

Whitewater: Not the Failed S&L, The Bonding Experience From Hell

by Evan Loeffler

At the June meeting of the Young Lawyers Division it was decided that the Board of Governors, of which I am a non-voting member, should engage in a bonding experience together. Since most of the bonding-type experiences in which I have participated involved drinking beer—one of my hobbies—I was all for it. I figured we could all go to a baseball game or play a round of golf. This was the form our bonding experiences had taken in the past. It turned out that the bonding activity had already been selected without my being consulted. It was not until we arrived *en masse* at the site of the activity that I learned what had been planned.

I had been doomed to spend the afternoon whitewater rafting.

"Are you guys out of your freakin' minds?" I shrieked incredulously. "Didn't any of you see *Titanic*?"

For those who have been spared the experience, whitewater rafting is an activity where nine people cram themselves into a rubber raft built for three and, armed with nothing but dinky plastic paddles, drift down a glacier-fed waterfall. This is supposed to be fun. No beer or other sedative is allowed the participant until after the trip is over.

I was particularly put out by this state of affairs: I had not driven to the rafting embarkation point on my own, but had ridden with several other would-be adventurers. We had driven a good half-hour from the hotel, so I could not simply walk back.

Before embarking, each of the condemned is issued a wetsuit, a raincoat, rubber booties, a crash helmet, a life-preserver, a dinky plastic paddle, and a suicide pill. My wetsuit, peeled from the lifeless frozen carcass of an earlier thrillseeker, was still wet and cold. We were given a quick lesson on how to behave in the boat ("Paddle when I say 'paddle,' don't paddle if I say 'don't paddle.'") and away we went.

At first the experience was rather pleasant. It was a bright sunny day, and ancient trees dripping with Spanish moss hung lined the banks of the Devil's Elbow river. The sun glistened cheerfully off of the tombstones that dotted the shore, and vultures circled gracefully overhead in the wafting breeze. Then we hit the rapids.

I had been paddling along, shivering somewhat gracefully in my soggy wetsuit, when the water turned suddenly to foam and the boat started spinning out of control. The tour guide yelled for half of us to back paddle while the other half was supposed to paddle forwards. I thought, as did the rest of the crew, that he meant that the people in the front of the boat should paddle forwards while the rest of us should paddle in the other direction. Our inflatable raft stretched and then snapped back into place. We hit a rock, bounced off a tree on shore, and were temporarily submerged into the icicle-cold water.

The boat came to a relatively calm patch of water, which gave us a chance to catch our breaths. I noticed at this time that my wetsuit was working well: I was very wet, and the suit efficiently kept the water from escaping and allowing my body a chance to warm up.

"Are we there yet?" I asked. I received several stony glares from my colleagues in return. No one has a sense of humor when they're cold and wet.

Our trip continued down river, alternating between moments of ennui and sheer terror until we reached the "big rapid."

I assumed that I would hear warning background music like in the movies if we ever got close to a waterfall. This was not the case. The first I knew of the waterfall was when I realized that the constant stream of helpful and occasionally offensive suggestions of what we could do with our paddles coming from the tour guide suddenly stopped. I looked back and saw him hurriedly strapping himself into the boat. I looked forward and saw that the river ended rather

abruptly up ahead. At about the same time my shipmates noticed the same thing. We all started back paddling furiously, but it was too late. I bit down on my suicide pill and found that it was really a cough drop.

For those not in the know, free-falling in real life is similar to free-falling in a nightmare except that in a nightmare you typically wake up. The difference between a roller-coaster and going over a waterfall is that one can see the remains of those who did not survive the journey at the base of a ride. The river, on the other hand, swallows its victims. After an interminable period during which all I could hear was the whistling of air and the shrieking of my fellow young lawyers—and myself—we hit the water, became very, very wet, and continued on our way. It was the worst three-foot drop I had ever experienced.

The end of the trip was somewhat anticlimactic. Those of use who had not succumbed to hypothermia weakly paddled the boat to safety, disembarked, and then attempted to beat the tour guide into a quivering pulp. The guide, however, was used to this sort of behavior from his passengers and escaped by sauntering away. We found it difficult to keep pace, our extremities being completely numb with cold.

I have to admit that as a bonding activity, whitewater rafting was a success. We were, after all, frozen together for a good hour after finishing the expedition. By this token we had bonded with our wetsuits and our paddles. Moreover, I had bonded with nature, since a pound of river mud had found its way into my wetsuit.

I did not come away without learning some things about myself and my colleagues, however. I can now smugly remind the next board member who calls me a wimp that he or she shrieked as shrilly as I while plummeting down the river that afternoon.

Next time, however, I'm walking home.