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The Almanac

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September 13, 2000 ■ Vol. XXXVI, No. 2 ■ 50¢

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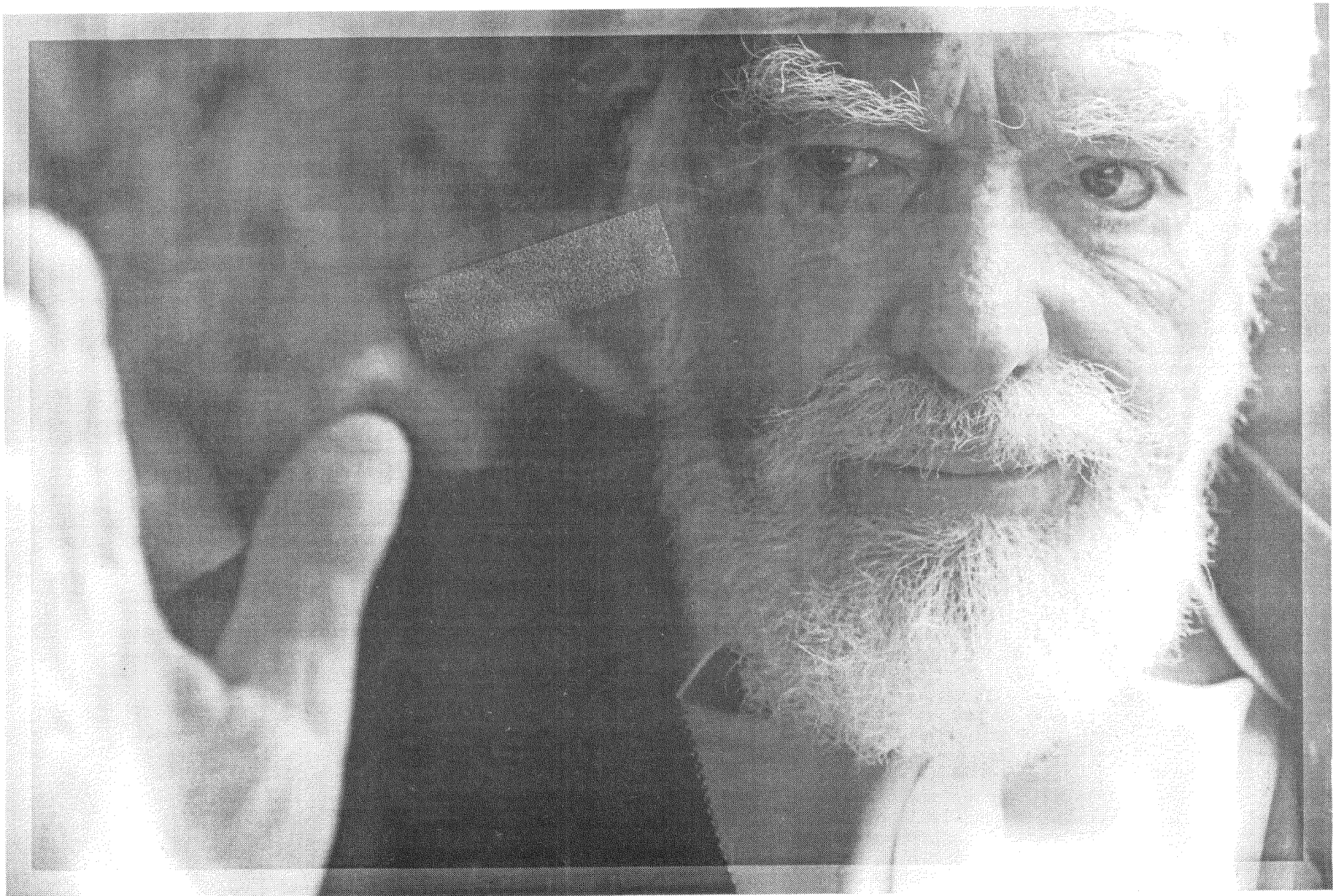
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Just our type: Stanford Blood Center looks for donors in all the right places.

Crusader *for* Nature

Fighting dams on the Colorado,
saving redwoods, running
the Grand Canyon, Martin Litton still
battles fiercely for natural California

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Margaret Koye

Crusader *for* Nature

At 83, Martin Litton is still running the Grand Canyon in dories and raising a rumpus for redwoods and a host of conservation causes

BY MARION SOFTKY

Almanac Staff Writer

Legendary conservation leader David Brower once called Martin Litton his “conservation conscience.”

And for the last 50 years the Portola Valley firebrand has been living up to his reputation.

He may look and sometimes sound like Santa Claus, but Martin Litton is still a hard-core conservationist. Since 1950 he has fought in the biggest conservation battles that have helped shape today's West. He was a major force in saving the free-flowing Colorado River in Dinosaur National Monument and the Grand Canyon. Through personal lobbying and his role as travel editor at *Sunset* magazine, he was a key player in establishing the Redwood National Park in 1968.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Litton's uncompromising activism has upset people — not only in the Forest Service but in the Sierra Club, which has occasionally avoided a fight, or come down on the wrong side of an issue — from Mr. Litton's point of view. Like the nuclear power plant at Diablo Canyon. The Sierra Club supported it as a lesser of evils; Mr. Litton fought it. It was built, and eventually closed.

