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Float, Paddle, and Surf

River sports make a tourist attraction.

by Travis Armstrong

Whitewater kayakers and surfers cut, rolled, flipped, and performed other feats of skill while riding the fast moving wave at the Boise River Park. The spectators standing along the river's edge gathered not only to watch and admire the athleticism of the participants but also to appreciate and celebrate the recently constructed Harry Morrison Dam. The inaugural Boise River Park Surf and Kayak Rally, held in June 2014, was organized not as a competition but rather as a showcase of the new Boise River Park with the dam as its centerpiece.

The 2014 Surf and Kayak Rally marked the newest chapter in the history of river sports on the Boise River. In July 1959, the Boise chapter of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, or Jaycees, hosted the inaugural Keep Idaho Green raft race. The Jaycees organized the race to call attention to the issue of human-caused forest fires. With several hundred spectators gathered onshore, rafters paddled and battled their way down the river with many rafts capsizing en route. The *Idaho Statesman* reported, "More Boise Jaycees were dunked in the river as a result of mishaps during the four-mile run than doughnuts at a Pentagon building coffee-break."

Although separated by more than a half century, the Keep Idaho Green raft race and the Boise River Park Surf and Kayak Rally were made possible through an actively managed Boise River. Irrigators have long controlled the river, and the City of Boise has worked to make the river safer and more accessible for a wide variety of river sports enthusiasts. Rafters, tubers, kayakers, and surfers have been shaped by this management of the river and in turn have helped to shape the river themselves.

As the late historian J.M. Neil pointed out in his unpublished manuscript *City Limits*, "Until the completion of Lucky Peak Dam in 1955, the variations in river flow would have sharply limited the opportunity for tubing." The Boise River, once highly braided and with flows susceptible to both seasonal floods and summertime drought, became much more predictable once Lucky Peak Dam was built. Although the dam was built primarily to meet irrigation and safety needs, rafters and tubers capitalized



MIKE LEEDS PHOTOGRAPHY

on the consistent flows. They now could float the cool river throughout the duration of Boise's long and scorching summers without fear of running aground because of low flows.

The consistent flows of the river provided by the Lucky Peak Dam would have been of little use to floaters if sanitation on the river hadn't been much improved some years prior. A *Statewide* newspaper guest editorial written in 1949 by then



Sandy Point Beach offers cold clear water for swimming at Lucky Peak State Park.

Boise Commissioner of Public Works J. V. Otter lauded the recent strides the City of Boise had made in cleaning up its river. Otter cited two major developments that had led to a far cleaner river. First, in September 1949, Boise's first sewer treatment plant came online. (Before the plant was built, raw sewage from the city flowed directly into the river.) Second, the city passed an ordinance requiring that all residential garbage be deposited in the landfill south of Boise. Before the ordinance went into place, city residents often pitched their trash in a number of unauthorized dumps, some of which were located along the river. Commissioner Otter wrote that

these unauthorized dumps were a “menace to public health and ... a breeding place for rats.” Without these sanitation improvements, the Keep Idaho Green raft racers would have been floating in the river along with human waste and rats scurrying along the shores.

Clayne Baker conceived the idea of the 1959 raft race. Baker, an 84-year-old Boise native, was a third-generation owner of Baker’s Dairy Farm. Living a stone’s throw from the Boise River to this day, Baker has long had an intimate relationship with the river. Beyond starting the annual Keep Idaho Green raft race, Baker was also an avid fly fisherman. He was a founding member of the Boise Valley Fly Fishermen’s Club and he founded a popular youth fly fishing club known as the Woolly Buggers.

During the Keep Idaho Green competition, rafters launched at present-day Barber Park in east Boise and finished just west of downtown at Ann Morrison Park, which had been christened earlier that summer. Local businesses sponsored individual rafts. According to Baker, the race got “quite competitive.” Spectators got into the action as well, pelting the participants with eggs and other debris. Baker smiled when recalling the event he enjoyed more than 55 years ago. He said that all “had a blast” and that the race got “kind of wild, too.” There may have been some “serious drinking” going on, he admitted.

When asked about the legacy of the raft race, Baker said, “We [the Jaycees] thought that this was something that would catch on.” Catch on it did. The Keep Idaho Green raft race became an annual event stretching for at least 20 summers. The well-known summertime event helped to popularize tubing on the river.

