

1-4-97



**JIM WASSERMAN**

## Wild river makes a run for history

**T**hey'd all been trapped inside too long, stir crazy from three weeks of fog, rain and holidays. Now the river roared by beneath a perfect blue sky filled with buzzards and helicopters.

And giddy were the sightseers.

"Surf's up!"

"Awesome!"

"Unbelievable!"

It absolutely was. In Friant, the San Joaquin River swooshed and boiled over a two-lane bridge to the rolling green hills of Madera County. Fast flood water covered the whole road. But you could walk to the edge and put your hand right into the flood. It was 9:30 in the morning. The water was cold.

People from everywhere parked their cars and pickup trucks and got out. They walked down to the water, and TV reporters quoted their festive amazement.

It was a gawker's paradise.

Cowboys, sheriff's deputies, locals, gamblers: They took pictures of the flood water, had their pictures taken in front of it, carried kids on their shoulders, compared their memories and cussed at the sheer wonder of it all.

No one had ever seen anything like *this*.

And there to the right, on this perfect winter morning, Friant Dam spilled its huge man-made flood over the top. Tons and tons of beautiful blue lake water revealed itself dark green going over. Then quickly turned the bright white color of ocean surf and mountain waterfalls.

It made the river wild.

It was out of control.

Up the hill from the dam itself, you've never seen such a beautiful sight. The flooded panorama spread far and wide — the color of soft blue across a bright green landscape.

Way out there, cattle grazed on the hillsides. Capt. Scotty buzzed overhead. And everybody who could came up to the dam, too, with all kinds of cameras and their many acclamations:

"Neat."

"Tough."

"It's pretty awesome."

Until sheriff's deputies and the CHP crashed the party at 10 a.m. and roadblocked the sightseers out of Friant, people could still walk down a road near the side of the big dam.

You could feel that sound in your bones — like hard storm surf. Or thunder. And that *view* is sure to fill drug-store photo envelopes all over Fresno next week.

Then bragged about for decades: *I was there.*

By 10:30 a.m., the growing river had thoroughly flooded several houses, a handful of mobile homes and the Fresno County Sportsman's Club at the end of Rice Road.

Pathetic.

There was a big propane tank loose in the river, too.

For this, if anyone ever talks seriously again about hundreds of houses on this kind of flood plain, below a giant dam, they ought to have their heads examined.

Down the river floated beer cans, a single light bulb, coffee cans, wood blocks, a trash barrel and 16 redwood picnic tables piled up against a row of cottonwood trees. (Wait, make that 17.)

Robert Smith, who said he'd lived by this river for nine years, just stood and watched. Water rose inside his green mobile home. After getting trapped by high water in Sacramento on Thursday, he got home to Fresno at 7 a.m. Friday, about the time the feds turned the water loose over the dam.

"I got my stuff out, and then it came up," he said.

Where the river usually ran was *way, way* out there, he said. Hundreds of yards out there, past that tree. See it? Now the river was right here and supposed to come up another 3 feet before the day was over.

Nobody. Nobody had ever seen *this*.

Jim Wasserman is a Bee staff writer. For a sneak preview of his column, call BeeLine 443-2400, Ext. 2160, the night before.