

BUTCH'S GREAT ADVENTURE

An old (with absolutely no emphasis on old) friend worked with me in Caltrans District 1, on the California North Coast in the mid- 1970's. I will not reveal his real name to protect his reputation, and will refer to him only as Butch. If you knew his real name, you might recognize him as President of the Caltrans Quarter Century Club.

Years ago, Butch, my brother, and Jim (another friend) took a few wilderness backpacking trips together. I know Butch loved the backpacking trips, so it was difficult for me to understand why he would move to San Diego. But he did.

Fast forward a couple of decades (to late 2005 or early 2006) and Butch emailed me about the possibility of going clamming on the mud "islands" in the southern part of Humboldt Bay. It seems that he and a fellow named Charlie (another Caltransient) had gone clamming in the south Bay some thirty years ago. Butch saw a "Dirty Job" program on television, and thought those jobs paled in comparison to "mucking" for clams in Humboldt Bay.

It sounded interesting, so I helped Butch pick out a couple of days with very low tides during daylight hours, and we lined up someone to haul us out to the mud islands in a boat. But Butch made a timeshare trade, and opted for Florida over the clams in Humboldt Bay.

Then, in mid-February of 2009 I got an email from Butch indicating he was still interested in "mucking for clams". He checked and found a very low tide for Humboldt Bay in mid-April, and asked if I was still game. I had no interest in Clams, remembering what a chore it was to clean them. But it seemed like it could be a fun trip, and I volunteered to recruit Jim, our backpacking friend to go with us. Besides, when we went backpacking, Butch's antics were always great entertainment (but that's another story).

Butch was planning a trip to Alaska in the summer, so he purchased an older motorhome, and intended to use the clamming trip as a "shakedown" to sort out potential equipment concerns. He planned to tie his canoe and sailboard to the top of the motorhome, and bring them on the clamming trip. He was concerned with canoe stability, so he decided to use 2x4's and tie-down's to attach the sailboard to the canoe as an outrigger. Since this was obviously not the ideal vessel for clam mucking, he advertised on "Craigs List" for additional transportation. A commercial fisherman responded to his ad, and offered to transport the clamming crew to an island in the south bay and back for only \$500. Bargainer Butch Italianed him down to a mere \$350.

Butch is a great recruiter, but he was having trouble recruiting people from San Diego to make the trip north with him (go figure, who wouldn't want to ride 1,000 miles to crawl around on their bellies in mud trying to catch clams?) So, Butch asked me to check around and see if any of the locals were interested in mucking for clams. I got nibbles from a couple of Caltransients, and kept them in the clam mucking information loop. Meanwhile, our backpacking buddy Jim got sick and ended up in the hospital, an expensive but effective way of backing out of a clamming trip.

MORE OF BUTCH'S GREAT ADVENTURE

Butch packed up his motorhome for the trip north, planning to leave at midnight to get through Los Angeles traffic early in the morning. When he found out that the dash lights on his motorhome didn't work, he rescheduled the trip to start the next morning.

I couldn't reach Butch on his cell phone enroute, so I was unable to let him know I was heading to Ukiah (about 160 miles south) to visit Jim in the hospital the Friday Butch was scheduled to arrive in Eureka. When Butch arrived in Eureka, he checked in at the Caltrans District Office. Obviously I wasn't at work, and the guard in the lobby wouldn't let Butch in without an escort. While he was there, he tried to recruit crew, but the people he talked to were leery of both Butch and his equipment. Most gave the rather transparent excuse that they couldn't get time off work.

His recruiting thwarted, Butch took a short trip (about 10 miles) to check out the mouth of Humboldt Bay and look for a likely camping spot. He pulled into the Off Road Vehicle staging area on the north spit of Humboldt Bay, and found that his motorhome was overheating and low on water. Re-filling the radiator with water, he was unaware that the fan belt had broken. About four miles later, when the engine started sputtering and popping, it became apparent that he had big problems. Butch pulled off the road and called a tow truck.

Pro-Pacific, the repair shop his motorhome was towed to, gave him the bad news. A head gasket was blown at the very least, but it was quite possible that the head was warped or cracked, or that the engine block was cracked. Butch was a thousand miles from home, and repair costs would exceed \$7,000. The good news was that Butch could stay in the motorhome while it was in the shop parking lot, awaiting the arrival of a rebuilt engine.

Butch called me just after he got the estimate. He seemed a little down, but more philosophical than I would have expected, and he wasn't even crying (Butch and I are both fiscally conservative, but most people just refer to us as cheap).

After a good night's sleep in his camper, in the parking lot of Pro-Pacific, approximately fifty feet from northbound highway 101 in downtown Eureka, Butch decided to do some recruiting in earnest. Rebuffed by those he approached in Stanton's Coffee Shop, he was advised to try recruiting at an AA meeting a few blocks away. After a short recruiting stint, he hit paydirt and signed up a cameraman.

