

Pikes Peak River Runners

The Chic Millennium June 1999 Idaho: Middle Fork and the Main Salmon



By Christina King

Middle Fork of the Salmon (One of Idaho's premier whitewater rivers)

This permit was the culmination of many telephone calls for cancellations. Water flow, road closure, and work schedules made it difficult to nail down a date with enough notice. In the space of two weeks, we got a date for June 24 on the Middle Fork of the Salmon and June 29 for the Main Salmon. A difficult feat to pull off! The Middle Fork is 100 miles long and flows into the Main Salmon river. The Main Salmon put-in is a few miles below and we planned to float to the Corn Creek put-in and check in with the ranger and run another 85 miles to Carey Creek. Pete and I got a group of ten boaters together on short notice and our trip was set. **Our group consisted of the Constantine family (Ken, Cindy, Katie [14], and Kirsten [14]), Chris Canady, Jack Schneider and Wendy Rombold, Pete and Christina King, and Ed Tucker (Christina's dad).** The King's are veterans of the Middle Fork and Main Salmon rivers, and Jack had run the Middle Fork once many years before. Ed was a veteran Grand Canyon and Main Salmon "bow monkey" but had never run the Middle Fork.

Pete and I got to the put-in first and started rigging our boats after checking in with the river ranger. The river was running 5.78 feet on the gauge. Officially considered high water but manageable. The ramp that is used to slide the boats down to the river must be seen to be believed. Boater's load their boats fully rigged and slide them down to the river.

Campsites on the Middle Fork are assigned by the ranger. Each group can camp at one hot springs campsite during their trip and (of course) allowed to visit all the hot springs. There were lots of commercial and private boaters rigging to launch the next day (7 permits/groups). We were the smallest group by far. The average group size seemed to be in the twenties. This large group size turned out to be a trend for our entire run through the Middle Fork corridor. Much different than our typical previous early season runs. Usually, we considered ourselves lucky to see others on the river for safety sake.



Day 1 Fire Island

The first ten miles of the Middle Fork keep your attention. I rowed constantly. The first rapid is a few yards from the launch ramp. Murphy's Hole (high water rapid only) was manageable but at exceedingly high levels it is extremely hard to pull away from. Chris was running a flat-bottom bucket raft with no passengers. Chris spent the next 185 miles bailing on a consistent basis. Velvet Falls rapid was coming up at mile 6 and Chris was running out of control (full of water). Pete, Jack, and I pulled left and missed the falls. Ken ran the left side of the falls and Chris went right down the middle. Chris described it as submerging his raft through a wall of water. We all were glad Velvet was behind us and our boats were upright. We floated by the Trail Flat hot springs, but they are located near the river's edge and were underwater. The other rapids we ran during the day seemed to blend into each other one after another. After some confusion about where the actual Fire Island campsite was located, we finally pulled over to the correct place and set up camp.

During dinner, a moose ambled by camp and stayed within close view for several hours. What a treat!

After dinner we made a short hike upriver to Sheepeater hot springs and soaked our adventurous first day away. Deer ambled by while we soaked and were totally unconcerned by our presence. Many animals congregate near the Middle fork's numerous natural hot springs and use them as mineral licks. The weather during the day was extraordinarily warm.



Day 2 Pungo Creek

Day 2 dawned very cold (you could see our breath) after a wild evening thunderstorm. We were glad to be safely tucked into our tents during the storm. As the day progressed, we warmed up nicely. Pistol Creek rapid (sharp s-bend) with boiling eddies and holes was our biggest rapid today. Everyone did fine. We stopped at the Indian Creek ranger station and checked out the dirt airstrip. Camp was at Pungo Creek where we poked around the remains of an old gold mine. No nuggets were found except for the scenery. Dipsticks made their

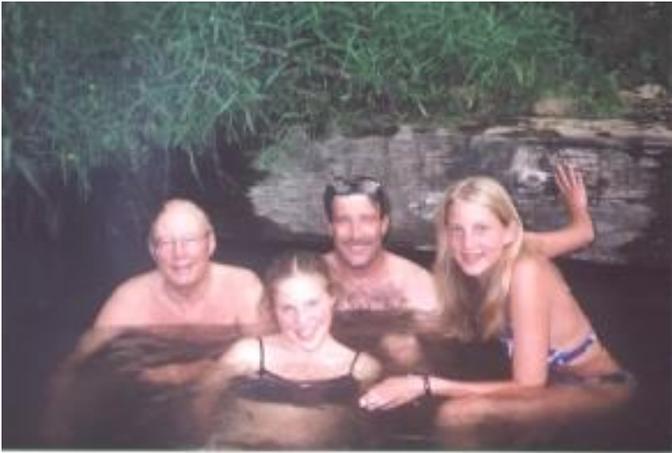
first appearance and the weather was perfect for water fighting.