The Boise River float developed into what is now a quintessential summertime activity. On any given weekend, hordes of tubers and rafters can be seen lazily floating down the river. Ada County estimates that as many as 100,000 floats occur on the river each year. Although people can float on any section of the river, the traditional float follows the same



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Competitor in the Keep Idaho Green raft race.



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The Boise River is a popular recreation destination.

section of the river as the Keep Idaho Green raft race. Floaters put in at Barber Park and take out at Ann Morrison Park footbridge, located a couple of hundred yards upstream from Settler's diversion dam.

Ada County manages Barber Park. As the popularity of the river float grew over the years, Ada County added amenities to match demand. Today at the park, floaters can rent tubes and rafts or inflate their own water crafts at permanent filling stations. The county built concrete fortified steps leading into the river to minimize erosion at the primary launch site.

Allen Haynes counts himself as one of the regulars on the river. For many years, he has lived in an apartment near the floater take-out at Ann Morrison Park. When the temperature

DEBBIE COURSON SMITH



Floating the Boise River near the Baybrook Court Bridge

ris, Haynes throws his personal raft and supplies in his backpack and heads to the park. For 3 bucks he can catch a ride on an old white bus upriver to the put-in at Barber Park. School bus-style shuttles run by Epley's Whitewater leave from Ann Morrison Park on the hour during the week and every 20 minutes on the weekend. Epley's contracts with Ada County to operate both the shuttle system and the raft rentals out of Barber Park.

A nontraditional Boise State student studying to be a social worker, Haynes, now in his 50s, spends much of his free time in the summer floating the river. It is an activity that is "easy on the budget" and lets him hang out in the sun,

either socializing with friends or seeking solitude and spotting wildlife, such as beavers, otters, herons, and eagles.

Haynes believes he was 12 when he first began floating the Boise River in the mid-1970s. Although not a Boise native, Haynes visited his grandparents in Boise every summer. He recalls throwing his inner tube over his shoulder and biking up to Barber Park from their house. When he was a late teenager, Haynes would hop on the back of his buddy's Honda 50 motorbike with their tubes over his shoulder and a 12-pack of beer between his legs. Back then, they would make a full day out of the trip, stopping here and there along the river to swim, lounge on a sandy beach, or build a fire for a barbeque.

Floating the river was different back then. The experience has become more controlled and regulated. With development along the river, the number of places a floater can stop and hang out along the shore has been minimized. Alcohol on the river was banned in 2005 and building a campfire is out of the question.

For Haynes, the changes in the river float experience are largely for the better. The population in Boise and the surrounding region skyrocketed in the past couple of decades. When he first began floating the river, he said he would see “10 to 20 other people on the river” through the course of his float. On a blistering hot summer weekend now, there are times that he is within 10 feet of other floaters for the duration of the 6-mile float. The river is packed. Haynes said that it can almost be like “a ride at some amusement park.” Haynes believes floating the river in the manner that he and his friends did 30 years or more ago simply wouldn't be “safe or possible” anymore. He is happy that the river float is now more accessible for a wider variety of people.

Safety on the River

The Boise Fire Department makes the river float safer and more accessible for people like Haynes. When recreationists get into trouble on the river, the Dive and Swift Water Rescue Team goes into action. A minimum of five firefighters with advanced training geared toward water rescue are on duty at



DEBBIE COURSON SMITH

Stacks of rafts are ready to launch on the Boise River.

all times. The team stages their rescue boat and scuba gear out of Fire Station #1 near Fort Boise Park. Approximately 30 firefighters constitute the rescue team for the fire department.

Division Chief Paul Roberts leads the Dive and Swift Water Rescue Team. Because of the river's cold and fast moving water, Roberts states, recreating on the Boise River carries "inherent risks." In the past 5 years, the team has officially responded to 106 rescue calls. More than 90% of the calls were for swift water rescue versus encounters where scuba gear was needed.



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Rescue team performs life-saving techniques as part of their training.

The Boise River is rarely closed for floating. One can recreate on the river year-round. In extreme circumstances such as high flows beyond flood stage, the fire department posts closure signs on the river and sends out a public service announcement via the media. If a recreationist is rescued by the team during one of these high flow periods, that person may receive a bill from the Boise Fire Department. The bill can range from a few hundred dollars to several thousand dollars depending on the circumstances. At no other time does the rescue team bill for its services.

