

FAMILY PADDLING

FAMILY FUN ON THE LOWER SALMON

BY ASHLEY LODATO



Snow Hole Rapid on the Lower Salmon.
Photo by Ashley Lodato

JULY 20TH, 2016, 1:45am, Hammer Creek launch on the Lower Salmon River. The white lights of a minivan illuminate our tent. The kids don't even roll over, but my husband Jon and I wake up.

"I think it's them," he whispers.

"Them" is John and Kirsten Rigney, whom we last saw in December of 2002 at the Diamond Creek take-out on the Colorado River after a blissful 23-day private trip from Lee's Ferry. At one time we all knew each other well. But for nearly a decade and a half, our interaction has been limited to Christmas cards and an occasional email. Trusting that the depth and longevity of our past friendship will trump 14 years of minimal contact, we are about to embark on a week-long family rafting trip together on the Lower Salmon River.

"We" is not just the four of us; it's the four of us plus six kids, two for us, four for them. When we last vacationed together, 14 years ago, none of us had kids. We had flexible work schedules, no mortgages, and ample discretionary time.

Fourteen years later, we are all yoked with the stresses and responsibilities of adulthood: jobs, house payments, and, most notably, kids. The fact that we are all now parents represents the single biggest difference between our Grand Canyon selves and our impending Lower Salmon selves. We can only hope that we've all made the transition to kid-pace at the same rate.

In the wee hours of our launch day for our Lower Salmon trip, we greet John and Kirsten in the dark, help them set up their tent, and lift their sleepy children out of booster seats and into sleeping bags. The

rest can wait until morning.

The fact that we don't really know each other anymore was not even the biggest obstacle to the trip. Coordinating their flights from Connecticut, a raft rental, and river gear for their first family rafting trip consumes the Rigneys, while we, in Washington State, organize food, kitchen equipment, and groovers. The logistical texts that fly between us hint at the fact that we haven't traveled together in ages ("Greek or regular yogurt?" "Beer or hard cider?" "Creamy or crunch peanut butter?"), but not once do we ask the questions that loom large: What do you value? How do you resolve conflicts? What is your parenting style? The unspoken assumption is that we are still enough of the same people we were 14 years ago to make this shared vacation work out.

There's something about friendships formed in the field that transcends typical obstacles and boundaries. All our years working at Outward Bound together created in us a common rhythm that we hope will be present on this river trip. Three of us spent many years together in our 20s and 30s at an Outward Bound basecamp in northern Maine, with no electricity and no running potable water, in the pre-cell-phone era. The Internet was hardly a thing yet, and with only one shared phone line, we couldn't waste the time a dial-up Internet connection took.

So we spent time with each other, with few distractions from the world outside. We were together from dawn until dusk, sharing work objectives, living quarters, and meals. On days off we headed to a nearby river to surf. In many years we spent between 60 and 120 days straight in each other's company. Surely we can manage it for seven days this time. But still, I bring three novels, just in case we can't find anything to talk about.

When we get up on launch day, the madness of any river launch ensues. This is familiar terrain for our family. After 20 years of whitewater canoeing, Jon and I went over to the dark side in 2013, and have been doing an annual raft trip ever since. But for the Rigney kids, this is new territory.

Take the groover, for example. Having been on four other long river trips, our kids are comfortable with doing their "number 2s" in an ammo can topped with a toilet seat. But this is the Rigney kids' first river trip and John has been preparing them by trying to describe the groover system. A week before the trip he tells me that they still don't understand how it works, so I text him a photo of a friend utilizing the groover on our 1998 Grand Canyon trip. (The fact that we even have such a photo is illustrative of our pre-parenthood irreverent puerility.)

Below China Rapid on the Lower Salmon.
Photo by Ashley Lodato

The graphic serves its purpose. "They get it now," he reports.

The Rigneys mention having brought an inflatable for the kids, which brings to my mind an image of a small ring or a beach ball, so I think nothing of it until I see it on the loading ramp—a blow-up Orca the size of a VW Bug. Jon and I look in horror at what we are sure is soon to become a gigantic piece of river trash.

"I give it two days," he whispers to me.

"Two hours," I whisper back.

Jon and I eat our words, silently, numerous times throughout the trip, as Whaley

the inflatable Orca not only survives, but becomes the second-most popular member of the trip, right behind adorable 4-year-old Hazel Rigney.

Once we launch, any doubts we might have had about compatibility evaporate. We're just four old friends with a blissful week stretching out before us. Removed from their usual social environments and activities, the kids have no entertainment other than each other and the sand, rocks, and waves of this beautiful ribbon of water. And the river works its magic. Within 24 hours the three oldest girls from our two families have bonded, promising pen pal relationships and lifelong allegiance.



