

# WILD WATER, WILD WOMEN

*A whitewater SUP adventure in the heart of Idaho*

By Nikki Gregg Photos by Mike Leeds

**The air around us is charged with electricity.** But we're not stuck in a lightning storm. We're dripping with sweat in the July heat as we put on our river gear and pump up our inflatable boards. It hits us that we're finally all together in the whitewater mecca of Idaho, ecstatic to start a three-day river adventure. We're amped to put on the water of our first stop and paddle in the environment that elicits passion in each one of us: the glorious rapids of a river.

One month prior, I stopped to grab a quick bite to eat at the Eddyline Brewery in the river town of Buena Vista, Colorado, when I overheard a group dining next to me discussing standup paddling on whitewater. They were tourists who'd just finished a rafting trip. I had to stifle my laughter while ingesting their bold outbursts, trying not to spit beer all over my food:

"Standup paddling *definitely* does *not* belong in the river!"

"Those people are crazy!"

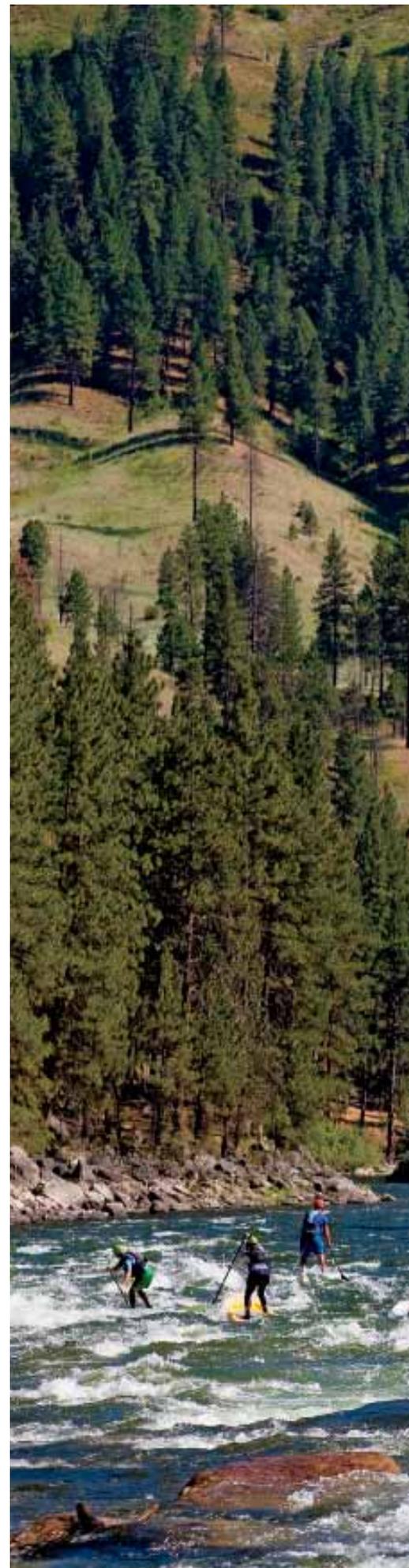
"Why would anyone want to *do* that in whitewater?"

