

LOST ON A BOULDER

A cautionary story about idiots and Class 5 rapids

By Rick Levin

Some weekend during spring term of my sophomore year at college, a group of us decided to go rafting down the Columbia. An old, old friend of mine, Scott, organized the trip, with promises that he'd take care of everything. All I was to do was grab three or four of my college buddies, and provide a second car for setting out.

Scott's purportedly well-nigh professional preparations consisted of: A raft, four mismatched paddles, two fifths of whiskey and six waterlogged life preservers that looked to be circa 1953 or so.

Within a quarter mile of setting in, we went over a waterfall. One minute we're tranquilly floating down the gentle Columbia River, and the next we're falling backward into a 30-foot abyss. In slow motion, I watched my friend Erik levitate bodily out of the raft while this macabre warble like a rooster on crank came out of him.

Whump!

We were still capable of laughing at that one, believing it to be an aberration — perhaps some temporary rip in the time/space continuum like in *Land of the Lost*. Little did we know the waterfall was not the end of our troubles but the beginning of a low-brow psychedelic odyssey that was part *Deliverance* and part Dante's *Inferno*.

At one point — after we'd lost two life preservers, busted one paddle and suffered various minor contusions and sprains — we came around a bend in the river and sluiced into a misty, spouting, gurgling, grinding stretch of whiplash rapids punctuated by quick, sucking eddies formed by leeward pressure of the current pushing against

the underside of massive sedimentary boulders.

We did our damndest. Scott shouted directions from his perch on the stern — "Left! Left! Paddle, asshole, PADDLE!" — and we'd almost cleared the shitstorm, emerging only seconds from another, less turbulent bend, when the raft got hitched up against this gargantuan rock. Wild water gushed around the raft, shooting rooster tails; slowly, the boat was being pushed up and over the boulder. "Jump!" Scott screamed.

There was noise, and then not-noise — or rather, sound became muddled and amplified, as though I'd been sealed inside a washing machine. Coming up for air, I was hurled

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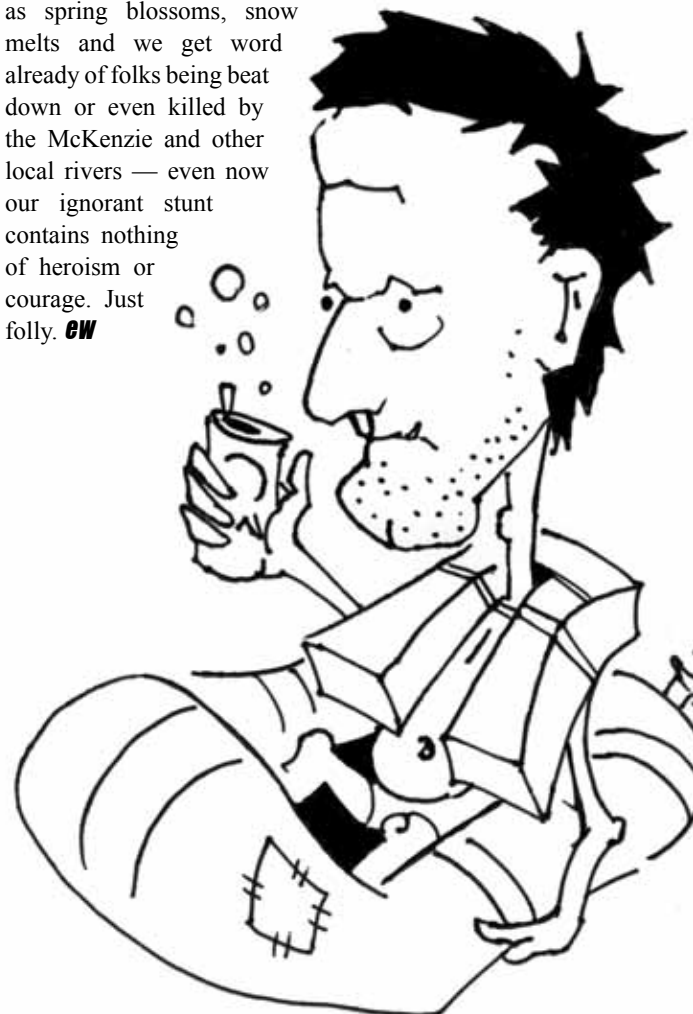
against another boulder. For all I was worth I scrambled to get on top of the thing. I stood — and continued to stand, stranded, smack in the middle of the mighty Columbia, lost and alone like some fuckpenny Robinson Crusoe.

It took them more than an hour to coax me off that rock and into a relatively unaggressive pool of water where I could dogpaddle ashore. Scott found a tree branch that was long enough to reach the middle of that pool. The idea was, if I went under, I could grab the limb and be hauled to safety. Or get skewered like a hotdog in boiling water.

One crucial piece of data might have saved, even prevented, that trip, but — as befits the whole fiasco —

the warning was retroactive rather than preventative: The park ranger who found us said we'd traveled through Class 5 rapids. The ranger wasn't impressed. He gave us the universal expression of a parent who is "disappointed" in you.

And, to tell you the truth — as spring blossoms, snow melts and we get word already of folks being beat down or even killed by the McKenzie and other local rivers — even now our ignorant stunt contains nothing of heroism or courage. Just folly. **EW**



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