Dad experienced his first Smore for dessert tonight. He ate 4 but did not have the patience to slowly melt the marshmallows. Kirsten was horrified by Dad's method of turning the marshmallow into a flaming black carbon cinder and then eating it. Some people are sleeping with their dipsticks because of stealing.



Day 3 Big Loon

Sunflower Flat hot springs was our destination first thing in the morning but we had to get through a rapid called Ski Jump. Ken ran the hole, but we all floated upright into Sunflower ready to stand under the hot shower and soak in the hot spring pools making sure to dodge the abundant poison ivy. We stopped for lunch at Jackass and watched another group run the hole in Jackass rapid. One boat looked very tippy but stayed upright. Saw several river otters that looked like logs. My dad waved to one of them and he swam toward us quite curious then swam away. Whitey Cox hot springs provided more than soaking entertainment. Whitey's gravestone was decorated with piles of elk antlers. The group camping at Whitey captured several gopher snakes and looked like human snake charmers.



Camp was at our assigned hot springs camp called Big Loon Hot springs. We ate dinner and walked a mile up the path that runs along Big Loon creek to the hot springs. After listening to the men in our group talk about the Millennium (Year of the Men), the women formed their own Millennium group. We called ourselves the Chic Millennium club. Katie and Kirsten were dubbed the Chiclets. We took turns dunking in the cold creek running next to the hot springs. Ed and Christina set the record for the longest cold-water dunks (4 minutes). Turns out we were practicing for future unintentional river dunking's. (See Day 4). Today was a full day of hot springs.

Day 4 Driftwood



Hospital Bar, our last hot springs on the Middle Fork, was underwater. We ran Tappan Falls (easy at this water level) with no mishaps. We stopped to have lunch at the Flying B outfitter ranch.

Haystack rapids was right around the corner. I noticed lots of landslides from storms in the last year. I ran lead and chose a left route through Haystack.

Extremely poor decision, I have always run it on the right but thought I saw a slot on the left that looked better this time. I dropped into a huge hole, surfed, and flipped sideways, as the hole shot my boat skyward. Dad and I were in the water, running almost the entire rapid in our lifejackets. We rescued ourselves at the end on river left. My dad later said he did not have much energy left. My first flip was in Lava Falls in the Grand



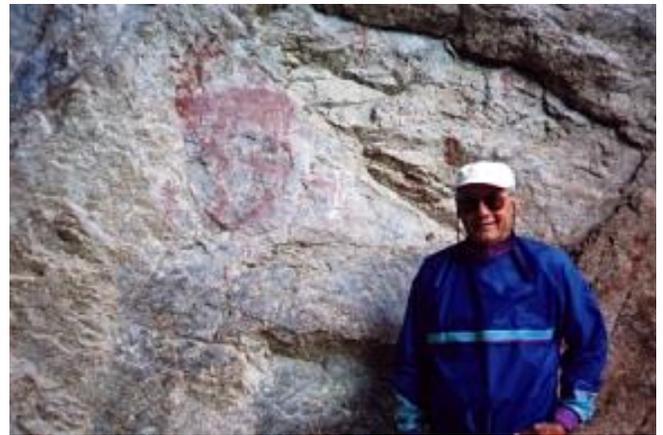
Canyon and this (my fifth) flip was harder according to Dad. This comes from the mouth of an AARP-let (67). I agreed.

Right after we got out of the river, I saw Chris go by us chasing my boat. Ken was way behind and never saw my flip. My dad and I were gasping for breath after dumping over many rocks and drinking lots of river water by accident. We saw Ken as he waved to us and kept floating. We were too shocked to react. Turns out, he never recognized that it was us and thought we were kayakers going to the bathroom at the river's edge. When they rounded the corner, they still did not realize that we were upriver, and the upside-down boat was mine. They eventually figured it out. Jack and Wendy stopped to pick us up and Pete (running sweep) chased after my boat. Chris finally corralled my boat after a mile or so and they had it flipped back upright by the time we got downriver. My dad lost his Teva, and I lost some self-confidence, but no equipment was lost or damaged. Otherwise, we were tired but safe. I did not feel confident again until the Main Salmon. I was glad we camped at Driftwood with no more rapids to run today.