The team works to make the river safer in the spring before the busy recreational season ramps up for the hot summer months. The team identifies hazards in the river such as downed trees they call "sweepers." Floaters sometimes hang up on these sweepers and can get pinned under water. Regarding these hazards, the fire department consults with

a variety of stakeholders that include the Idaho Fish and Game Department, Idaho Department of Water Resources, Ada County, and the City of Boise Parks and Recreation. With a consideration for fish and wildlife habitat, a mitigation plan is put together to address these hazards. The goal is to make the river safer by removing the most dangerous hazards while maintaining variety in the river flow, which is necessary for proper fish and wildlife habitat. Adhering to the mitigation plan, the rescue team, Ada County, and the City of Boise remove the identified trees and other hazards using various tools such as chainsaws from boat and shore. Once this work is completed, the fire department communicates to Ada County and other stakeholders that they have done what they can to make the river safe for the commercial phase of the float season.

Creating a New Wave of River Sports

Now that the traditional river float through the heart of Boise was relatively safe and user friendly, the City of Boise turned its attention to the neglected section of the river west of downtown. Approximately 1 mile downriver from the floater take-out in Ann Morrison Park is the Boise River Park, a section of the river that the city has cleaned and modified to accommodate recreation for kayakers and surfers. The city opted to build the Boise River Park in two phases. Phase I of the river park entailed the rebuilding of the Thurman Mill diversion dam into what is now officially known as the Harry Morrison Dam. Completed in 2012, the dam sits in the section of river adjacent to the popular summer recreation spot Quinn's Pond. This was the site of the 2014 Surf and Kayak Rally.

Unlike most dams built to store water and generate electricity, Morrison Dam was built not only to divert water for irrigation but also to create and shape waves that kayakers and surfers could ride. Wirelessly controlled by a laptop, pneumatic air bladders installed at the dam inflate and deflate, which in turn elevate stainless steel flashboards. This control, coupled with the water



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Boise Fire Department team removes hazards from the waterway.

flow levels discharged from Lucky Peak Dam far upriver, determines the shape and size of the waves.

City of Boise employee Ryan Ricardo was in charge of creating two separate waves on the day of the 2014 Surf and Kayak Rally. Demonstrating the full range of the dam's abilities, Ricardo modified the waves while professional surfers and kayakers played on his creations. Through a loudspeaker, an announcer described the wave changes to the crowd gathered to watch.

The city hired Ricardo in 2013 to work as a wave technician. Young and energetic, Ricardo was a natural fit for the job of working with the kayaking and surfing crowd. According to Ricardo, multiple factors affect the wave shape. First, the waves he creates are “completely dependent” on the amount of water discharged by Lucky Peak Dam upriver. During times of high river flow, he creates two separate waves. Conversely, during times of low flows such as later in the summer, there is only sufficient water to create a single wave. Another primary factor affecting wave shaping is the dual nature of the Harry Morrison Dam. Ricardo noted that many people in the community don't understand that the



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Water is diverted from the Boise River for irrigation.

primary function of the dam is to divert water for irrigation. The dam's irrigation purpose takes precedence over recreation. Ricardo must closely monitor the amount of water directed to the irrigation canal because thousands of acres of farmland depend on receiving the proper amount of water. Too much or

too little water directed toward irrigation can have disastrous consequences for the farms. Consequently, during times of low flow, Ricardo has less latitude to make changes to the surfing wave.

Ricardo shows up at the river park almost every day. He attempts to alternate days between waves that are preferred by kayakers versus a wave shape preferred by surfers. Ricardo routinely posts selfie-style cell phone videos to the Boise River Park Facebook page. His videos describe the wave and any other relevant information that users need to know before heading down to the river park.

Surfing

Generally speaking, surfers prefer waves that are glassy and smooth. The wave has to be steep and fast enough to hold the surfboard in the wave. Kayakers, on the other hand, tend to like what is known as a retentive wave, which has frothier whitewater behind it. This type of wave allows kayakers to ride and perform tricks in the wave without getting pushed out. Ricardo can cater waves to individual users while sitting on the riverside with his laptop. He has developed relationships with many of the recreationists and consequently knows their individual preferences.

A former kayaker, Ricardo has caught the surfing bug. The learning curve for river surfing is not as steep as that for ocean surfing, he said. Ocean surfing requires a lot of paddling and positioning for a mere 10-second ride. In contrast, once a river surfer learns to balance on the board, the ride on the stationary wave might end only when those surfers waiting in line grow impatient. Ricardo witnessed numerous surfers pick up the sport over the course of the summer. Some were able to quickly evolve from first-time beginners learning to merely stand on the board to proficient surfers “ripping across the face” of the wave.