Mr. Litton is not only an accomplished writer, journalist, photographer, pilot, and speaker, he is a doer as well. He initiated the popular

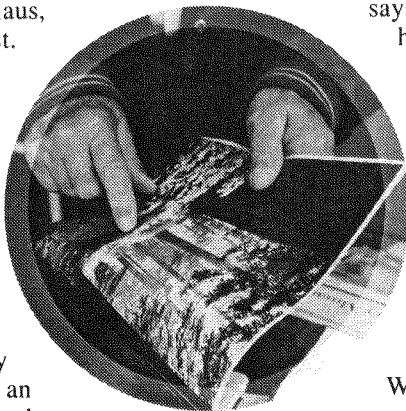
dory trips down the Grand Canyon. From his first run in 1955 until last year, he has rowed the wooden boats over the 96 named rapids more than 150 times, through last September.

“The Grand Canyon is the star river run in the world,” he says in an interview on the deck of his Portola Valley home, looking out over the wooded Peninsula hills.

On this rapidly warming Monday morning, the old lion looks bloody and bruised — but not from his environmental battles. The previous night he flew back home from speaking at a population conference in Southern California, and spied a pretty pink flower at the bottom of a steep bank. Setting out to get it for Esther, his wife of 58 years, he fell, and rolled down the hill, accumulating scratches and bruises, but no real damage.

Relaxed and articulate, Mr. Litton reflects on a life that straddles college in the Depression, service in World II as a glider pilot during European invasions, conservation battles of the 1950s to 1990s, and a plateful of current causes. “I don't think of myself as old,” he says. “I keep thinking life is going to begin some day — until I look in the mirror.”

Now 83, Mr. Litton is still pursuing a range of causes that would wear out any 20-something. He's trying to save the new Giant Sequoia Na-



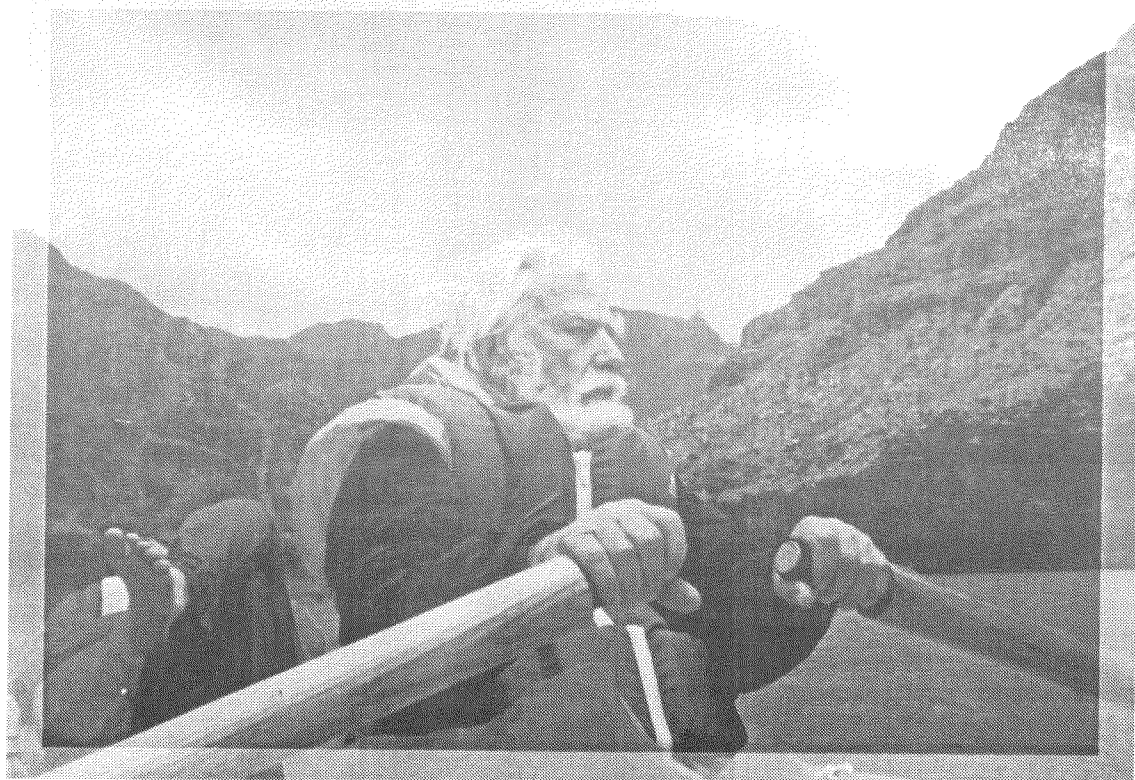


Photo courtesy of Martin Litton

Martin Litton may be most famous for running dory trips down the Grand Canyon. He also fought mightily to block the dams that threatened the free-flowing river.

tional Monument from the Forest Service, flying journalists and film-makers around the state in his vintage Cessna 195 to see various environmental disasters, speaking to outdoor and conservation groups, planning lawsuits, working to drain Glen Canyon Dam. And so on.

