High Side

Whitewater El Dorado

June 26 - August 17, 2025

Richard Montgomery. Lars Holbek. 1980.

HIGH SIDE: Whitewater El Dorado

Rushing through the dramatic canyons and golden hills of El Dorado County, the South Fork and Middle Fork of the American River have long served as both playground and proving ground for whitewater enthusiasts. From spring snowmelt surges to late summer flows, these rivers offer a dynamic setting for rafting and kayaking, ranging from the accessible Class Class II and III rapids of the South Fork to the more rugged, remote creeks and rivers like “South Silver”, Silver Fork and Upper/Lower Cosumnes. First gaining recreational popularity in the mid-20th century, these waterways attracted adventurers who were drawn by their challenging rapids and stunning Sierra Nevada scenery. Today, they remain among California’s premier whitewater destinations, hosting tens of thousands of paddlers each year.

The cultural importance of whitewater rafting and kayaking along these rivers has grown into something far deeper than mere sport. Local guiding companies, some of which have been family-owned for generations, form the backbone of a vibrant river-running community. Seasonal rafting has become a rite of passage for locals and visitors alike, fostering traditions rooted in camaraderie, respect for nature, and storytelling around river camps. Annual rafting festivals, conservation-oriented river cleanups, and community education programs have all reinforced a unique cultural identity that blends adventure with stewardship.

Conservation efforts have played a pivotal role in protecting the American River’s vitality and ensuring its accessibility for future generations. Following the threat of dam projects in the 1970’s and 80’s, activists, boaters, and environmental groups rallied to preserve free-flowing stretches of the river. The establishment of the American River Conservancy has helped secure ecological protections, while other non-profits like Friends of the River have championed watershed preservation, flow regulation, and responsible recreation practices. These efforts have not only maintained water quality and habitat for native species but also guaranteed that the spirit of the river remains untamed for generations to come.

Today, our local waterways and the South and Middle Forks of the American are more than channels for sport—they are arteries of cultural memory, ecological richness, and regional identity. Every paddle stroke on these waters is a tribute to both nature’s raw beauty and the human efforts to preserve it. As increasing numbers of people seek solace and excitement in California’s natural landscapes, the American River stands as a living example of how recreation and conservation can flow together in harmony.

We acknowledge and honor the original stewards of this land, the communities of Nisenan and Miwok people who thrived and continue to thrive here. We honor their stories and ongoing contributions to our communities.

River Running

by Bill Center

After spending a good part of my life alone in the wilderness that I've grown to believe in, I became part of a company whose business it is to take people down white-water rivers. The job is a chance to live intimately with people in an environment free of clocks and smog and traffic and constant commitment to all sorts of things besides ourselves; it is a chance to live an integrated life in a whole world, but most of all it is a chance to live near or on the river.

Bill Center. 1976.

At first glance the river is power without pattern, jumping and falling at will, sweeping away anything that is in its path, running in clear channels that suddenly dead-end in bushes or rock piles or waterfalls, capricious and crazy; it runs its own path slowly devouring whatever it rubs against. Then you are in it, at first fighting it, you learn how to flow with it, you learn to read it and be one with it.