BUTCH'S GREAT ADVENTURE CONTINUES

I caught up with Butch on Saturday afternoon, and we went to a tavern in Eureka to meet Stanley, a fellow Caltransient that Butch knew from San Diego, and one of our clam mucking recruits. Stanley had a pickup with a rack on it, and volunteered to haul Butch's canoe and sailboard to the launch site at Fields Landing on Monday. A second Caltransient recruit (Carlton) had given us the wrong home phone number. We were starting to suspect that he had done so on purpose, but then he called Butch to discuss the clam mucking trip. He said that he had to finish a project on Monday, but he might be able to go if we went again on Tuesday.

Butch and I continued on Arcata for an early dinner and made battle plans. We would head out to King Salmon early Sunday morning to see what the low tide looked like and dig a few clams with shovels. Then we would check out the boat ramp at Fields Landing, and identify any potential impediments to Monday morning mucking. On the way home we tried without success to locate Butch's cameraman recruit. Then we headed over to Long's Drugs where I bought my fishing license. I had to repress my sticker shock, knowing the extent of Butch's repair bill.

The Sunday morning was calm and slightly overcast, with a very light breeze. I thought the clam dig went well, but Butch was disappointed with both the small size of the clams and the effort/back strain required to dig them. Several of the clams were broken, much to the satisfaction of the sea gulls that gathered nearby. We checked out the boat launch ramp at Fields Landing, and while it looked good, the low tide exposed a buildup of bay mud at the bottom of the ramp.

Butch called the commercial fisherman, to make sure he would meet us at the launch site at Fields Landing Monday morning at 0700. Butch said it sounded like the fisherman was having an argument with his wife or girl friend, and said to call him back at 1900 hours. Butch didn't get an answer when he called back, so he left a message that the clam mucking trip was on, and to meet us at the Fields Landing boat dock at 0700 hours on Monday morning.

Monday morning I tried on my wet suit top for the first time in thirty plus years, and it missed closing by three or four inches. No big surprise here, but also no problem. I had woolen underwear and would stay dry, since I was scheduled to replace the cameraman.

I got to Pro-Pacific just after 0630, where Butch and Stanley had already transferred the canoe, sailboard, and the 12' two by fours to the carrier on Stanley's truck and tied them down. I helped lift the 100 pound plus deep cell battery into the truck, and we were on our way, on schedule and exactly as planned.

We got to the boat launch ramp a little before 0700 hours, and surveyed the situation. While there had been a slight breeze on the Bay Sunday morning, there was a cold and steady 15 mile per hour breeze on Monday.

BUTCH FINALLY HITS THE BEACH FOR HIS GREAT ADVENTURE

Butch started putting on his wetsuit. Much like me, he hadn't worn the wetsuit in a couple of decades, but assured me it would fit because it was unlined and the neoprene would stretch. I think it must have shrunk, since Butch could only zip it up about four inches. Fortunately, Butch had a roll of duct tape, so I put a wrap around him (like a belt) right at the point the zipper stopped. It did look a little funny, kind of like a man with his shirt unbuttoned and no undershirt, but I didn't laugh (then).

We packed all of our stuff down to the dock on the side of the boat launch ramp, and Butch got into the water and mud to assemble our canoe/sailboard catamaran. Butch is very good with tie down straps, and while the craft looked like a bad joke, it was well secured. With our backup boat nearing completion, we were only a little concerned that the commercial fisherman and his boat were no-shows.

Meanwhile, Stanley needed to use the restroom, but the restroom was locked. So he headed back to Eureka, while Butch and I loaded the battery into the boat and hooked up the electric motor. Minutes passed like hours in the cold wind, and Butch appeared a little impatient as he stood in the water and waited for Stanley to return. Stanley got back in about a half an hour, and while he was putting on his wetsuit, I borrowed one of his life jackets (not that I didn't have complete faith in Butch's hand crafted catamaran).

The launch from the boat ramp was fine, but I was concerned that the little electric motor wouldn't push our craft upwind, so I asked for a test as we left the boat ramp. Butch obliged, and proved conclusively that the craft could make nearly a half knot upwind. With that issue settled, Captain Butch brought the craft about and started up one of the south Bay channels.

A few boats had launched before we got there, and a couple more launched while we were preparing our craft. Everyone that we could see was standing on the mud islands or the Bay shore, digging clams or hooking them (rather than just pulling them out of the mud). Butch assured us that everyone else was just in the wrong place to "muck for clams".

It was almost time for the tide to turn and start back in when we started up a small channel between two mud islands in the Bay. Since I was the camera man, rather than one of the "muckers", I pointed out a mud flat that looked particularly soft, at the point of the mud island. Captain Butch decided that the main island would be a better place to muck, and he put ashore immediately after he saw a clam spout water in the air.

Butch hopped out of the boat and immediately set to work "mucking for clams", while Stanley and I watched. The mud was a little firmer than what Butch had hoped for, a little too soft for walking, but a little too hard to just pull clams out of the mud. Mud had to be removed by hand before the clam could be extracted.

Butch said that he had one, and I started filming. He pulled the clam out triumphantly, as the camera rolled.

