

30. RECONNAISSANCE BY RAFT

The first three months after we took over the Ferree Place were filled with calving, draining the meadows and getting the pivot installed. In May, I decided that we should conduct a broader survey of what we had taken on. All we had seen of the canyon, for instance, was looking down from the rim.

In the good old *fire, ready, aim* spirit, I thought reconnaissance by raft sounded like a bright idea, so I found a small raft, four paddles and life vests. Jeanne, of course, was game and, with some determined persuasion, my sister, Becky and her boyfriend, Dave Ball, agreed to join us with some misgivings as I recall. My mother was drafted to take the pickup back to the ranch and watch the kids for the day. The plan was that we would float merrily down the river, arriving at our house sometime that afternoon.

It was a cool overcast morning around the middle of May. The spring runoff had started and a lot of water was coming over the dam. Close up, the river revealed a menacing aspect that it lacked from several hundred feet up. The menace was aggravated by the roar of hundreds of CFS pouring over the seventy-foot spillway and blasting out the gates at the base of the dam, together with the mist drifting out of the cataract.

We put in just below Halligan Dam where the old stove is. The current grabbed us and we were swept swiftly out into the river, downstream, around a corner and *bam*, hard up against a barbed wire fence.

It was raining now and we spent the next hour trying to keep the raft dry so we could patch the holes (in a moment of enlightened foresight, I had thought to bring a patch and pump kit). The fence hazard and the fast water was a rude awakening.

Finally, on our way again, we spent the rest of the day scouting ahead on foot as far as we could on whichever side of the river we had managed to pull up on. The river was too deep and fast to wade, and

attempting to swim with a life vest just meant being swept down the river without the relative safety of the raft.

Just because we had reconnoitered our next passage on foot was no guarantee of smooth sailing. At high water, the North Fork in the canyon is really rough, especially in a raft small enough to navigate the narrow passages. The current at sharp bends can (and did – more than once) cause the raft to run straight up the rock face dead ahead and go over backwards instead of turning the corner. We spent more time in the water hanging on to the raft than we did in the raft.

I have never felt so completely isolated as that day on the river with low hanging clouds and intermittent cold rain, not knowing where we were or what was coming next.

There were two extra-bad spots. The first we called the *Big Snag*. It was a double dog-bone turn at the base of a big cliff, featuring a humongous Ponderosa trunk worn white with the stumps of its big branches poking every which way, followed by a gigantic boulder in heavy rapids. Once you could see it, it was too late.

The second, we named the *Crescent Island*.¹ We had the opportunity, and what's more, the good sense to portage that one.

About ten hours, three fences and several raft repairs later, we came to the North Poudre diversion. It was cold and raining hard, and it seemed like we had arrived at the end of the world. Looking down river in the twilight at the thick willows being laid down by the heavy current, we determined discretion the better part of valor. We quit.

I went ahead up the North Poudre diversion road (really steep),² now turned to a gumbo-gravel soup, to look for a ride. When I finally reached the Cherokee Park Road at the top of Calloway Hill in the dark and rain, the first vehicle that came along was our old nemesis, Roy Brown, the game warden.

Roy drove me back toward the canyon through Clarence Koch's property to the top of the diversion road, where we met Jeanne, Becky and Dave. Sopping wet and hypothermic, all of us squeezed in the cab with Roy, who surveyed us with an attitude of superior bemusement.

Having arrived home like drowned rats at about 11:00pm, my mother greeted us hysterically at the back door: "*Why didn't you call?*"³

Jeanne and I came away from our adventure profoundly impressed. The canyon was wilder and more magnificent than we could have imagined. We had just had a near-religious experience and whatever lingering doubts we might have had were washed away. We were on a crusade.

¹ (more about the *Crescent Island* later)

² See Mary White's painting, opposite, featuring the North Poudre diversion road. Mary earned a master's degree in painting and glass from the California College of the Arts. She spent nineteen years on the faculty of San Jose State University, where she ran the glass program and, as a Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, Ireland. (more about Phantom Canyon artworks, later)

³ 1981 was way before cell phones – not that there would have been a signal anyway.



#13 Phantom Canyon Ranch, Mary White - 1986. Acrylic on paper 24" x 30"