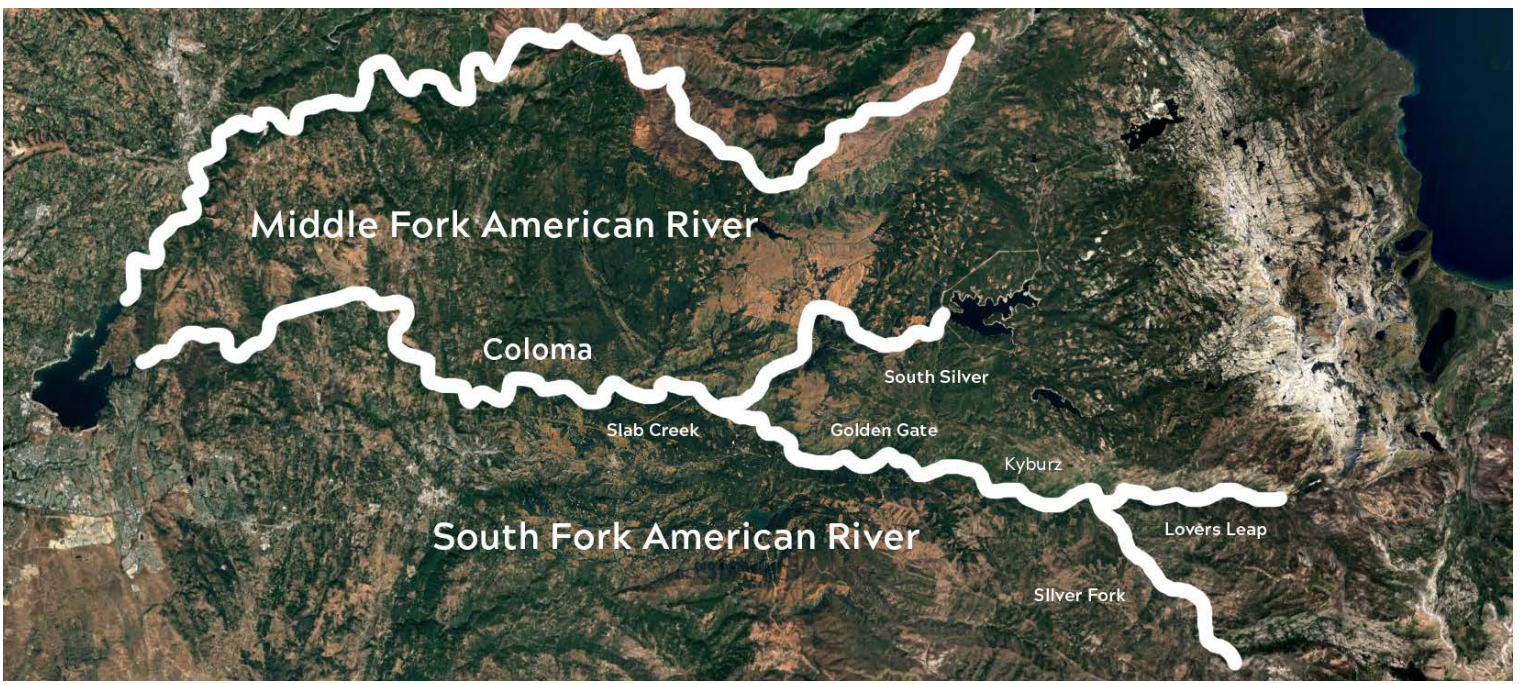
Going down a river is like looking into the future; you see the place that you wish to be, and then trace a naturally flowing path back to the place you are or can easily reach.
So when that water starts to run and tumble and thread the rocks and reeds, it is important to be in that little spot of water that will go through the rapids hitting the fewest obstacles.

Then there is the time that can be spent to look at the shore and understand that the river is a moving picture in a fantastic theater, a track of captured time that can be left to walk around and explore and hunt for rocks that were touched by [people] a hundred years ago and flowers that have just bloomed and cliffs that expose a million years of geology, to feel and see just like the sky and clouds whose existence is measured by an endless pattern of color and change.

And to do this with people, who perhaps have trouble not wanting a constant rapid or people who are afraid of the next one, to talk and listen and share a summer with others who share their lives, to see the excitement of a day spill into the night with fire-licked hours of honesty and laughter that reflect both the spirit and calm of the water running a dozen feet away.

To do this with people who perhaps live in so much pain, traffic, smoke, and time-stained days that are always too long or short; with people who are just like me and totally different and all at the same time, in a place that quietly asks us to share ourselves without pride or apology, as it shares itself.

Generation Gap. North Fork American River. Chuck Stanley, Lars Holbek, and Richard Montgomery. 1980's.



El Dorado County Waterways.

A River's Throughline

River running in the American West has been shaped, since the mid-20th century, by the enduring love of wild spaces that lies at the beating heart of environmental advocacy. Dating back as far as the 1940s, early pioneers of river running (including folks such Lou Elliot, founder of the American River Touring Association or ARTA) were molded by their involvement with the Sierra Club, where they developed a section of the club they called the "San Francisco Bay Chapter River Outings Group." In line with the Sierra Club's mission to "explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places of the earth," river runners immediately saw rafting and kayaking trips as an effective way for people to connect with wilderness, to learn about natural history, and to be inspired to protect wildlands – all while having incredible fun.

10 HEADWATERS NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1988

Analysis

The empty promises of New Melones Dam

■ by Tryn Calhoun

Friends of the River Headwaters Article. 1988.