BUTCH'S GREAT ADVENTURE PEAKS AND WINDS DOWN

In the wake of Butch's success, I tried to coax Stanley out of the boat to start "mucking". Stanley was reluctant, then admitted that he had not purchased his fishing license. I gave him instructions on how to operate the camera, and climbed onto the mud island with minimal enthusiasm.

It was cold, the wind was blowing, and I knew that hypothermia could not be far away once I got wet. So I trudged around in the mud, half-heartedly looking for water spouts from clams, rather than getting down on my hands and knees to dig at any old hole in the mud. I dug in a little over a foot a couple of times, but no clams. Meanwhile, Butch was digging clams like mad, and very few of them turned out to be shells filled with mud.

I finally saw a good water spout from a clam, and decided it was time to dig in earnest. While I didn't want to come home with clams, I wanted to be able to say I caught at least one reasonable sized clam. So I got down on my knees in the mud, and scooped out more and more mud. I was just past my elbow in mud when I caught up with Mr. Clam, a reasonable sized Horseneck (or Gapper) clam.

Since I was already muddy, I started digging in earnest, and caught a few more Horseneck clams. Butch did much better, catching around ten clams, about half Horseneck and the other half Washingtons. But the cold wind and the hard digging had taken its toll on Captain Butch and the crew. Besides, we rationalized that it was only a few minutes before the tide would overtop our mud island. So we washed off the top coat of mud with Bay water, then climbed in our makeshift catamaran for our trip back to the boat launch.

The trip back was slow, but surprisingly pleasant. Stanley and I rowed and chanted on our way back (OK, so I lied, Stanley didn't chant). Butch asked Stanley to crawl out on a 2x4 to tighten a strap on the sailboard. Stanley said OK, but I quickly admonished him with "Stanley, you're not that gullible". Fun is fun, but with hypothermia so close at hand, I had no desire to swim in the bay.

A few people were still clamming, but others were picking up and heading back. Despite their sophisticated equipment, most of them looked just as cold as I felt.

Once we were safely on the shore we washed up our stuff and packed it up to the upper end of the dock. Butch sat on the north end of the boat ramp, up against the dock, to take off his wet suit. The wet suit bottom's ripped nearly in two when he took them off, but he was far too cold to be very upset. Safely on shore, I broke out in delirious laughter as I reminisced about the events of the morning, and what other clammers must have thought about Captain Butch, his vessel, and his crew.

Butch and Stanley finished changing out of their wet suits, then we picked up all of our stuff and tied down the canoe, sailboard, and 2x4's. Stanley suggested that we go to Gill's by the bay for breakfast. Butch and Stanley went, but I was soaking wet with no change of clothes and declined. I was headed home for a long hot shower and dry, warm clothes.

THE (ANTI)CLIMAX OF BUTCH'S GREAT ADVENTURE

Monday afternoon I was pretty sure that everyone was done "mucking for clams". Butch was tired, and ready to take Tuesday off, but he was up for a Wednesday outing, primarily for more film footage. Tuesday afternoon Butch called Carlon and talked up a Wednesday trip. He was sure they could easily catch more clams if they got further south into the softer mud of the Bay. After he gave Carlon the pitch, he asked me if I was up for another trip. Not having learned my lesson, I agreed to be camraman (and only camraman) if he could talk Carlon into going.

Carlon was interested, but he still hadn't finished his project. His job was very important to him, since he was an engineer and made quite a few clams. He decided those clams were more important than any he might muck out of Humboldt Bay, and ultimately declined Butch's invitation. It would be hypocritical of me to say I was disappointed. While I did feel bad for Butch, I didn't feel bad enough to risk hypothermia or drowning a second time.

Butch's new engine came in Tuesday, but Pro-Pacific had to wait for more replacement parts. While he was waiting, Butch cleaned the clams, then hiked to a meat market and picked up dry ice to keep the clams cold. Pro-Pacific had the rebuilt engine in and running on Thursday night. I stopped by and had coffee at Stanton's with Butch on Friday morning. He was ready to start south, but Pro-Pacific was still working on hooking up his dash lights and a new heat gauge. Rather than look over the mechanic's shoulder, we went out to look over the North Jetty.

It was slightly overcast, but an unusually calm day on the North Jetty. Not only was the tide quite low, even for a low tide, but there was no wind and virtually no swell. Even on calm days there are usually waves several feet high breaking against the jetty, but on this Friday there was only a gentle swell, well under a foot. We walked clear to the end of the north jetty, stopping for a few minutes to look at the thousands of mussels, exposed by the low tide. Butch spotted what he thought were clams, just above the water line. He went down to look, and they were mussels over six inches long. Butch pulled out his trusty Swiss Army knife, and cut off a couple to take back home. Turns out that when mussels get that big, they are a bit chewy!

I was very impressed with Butch's great adventure, and told him to count me in for his next one. Butch said he always wanted to go beachcombing in Del Norte County right after a winter flood, so he could build a raft and sail it to San Diego. I was interested in scheduling the trip for my 95th birthday, figuring it would give me plenty of time to shop for a wet suit that fit, and if we were both still around, it would be a great way to go.

If you are interested in one of Butch's great adventures, he can be contacted at:
www://whatintheworldareyouthinking.org.