The scenarios that would require such maneuvers on the real run were described and we were informed that if we failed to pass any of these tests to the boatman's satisfaction, we would be asked to hike back up to the put-in where a van would be waiting to take us out. Hmmm. How embarrassing, but it was easy to understand why they did it . . . if you couldn't self-rescue you could easily become a casualty on this river, from what I'd been told.

Chris and the boatmen divided up the party. Strong, experienced, athletic types were preferred for bow paddlers, these folks took the brunt of the paddling chores. The boat setup for The Creek

was an oar-paddle hybrid arrangement. The boatman/guide was toward the rear of a 16' self-bailing raft and two bow paddlers were positioned in the front compartment, one on either side. These paddlers had foot cups to help hold them in since their presence was important to the performance of the entire boat. An oar boat alone could not negotiate some of the holes on this run, it would stall out and possibly flip. A paddle boat might have some trouble with the more delicate moves, the addition of the oars added this capability. Boating a river like this is really like a ballet dance in the middle of a moving rock slide - you make small, delicate moves, not too much, not too little, all while thousands of pounds of water rushes under and around you at 15 - 30 feet per second. If you stay where you belong you have an uneventful but thrilling run. If your 800 to 1000 pound boat and load is off by 18 inches, or sometimes less, you can flip, wrap around a rock in mid-stream, spew passengers and crew into the raging river, or any number of other harrowing events. Boating anywhere is a sport of position and timing, here it is a sport of inches and tenths-of-seconds. Staying out of the water is good advice on any river, here it is the secret of life.

I ended up on Bob's boat, as I had hoped (and requested), paddling in the middle position on the left, right behind Matt. It was perfect. I have rowed a lot of river miles, but I had not paddled a raft since guide school in 1986. Staying in the boat is a learned skill, I knew that much, and the middle position was not as critical to a successful run as were the bow paddlers. Bob's boat, left middle position was a good spot for a near-50, overweight boatman from Oklahoma, it suited me just fine. John, the first-time river runner was on the middle right, right beside me. John looked to be in good physical condition and plus he was cool. I liked John, not pretentious or macho, just out to experience Cherry Creek at the urging of a friend who was in another boat.

We pushed off and did a few paddle drills, boated some class-III, IV drops on Cherry Creek and reached the test eddy. Now, I'm an OK swimmer, I can swim a mile and cover 1000 meters in about 30 minutes, slow but at least I can do it. The creek was narrow, maybe 40 feet, not too swift, it should have been easy, a piece of cake. But there were complications, nothing is ever what it should be. I had a 1/8" thick bib-overall wet suit on, called a Farmer John, over that I had a paddling jacked which was another 1/8" neoprene vest with nylon sleeves, and over that I had a life jacket which in this case was a 1-1/2" thick foam vest, all of which was keeping me toasty warm . . . really too warm, almost to the point of enervation when combined with the hot sun, warm air and anxiety. I was definitely not up to par today, not even close. My number came up, I jumped in and held a good line across the river. If you swim perpendicular to the current you will go downstream just as fast as the current is flowing. But if you angle upstream just a tiny bit you offset some of the current with your swimming and still make headway toward the opposite shore. To satisfy myself that I could self-rescue with a minimum of downstream distance in the river, i.e., getting minimally closer to the next rapid, I wanted to try to make an almost straight line across the river, losing as little shoreline to the current as possible. I pushed the swim hard, took quite a bit of water swimming through some almost trivial riffles in the river, but I achieved my goal. I lost less than a boat length crossing, noted that most of the other swimmers had lost multiple boat lengths in their swims. Good, except there was a price, my heart was pounding and I was winded. I walked back up a ways, jumped back in and did it again, another nice swim, but with the same price, winded and heart racing. I wasn't worried about having a heart attack or

anything breaking down, I get regular, intense exercise, but I was concerned that this piddly little swim seemed to be whipping on me. Then, under the boat in an upside down crawl, a gulp of luscious air and a pull into the boat. This part of the test was over, I did OK, but I was concerned about the resources I had to expend to make it, it seemed like a lot.