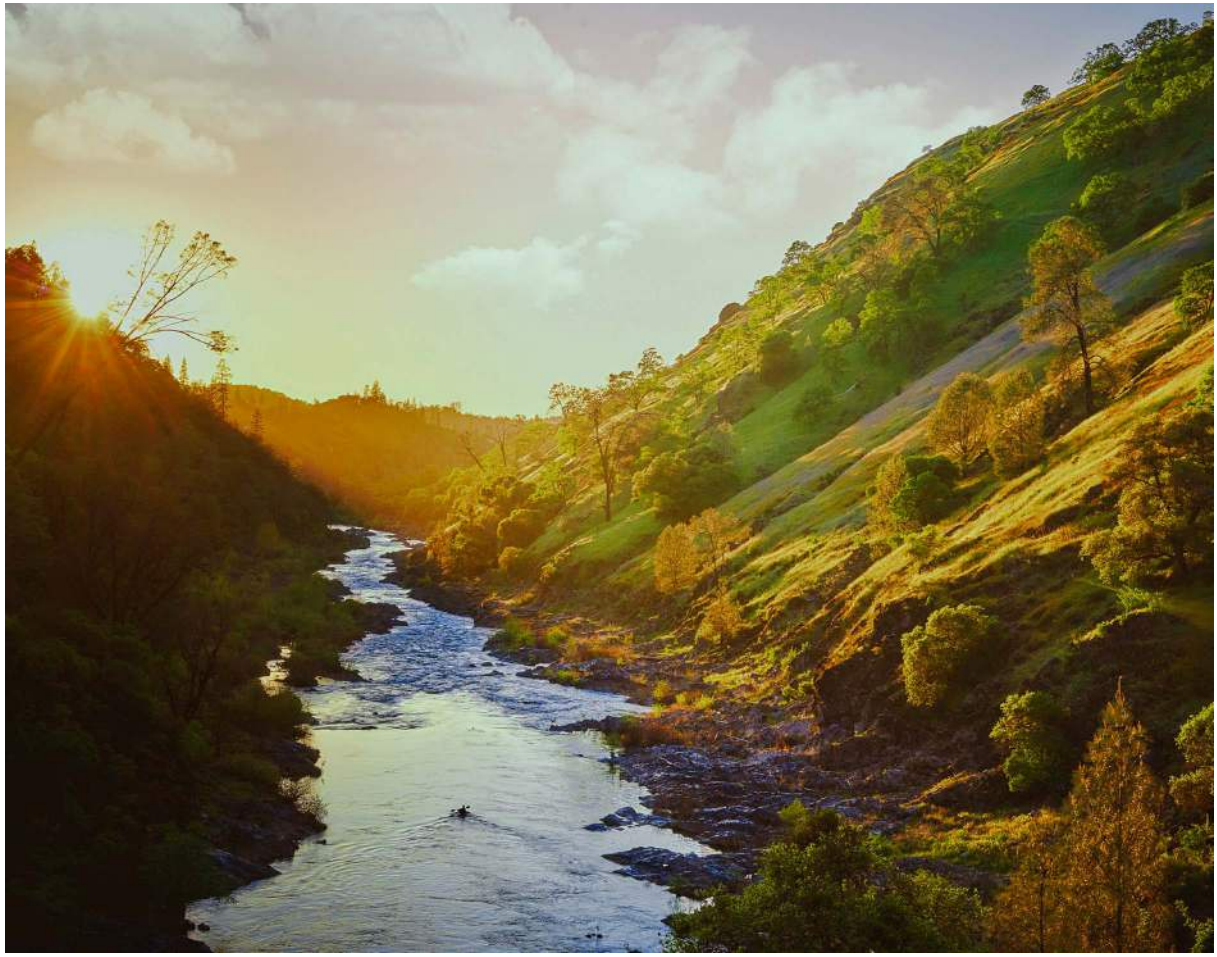
In the late 1960s and early 1970s, one California river in particular fomented passion for environmental conservation among the whitewater community. The Stanislaus River in California, with its pristine limestone canyons and exhilarating rapids, became the epicenter of a landmark environmental battle. Construction of the New Melones Dam threatened to flood this beloved river, which at the time served as a central hub for whitewater adventure and a growing recreational community.

The threat of this dam launched a ten-year campaign to save the river. River guides, conservationists, and ordinary citizens banded together to oppose the dam, pushing for a statewide ballot measure – Proposition 17 – that would have designated 9 miles of the Stanislaus River as "Wild and Scenic" thereby stopping the construction of the New Melones Dam. Ultimately, Prop 17 was not passed and construction on the dam was completed. The reservoir was filled and the canyon was lost. But out of this struggle, landmark advocacy and environmental policy organizations were forged.

