

Dad and the International Boat Race

By Marilyn Reeves

Back in 1949, a group of fellows got together and came up with the idea of having a white water boat race on the Arkansas River, which flows through the bottom of downtown Salida. They dubbed the race FIBArk (First in Boating the Arkansas), and it's been the town's most prestigious annual event ever since.

That first year, at age 35 and eager to participate, Dad was able to obtain a kayak wholesale through one of the suppliers for his sporting goods store, Tuttle's Trading Post. So he set out one fine day, along with a couple of buddies who went along to help track his progress, in order to practice for the big event. He came back home a few hours later looking like a drowned rat. Apparently he had only gotten a couple of hundred yards down the river before he and the kayak turned belly up and his buddies had to fish him out of the water. The kayak didn't fare so well, however. Perhaps its drowned remains are still lying somewhere down at the bottom of the river. Discouraged but not dissuaded, Dad contacted the supplier and told them what happened, and lo and behold, they sent him another kayak – free of charge.

So a few days later, Dad tried again. This time he met with a rather large tree that had the effrontery of having fallen into the river, spreading its deadly branches like a snare to catch all those intrepid paddlers that happened to cross its path. Thank heavens his friends were there to rescue him once again as the second kayak ended up in the same watery grave as the first. At which point, Dad decided that he'd make a better spectator than a participant and enjoyed watching the race as the more experienced guys – some of them coming all the way from Europe – paddled by, from the vantage point of the F Street Bridge at Riverside Park.

Thus began the tradition of the annual Boat Race Weekend, featuring a carnival at the park with booths offering arts and crafts items and all sorts of food, from funnel cakes and smoked turkey legs to burgers and burritos. Various bands take the stage and loud speakers broadcast the sound, which can be heard all over town. And there's a Ferris wheel and other rides for the kids.

The Parade is held on Saturday morning, led by the Salida High School Marching Band. There used to be beautiful floats and a Boat Race Queen. Nowadays, it mostly features enormous, lumbering farm equipment, a few horses, and Shriners – lots and lots of Shriners – weaving around on their big, noisy motorcycles or tooting the horns of their souped-up Model T's.

And the annual FIBArk Boat Race itself is held every Father's Day Sunday.

So, if you're looking for something to do some Father's Day weekend, why not drive down to Salida and join in all the Boat Race fun? Perhaps, if you're lucky, you might even catch a piece of candy or a string of beads tossed by the Shriners at the Parade, as they roar by, waving to the crowd from their big, loud Harley Hawgs.