We regrouped downstream a little. Matt suggested a Power Bar for us, I recovered one from my jacket pocket and cut it in half. Matt devoured his, grinning like a wildman, I tasted mine and didn't feel like eating. It tasted grainy and my mouth was dry. Lars, an experienced river man and our right bowpaddler, suggested lots more water. I tried it, but even that didn't help. The boatmen huddled up to determine boat order. Boat order is a major decision. You want a boat in front of any swimmers, swimmers will usually float ahead of the boat they came out of. Being the lead boat is a very responsible position, it is usually given to the boatman least likely to have swimmers, since they will have no one in front of them. The lead boatman must also know the river well, since although each boatman picks his or her own line through the rapids, the line of the boat ahead of you has an impact on your run. If the lead boat is pinballing downstream it is distracting and potentially error-inducing. Bob was a likely candidate for lead boatman, he had made a flawless run on the all-guide trip of a couple of days ago. As it turned out Chris was to lead, Bob second and the rest of the crew behind. Off we went, into the main Tuolumne, toward the fabled Cherry Creek run. My internal anxiety was rising, but within very acceptable levels.

Some class-II, -III stuff, a class-IV here and there and then our first class-V drop, I forget the name. I'll call it First One. We negotiated First One without incident, it was fast, white, and had a substantial drop. The water was clear, the sun bright and unfettered by clouds, the tiny bubbles in the pure, glaring white waves looked like a pile of tiny diamonds, facets reflecting and glinting with gem like brilliance. We hit the horizon line, dropped and were through it, before any fear could well up inside. I glanced back to see what it looked like and noted that it was not much different than some runs I had done on the lower Arkansas and Royal Gorge in Colorado. In the pool below the rapid I told Bob he might enjoy catching the Arkansas at high water, it was similar. This First One had good elevation change, but was eminently runnable, no problem. Maybe Cherry Creek had been overrated. It happens, you know.

On we went, negotiating other class-V drops. I mentally noted that some of them were getting bigger, that was consistent with what Matt had told me, "They start out pretty easy, then they build until Eulogy and Coffin and the Miracle Mile, man those are burley!" I had asked Matt what "burley" meant, he said I'd know, check the ones he had mentioned and Lewis's Leap . . . Burley, man! Matt was loving it, he'd lean way out to the left, grab water with his paddle and pull hard. It was my responsibility, since I was behind him, to synchronize my strokes with his, I did my best with considerable success. But staying in the boat was definitely a problem. Bob and Lars had told me to put my left foot partly under the thwart (inflatable seat) in front of me, my right foot next to but not under the thwart behind me, my butt resting lightly on the center of the tube and my knees at right angles. Well, we were too busy for me to discuss it, but that dog won't hunt. You see, there were too many constraints on the system. If my knees were at right angles, my butt was inboard of the tube center, if my butt was on the tube center, the best place for paddling leverage, my left leg was extended and my right foot was lightly placed on the floor,

there were no foot cups in the middle position. Bummer. Way Bummer, actually, because I wanted to stay in the boat, but even more I wanted to do my part on the paddle. After all, I had my pride, I was an experienced boatman and didn't want to look like a Code-W (Wimp!) in front of my friend Bob. I had no illusions about my skill level in either rowing or self-rescue compared to Bob, but still, I wanted to do a good job, I wanted Bob to be proud of me. Hah!

We continued to descend, a few more class-V's, then on a relatively modest class-V drop, Bob later told me it was Corkscrew, we entered a chute and I immediately knew there was a problem, well before things went south. We were at a slight angle to a relatively small wave coming at an angle from the left. There was no compensating wave on the right, I knew we would stall our forward motion on the wave when we hit it. All this in a short fraction of a second, if you boat you look for stuff like this, it's trouble. I dug my paddle, pulled as far inboard on the boat as possible and we hit it. The glistening gems in the white froth came up to meet me. It must have been bigger than I thought 'cause the glistening gems came over my head, but so did someone else. A fellow boater, maybe John, I don't know, had also been dislodged and fell over me, pushing me out of the boat and into the river. Oh, Dang! (Not my actual words!) I had hoped to avoid this. I popped up, noted Chris on the left in a small eddy, started to swim left with my paddle. I've never experienced panic in the middle of a boating accident, and I didn't this time. I was calm, calmer than before being dunked, but I did want to get out of the water, in the worst way. Damn paddle! Now these things are \$35 - \$50 and I hate it when one of my passengers loses one of mine, so I held on to my damn paddle tightly. Stupid move. If this ever happens to you, throw the damn paddle to safety. The guides had probably told me to do this in the instructions, but it didn't register. It didn't register until on the shuttle back to the boathouse Scott, one of the regular Cherry Creek crew, told me again. It seemed much more significant after the fact. Anyway, there I was, being flushed downstream toward a watery end with this Damn Paddle! I caught a glimpse of a grinning Matt in the left eddy as I went by, he was already out. It wasn't easy to swim with the damn paddle, in fact it basically neutralized one arm. I couldn't swim at all on my belly, the recommended stroke for fast exit in a pool, I rolled over on my back and tried the more usual backstroke with moderate to poor success, but it helped. Bob came up beside me, he was swimming as well, told me to swim right. I turned in the blink of an eye, swam right and managed to get myself out of the current. Instead of being proud of having not lost the damn paddle, I had damaged my confidence on self-rescue. I considered myself very stupid for not having focused more on getting my butt out of the river than on holding onto that damn piece of aluminum and plastic. Maybe I was in over my head. Gosh, I was just one day short of 50, how embarrassing to die the day before your 50th birthday! Bummer! These were my thoughts that fluttered about inside my head as I got back into the boat.