Friends of the River (FOR), which was founded in opposition to the building of the New Melones Dam, is one of California's most influential river conservation organizations. Since its founding in 1973, FOR has been at the forefront of efforts to protect the state's rivers from unnecessary dams, overdevelopment, and ecological degradation. Driven by grassroots activism and policy advocacy, the organization has played a pivotal role in shaping the environmental landscape of California.

As the Stanislaus River was dammed and flooded, many of the same people who fought to save the Stanislaus — including groups like Friends of the River — now turned their attention to protecting and enjoying the South and Middle Forks of the American River, which were becoming increasingly popular with whitewater enthusiasts.

The South and Middle Forks of the American River, winding their way through the striking ravines of El Dorado and Placer Counties, do not only serve as a recreational haven — the American River is a vital natural resource, a historic corridor, and a biodiverse ecosystem. Known for its scenic beauty and thrilling whitewater rapids, this river has drawn paddlers, hikers, and nature lovers for decades.



Scott Ligare. South Fork American River.

Existing whitewater outfitters, including ARTA (founded in 1963), began to relocate to the Coloma-Lotus Valley, bringing their staff with them. Soon, these folks found themselves yet again facing the threat of dams, as well as general resistance to commercial rafting from long-standing local residents. Whitewater outfitters effectively advocated for both their industry (El Dorado County implemented a permit-based River Management Plan in the 1980s) and defeated plans to dam the American River.

Bill Center, John Garamendi. ARTA River Trip South Fork American River.

These same whitewater advocates became aware of development plans along the banks of the American River and sought to protect this wilderness for its beauty and its biodiversity. A group of strong advocates, including Camp Lotus owner and ARTA manager Bill Center, Alan Erghott, and photographer Mark Leder-Adams, led the efforts to create a land trust that would preserve the natural landscape into the future. Now called the American River Conservancy (ARC), this organization has grown into one of Northern California's most respected land trusts and environmental organizations. Headquartered in Coloma, ARC has played a transformative role in protecting and restoring the natural landscapes of the American River and Cosumnes River watersheds.

The organization has also become a hub of cultural activity and education. ARC hosts art-based classes, naturalist training, summer camps and youth programming, arts festivals, concerts and more.

Bill Center and Alan Ehrgott. Photo courtesy Alan Ehrgott.

Since the 1980s environmental advocacy and the simple fun of recreation on the river have become core identifying values in the Coloma-Lotus Valley and in El Dorado County at large. Approximately 100,000 people visit the valley each summer, driving the local economy and cementing the South Fork American River in its place as one of the most appreciated, accessible, and most rafted rivers in the American West. The same Sierra Club-inspired values that drove folks like Lou Elliot to found companies like ARTA, serve as the cultural bedrock on which the industry was built: explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places.

Ill-advised roads bulldozed in 1988.
In response the American River Land Trust
was founded in 1989.

Photo Courtesy Alan Ehrgott.

Rafting/Kayaking Terms

Boof
A technical maneuver used by rafters to launch their raft off the top of a drop in a river. This move helps the raft clear obstacles and maintain speed, ensuring a smooth and thrilling ride.

Tongue
A rapid that narrows and intensifies as it approaches a drop. This creates a concentrated flow of water that can be tricky to navigate, demanding precision and skill.

Peel Out
To peel out means to exit an eddy (a calm area of water) and re-enter the main flow of the river. This maneuver is often part of a larger strategy for navigating through complex rapids.

Scout
To scout a rapid involves approaching it from the shore to assess the conditions. By studying the line and planning the best approach, rafters can navigate rapids more safely and efficiently.

Surf
Riding a wave or hole in a rapid for an extended period.

Cubic Feet per Second or "CFS"
The flow of the river is most commonly measured in cubic feet per second or CFS. A cubic feet of water equals 7.48 gallons.

Hole Punch
a maneuver used to push a raft through a powerful hole in a rapid.

Raft
An inflatable boat used for navigating rivers and whitewater.

Paddle
A tool used to propel and steer the raft, usually with a single blade.

Photo courtesy of Hotshot Imaging. 2024.

PFD (Personal Flotation Device)
A life jacket worn for safety while rafting.

Put-in
The location where you begin your rafting trip.

Take-out
The spot where you exit the river at the end of the trip.

Eddy
A calm area behind an obstruction where the current reverses direction. Used for resting or regrouping.

