


Adventure of White Water River Running

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Photos by Jim Blaser

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 Bishop Vaughn J. Featherstone has been running rivers for many years. His first experience was as a young Explorer leader when he took groups of boys down the Snake River in canoes. Later he made the acquaintance of Jack Currey, president of Western River Expeditions, and he became a boatman for Jack and gained much valuable experience in river running.

He has run the following rivers, some many times: the Yampa and Green rivers in eastern Utah; the Colorado River, including the section in Cataract Canyon; the Usumacinta River in Mexico and Guatemala; the Selway River in northern Idaho; the Salmon River; the Middle Fork of the Salmon River; plus many other minor rivers.

Through the ages men have blessed and cursed the waters. Rivers and streams can be a thing of beauty far beyond our power to paint or describe. They can bring peace and serenity as they cascade over rocks and logs, ever moving on. Conversely, who has not sat by a radio or TV set horrified at the devastation wrought by flood waters on the rampage. We have seen homes washed from their foundations and have seen cars and trucks tumbled like toys before great waves of water.

Can Latter-day Saints enjoy the water and still have a profound respect for its powers of

destruction? I think they can. It has been my privilege to float down many of the rivers in the western United States and in Mexico.

Many times I have been questioned concerning the 61st section of the Doctrine and Covenants:

"But verily I say unto you, that it is not needful for this whole company of mine elders to be moving swiftly upon the waters, whilst the inhabitants on either side are perishing in unbelief.

"Nevertheless, I suffered it that ye might bear record; behold, there are many dangers upon the waters, and more especially hereafter;

"For I, the Lord, have decreed in mine anger many destructions upon the waters; yea, and especially upon these waters.

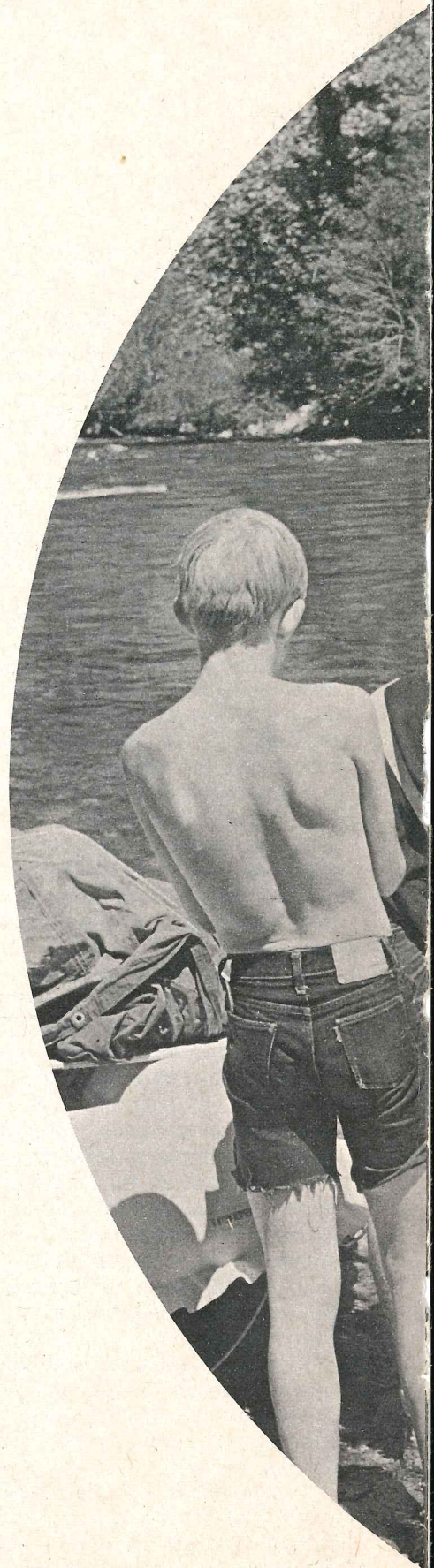
"Nevertheless, all flesh is in mine hand, and he that is faithful among you shall not perish by the waters.