Lars had grabbed the oars and pulled into the eddy, he'd done a good job. We regrouped and soon everyone was back together. I wasn't hysterical or terrified or even really scared that much by the incident. It was pretty benign, nice pool, but my confidence was damaged a bit, I had not reacted properly and that was worrisome. John was not unhappy even though the water had pulled a fingernail completely off. He was smiling and ready to go. He had his paddle with him, I marveled at him recovering so easily with it, I don't remember his answer, on we went.

More class-V stuff, as Matt had said, building. We ran a few more drops, they were huge. I'd look back and feel total awe. They were more nearly waterfalls than rapids, inclined at crazy angles to the horizontal, with narrow, circuitous passages. Coming up to a rapid all you could usually see was pulsing mist over a horizon line, where the river dropped out of sight. When you reached the entry of the rapid you could see some of the hydraulic and rock artifacts in the rapid, but seldom could you see to the end of the rapid. This river required rote knowledge of where the runs were supposed to be as well as instantaneous reaction to current water conditions and an uncanny ability to read the water going in. A tiny mistake, just touching a partially submerged rock, could substantially mess up a critical entry, throwing the run from smooth and uneventful to near catastrophe.

Bob was doing an excellent job of rowing and paddle captaining, but he was, admittedly, a tad off. Just a tad, but it was enough. We hung on a little pour-over. At one point the boat in front of us hung up, Bob was forced to the right side of a rapid called Blind Faith. We did OK until right at the bottom the bow of the boat perched on a flat rock and blocked the exit. The boat was flat, in normal boating position, the only problem was that water pouring into it from above had pinned it straight down between some rocks and it was underwater, almost totally submerged. If this had been a quick thing, it would have been OK, but it went on for maybe 2 minutes, generally getting worse all the time. Bob finally rocked one end off the rock and away we went, back to our stations, none the worse for the wear. Except maybe my confidence.

Glances back were becoming more and more astounding. The drops were huge. Early in the run I had claimed that I had seen stuff of the size that I saw in this river, but that was bogus at this point. I had never seen anything like this. I pointed out on more than occasion that "I ain't never seen no shit like this!", the punch line on a tee-shirt I have from one of my high-water Cataract Canyon trips. It was true in that particular instance, but it's darn sure true this time, this was incredible.

We stopped for a snack above the Miracle Mile. I heard Chris say earlier that it would be a light one, they didn't want the paddlers reactions slowed, it was a good call. It was very enjoyable to shed the life vest, paddle jacket and peel down the top of the wetsuit. It was hot out and, despite a few overly exciting moments, Bob was doing such a good job that we weren't even getting very wet, at least I wasn't. Matt was taking the brunt of the waves.

Cooling off helped, and the adrenaline started to wane a little, inducing the usual post-adrenaline ultra-calm. It was nice, sitting on a rock in the shade - calm, kicked back, waiting to go again. The moisture on my skin evaporated leaving me cool, the bright sun, almost directly overhead, felt good . . . calm, warm, relaxed . . . ummm, wonderful! I went over to pee, remembered the cautions about rattlesnakes in the area. Oh, well . . . The snacks were tasty, Matt and I were offered some of them, I tasted some sausage, something that would normally have really hit the spot. But this time, for some reason, it was too rich. I guess the intensity of the day was suppressing my appetite. No problem, water is just fine, thanks. Back into the boats, back into the unknown.