Hydraulic
A turbulent reversal of water formed when fast current drops over an obstacle; can be dangerous.

Wave Train
A series of standing waves formed by the river current flowing over uneven terrain.

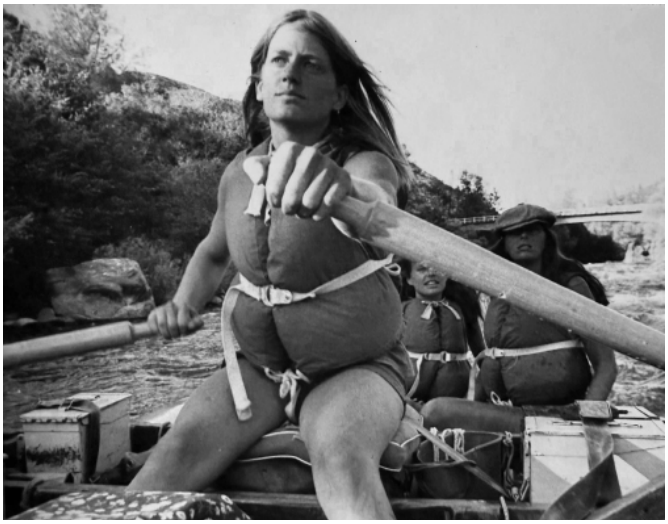
Strainer
An obstruction like a fallen tree that lets water through but blocks solid objects—a serious hazard.

Sweep
A guide or boat that stays at the back of the group for safety.

Oar
A larger, double-handed rowing device, often mounted on a frame in larger rafts.

Line
The intended path through a rapid or section of river.

Scout
To get out and examine a rapid before running it, to find the safest line.



Robin Center. William McGinnis. 1973.

Gavin Rieser. Boone Bates. Slab Creek. 2018.

Classes of Whitewater

Class I – Easy

Flat water or very small, gentle rapids. Few or no obstructions; easy to navigate. Suitable for beginners, children, and families. Minimal risk.

Class II – Novice

Straightforward rapids with wide, clear channels. Small waves, few rocks, minimal maneuvering required. Basic paddling skills helpful. Low risk.

Class III – Intermediate

Moderate rapids with irregular waves and narrow passages. Requires precise maneuvering and good control. Previous rafting experience recommended. Medium risk.

Class IV – Advanced

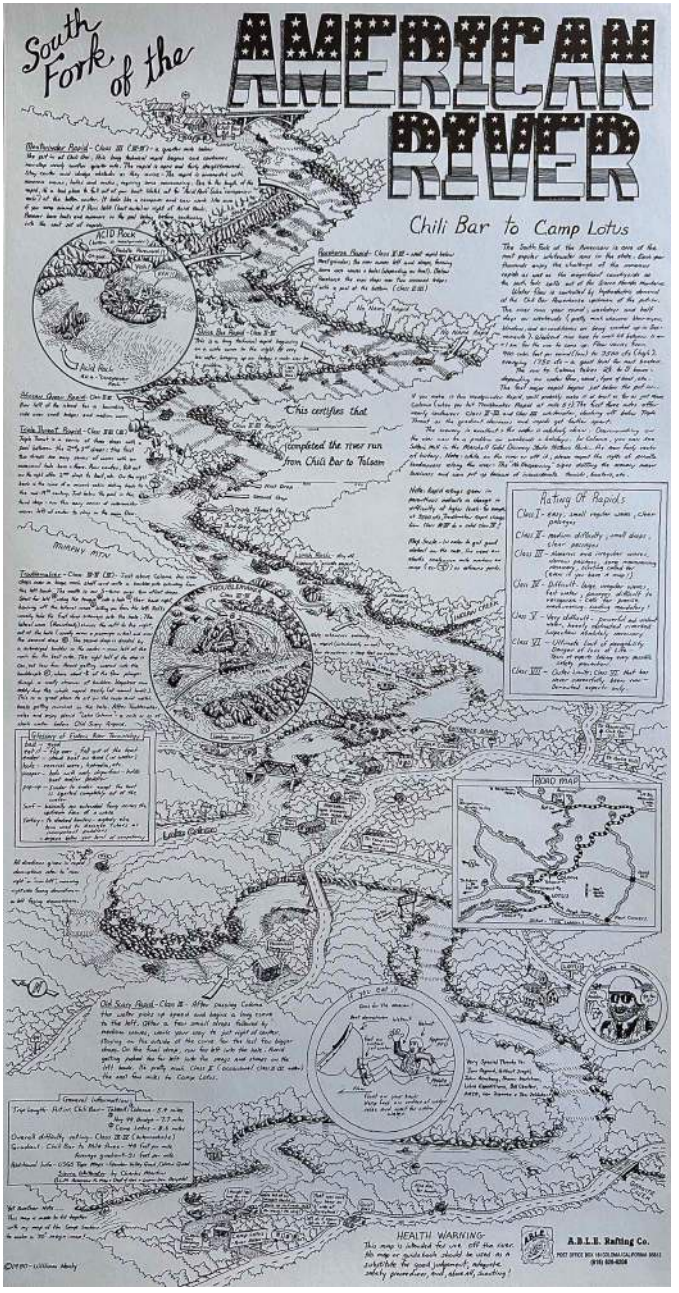
Intense, powerful rapids with complex routes. Big waves, holes, and constricted passages. Strong paddling skills and guided rafts required. High risk.