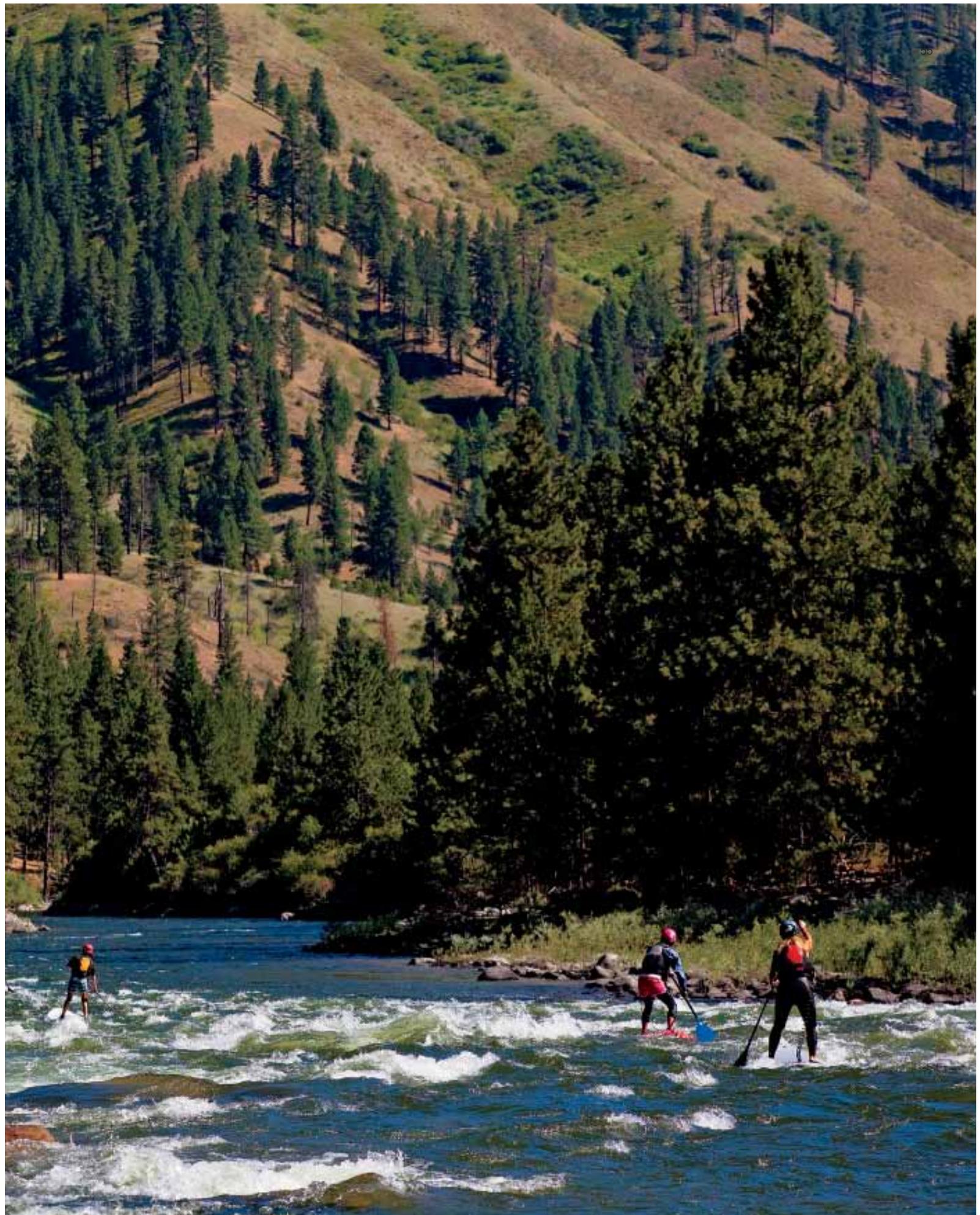
"What's *wrong* with those people?"

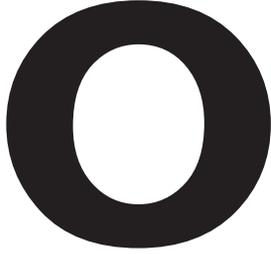
I kept my mouth shut and continued to eat. If only they'd known.

I was in the middle of hand-picking this team of five women from all over the country to join me in Idaho, a seemingly endless playground of rivers and one of the top destinations for paddling in the United States. Whitewater SUP is a niche of the sport, and the few women who are pushing and shaping this discipline are hard-core. They charge.

Take Haley Mills for example. With 14 years of whitewater kayaking experience and standing a mere 5 feet tall, she's a sassy powerhouse of fierce athleticism. A professional kayaker currently point-ranked as the top female freestyle kayaker in the U.S., Haley saw standup paddling as a new challenge, wanting to surf waves standing up, seeing the river in a totally different way. Haley revealed her competitive SUP prowess in Colorado last summer, standing on the podium after every river event she entered.







ur first Idaho stop is the Payette River with its three main forks: the North Fork, the South Fork and the Main. The South Fork Payette consists