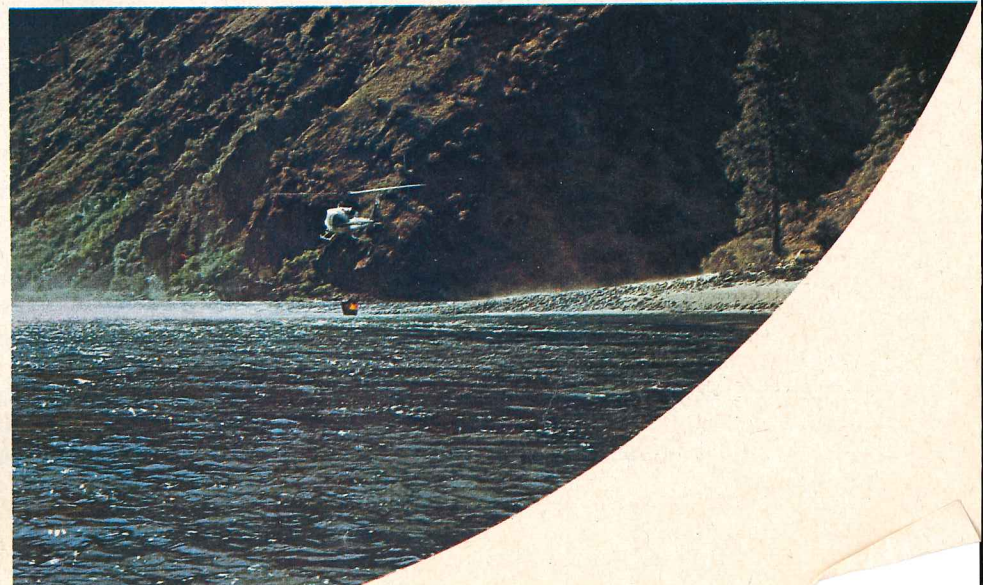
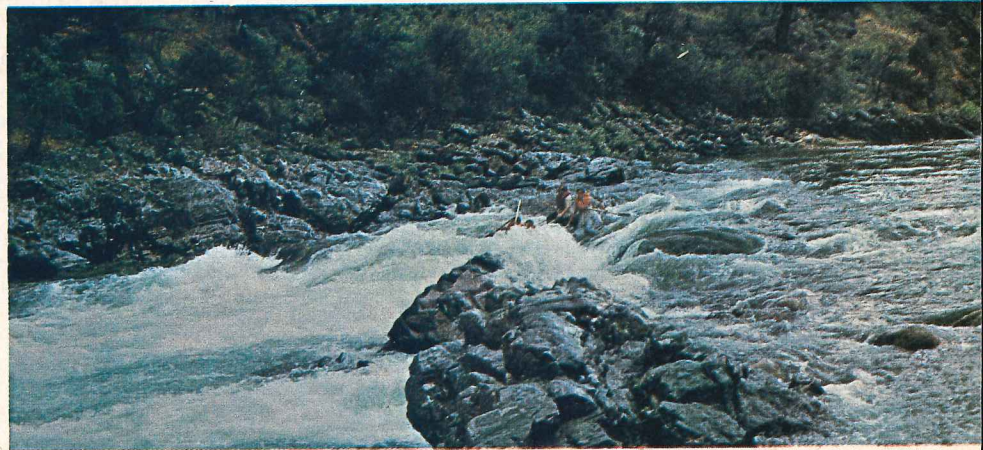
"Behold, I, the Lord, in the beginning blessed the waters; but in the last days, by the mouth of my servant John, I cursed the waters.

"And it shall be said in days to come that none is able to go up to the land of Zion upon the waters, but he that is upright in heart.

"And, as I, the Lord, in the beginning cursed the land, even so in the last days have I blessed it, in its time, for the use of my saints, that they may partake the fatness thereof.