Class V – Expert

Extremely challenging rapids with violent currents. Large drops, continuous whitewater, and hazardous obstacles.
Expert paddlers only. High risk.

Class VI – Extreme and Exploratory

Unnavigable or nearly impossible rapids. Massive, unpredictable water features. Only for professional teams with scouting. Life-threatening risk.



South Fork American River. William Nealy. 1980.

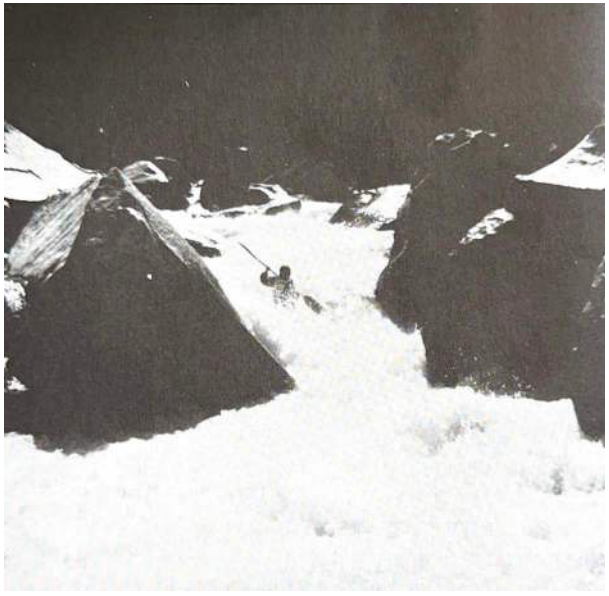
Straight Shot

by Chuck Stanley from *The Best Whitewater in California*

To name a rapid is an awesome responsibility. All those that follow in your footsteps will be forced to utter those hallowed words you've chosen to denote the collection of rocks, waves, holes, and fear that constitute a class V rapid. I can think of few rapids more aptly named than "Straight Shot," a class V rapid on the Golden Gate run of the South Fork of the American River.

It was on the first descent of "The Gate" that Richard Montgomery, in one of his heroic moods, elected to run a six foot vertical drop without thoroughly scouting. He landed in two feet of water. The boat stopped with a loud jarring smack on the rocks. All was not well with Richard; he had a pained expression on his face, due to a distorted ankle.

As a result, Richard was no longer able to portage unassisted. He was reduced to hobbling, while Lars or I carried his boat. The pain made him reluctant to even scout if it involved much walking. He relied on our verbal reports of what lay below.



Richard Montgomery. Straigh Shot.
Lars Holbeck.

This system worked well enough for a while. To scout Straight Shot, we had to walk on a smooth sloping granite slab 40 feet to get a view of the rapids. Richard elected to stay with his boat. I took one look and wimped out. Massive boulders force the river width down to ten feet. Between these jutting shores the water fights; twisting boils carom off the walls with awesome force. A sideways kayak would be instantly folded like a Tijuana Taco. I got into position to take movies as Lars backpaddled at the lip of the rapid.

Richard, while in his boat, peered downstream at the drop that was just out of his sight. While in the pool, Lars assured Richard that the rapid was an easy "Straight Shot" down the middle. I filmed as Lars fought his way through the boiling maelstrom. He managed to thread the needle. To save time, I unfortunately elected not to record Richard's descent. I quickly packed up the camera and begam my portage.

