

# "History of the White Water Rafting Trips"

by Fred Opperman

The rafting trips all started back in 1985 when I was invited along to fill a spot with a group of employees from Ford Motor Company. This group had been going for a number of years and like most large groups, someone always seems to cancel at the last minute, and I filled that spot.

I was hooked. The thrill and excitement was like nothing I had ever experienced before. The Gauley River is a dam released flow that is regulated to provide rafting opportunities for various rafting outfitters and kayakers. At the release, there are three tubes gushing 2,600 cubic feet a second for normal flow. It is at this point that all rafts are put in. The roar with it's tremendous noise and mists, along with churning water is something to see, let alone try to launch a raft into this inferno. The river falls 678 feet over a 26 mile run. The Upper Gauley is rated as the best whitewater river in the East. There are about 80 rapids of which 5 are class V+ rapids; 9, class V; 15, class IV; 29, class III; and the rest are class II rapids. This all makes for a very exciting and thrilling ride. The Gauley is rated as 7th best white water in the world!

In 1986, I asked if I could bring some friends with the group from Ford Motor Co. That year, my son, Todd played hooky from school and I had Joel Purpur and Dan Murray also along for their first trip down a wild scenic river.

In 1987, with now Joel and Dan hooked on this wild trip, we got a raft of our own, that is eight guys. That year we had myself, Joel, Dan, Steve Stewart, John Jackman, Al Fierst, Bruce Williams and Don Spiers. This was really the first trip where it was all golf related from the Chicago area. Our River Guide this year and the past two years was Robin Moore. When our group awoke at the Bankers Club in Thurmond, WV on Sunday morning to go rafting, there was a light skim of ice on the puddles. Everyone thought we were crazy with it being so cold, and then to go rafting for two days. It turned out fine.

In 1988, the drought year, the river was low and we could only float the Upper Gauley for one day and then we were bussed to the New River for the second day. This year we took two rafts or 16 guys. They were: F. Opperman, J. Purpur, Dan Murray, Steve Stewart, John Jackman, A. Fierst, B. Williams and D. Spiers. The rest are all first time rafters: Tom Nestor, Roger Stewart, John Lebedevs, Julius Albaugh, Dave Murray, Peter Leuzinger, and Dave Fisher. Again we stayed at the Bankers Club. That year they were filming the movie "Matewan" and Thurmond was the set.

1989 was again two rafts with 16 guys. The Banker Club had closed and most of the group camped at Class VI the night before. This year we had: F. Opperman, J. Purpur, D. Murray, S. Stewart, J. Jackman, A. Fierst, B. Williams, Dave Blomquist, P. Leuzinger, T. Nestor, Dave Fisher and J. Albaugh. The rookies were: John Gurke, Steve Tedhams, Mike Hessenius, and Len Berg.

1990 was again a group of 16. River Guides were Robin Moore and Marty Tribble. The rafters were: F. Opperman, J. Purpur, D. Blomquist, J. Albaugh, Don Spier, B. Williams, Len Berg, A. Fierst, P. Leuzinger and Dave Fisher. The rookies this year: Steve Crow, Don Cross, Tom Murphy, Tim Bets, Reny Jacobson and Ken Kinka.

1991 the group was expanded to 22 and three rafts. Our guides were Robin Moore, Marty and Al. The group included: F. Opperman, J. Purpur, S. Stewart, J. Albaugh, P. Leuzinger, Mike Hessenius, Len Berg, Ken Kinka, D. Spier, R. Jacobson, J. Lebedevs, Steve Crow, D. Cross, A. Fierst, B. Williams, John Gurke, D. Blomquist and Tom Murphy. The rookies: Rick Uthe, Brian Wilkens, Trent Bradford, Walter Fuchs and Dave Ward. Remember, Wally couldn't find his tent after he had set it up.