"And now I give unto you a commandment that what I say unto one I say unto all, that you





shall forewarn your brethren concerning these waters, that they come not in journeying upon them, lest their faith fail and they are caught in snares;

"I, the Lord, have decreed, and the destroyer rideth upon the face thereof, and I revoke not the decree." (D&C 61:3-6, 14, 16-19. Italics added.)

This scripture may be the cause of great concern among those who would consider river running or a kayak trip down one of the major rivers. One of the problems many of us have is that we lose our perspective. To my way of thinking our Savior created few things more beautiful than lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams, which beautify and give variety to the face of the earth.

One of the great men I know is Brother Dale Duffy from Boise, Idaho. Every young man who has ever come in contact with Dale will never forget his influence. It was Dale's idea, as a Scoutmaster, to purchase boating equipment and float the Middle Fork of the Salmon River.

The troop started river running about the time my three oldest sons were in Scout and Explorer troops in the Boise 15th Ward. I remember well how Dale involved the young troop leaders in planning. Few men know better the meaning of the phrase "preparation precedes power." We started a year ahead. Every boy who wanted to go had to earn the swimming and lifesaving merit badges and be able to swim two-thirds of a mile.

The biggest challenge they had to meet was the "Duffy Battle." This was hand-to-hand combat with Dale Duffy in water over their heads. He made it a real challenge to see what kind of substance the boys were made of under pressure. During this battle, I'm sure each boy found just how hard he could fight for his life if he had to.

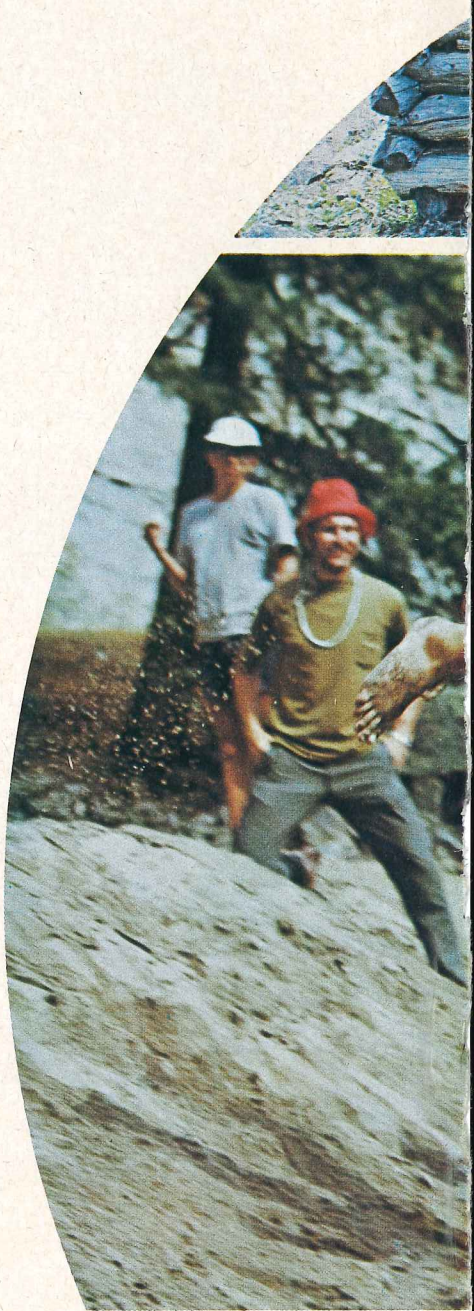
There were also hours of

classroom training prior to the first float trip, followed by the practical application of this training as the boys floated down the Boise River in preparation for the Middle Fork experience. Following are some of the things my boys remember and will never forget from this special training:

- * You are never on the river without a life jacket.
- * Every boy must have a razor-sharp knife in a scabbard on his hip, for use in case he falls in and gets tangled in the rope.
- * When you fall in, you face downstream, your feet in front of you to parry off the rocks that are down river.
- * When you fall in, always stay with the boat if possible.
- * When you swim to shore, swim to the closest shore, diagonally downstream. This conserves strength, and once you are ashore you can be picked up by another boat.
- * If someone in your boat falls in, the closest crewmen should immediately grab him and pull him back into the boat as quickly and with as much strength as possible.
- * Never pass the lead boat.
- * The rubber raft assigned to bring up the rear never passes other boats.
- * Never panic, no matter what the condition. Think back on your training and you will recall a specific teaching point or principle that will pull you through.
- * Whenever anyone is floating loose after being capsized, pick him up in your boat immediately.