As I was putting on my spray skirt, my view of the rapid was blocked, but I could clearly see Lars in position to photograph from a midstream boulder. As he raised his camera, I knew Richard must have begun his run. All appeared well until Lars lowered his camera and his eyes bugged out in disbelief. Seconds later, and his "tacoed" boat Richard's descent. I quickly packed swam into my sight. He had bridged up the camera and began my sideways momentarily before the kayak bent in half and ejected him. Several frantic seconds later, we had Richard safely to shore just above the following class V rapid. A swift kick to midsection of the Hollowform and a short rest for the wounded warrior and we continued the battle.

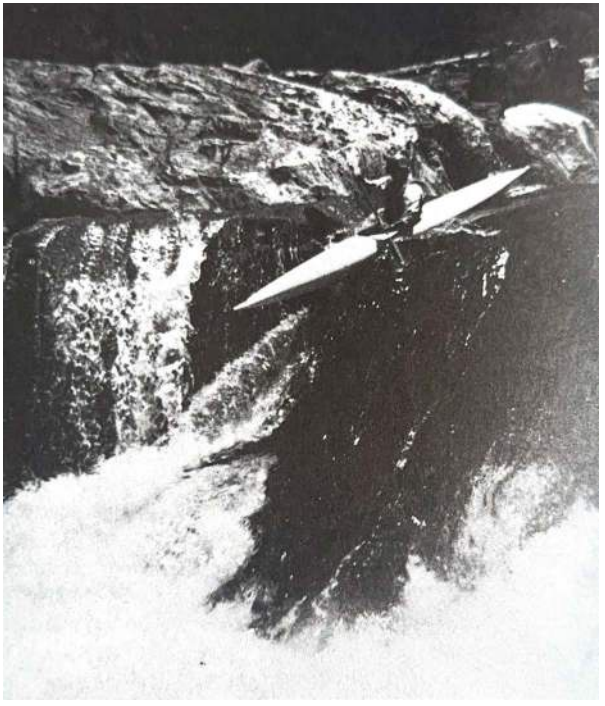
Kayaking Gear

A Personal Recounting by Richard Montgomery

1. Kayak
(The word kayak originates from the Inuktitut word qajaq)

Indigenous peoples made the first kayaks nearly 4,000 years ago in the subarctic regions of the world. These boats have been used to hunt on inland lakes, rivers and coastal waters of the Arctic Ocean, North Atlantic, Bering Sea and North Pacific oceans. Made of stitched seal or other animal skins stretched over a wood or whalebone-skeleton frame, traditional kayaks are long, fast, and quiet. Skin-on-frame kayaks are still used for hunting by Inuit in Greenland, because the smooth and flexible skin glides silently through the waves.

By the 1950s, whitewater kayaking had come to the U.S., often using wood and canvas boats imported from Germany. Fiberglass, being much less susceptible to rips and tears and thus leaks, took over in the 1960s. Surfing culture and the aerospace industry gave us a large supply of fiberglass resin and some know-how. Almost all boats in California in the early 1970s were homemade fiberglass boats.



Chuck Stanley, Lower Rubicon. Lars Holbek. 1982.

Much of the whitewater kayak culture back in the 1970s revolved around kayak racing: slalom gates hung over rapids while paddlers passed through them in a style of racing that mirrors slalom skiing. Down in Kernville lived a fireman named Tom Johnson who had taken early retirement due to an accident and whose life was devoted to kayaking. He realized the possibilities behind the same plastic that garbage cans were made of: cross-linked polyethylene, which is more flexible than fiberglass. Hit fiberglass hard on a rock and it cracks. Hit polyethylene hard on the same rock, many times, and nothing happens.

By 1978 we had realized that polyethylene plastic allowed us to actually use rocks to our advantage in rapids. We could skip over them, use the lip of a rock to “boof” into an eddy, maybe completely missing a giant hole that we would have felt obligated to run in a fiberglass boat. From there, kayaking began to change dramatically.

2. Paddles

Traditional Inuit paddles are made of wood and bone, with a long and narrow shape designed for long-distance paddling and rolling. The paddles I made in the 1970s used a closet pole for a shaft. The end of the shaft was shaped to fit on a mold. We placed the shaped shaft between two halved of the mold and where we built the blades out of fiberglass. Blades were feathered (angled in opposition to each other) to ninety degrees. Factory-made paddles, with fiberglass shafts were lighter and more pleasant to use. These days, paddles are typically made from carbon fiber. Blades are either not feathered at all or are feathered only up to 35 degrees.

Photo courtesy Eric Magneson.