Christopher Peterson was one of the surfers who benefitted from Ricardo’s wave-shaping skills at the Surf and Kayak Rally. In laid-back surfer fashion, Peterson described the rally as “just another day surfing.” He estimated that at least



TEAM PIRANHA

Christopher Peterson
catching waves

500 spectators looked on as the surfers and kayakers turned and twisted. A highlight of the event for Peterson was meeting a contingent of German surfers who had traveled to Idaho to participate in the event. This was noteworthy because some people track the origins of river surfing back to Germany. River enthusiasts have been surfing the Eisbach River flowing through Munich for decades.

Peterson noted that river surfing in Boise is beginning to catch on as a result of the new wave-shaping dam. He estimated that there are 50 regulars down at the wave with many more in town that dabble in the sport. The river

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Surfers frequent the wave-shaping feature of the Boise River Park.

park's proximity to the greenbelt as well as to the 36th Street pedestrian bridge (which connects the Live, Work, Create District, also known as the Waterfront District, in Garden City with Esther Simplot Park in Boise) attracts curious onlookers. Peterson said that it is not uncommon to have 100 people gathered on the shore watching the surfers on a warm summer evening.

To capitalize on the growing popularity of the sport, Peterson shapes and sells surfboards out of his backyard shop. To date, he has shaped about 30 boards. Surfboards intended for river waves have specific parameters that differ from ocean surfboards. First, they have a "low rocker," which means that

they don't have much of a curve from tail to nose. A 20-inch width is typical with a full versus a pointy nose. Finally, the buoyancy of the board is critical. River surfboards have to be buoyant enough to support a surfer on a standing wave. This is in contrast to thinner, less buoyant ocean surfboards that are propelled forward by a powerful wave.

Peterson encountered resistance when he first began surfing the Boise River. Naysayers, to include some of his old ocean surfing friends, questioned why anyone would want to surf on a river. Bringing surfing, a sport linked with coastline, to the interior was a bit too much for some people. But, with the growing popularity of the sport, Peterson grinned, "many critics have turned into the biggest addicts."

Peterson is quick to list the advantages of river surfing in Boise. He said that although the surfing in Hawaii is tremendous, the season lasts only 4 months out of the year. One can travel to the Oregon and Washington coast to surf, but conditions there are windy, foggy, and cold. In contrast, the consistent wave at the Boise River Park can be surfed 8 months out of the year. As for weather, locals know that the sun rarely hides for long in Boise, Idaho.

New Dam Improves River Safety

The festive atmosphere of the Surf and Kayak Rally marked a sharp contrast to the tragedy that had occurred at this same site four summers earlier. On August 1, 2010, 20-year-old Cassie Conley was fatally injured at the site of the current Morrison Dam. Conley, a mother of two small children, had been tubing in this notoriously dangerous section of river. Before the construction of the Morrison Dam and its surf wave, Thurman Mill diversion dam stood in its place. The nearly 100-year-old diversion dam created a strong undertow that held Conley underwater and ultimately led to her death. A local news station reported that three other water rescues had occurred at the diversion dam in the 2 weeks before Conley's death.

The reconstruction of the Thurman Mill diversion dam, beyond its recreational and irrigation purposes, was

undertaken for safety reasons. “The original premise of the Boise River Park,” according to Tom Governale the Superintendent of Parks for the City of Boise, “was to make this section of the river safer.” Following the death of Cassie Conley and other similar incidents at this location, the Thurman Mill diversion became the “poster-child” that helped to further rally support in the community for the rebuilding of the dam.



AU CASAS

Kayaker throws a move.

Paul Collins echoed Superintendent Governale’s account. Collins, a local physician and longtime kayaker, served as the board president of Friends of the Park. This volunteer-led organization partnered with the City of Boise in raising funds and planning for the Boise River Park. It was Friends of the Park who organized the 2014 Surf and Kayak Rally.

Collins and a few other prominent local kayakers first sat down over drinks nearly 25 years ago and hashed out the idea of building a kayak wave on the Boise River. In spring 1998, Collins and these other kayakers approached Governale about making a water feature in the river. They soon discovered that the process would be much more complicated than simply “moving some rocks around in the river.” Many stakeholders, including irrigators, federal entities, and environmental regulators, would have to be consulted and their views considered.