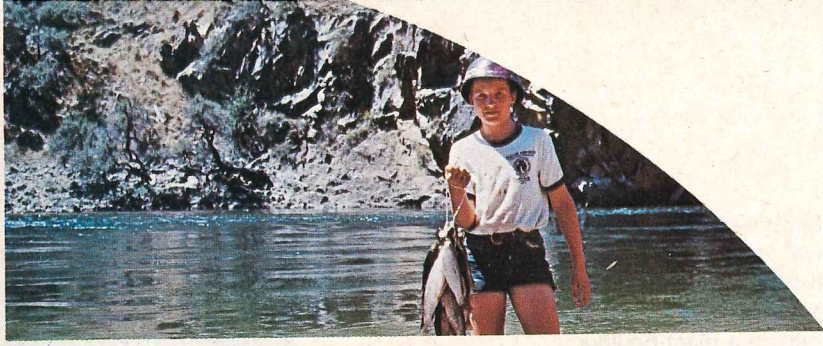
Of course, this is only a small particle of the training the boys received from Dale Duffy. They listened because they respected him and knew that anything they did not understand might put their lives in jeopardy.

On every trip the boys would go to a point just below Dagger Falls and jump into the cold, chill



water and float down about 50 yards. This was to take away the initial shock of falling into the water should they capsize. We assigned a crew to each raft, with one of the boys assigned as crew leader. This boy was given total authority while on the river. Usually we would have about six rafts, with three to five boys and their gear on each raft.

I well remember one trip when Scott, my fourth oldest son, was on the same raft with me and three other fellows. On the



first or second day of our trip we capsized (which was very common), and the raft got caught in a backwash and was being pounded by tons of water. I came to the surface and watched for my crew members. I counted them. One boy came up, then another, and then a third—but no Scott. I started to feel real concern when I looked back and forth across the river and couldn't see him anywhere. Fifteen or 20 seconds is an eternity when you are waiting for your son to come

to the surface. It's the most helpless feeling in the world. Finally I saw Scott come to the surface and heaved a great sigh of relief.

"What took you so long?" I yelled to him.

"My foot got caught in the rope, and I was being pounded around because the boat was caught in the backwash." Then he said, "But I remembered Duffy's instruction, reached on my hip, pulled my knife out of the scabbard, cut the rope tangled

around my foot, and floated free." I owe my son's life to Dale Duffy's training.

About three weeks after our trip another group of river runners went down. Their boat wrapped around a huge rock. All of the crew except one climbed onto the rock. The other crew member got caught in a 50-foot rope and couldn't get loose. By the time those on the rock had pulled him upstream against the current and lifted him out of the water, he had drowned. This young man was 21

