

Six Tough Miles on the Middle Fork By Will Hansen

Here's my trip report from our May 2008 high water Marsh Creek/Middle Fork trip. The title makes it sound pretty bad. Maybe the title should be "Six Really Tough Miles in Six Really Great Days". While those first few days were rather eventful and challenging, it was an outstanding trip overall and a fun story to tell. In fact we should have seen it all coming as the events started before we left Ralph's driveway!

The plan was to drive from Seattle to Stanley, ID on Friday May 23 for our May 24, 2008 launch on Marsh Creek. The participants were:

Ralph Pond – permit holder
Gordon Conger – Ralph's passenger who would celebrate his 73rd birthday on the river!
Dave Nissen
Chuck Morgan
Larry Pond
Rich Samuel
Barry Brazzell
Charles Davis
Will Hansen

We would spend 5 nights on the river. Campsites were to be something like 1) Gardells, 2) Sheepeater, 3) Pungo, 4) Driftwood, and 5) Otter Bar. During the week before our departure, we watched the spring peak happen with the level hitting about 8.5 feet on the Middle Fork Lodge Gauge. It then fell pretty fast and it looked like we'd have flow in the range of 6 feet, +/- a few tenths.

This was my first early season Middle Fork trip and, while Ralph and the others will run the Middle Fork at any level, I was secretly pleased that all the wood from last year's fires would have a chance to wash on out of the system.

With the long drive ahead of us, Chuck and I agreed to meet at Ralph's on Thursday night for a 'trailer packing party'. We'd be travelling with Ralph and Gordon in Ralph's rig and getting everything onto the trailer Thursday night would help us all make the goal of a 6 am departure the next morning. No sooner was the trailer loaded than we noticed a flat trailer tire. We quickly found the offending screw and removed the wheel. Ralph disappeared into his garage and returned with a patch kit and a compressor and we repaired the flat (do I need to mention that Ralph is one of the more prepared-for-anything boaters I've ever met). But since the spare was better than the repaired tire, we decided to run with it instead. Buying new trailer tires had been on Ralph's to-do list but just hadn't gotten done. So, with the high motivation that a Middle Fork launch in 36 hours can bring, we hatched a plan to start driving and buy his new set of tires in Pendleton, Oregon 'on the fly'. Right on schedule, we blew out of Seattle early on Friday morning with that great 'on the way to the Middle Fork' buzz.

But as we approached Umatilla, the check-engine light started flashing and then went solid a few minutes later as the Ford Expedition started missing. Hmm... I thought to myself "this trip's starting to become a bit of a challenge". Ralph knows his vehicle and guessed the problem to be a bad coil. Putting our heads together, we made our little visit to Pendleton a pit-stop that would make NASCAR fans proud:

We purchased and had installed a new pair of tires for the trailer, filled the rig with gas, bought and ate lunch, picked up some bug spray at Wal-Mart (on expectation of ticks), and purchased and installed a new coil for Ralph's Ford Expedition (with borrowed tools), including before and after diagnostic tests to confirm the problem and the repair. And the kicker, get this... we were on the road again in 90 minutes flat! And 15 of those minutes were spent getting lost trying to find the Shucks Auto Parts store, during which we waited for a mid-day train to crawl through South Pendleton!

Our little stop in Pendleton is a testament to what Middle Fork boaters can do to make a launch on time! For those of you scratching your heads, and those who may eventually find yourself in similar circumstances, here's how we did it: Ralph called ahead to prime the tire installation process at Les Schwab, and the wonderful and friendly gals at the Pendleton Shucks diagnosed the bad coil (it happened to be one of the easy-to-get-to cylinders in front) and they loaned us the tools to make the fix. Those gals even talked us through Pendleton streets like a team of air-traffic-controllers 'til we found their place! What great service!

The next 'event' in our eventful trip became apparent as soon as we arrived in Stanley that evening. We learned that Ralph's brother Larry, coming up from Boise, had limped into Stanley with a blown alternator a few minutes before us. Those Pond boys were definitely having a run of bad luck. Quick thinking and the fact that Shucks in Boise stays open until 9 pm, made it possible for Larry's wife to pick up the part back at home that night. So we had the new alternator "virtually in hand" before we launched and Larry had his wife Fed-Ex it to Stanley on Monday. A buddy in Stanley from Larry's guiding days agreed to babysit the fix, and connect the rig with the shuttle company. So, as we hit the sack that night in Stanley, we had now dodged 3 bullets!