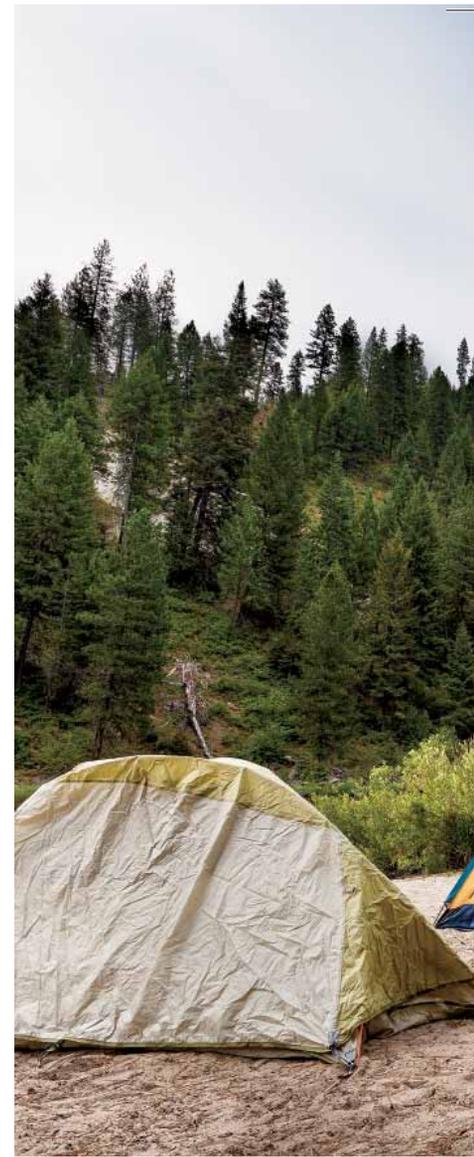
mostly of Class III - IV rapids. The North Fork features miles of continuous Class V, one of the most difficult stretches of river in the country. The section we're running is the Class III Main Payette, which begins when the North and South forks converge at Banks, a small state highway turnout with a café and raft outpost. We join our guide for the day, local Boise resident and owner of Glide SUP, Jeffrey Banks. Also on the water with us is photographer Mike Leeds, an Idaho-born and -raised whitewater kayaker. He jumps in his boat with all his camera equipment and follows us downriver.

I constantly get asked, "Why would you run a rapid on an SUP?" The answer isn't easy. It's all of it. It's how you can hear the rapid before you see it. How the river drops off and the horizon-line ahead indicates where the river's gradient increases and

a rapid forms. As you get closer, you can feel the rumbling and see the intermittent spurts of mist rising from the river. Your heart beats faster and the adrenaline flows thicker in anticipation. You feel more alive than ever—and totally in the moment, completely present, the only thought being the task at hand.

It's not just the heart-pumping challenge of making it through a rapid standing. There's a distinct feeling of joy when paddling with your friends and taking in surroundings often not accessible by foot. There are no aggressive or foul-mouthed surfers calling you a "sweeper" or a "kook" in the lineup, only smiling faces and encouragement from people who are rooting for you. There's a special bond forged with friends on the river. Lifelong bonds.

At the top of a rapid named Go Left on the Main Payette, Jeffrey tells us to pull to the side so we can scout. The entry has a nice green tongue to the left of a large boulder leading into a big wave train. But this rapid, unlike the others, is quite shallow. A rather large wave halfway into the rapid seems unavoidable. No one can get far enough left. We all hit it—like colliding with a brick wall—stopping our boards and sending each of us into the drink for a swim.



**The Life: Camping above the North Fork's powerful rapids. Below, the author charging on the Main Payette.**



and help take care of his ailing grandmother. Chris discovered river surfing after tragically losing his grandmother in a house fire. His story is inspiring, not to mention his surfing. It's almost like watching art to see him slash river waves on his shortboard with an effortless style.

The next day we charge Howard's Plunge, the final rapid on the "Carbarton" stretch, a Class III section on the upper North Fork (above the Class V stuff). We stop and scout from the road as the apprehension builds. This is going to be a tough one. Haley sacks up and charges first, avoiding the huge hole on the right and almost makes it. Rookie river-girl, Terri Plunkett, also nearly sticks it. We all run the rapid a few times, but my lines are off and I manage to Superman off my board on each try (one time right into the huge hole I was desperately trying to avoid). Brittany Parker, however, had the most memorable experience of us all.

Brittany, the youngest of our group at 22, is a fun-loving raft guide and standup paddler from Glenwood Springs, Colo. I met her at the 2011 Rocky Mountain Surf Festival when she nearly passed me during the downriver race on a Costco Wavestorm wearing a high-flotation PFD for customers on raft trips. Over the last couple of years she's become a tough competitor in river SUP. During Brittany's last run down Howard's Plunge, she falls right into the crease of the river's current between the hole and the main flow, sucking her under for the longest whitewater downtime she's ever experienced. The terrified look on her face says it all when she resurfaces, reminding us that the river can be completely unforgiving. Spend any amount of time running whitewater and you're sure to get humbled.

Watching each of the girls paddle down the river that afternoon, Melanie Seiler earns the most style points. The veteran West Virginia whitewater paddler is rocking knee-high socks and a skirt, gliding down each rapid with ease. She's been paddling and raft-guiding on the New and Gauley rivers since the late '90s and it shows. And for someone who can be credited for establishing SUP in the storied New River Gorge, Melanie sees river SUP as a "whole new challenge that forces you to analyze moving water in a completely different way." She also admits it's kind of silly. And incredibly fun. Sticking a hard move is so much more rewarding on an SUP for her.