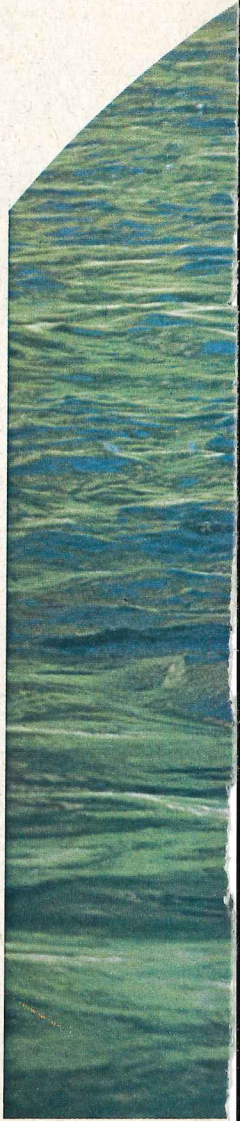
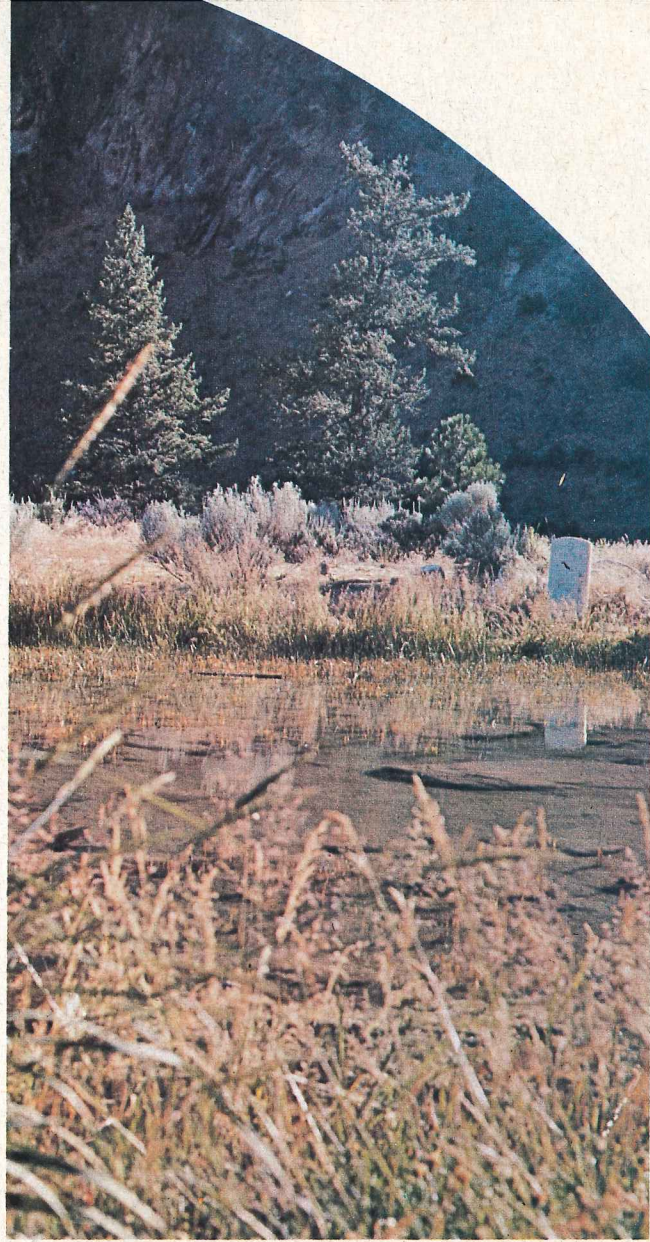
years old. Scott was 13. The whole difference was in training.