Day 5 Otter Bar

Today brings a fresh perspective. Ultra-River Conservatism. I re-lived the flip all night. Rattlesnake cave with pictographs is our first stop. This hidden cave shelters colorful pictographs of elk and stick figures.

We pull into the Waterfall Creek eddy to gaze up at the thunderous whitewater pouring vertically down the tumbling rocks. A pack bridge crosses the thundering creek. Some of the more energetic in our group hike up to Veil Falls to stand under the light mist but miss seeing the pictographs (forgot to look up). We stopped for lunch and had a large group (15) of big horn sheep and lambs cavort across the river from us. The lambs were so cute. Big waves signal unnamed rapids above Porcupine, Redside and Weber rapids. All were run uneventfully. We looked for the trail near Papoose camp and the rainbow cliff wall that signals a path to more pictographs but miss it. We hug the left wall at Lower Cliffside rapids and run it well. Stopping at Stoddard was tricky because of the lack eddies but we all made it. Stoddard Creek is the site of more great pictographs. Even found a dead hawk at the base of the cliff. Looks like the hawk misjudged the cliff face. Camp for the evening was Otter Bar. Otter's lovely sandbar was just coming back after the high water. Saw more river otters at Otter bar, how appropriate! Swam in the eddy and dip-sticked each other mercilessly.



Main Salmon

Day 6 Lantz Bar

Today was our transition day from the Middle Fork to the Main Salmon. Rubber was my last big rapid on the Middle Fork. I approached it too tentatively and set my boat up on its side. Fortunately, Dad high-sided and we stayed upright. Okay, my confidence is lost again. I still had more rapids to go; Hancock, Devil's Tooth, House Rocks, Jump-off, and Goat Creek. Ken lost Katie for a moment in Devil's Tooth but Cindy hauled her back in and all ended well. We floated out to the confluence of the Main Salmon and dropped Dad off at Cache Bar (where his truck was waiting for him). Katie got one last dipstick off at him as he drove away with our trash. After saying goodbye to Dad, we floated down to Corn Creek (put-in for the Main) and checked in

with the ranger. The Main Salmon was running 5.5 feet. Much bigger volume compared to the Middle Fork. Got our boat tags and floated down to the pictographs at Legend Creek. Camp was Lantz Bar with a long water fight. The Chiclets missed Ed and adopted Pete as their new mascot (mush, mush, mush). Kirsten really cracked the whip around Peter, barking out orders on behalf of the Chic Club. She made a wonderful Chiclet. We hiked up to the Lantz cabin and poked around looking at the old homestead and visitor cabin.

Day 7 Yellow Pine

Barth hot springs was today's highlight. We spent an hour soaking in the hot springs and turned into prunes. Barth has been cemented in by the local outfitters and fitted with scrubbing brushes to clean the sides. It has a drain plug that is supposed to be pulled when each river party is done using the hot springs (to minimize algae growth and clean out the tub). This is our most deluxe hot springs yet. We scrubbed and emptied the tub when we were done. Most of the rapids are washed out including Salmon Falls, but Split Rock rapid still had big waves. Camp was a spacious timbered beach called Yellow Pine.



Day 8 Rabbit Bar

Big Mallard and Elkhorn rapids are noticeably big. Ken runs numerous holes in Elkhorn. It turns out to be a long day with lots of flat water and wind. We camp at a nice sandy beach, swim, and (of course) water fight.

Day 9 Takeout at Carey Creek

We only have Dried Meat and Chittam rapids today. Chittam is huge. At this water level it is the most difficult rapid on the Main Salmon. Pete, Jack, and I run right breaking through a huge right lateral to get away from the wall and holes on the left. Chris and Ken elect to run left all the way. Interesting and scary but all runs were okay. Carey Creek is our takeout and we are glad to reach it safe and sound. What a fun trip with a great group! Everyone pitched in and worked well together. The Chiclets (Katie and Kirsten) made the Chic Millennium Club proud. The Chic Millennium club will have many more recruits before Jan 1, 2000 arrives. Pete and I leave the take-out to make our way to Westwater Canyon (Loma to Cisco) for yet another river trip. See our next story [Snap, Crackle, Pop, and Roll for our Westwater trip](#). So many rivers, so little time!