Planners decided that the new wave-shaping feature should ideally replace one of the hazardous diversion dams

located on the river. Speaking generally of diversion dams, Chief Roberts of the Boise Fire Department noted that they are extremely dangerous. During high water flows, the dams create a “horizontal whirlpool,” known in his industry as a “drowning machine.” Once caught in the whirlpool, people have a difficult time swimming out.

Ultimately, the Thurman Mill diversion was slated for reconstruction. Prior to its rebuild, the Thurman Mill diversion created a kayaking play wave during high water flows. Collins and other kayakers recreated at this spot, but Collins admitted it really wasn’t made for “human consumption.” One of the great successes and surprises for Collins has been the popularity of surfing on the shapeable wave. He said that the original planners had no idea that there would be surfing at the wave when they were working to create the park for kayakers.

The process of building the Morrison Dam, from inception to construction, was long and difficult. Raising money for the park was a challenge for Friends of the Park volunteers as their efforts coincided with the economic downturn. Believing in their vision, however, they refused to give up and just “kept asking.” Collins noted that one of the great things about Boise is that “there are people that are willing to provide time, energy, and money” to projects like this, and many of these individuals take no credit. He said the community will never know about many of the people that selflessly gave to the project.

Collins also credited Superintendent Governale’s “superb” leadership for making the river park happen. It was Governale that secured city funding, spearheaded the management of the permit process, and negotiated with the various stakeholders. Throughout the process, Governale worked closely with the Thurman Mill board of directors and then president Mike Matzdorf. The agreement forged between the City of Boise and the Thurman Mill irrigation district was unprecedented. Governale noted that this was “the first time in Idaho that an irrigation company entered into an agreement with a public entity to benefit public recreation.” The irrigators received a new dam while Boise kayakers and surfers had their wave.



BOISE RIVER PARK

Workers install the flashboards in the WaveShaper III.

Boise River Park, Phase II

The 36th Street pedestrian bridge spans the Boise River within view of the Harry Morrison Dam. It is December 2014, and a large, bold-lettered red sign hanging on the bridge warns of DANGER and HAZARDOUS AREAS downstream. Old concrete, rebar, and jagged metal can be found in the river just downstream from the wave-shaping dam. This section of river, near the Farmer's Union diversion approximately a quarter mile downriver from the Harry Morrison Dam, has a long history of neglect and abuse. Kayakers, surfers, and other recreationists are warned by the sign to stay away from these downriver hazards as they could cause injury to people and damage to equipment.



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Hazard signs displayed on the 36th Street pedestrian bridge

According to Superintendent Governale, the City of Boise will work on removing these hazards during a second phase of the Boise River Park. The plan is to build three more waves that can be used for recreation. Following the precedent set with the Harry Morrison Dam, the city will partner with Farmer's Union to ensure that their irrigation water needs continue to be met. Unlike the dynamic wave at Harry Morrison Dam, the three new waves are intended to be static structures. The uppermost drop will use a wide-crested weir with flap gates. The lower two drops will have a less forceful wave, which makes them perfect for beginner and intermediate kayakers.

When Phase II of the Boise River Park is completed, Boise will have two distinct sections of the river to recreate on: (1) the traditional tube float route from Barber Park to Ann Morrison Park, and (2) the Boise River Park. As it stands, these two sections of the river are separated by the formidable Settler's diversion dam located at Americana Bridge. This dam creates a 4-foot drop in the river that is not safe for tubing or surfing. The few tubers and rafters that float below the traditional take-out must portage around the diversion dam or they risk getting caught in a "horizontal whirlpool," as described by Chief Roberts.

Some people, including Superintendent Governale and Dr. Collins, envision that another partnership could be forged to replace Settler's diversion dam in the same manner that the Thurman Mill diversion dam was replaced. With this dam addressed, recreationists could float the Boise River continuously from Barber Park through the Boise River Park and beyond. Nearly the entire section of river within the city of Boise would be accessible for river sports.

River sports enthusiasts have long recreated on the cool waters of the Boise River steadily flowing through the heart of the city. Through control and management, the river evolved over time while recreation on the river persisted and grew. Tubers, rafters, kayakers, surfers, and paddleboarders have capitalized on the management of the river and have effected change to the river themselves. They look forward to this trend continuing well into the future.



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Twisted metal and other dangers lurk along the Boise River.



TRAVIS ARMSTRONG is drawn to the backcountry and can often be found running, mountain biking, or motorcycling in Idaho's mountains and deserts. Travis writes about the unique ways that Idahoans explore and experience their beautiful state.