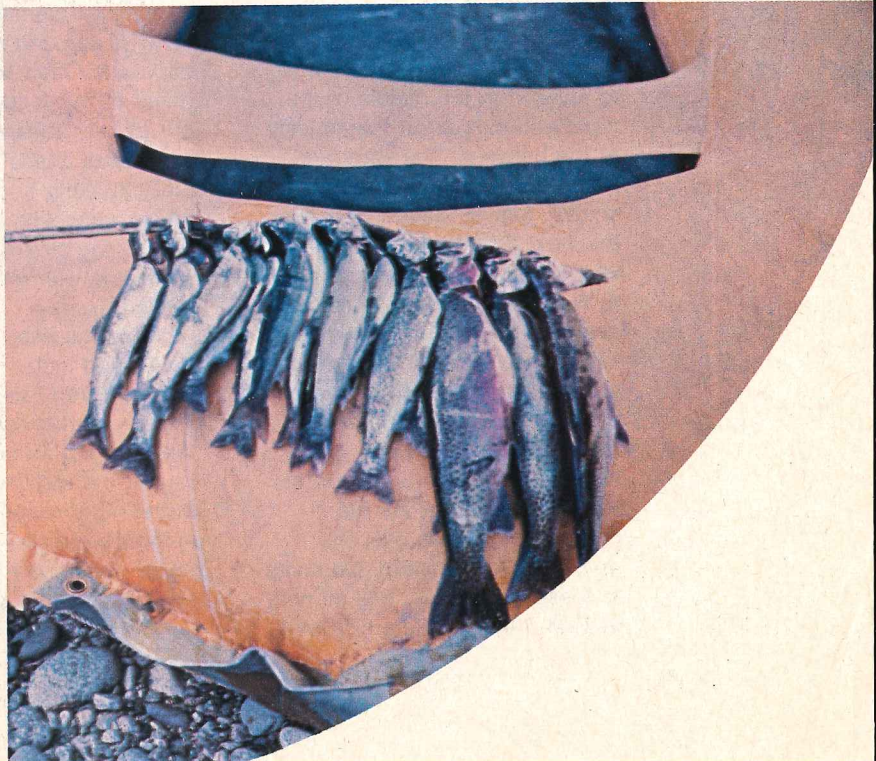
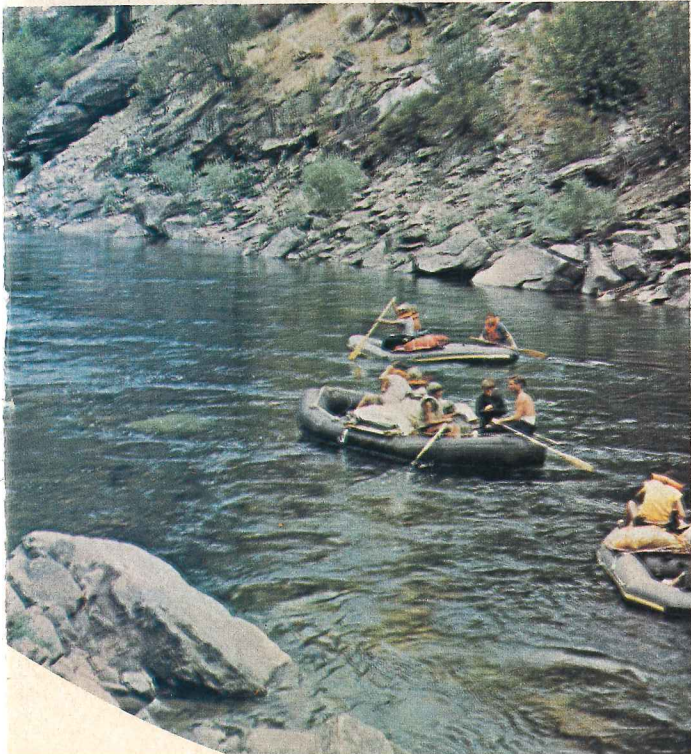
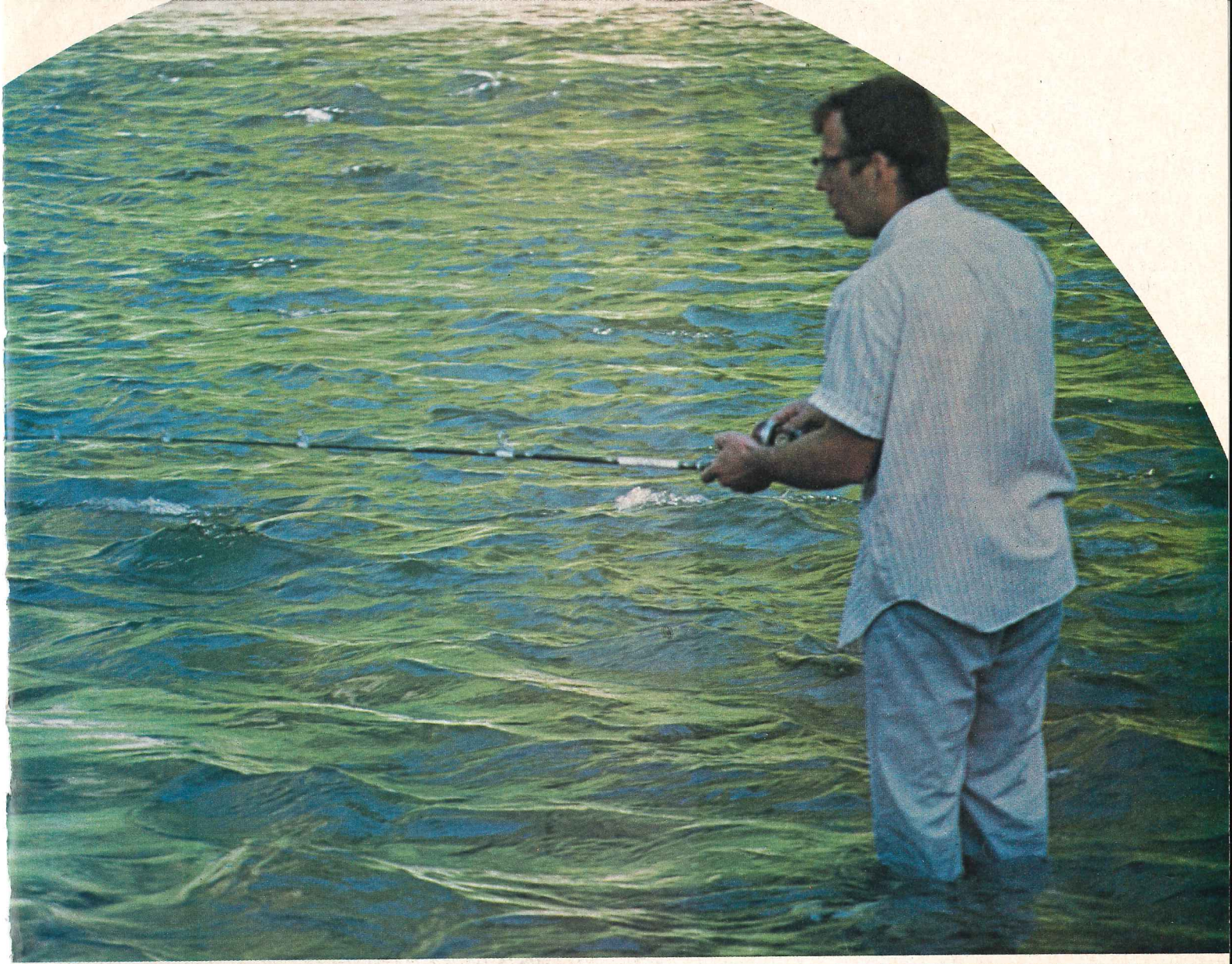
On a different trip, Joe, my third son, got caught in a huge backwash behind a giant boulder. Usually the body is heavy enough that you sink down below the waves and wash, and the current pulls you under the backwash and away from danger. However, in Joe's case the water washed him into the backwash, which threw him like a top back into the hole. This happened over and over, and we feared for his life, but Joe did not panic. He remembered that Dale had told him he would wash through, and so Joe let himself drop down into the water and eventually washed through.