I'd been experimenting with foot and butt positions in an effort to find the magic mix of paddle pull, foot-knee position and butt pressure on the tube that would lock me in the boat in a totally "bomber" situation that I could hold under virtually any circumstances and yet let loose in a heartbeat if necessary. Lars, Bob and Matt all claimed that Nirvana existed and was just a matter of putting the proper weight on your feet and pulling hard with your paddle. Nirvana eluded me, I didn't find it, pain and worry persisted. The best I could figure out was to watch ahead closely and lean off onto my right foot when we were drifting into something sideways. This happened often, through no lack of skill on Bob's part, it was just the way it was. I quickly rationalized that it was better for me to stay in the boat and miss a stroke than to hang out there and go swimming. Yea, that's it! I'm doing my boat mates a favor by leaning in, rescues are treacherous for everybody, wouldn't want to put them in any danger, now would I? Actually, I was cutting them short by missing those strokes, but the instructions about holding yourself in place with a good, deep pull didn't seem to be working. What worked to keep me in the boat without benefit of foot cups was a slight lean to the center when it looked like we were approaching a jerk that would throw me left. It made a world of difference, but I still didn't have full confidence.

The Miracle Mile, a particularly steep (210 feet per mile) section of river, came up and we went in. I expected to see continuous froth for a full mile, with no hope of exiting the river if you were out of the boat, but it wasn't that way. The drops were huge and building, but there were pools, albeit small ones, that would allow a swimmer a chance of getting out. I had already decided that if I went in again, the damn paddle was going to have to swim for itself. Embarrassing as it would be, I'd get them another one. Bob's boatmanship and my luck held, however, no more swims.

Now, I've got to tell you, this whole place was wild! Bob was maybe a tad off, but relatively he was doing great. One boat got on the wrong side of a house sized rock in a spot called Ryan's Hope and was forced through a slot about 2/3 the width of the boat, so narrow that the boat was tilted up on its side going through. Oh, Dang! (Not my actual words!) In another drop Lars bounced out of the boat for no apparent reason, however there was surely a good one, Lars was very capable. In a little (big!) rapid called Mushroom, Bob brushed a rock on the right side of the entry, it deflected the boat to the left, the current grabbed it and we got stuck in a little alcove, pushed against a sheer wall by tons of water, just a couple of feet from the frothing, boiling slot called "Freight Train" that Bob involuntarily selected as our best chance. We eventually rocked free and took the amazing ride . . . "YaHoo!" doesn't begin to cover it!

The tension was starting to wear on me. Most of the rapids were not so awe-inspiring that they really frightened me, but the prospect of swimming through the next one down darn sure did. That was the problem down here, not the rapid you were in so much, at least most of the time, but the next one, the one you'd have to swim if you didn't self-rescue in the tiny pools between rapids. Oh, Dang! Oh, Dang! (Not my actual words). I had waited for the opportunity to boat Cherry Creek to present itself, I had not actively sought it out, other than expressing interest (no begging or groveling, you know . . .). I had imagined that actively seeking this intense an experience would be bad Karma. That was a good call, I'd have wondered why I'd worked so hard to get myself in this mess if I had.

The day went on and, as the afternoon waned, wore on. The rapids were coming regularly, every one of them was an experience in looking forward and wondering what lay ahead. Take-out had been estimated for around 3 p.m., I remember looking at my watch, noting that it was 3 p.m. and wishing I was out of the water. Very unusual, I usually feel deep sadness at the take-out. This time I was stressed to the point that I just wanted it over with. I wasn't really having fun. The concept of hiking out was never really seriously considered, but it did float through my brain for a few seconds, viewed as not a totally unreasonable thought.

The sun was coming in at an angle now, right ahead of the boats, glistening off of the ripples in the water, creating a silhouette effect with the scenery that was in shadows. This is a scene that I had experienced many times before, a glorious, surreal image created by the beauty of the canyon, the angle of the sun and the adrenaline in my system. Drugs, heavy drugs.