Keep in mind that I haven't gotten to the "Six Tough Miles" part! Read on...

Saturday we launched on Cape Horn Creek at about 1 pm and then proceeded onto and down Marsh Creek. I'd heard it was pretty busy water and that is certainly the word for it. While Marsh really keeps you on your toes, the history of surprise wood on this stretch kept me a bit stressed. Sure enough, a few turns above the pack bridge, there is an island and it had logs fully across both channels. The log in the left channel was about 8-10" out of the water. Our lead boats, Dave and Barry, managed to pull off and direct the rest of us down the right channel where the log in that channel was just at water level. We were all able to teeter-totter over it and on down to the Middle Fork. The 'sluice box' section was pretty cool.

The only tense moments for me in the whole fast ride came as a result of trying to keep separation (I like big separation). In anticipation, I'd installed some old Carlisle blades just for the Marsh Creek section, and sure enough, I broke one and bent the other and managed to pop an oar while trying to stay off the boat ahead of me in a fast boulder garden. But, given all the stories about Marsh Creek, I look back fondly.

When people ask me about the Middle Fork and what it means to whitewater boaters, I try to draw the comparison to what Augusta National means to golfers. Maybe the Grand Canyon is St. Andrews on this scale. But the point is, the Middle Fork is sacred ground. Everyone who is really into the sport knows each rapid, feature, and campsite. Annual changes are discussed over and over in on-line forums. To an early-season trip, Marsh Creek is the Amen Corner. Damn, it's just good to get through Marsh without a mishap.

So, late in the afternoon, and with much relief but some remaining apprehension, we arrived at the eddy above Dagger Falls. We scouted from the platform and decided to send 4 boats, put three guys with throw bags downstream around the corner, and Gordon and I would man the cameras for these first runs. Two of our first four boats flipped in Dagger. What's remarkable about the first flip is that Dave Nissen is one of the best cat boaters there are and was right on his intended line. Chuck popped an oar up under the footbridge and was a bit distracted, so his flip had a little 'encouragement'.

The flips were surprisingly quick and violent affairs, especially considering that both boats were fully loaded for a 6-day Middle Fork trip. Dagger was a dicey deal that day. Fully loaded boats plunge deep into the froth at the base of the falls and they come shooting back up like a volleyball released under water. Ralph, the last of the four to run, aced the drop but still managed to do an unintentional 180 degree spin, and crashed the laterals backward before he disappeared around the corner. (you can see the photos in the Dagger Falls album on my website at www.whitewatercampsites.com). After Ralph went by, I quickly hoofed it up the hill from my vantage point and around and down to the eddy. I arrived just in time to see Ralph pause in the eddy for a moment to consider his dilemma. He then took off downstream to help Barry corral the 2 flipped boats. Gordon, Ralph's passenger who had walked around the falls, would be with us, and his gear was now gone to points unknown with Ralph.

Chuck had caught a throw bag and made it to shore, but he was pretty gassed and being attended to by Charles, Rich, and Larry (Rich is a doctor, by the way). I joined them to discuss options. The analysis went like this: It was after 5 pm, we now had 4 boats downstream somewhere, two of them upside down. Furthermore, since Chuck was on shore with us, there were only 3 boatmen downstream to manage those four boats. And we had just witnessed a 50% success rate at getting through Dagger right-side-up this day. While I was the Marsh Creek rookie, the other three guys in the discussion had all run Dagger before. But given all the factors, the decision to portage was pretty quick and easy. There were now six of us with 4 boats to portage.

A Dagger portage is not a pretty thing, especially as the rain started to fall. It's a long slug, uphill, across the campground, and back down to the river. All told, counting time

we spent that evening, and finishing up the fourth boat the next morning, the portage took more than 1.5 hours per boat. That counts the time to disassemble boats, lug the gear down to the lower parking area, put boats back together, lower the boats down the steep embankment, and repack everything. About an hour into it, Ralph showed up to tell Chuck that his boat was gone, downstream – maybe Riggins. Just kidding.