That night we set camp on a white sandy beach on the North Fork. After a long day, we're pretty beat and we crash in our tents or outfitted 'car camping' vehicles to the sound of rapids. I have a chance to chat more with Leeds' photo assistant on our trip, Chris Peterson, a professional surfer from Hawaii who relocated to Boise to take a break from the surfing scene



**T**raveling north on Highway 55, we stop at Kelly's Whitewater Park in Cascade, Idaho. We spend hours playing on small manmade play-waves in the park, at one point surfing the same wave simultaneously. Terri catches her first river wave that day and her stoke is priceless. Though Terri traveled from Southern California as the only inexperienced river paddler in our group, I was compelled to invite her because of her instant love and passion for whitewater and her willingness to charge. She's not afraid to take a beating.

We'd planned to rough it during our trip and camp each night, but received an unexpected hookup from Jeffery for a night's stay in his friend's cabin on nearby Cascade Lake. We grab our boards for a sunset paddle, then grill out, washing it down with my infamous beer-ritas, sharing stories and s'mores. We don't stop laughing at the campfire outside the cabin.

The next morning we're on the road again, pounding pavement north to Riggins, Idaho, a town that proudly calls itself the Whitewater Capital of America. En route, we stop for coffee in McCall, a remote mountain enclave situated on Payette Lake and a beautiful setting to fuel up.

Riggins is another hour north, so once we hit town, Terri and I duck into a store for a few supplies as we'll be off the grid for the night. Chatting up the woman at the counter, we tell her about our trip and she asks if the river was

dirty. "The runoff from the last storm made shit crick all muddy," she exclaims, concerned that the clarity of the water would compromise our photos. I look over at Terri's face, which is contorted into a look of total confusion, her eyes as big as saucers. "There's shit in the *crrrrrick*?" Terri asks slowly with a high-pitched crack in her voice. Growing up on the SoCal coast, Terri isn't fluent in the local dialect and is rightfully worried about tainted runoff.

"She's saying Sheep Creek, that flows in to the Salmon River," I translate, containing my laughter until we get to the car. Priceless.

Our caravan makes its way from Riggins about 20 miles upriver on a dirt road that takes us into the wilderness. The Salmon River is breathtaking with its white sand beaches, big Class III rapids and warm water. We spend most of the day surfing at two standing river waves, Couch Wave and just up the road at a spot called Gold's Hole. Hours drift away as we paddle for the wave, falling, swimming, hiking back up the rocky riverbank over and over again, all of us pushing and encouraging each other. The workout is intense. Between hiking up and down the river, continuously falling and swimming, getting back on our boards, and using every muscle to stay upright through rapids, it's a huge effort. Terri loses eight pounds on the three-day trip. River SUP is the true SUP fitness boot camp.

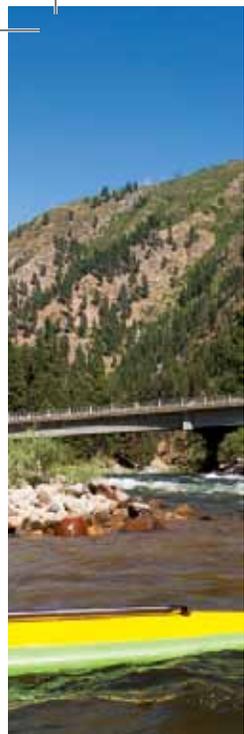
Reluctantly, we make our way back to Boise. No one wants the trip to end and the solid bond between the five of us is undeniable. It's a welcome change to be around other females in a non-competitive environment, where we can let our guards down, have fun and enjoy the river and each other's company. "Traveling



with a group of women who all have different strengths and being able to learn from each other made it unreal," Haley tells me later.

As the girls trickle out of Idaho, I find it hard to leave right away. I spend another two weeks camping and doing a few SUP instructional clinics for the hospitable folks at Boise's Idaho River Sports paddling shop. I feel like I've extended my family a little here in the Potato State, with all its wild grandeur and welcoming paddlers.

But there's more out there, and I still want a little more time on the river.



*HOURS DRIFT AWAY AS WE  
PADDLE FOR THE WAVE,  
FALLING, SWIMMING, HIKING  
BACK UP THE ROCKY RIVER-  
BANK OVER AND OVER AGAIN,  
ALL OF US PUSHING AND  
ENCOURAGING EACH OTHER.*

