

# THE TUOLUMNE GRIDDLE

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STEVE WELCH

**IF GEAR COULD TALK, IT WOULD ALL LISTEN** to the Tuolumne griddle: “I was born in 1992. Custom-designed and custom-built to replace my grandfather, an aging and warped World War II military surplus field-kitchen lid that had seen too much heat and too little attention. I was made of quarter-inch thick anodized aluminum, with welded 12 gauge round-stock handles, perfectly-sloping sides, and special anti-rocker bars on my bottom. I was the cat’s meow, cutting edge, one-of-a-kind. The griddle of the future.”

Well, '92 was a high water year and on my virgin voyage, the Tuolumne was flowing at over 8,000 cfs at put-in. I was in the Assistant Guide’s drop bag with Pete “the Bomb” Propane, Freddy “the Bastard” Firepan, Quicksilver Jones and the Chicky Pail Sisters. They were veterans, and they wore their dents and chipped paint with honor, but I could tell even they were scared. This was big water and a young guide A sketchy combination. We were in for quite a ride.

The first day went smoothly enough. We got jostled a bit and we bounced around down there in the drop bag, but we stayed upright and made it to Indian Creek in good shape. Not to brag,

but I was a huge hit at dinner, handling the spaghetti sauce with ease and cleaning up afterwards with no scrubbing. At breakfast I churned out golden brown griddle cakes without breaking a sweat. Things were looking good and I could tell I had the attention of the Chicky Pail Sisters, if you know what I mean.

But things didn't go so well on the second day. Seems the Assistant Guide was a little nervous and lost his focus when it was time to strap Tommy the Table down on top of the drop frame. He did fine with the back bars, but in the front, instead of passing the cam strap around the top bar of the drop frame, his fingers got confused and he simply went around Tommy's bar. Without the front secured, Tommy was just sitting up there like a giant hinge and we were just sitting down below like little popcorn kernels, ready to pop out should things get too hot and the raft flip.

And flip it did. In the big, gnarly-ass hole at the top of Gray's. We didn't get far enough left, typewritered across the lateral and, Whammo!, we're flat-side up and there's Tommy flapping like a sheet in the wind and the rest of us visiting the Moss Lady.

I went down fast, straight to the bottom, and I saw something go by upside down and in a bad way; it was Freddy, God rest his soul.

Jonesy didn't have a chance, he blew his lid and they're still finding pieces of him along the shore.

Pete fared better; he had a wee bit of air and managed to stay near the surface and eventually got pulled into another raft.

The Chicky Sisters had quite a ride, tumbling and banging along the bottom, spinning in and out of eddies, puking up the soap and the Clorox. Hell, it must have been a nightmare. They made it to shore, though, and eventually found their way home.

But me, I wasn't so lucky. I stayed down. Took some big hits. Lost both my handles. Eventually I wedged down deep between

some big chunks of granite and I just lay there, exhausted, beaten, thinking I was a goner. Well, it's a miracle I'm telling you this story. A miracle. I was down there for four months. FOUR MONTHS! before Curtis, God bless his soul, came looking for me.

He left camp early one morning in August before the water came up with a dive mask and a heart full of compassion and he pulled me from my watery grave and into the glorious sunlight. Sweet holy Dutch Oven did it feel good. Not to brag, but Curtis even did the Fajitas on me that night down at North Fork and hell if I didn't nail it. Took the Olive Oil like I was a full-blooded Italian, if you know what I mean.

True story. Look, here, on my side, you can still see the scars from where my handles used to be.