My thoughts of experiencing mayhem on this river surely had some rational underpinnings, but the reality of the situation is that if you're running with an outfit of the caliber of Sierra Mac and with a guide of the caliber of my friend Bob, your odds of serious injury or death are minimal. There has only been one death on Cherry creek, in 1993, and that was not on a commercial trip. Incredible performance if you look out at the intensity of the water and consider the difficulty of rescue. In fact, Sierra Mac claimed to not even have had a serious injury in it's years of running Cherry Creek.

The reason for such a low accident rate was apparent when the boatmen lined the boats around Flat Rock Falls. ("lining" is a procedure where the boat is empty but tethered to the shore. It is kicked out into the current and allowed to float down, then pulled back in below the nasty spot.) This was a little drop that may have been runnable except that right at the bottom the water dropped over a 7 foot ledge right onto a partially submerged flat rock. When we exited the boats I hung around to listen to Chris and the other boatmen set up the lining procedure and the back-up safety measures. These guys were professionals doing a dangerous job. They were taking every precaution to see that the passengers and they were subjected to minimum risk. It was very impressive, very professional.

I was totally focused now, anticipating Bob's next move based on my own experience at reading water and rowing. 90% of the time my calls agreed with Bob's, in the 10% of the calls where we disagreed, 50% of the time Bob's call was better in the long run, 50% of the time I'd have stuck with my call. But I'm telling you, I was into this trip at that point, I was on the ball. Still leaning in when the prospect of a bump to the left side existed, but mostly paddle ready position, poised to make the stroke I anticipated Bob would call. I wanted this boat to make the run without incident, more than I have ever wanted any boat to do so. It was intense.

The boatmen lined flat Rock Falls, portaged Lumsden Falls, ran a little class-V drop that looked like the center chute at Rainey Falls on the Rogue, some more class-III stuff and there was the take-out pool. Man! Was I glad to see that place! The adrenaline come-down was starting. I was major calm, totally laid back.

Everybody helped unload the gear and get the boats up to the vehicles. I could still tell I was in an unfamiliar environment. I was carrying a bunch of paddles up the take-out hill and they started to get loose from me, just as Chris walked by. I felt like a total rookie, first day on a river.

Chris and his crew prepared a gourmet cold-cut buffet on one of the boats they'd set bottom-up at the take-out, complete with elegant bread bowl and dipping sauce, various peppers, pickles, olives, cheeses and high quality deli meats. They were a class act, these Cherry Creek boatmen.

Matt and I had our choice of going back on the passenger shuttle or riding back with Bob and the other guides, we chose to hang with Bob a while, I didn't know if I'd get to see him again this trip. I listened to the talk between the boatmen on the way back. They were discussing their trials and tribulations of the day, shop talk. It was interesting. These people risked their lives on a regular basis, partly because they love running The Creek, but partly because they love showing other, less experienced folks The Creek in a safe and responsible manner. If they hadn't been Cherry Creek boatmen they'd be flying military jets or defusing ordinance or fighting forest fires. Some high-risk, highly skilled profession that took nerves of steel, supreme confidence and a high degree of responsibility. These folks are the best, I was honored to have spent just one day with them.

On the way out I stopped to thank Bob and Chris for the experience. Bob was there, grinning as usual, but much to my dismay, Chris was tied up on the phone. I would like to have thanked him personally, I appreciated his expertise and daring and the chance to ride along, more than I would have been able to express to him, but even so . . .

Like all things in life, if you dance you pay the fiddler. The price for hangin' with the best is high. My self-confidence is battered. I feel old . . . maybe not 50 years old yet, but I feel older than I did before I went on Cherry Creek. I can't really describe it. Just a modest loss of self-confidence, a realization that there are some things I shouldn't be doing. But I think back to the swim test, and then to my botched self-rescue at wherever it was and I think, "I could do better than that!" Yes, I know it's a scary thought, but I'd like to try The Cherry Creek Run on the upper Tuolumne again, believe it or not. In fact, I'd like to try it lots more, I think it's one of those places on earth where it is best to either get good at it or avoid it altogether. Messin' with it will only get you hurt.

If you get a chance to go, GO! Don't hesitate a moment. Be prepared to be scared silly, if you know what's going on, but also be prepared for a profound experience. Some horrible fate may befall you, but if you pick your ride carefully you're probably safer on The Creek than on an urban street at 2 a.m. on Sunday morning. Have Fun, Be Careful!!

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