There is an element of physical danger when you go down any river. There is an element of danger rappelling down cliffs or water skiing. Yet I would ten times rather have my boys face physical danger on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River than I would have them drag the streets of the city where vile and filthy temptations lurk at every corner and where their spiritual lives are in danger.

Let me tell you some of the great, exciting things that happen on the river. There are bridges that span the Middle Fork. We like to stop and climb up on the railings of the bridges and dive or jump into the beautiful, sparkling-clear river 25 or 30 feet below. The water is clean enough to drink. It is absolutely beautiful. There are cascading waterfalls that we shower beneath. There are high cliffs, such as those at "Pool" or "Hospital Bar" campsites, that we dive from. The water must be 40 or 50 feet deep. The cliffs are anywhere from 15 to 40 feet high.

What a great experience for boys to feel that exhilarating challenge and accomplishment as they work up enough nerve to dive from these high cliffs. Then there





are several hot springs that other travelers have turned into pools and tubs where one can lie and soak his aching muscles and relax. Fishing is great. We usually have several griddles of fish during the trip. I really never cared much for trout until I ate some of that solid pink and white meat cooked out in the open. Now, just thinking about it, I crave some.

As a rule the weather is excellent, with not more than one day of rain during a week's trip; it is usually hot under a sunny, clear sky.

Among the exciting activities on the river is the water fighting that is carried on between crews of separate boats; they splash each other with bailing buckets, oars, and paddles.

In some places the water is absolutely calm, and one can just lean back, drop into the river, and float downstream in the cool, beautiful water. Occasionally we can even float through rapids in a lifejacket or on an air mattress.

We watch for sandbars for overnight camping. These usually lead right out into deep pools, and we swim before and after dinner, and often again just before bedding down. There is a huge bonfire to stand around and warm up by in between dips. One of the most thrilling experiences is to awaken in the middle of the night and look up at the majesty of the heavens. The stars are breathtaking, and there is no smoke, fog, or cloud to obscure the view. Sometimes when there is a full moon, we float the river at night. Such a sight is seldom seen anywhere else in the world. The Milky Way appears almost as a cloud, stretching from one end of the sky to the other. All the constellations stand out, giving evidence that God is truly in his heaven, and these are his creations. He rules over the heavens and the earth. On some of these occasions I feel so near to God, I seem to feel his Spirit

and know that he is willing to answer our prayers.

We read in the Book of Moses that Moses saw the beginning from the end and all the creations. And he said, "Now for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed." (1:10.) Under a star-filled sky on the river, I feel just the reverse. I feel the total importance of man in God's plan.

Every bend in the river, every new tributary, every change of scenery brings a new and exciting challenge. Because of the varying water levels, the river changes every trip. It is never the same. There are always challenges to keep a young man excited and involved in maturing to his full manhood. We see all kinds of wildlife that can rarely be seen any other way—mountain goats, mountain sheep, moose, elk, eagles, hawks, and all kinds of wild bird life such as chuckers, field grouse, and so forth—all adding to the experience of floating the river.

If we spend more than one day on a sandbar, we organize track and field activities, high jumping, broad jumping, racing, shot putting, and underwater swimming—anything that the mind of a young man can conceive. Often we engage in a game of flag football. Frisbies are usually aboard, and sometimes chess boards are brought along to help a river runner relax with a good mate after a hard day of rowing. Underwater swimming with snorkels and fins can be exciting.

From the river we see Indian caves and Indian writings on high walls. At Veil Falls a beautiful, sheer waterfall drops some 300 feet, making a gentle shower of rain at the bottom. Underneath in the huge cavern are many authentic Indian writings. We've never visited Veil Falls without seeing mountain goats on the high ledges in the cavern.

Another exciting experience is to see the salmon going upstream to spawn. We always see several, and it affirms our testimony that Christ truly is the Creator. These salmon fight their way over tremendous waterfalls, obstacles, and powerful currents, returning to the spot where they were born that they might spawn and start the life cycle again.

We constantly see deer on these trips. They are gentle and fairly tame, with a sense of curiosity that brings them close to camp. Our young men are impressed with the gentleness of the deer in the high, primitive areas.

White water river running is exciting, but there is an element of danger there. One must be well prepared, in top physical condition, and must love a good challenge. He should love the out-of-doors and feel the exhilaration that comes from the cold night air and an invigorating swim, as well as the heat from the warm fire.

I have never known a young man who floated down the river who didn't raise his spiritual level many degrees. There's something highly inspiring about seeing the majesty of God's creation in the primitive areas of Idaho. Almost every young man seems to be attracted to finding a secluded spot where he may kneel and communicate with the Lord. I've seen this happen again and again. My own experiences are the same. Early in the morning and late at night I find a peaceful place where I can kneel along the river and look up at the majesty of the heavens and the multitudinous creations of the Savior. I feel very close to him in that sacred setting, and it is during these hours that I pledge to the Lord every ounce of energy that I have—pledge to follow him at all costs—and have a desire to keep kindled in my bosom the powerful and holy feelings that come as I kneel before him. ❏