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Looking upstream on Lower Salmon.
Photo by Ashley Lodato

On our second day, we stop at an ancient pictograph site and see a dead sturgeon floating in the eddy. The fish is partially decomposed, but we can tell it is at least seven feet long. The smell causes us to minimize our time in the eddy, but the next day we have the opportunity to watch a group of anglers catch an eight-foot sturgeon just downstream. We float nearby while the five men take turns tiring out the fish so it can be brought close to shore for photos. It takes over an hour to land the fish, and when we are finally able to see it, both we and the kids are awestruck. As the fishing guide grabs the fish by the lip to flip it over, we see the entire great white length of this prehistoric-looking creature. When the sturgeon is released he darts down deep, presumably to his secret place in the river he calls home. We continue on, the pictographs and the sturgeon serving

as reminders that we are just guests in this canyon.

The rapids on the Lower Salmon are fairly mellow, and we navigate most of them without incident. We get wet, of course, and sometimes waves crash over our bows. But we take on water with glee, knowing our self-bailing floors are doing their job. Our early raft trips on the Colorado were supported by boaters rowing Outward Bound's old Avon Pro rafts, which did not self-bail. At the end of each rapid the hard boaters would look back at the rowers with pity, watching them bail bucket after five-gallon bucket of water out of the boat. One rapid dropped a record 50 bailing buckets

Kids at final campsite on Snake River.
Photo by Ashley Lodato

full into a raft. It took the rower much of the rest of the afternoon to bail out the boat.

But the rapids on the Lower Salmon have not posed any problems so far and thus, as we approach Lower Bunghole Rapid, we are not at all concerned. It's just another Class II rapid with a mild warning in the river guide: "wave gets steep at lower levels."

However, as we drop into Lower Bunghole Rapid, things happen quickly. First, we are slightly sideways, owing to my cavalier approach. Second, the wave is indeed steep; our whole 15'6" raft seems to fit in its trough. Third, my upstream oar dives down into the trough and is caught by downstream current. As the oar lifts me up by my stomach and tosses me out of the boat, I have only a split second to notice two things: 1) my husband throwing his full weight onto the downstream tube to prevent the raft from flipping and 2) the Rigney's nine-year-old son, Owen, who doesn't really like to get wet, going airborne as he is ejected from the boat.

Owen and I both pop up quickly and I can tell that he is okay the same way





The author SUPing on the Lower Salmon.
Photo by Jon Albright

that doctors can tell that a newborn is healthy—by the vigorous screaming. No water in those lungs! Jon hauls Owen back onto the raft and I swim to shore. Owen is understandably shaken but unhurt; I lament the loss of my sunglasses. But while Lower Bunghole bunged us up a bit, it didn't destroy us. Owen recovers with a good story to tell his friends back home, I dig out my spare sunglasses, and we all head on downriver.

One day we tie up the boats and walk up to a 100-year-old ranch that is now on state land. The historic buildings have been maintained and a caretaker lives on the premises, but he is not home that day, so we sit in the shade of giant old cottonwoods and wonder about the families who lived and worked in these rugged hills. For many people, camping life on a river trip constitutes "roughing it," but compared with what these early ranching and farming families endured to scratch out a living

from this harsh landscape, the rafting trip life is one of utter luxury.

And deluxe it is. Our hardships are petty, first-world complaints. There's sand in the tent. The drinking water is tepid. We are out of dried mango. None of this diminishes the simple pleasures of the spray of stars in an inky sky, the river's constant whisper, a week in the backcountry with people we love.

When the Salmon empties into the Snake, the tone of the trip changes. Jetboat traffic is a reminder that the Heller Bar take-out awaits us downstream. We linger in our final campsite, reluctant to acknowledge the trip's imminent end. As we deride Heller Bar, everyone is a little cranky. The adults know that this is merely a manifestation of our disappointment at the trip ending, but the kids don't understand this and they loll about griping and picking fights with each other. Fortunately the business of emptying

the groover at the SCAT machine has an inexplicably uplifting effect, and after 15 minutes of horrified fascination with the process, the kids have had their positive vibe restored. We eat Eskimo Pies in the parking lot and then hug goodbye, the promises of future trips just as sweet as the ice cream.

Prior to our trip, when local friends heard that we were about to spend a week on the river with two friends we hadn't seen in 14 years and whose four children we had never met, they gave us horrified looks. "How can you be sure you're still compatible?" they asked. "What if the kids don't get along? On a trip like that you'll never be able to get away from each other." We brushed away their concerns. "It will be fine," we said with confidence. "Maybe even great."

And it was.