

SEPTEMBER 19, 1991

In 1955 the Boss and some of his hunting partners rafted down the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Being the excellent story teller that he was, he immediately adopted "The River of No Return" as a scheduled part of his programs. All through the fall work he entertained us with tales of huge antlered elks, and mysterious, shy hermits, and forever hopeful miners who ranged along the banks of that wild isolated stretch of water.

The fever to see those sights never left me, but 36 years were to pass before I signed on with an outfitter. Late August, he said, was the time to make the trip. Right he was, because as I arrived at the small town of Stanley, Idaho, the mountains had the hazy feel of autumn and the trees were taking on a subtle tint of gold.

Also, due to the timing, the size of our group was small. We had more time to stop along the way, and the guides were under less pressure in all cases. I would have preferred a larger audience than 13 customers and six guides; however, I had stored up enough of the Boss's material, plus a sizable collection of my own stuff, to hold forth on any occasion except, of course, in the roaring waters of the rapids and falls.

On the rapids, I tricked the guides and the guests into believing I was frightened of the swift water. Just before we'd hit the currents I'd make a big deal of squinching up my eyes and holding my breath. On the first contact I'd pull the life jacket collar up over my face and take a two-hold grip on the safety ropes, like I didn't have a lick of river sense, or boating instinct.

It wasn't my place to tell them by the time I was 14 years old I was able to swim across a 5-by-20 stock tank four times without stopping. In those days we spent every 4th of July on the headwaters of Spring Creek. Furthermore, San Angelo had big ponds at the fish hatchery, and the Colorado River was only 100 miles from the ranch house.

Strange how gullible some folks are. On the last morning, I really put on a show. We shot a bad stretch called "Devil's Tooth" and another called "Cliffside" right in a row. Water poured over the front and sides of the raft. I bit my tongue in two different places.

At disembarkation point, I was the first one on the banks. The sand was warm and sound and steady. I was worn out from doing so much acting and I sure was ready to get off the stage.