3. Skirts and the Kayak Roll

A spray skirt connects the paddler to the boat, waterproofing the whole assembly. That way, the paddler is able to flip over and come back upright using the Kayak roll (previously referred to as the “Eskimo” roll). Traditional Inuit spray skirts (tuilik) consist of paddling jacket and skirt combinations made from specially-prepared seal-skin, sewn with sinew, with draw-string seals. As whitewater kayaking grew in popularity in the 1970s, we made our ow spray skirts from neoprene and wetsuit glue. There were two basic ways to make one: stretching a drum of neoprene across the cockpit, then cutting a hole in it to make a stovepipe, or, attaching two skirt halves with a seam along the long length of the boat. Modern spray skirt designs are more durable, but basically remain the same.

Photo Courtesy Eric Magneson.

Charlie Center. First Descent Pyramid Creek, “Horsetail Falls’. 2004.

Early plastic hollowform kayaks from the late 1970’s and early 1980’s marked a revolution in paddlesports, using rotomolded polyethylene to create durable, affordable, and virtually indestructible boats.

Photo courtesy of Larry Orman. 1971.

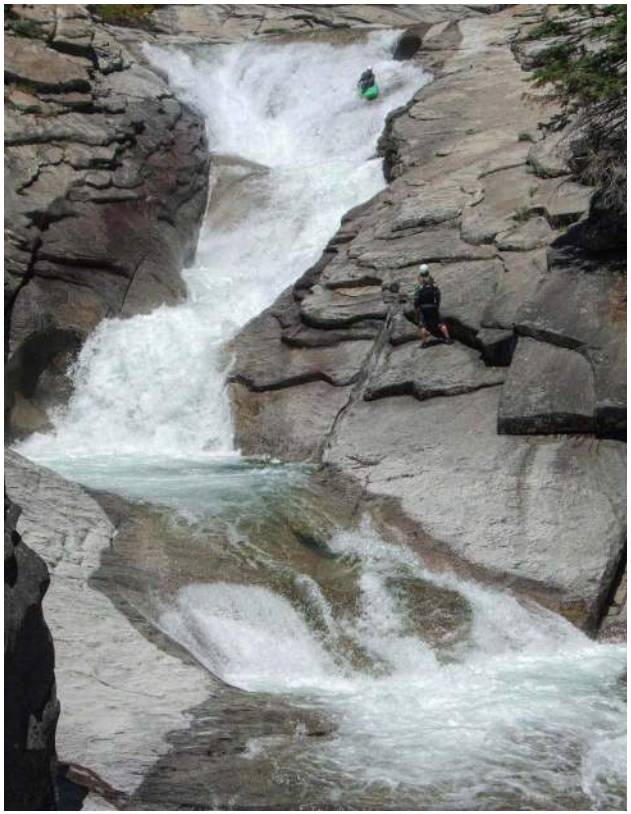
A basketboat (a Navy 15 man life raft) & 10 man Army assault raft painted ‘ARTA green’ (for invading beaches in WWII, with a sponson, a wave splash guard encircling the raft).

Eric Magneson. Early Hollowform. Sierra Nevada. 1979.

South Silver

Kayaking South Silver Creek in El Dorado County offers one of California's most exhilarating and technical whitewater experiences. Tucked into the Sierra Nevada near Ice House Reservoir, this short but intense Class V run drops nearly 600 feet per mile through a granite-walled canyon filled with slides, waterfalls, and steep chutes. Iconic features like the high-speed "Autobahn" slide and the multi-tiered "Teacups" demand expert-level precision and scouting, while hazardous drops such as "Skyscraper" are typically portaged due to dangerous undercuts. With flows driven by snowmelt, the prime paddling window is narrow—usually late June to early July—making timing and preparation critical.

The "Teacups" South Silver. Photo courtesy Jared Noceti.



"Skyscraper" South Silver. Photo courtesy Jared Noceti.

Despite its compact 1–1.5 mile length, South Silver Creek delivers nonstop action, challenging even seasoned kayakers with its continuous gradient and remote setting. Access is rugged, often requiring hiking trails to reach the put-in and careful planning for shuttle or exit. The creek's dramatic granite landscape and crystal-clear alpine water provide a stunning backdrop to the intense ride, making it a bucket-list run for advanced paddlers. Safety, teamwork, and solid Class V experience are essential, but for those equipped to handle it, South Silver Creek offers a wild and unforgettable descent.

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Coloma. Loren Christofferson. 2025.

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