

Community Comment – Sept. 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016

By Jon Sapper

Falling Short

Fall is a great time of year, but it's not quite the same as when I was a kid growing up in Humboldt County. I was getting a little nostalgic the other day when I was out in my yard trying to find some potatoes and picking plums, pears and apples off the trees. I paused from my work to notice that characteristic gentle warm Fall breeze rustling the leaves. If this beautiful afternoon could send me a message, it would say, "Take a nap, Jon. You're working too hard." I hated naps when I was a kid, but now they're worth their weight in gold. It's funny how your perspective changes.

One part of my childhood, about sixty years ago, was looking forward to the first week in September. You see, that was the time I could go down to the Eel River and the first runs of salmon would be showing up. It was a great sight, because that time of year, the water was running clear and pretty cold. There was a flow to it, but not too much of a flow where you couldn't see the fish. The schools of smaller salmon, we called them chubs back then, would pile up in upper tidewater just below Fernbridge. The bigger salmon wouldn't come till the end of the month. We had fun catching them and there was enough for everybody.

I was thinking about that as I was driving over Fernbridge a few days ago. I looked off the bridge and saw very little water in the river; but, what I did see was a yellowish green slime along the river's edges and out towards the middle. If those salmon tried to swim up that river now, they'd die. There's just not enough water. You can barely see it moving.

Back when I was a kid, I had already caught lots of salmon by this time of year. I started fishing for them by myself when I was about eight years old. I could go to the river alone as long as I got home before dark. It's too bad kids can't do that today. Fishing became a ritual for me and a passion that I have enjoyed all my life. The salmon is a survivor and an incredibly complex creature that can figure out which river to go up to spawn and what tributaries to take, in order to get back to the very place it was born. If that doesn't impress you, not much will.

My nostalgia is also tinged with a dose of sadness, wondering, what the hell did we do to this river to get it to this miserable point. For crying out loud, ocean vessels used to come up to Fernbridge when my grandfather was a young boy and the water there was over forty feet deep. It's a darn shame.

I don't fish for salmon in the Eel River the first week of September anymore, because they aren't there. So then, what does an old fisherman do with his time during the first week of September? Look for potatoes; pick plums, pears and apples off the tree and take a nap.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.