Ralph reported that all boats and boaters were safe at Boundary but we would be spending our first night on the Middle Fork with our group split across two camps a half mile apart. In the countless gear carrying trips, I became resolved to my fate for the evening: eat a little trail mix, put up the tent up in the dark and rain, and just crawl into my bag. So, when we called it quits for the night, we were all pretty damn happy to see that Charles had snuck off and whipped up a full spaghetti dinner in one of the Dagger campsites! The next morning, we finished the portage, after a great hot breakfast, again thanks to Charles. During the final carries, we met Mike Glasgow and Glenn Brown, who had also launched on Saturday but had camped at the Bear Valley Creek confluence. They proceeded to portage Glenn's boat and then Mike ran Dagger successfully in his Jag. After supporting Mike's run we floated on down to join the rest of our group at Boundary Creek.

The first few miles below Boundary were uneventful. But I did get a big peek into Murphy's as I couldn't follow Larry's elegant move to the left. As I roared down the gut at Sulfur Slide I remember thinking what a big rock that one on the left really is, to be this far out of the water at this level. And then it wasn't long before we were into Velvet. I was running second from the back with Charles running sweep. This was a tough day to run Velvet because the level was just below where the sneak on the left opens up. As I approached, I could see a boat upside down beyond the drop.

Chuck hadn't recognized Velvet in time and had flipped again. He came up in the cage right away, but was further shocked when Dave, who had eddied out as safety, waved him past. Barry would corral Chuck's boat and Dave would maintain position in case we had more swimmers. Smart guys. I haven't mentioned it yet, this group has over 250 Middle Fork trips between them. I was in the best of hands.

Ralph and passenger Gordon got side-surfed in Velvet long enough to both have religious experiences, and were finally released out the right side. I approached Velvet from too far left, trying to hug the signature rock. I won't do that again. It's sort of like skiing a steep slope. Despite your natural fears to the contrary, you need to lean out away from the hill to let your skis bite the snow. With Velvet, you need to come down the center, aim right at the gut, and then get momentum to the left as you pass the rock. If you nervously stay left as I did, the lateral current coming off the rock, pushing you out to the center defeats your intention to get that leftward momentum. As I approached down the left side and attempted to move left around the rock, my Jag was spun 90 degrees counter-clockwise by the lateral. In an instant I decided this might not be a bad thing, so I kept the spin going, and proceeded to go through Velvet backwards, with the gas peddle on the floor. Two power strokes and I was through. No style points but it felt damn good.

As soon as I got through the drop, I noticed with a shock that one of Chuck's tubes was deflated. Chuck had abandoned ship and was being picked up near the left shore. I do remember thinking "there goes Sheepeater for tonight – rats!" Chuck, while riding his upside down frame, had crashed into the right bank below Velvet. On impact, an overhanging rock proceeded to rip a 32 inch gash in his Ocelot. There's a bit of trivia for you. Wet rocks slide. Dry rocks tear.

Barry, Dave, Rich and Charles proceeded to corral Chucks boat while Larry picked Chuck up. I tried to get a few pictures. Rooky mistake on my part. I should have sprinted ahead to Big Bend to toss a throw rope from shore. We finally got the boat pulled in about 100 yards below the campsite, and dragged it up into the brush. But this was too far down to use Big Bend as a camp. After our portage at Dagger the night before, we all wanted to be together with our boats beached at camp. After our portage the night before, Dragging the gear back and forth 100 yards from boats to camp was not a tolerable option.

Everybody chipped in there on the beach at Big Bend to help with the patch job. Aire boats require two patches, and 32 inches is a lot of baseball stitches in the outer cover! It seemed to hold air as we carried it back to the frame, but by the time we had the tube strapped back on we realized the patch was not going to cut it. Pumping the tube every 5 minutes all the way to Sheepeater was not an option from the safety standpoint. So we limped the quarter mile down to Trail Flat and pitched camp. Sadly, the famous Trail Flat hot springs were totally flooded out at that level.

That night, the inner bladder patch was removed again, the surfaces cleaned, and a new patch applied, and left to cure overnight. By morning it was holding air, thankfully.