1992 the group grew by two to 24. Guides were Robin Moore, Marty and Pat. The group was: F. Opperman, J. Purpur, S. Stewart, D. Blomquist, Mike Hessenius, D. Cross, Tom Murphy, J. Lebedevs, Trent Bradford, Renny Jacobson, Ken Kinka, Rick Uthe, J. Gurke, D. Fisher, P. Leuzinger, Dave Ward, and Todd Opperman. The rookies: Dan Anderson, Tom Voight, John Minoque, Dan Albaugh, Ed Collins, Brian Melsha and John Conley. This year Tom Voight fell out before he ever really got into the raft, right at the put in.

1993 the group dropped back to 22. The guides were Robin Moore, Marty & Helen Tribble. This group with the years of experience in rafting after their names: F. Opperman 9, J. Purpur 8, S. Stewart 6, P. Leuzinger 6, D. Blomquist 6, J. Gurke 4, J. Albaugh 4, Dave Ward 3, Dave Fisher 5, T. Bradford 3, M. Hessenius 4, Tom Murphy 3, D. Albaugh 2, Tom Voight 2, R. Jacobson 4, Ken Kinka 3, and J. Lebedevs 4. The rookies were: Don Ferreri, Zach Thompson, Dan West, Greg Johnson and Tim Betz.

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(Rafting Trips continued)

1994 and what could be the final trip — the group was reduced to 16, with only 7 from the Chicago area. Our guides were once again Robin Moore, and Marty Tribble. A little info on the guides, Robin has been rafting for 20+ years. He was hand picked in 1991 to go on a National Geographic trip to Peru's Colca River and raft it. It is the earth's deepest canyon. See "National Geographic" Vol. 183, No. 1, January 1993. Unfortunately the only clear picture of Robin are his ugly and battered feet. Robin organized the river guides into an association and became their first President two years ago. Marty, has been rafting all over the world for the past 15 years. From England, Scotland, Australia and New Zealand. He follows the water so to speak. Both men are EMT's and very qualified, plus they tell tremendous stories and bad jokes.

This years group with the years they have been rafting behind their names: F. Opperman 10, Joel Purpur 9, Steve Stewart 7, Al Fierst 6, Don Cross 4, Dave Ward 4, Tom Voight 3, Mike Hessenius 5, Zach Thompson, Dan West, Brian Melsha, Brian Wilkens, Steve Tedhams, Fred Anderson, Harry Scheuman, and Kevin Henley. This year the weather was perfect with the temperature in the 70's and the water temperature was 68 degrees.



*The 1994 Group picture: Front row, left to right - Don Cross, Brian Wilkins, River Guide Robin Moore, Dave Ward. 2nd row - Zach Thompson, Brian Melsha, Fred Opperman, River Guide Marty Tribble, Joel Purpur, Mike Hessenius, Harry Scheumann, and Steve Stewart. Back row - Tom Voight, Dan West, Fred Anderson, Steve Tedhams, Kevin Henley and Al Fierst.*

Our group of 16 did pretty good by staying in the rafts. Robin did finally get Fred out at a rapid, the first time in 10 trips. Joel twice checked out the underside of the raft, once intentionally when we were instructed to run him over as he was swimming and the second time by Joel not being able to ride the bucking raft through a rapid. He was flipped off and was run over. He finally came up without his helmet and really gave Robin a scare for the length of time he was gone. Our trip was delayed three times by accidents and hauling people out who got injured. Leg splints were applied to two women. One of them had to be hoisted by ropes up a rock cliff to be carried out to a hospital. A black eye, scratches, and bloody noses were other accidents in the other boats in

our group. One raft flipped completely coming through the class V + Lost Paddle rapid. Everyone was out, including the guide. That is where the one woman was hurt.

Altogether over the past years, our group took 45 different people on this wild raft trip. Most of them kept coming back for more. Others drifted away, either by moving, job demands or white water rafting was not their idea of fun. For me it was the greatest, the thrill of the rapids and being able to share it with so many friends.



*Summerville Dan with 3 tubes putting out 2,600 cubic feet a second of white water.*



*Our raft going through a Class II rapid.*



*Joel Purpur and the back of Fred Opperman in the front of the raft while "surfing a hydraulic".*



*Zach Thompson, Brian Wilkins, Fred Opperman, Joel Purpur and Mike Hessenius waiting for the water to rise to start the second day of rafting.*