Back on the river, we got to witness the devastation the 2007 fires have had on the upper reaches of the Middle Fork. Both sides of the river from The Chutes to Dolly Lake have burned. Remarkably, several trees were still burning like chimneys across from John's Camp (this was May; the fire in these trees had smoldered all winter!). The USFS has since announced that Johns Camp, Greyhound, and Dome Hole are closed. Most of the other camps along this stretch have been touched by fire and some are moderately altered.

At this point, my waterproof camera decided to take several days off, probably out of mourning for the upper MFS. But it's still a beautiful place. I'm just thankful we got to enjoy it in previous years when it was lush and green. In a few years it'll get some flowers and start looking like the hills around Pistol Creek Ranch.

We stopped to scout Lake Creek and have lunch – the river channel has shifted back over to the right, after passing the fan. At that flow there's a big hole at the bottom, but easily missed by taking the left side of the right channel. Don't go down the far left channel – full of logs. Scout.

We stopped to pick up our permit at Indian Creek. I've got to say that it's a great thing to be almost alone on the Middle Fork. We gave the USFS gals a list of camps. Then we said – "hey, hang on, we think we're going to change our minds!" We then proceeded to give them a completely different list – we literally had our choice of any camp we wanted. I could get used to this!

That night we stayed at Marble Left – what a great camp. Chuck went overboard, with his cooking this time. He grilled one whole pork tenderloin per person! The next morning I hiked up onto the ridge behind camp and got some nice pictures, including looking down on an unmanned purple Ocelot as it came drifting by about 8:30 am! We found it later in the day tied up on the outside bend at Thomas Creek.

A few minutes after we pushed off we arrived at Sunflower for a great soak on a cold rainy day. What can I say about 9 naked guys in one of the epic hot springs on this planet? Sadly, the visual that will be forever burned into my brain from that morning is Rich walking up to me as I lay there soaking. He turned around, bent over, spread his cheeks, and asked in all seriousness "hey Will, do I have any ticks". "Gee Rich, I sure don't see any." Until then I really hadn't realized how comfortable docs must be, looking at the ass-end of guys. I was totally unprepared for that one!

Soon after Sunflower, we came upon the ghost boat. Since we were the only group in the area, we deduced that it must have been tied up by a Middle Fork Lodge employee after it got stuck in the brush. We contemplated the fun it would have been to swap out one of those nice purple tubes on the ghost rider boat for Chuck's tube with its fresh 32-inch zinger. But you'd want to be around to see look on the owners face. By the way, the ghost boat had a Miller Lite in the drink holder and more in a drag bag. We later learned that the driver was ejected at Velvet. The moral of that story is you shouldn't drink and drive, especially through Velvet Falls at 6 ft, unless you want to spend a night without your gear!

We spent that night at Trail Camp, another nice camp. I'd never stayed there. Nice sand areas up in the trees. We decided this would be Tequila night and I pulled out my stash of Hornitos and marg mixer. I remember Dave's Nalgene Margarita!

The next day, the Grouse and Tappan sections were a kick and the Jack Creek section was even better. Cliffside was thumping as we crept past along the wall. A lot of stuff was washed out.

We planned to stay at Cliffside Camp, but we found it to be very cramped; the only flat ground had poison ivy all over it. So after some discussion we floated on down to Otter Bar to share it with Mike and Glenn. Otter Bar at high water is not quite the same experience as Otter Bar in July. There isn't much left of it, and overnight the water rose and the center of camp became a long lake.

The last morning we proceeded to read and run Rubber and the rest of Impassible Canyon. And once more I got to experience my love-hate relationship with that last mile

above the confluence. I love that section dearly for the scenery and I hate being there as it means the end of another Middle Fork trip is only a few minutes away.

This story has been plenty long. I've skipped telling you about the vehicular carnage in the meadow at the Cape Horn Creek put-in and the crazy internet group that launched on both sides of us and promptly got split up in Marsh Creek, never to reconnect. Catch me around a campfire for more of our experiences from this trip.

Post Script

We went home by way of the Lochsa which was running just above 7 feet. I'm sort of embarrassed to say that in my many years of boating I'd never managed to get to the Lochsa. But maybe it was worth the wait. I doubt many others would have an introduction like I got. Picture this: me following Ralph Pond who knows the river like few others and is showing me all the rookie lines with me, fairly distracted, cranking my head around to watch Mark Cramer and Dave Nissen take the sporty lines right behind me. This was a very good trip!