Claire Dedrick, formerly of Menlo Park, holds Mr. Litton in immense respect and affection. She served — and sometimes crossed swords — with him on the Sierra Club board of directors before leaving to become secretary of resources for Governor Jerry Brown.

“He was one of the valiant fighters of the 20th century,” she says.

Oldtime Sierra Club activist Olive Mayer of Woodside has fought many battles alongside Martin Litton to save North Coast redwood forest in the 1960s. “He knows what he’s talking about,” she says. “He’s been there; he’s seen it; he’s measured it. He’s always right.”

A mixture of campfire host, raconteur and missionary, Mr. Litton doesn’t mince words or soften opinions. Calling Silicon Valley a “crime,” he announces, “I’m boycotting computers because of

what Silicon Valley has done to the Bay Area.”

The zest with which Mr. Litton pursues his causes belies the gloom of his views. Speaking of the population conference — one of his favorite issues — he says cheerfully, “I’m going to stir up a little interest in the fate of the earth — if it’s not too late.”

■ TOM SAWYER CHILDHOOD

“I lived a Tom Sawyer youth in the country,” recalls Martin Litton, a third-generation Californian.

With a father who was a veterinarian, he had lots of animals in his life, first in Gardena, and then in Inglewood. “High school was the best time of my life,” he recalls. “That was the pinnacle of joy.”

Martin began his love affair with the wilderness in 1937 when, at age 16, he took his first backpack trip, to the Kern River near Mt. Whitney. He’s been active in conservation ever since.

During the Depression, Martin went to college at UCLA for \$20 a year. He drove his 1927 Essex for 11 miles — 20 minutes — to the campus. The trip

See **CRUSADER**, next page ►



Photo courtesy of Martin Litton

Martin Litton uses his classic 1951 Cessna 195 to go to conferences, take aerial photos, and fly film-makers and journalists to environmental disasters all over the West.

Fifty years of conservation

A conversation with Martin Litton of Portola Valley is sure to traverse the highlights of the last 50 years of efforts to save the great forests and rivers of California and the West.

In his roles as a freelance writer for the Los Angeles Times, a notable leader of the Sierra Club, an editor at Sunset Magazine, a pilot and photographer, and a crusader, Mr. Litton has made his mark in the great conservation battles of the last half century.

And he is still fighting.

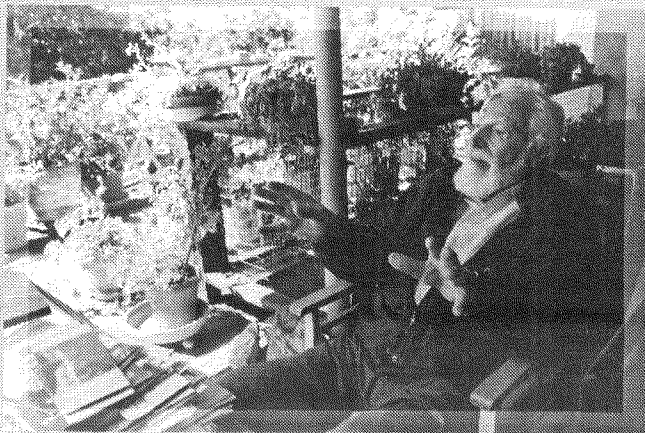
Two issues dominate his concerns: forests and rivers. And he’s played a major role in saving both.

■ FORESTS FOREVER

Mr. Litton recalls the family camping trip to the Northern California redwoods to research a travel article focused on the redwood state parks.

“What I saw appalled me — not just logging, but freeways,” he says. “I saw what was going on.”

Some of that passion energized his cover story on “The Redwood Country” in the October 1960 Sunset magazine. A picture of his family in an autumn grove graced the cover.



“We stopped them cold,” says Martin Litton of plans to build a freeway through northern redwood forests. The State Division of Highways was the enemy then — the way Stanford is now.

“Letters started to pour into Congress, and that was the beginning of the Redwood National Park,” Mr. Litton says with satisfaction 40 years later.

Mr. Litton did lots of lobbying and testifying, and put many miles on the Sunset plane, before the freeways stopped and the park happened.

He particularly remembers tackling Governor Pat Brown on the subject of Freeway 199, which was planned to slash through the northern redwood forests between Crescent City and Grants Pass in Oregon. The following day, Governor Brown cancelled the freeway. “We stopped them cold,” Mr. Litton recalls with delight. “The State Division of Highways was the enemy then — the way Stanford is now.”

Redwood National Park was created in 1968.

■ MAN AND THE RIVER

In the early 1950s, Mr. Litton learned that the Bureau of Reclamation was planning to build a couple of dams across the Colorado River in Dinosaur National Monument. As he often did, he went camping with his family to check out the area. And took lots of pictures.

Not long afterward, Sunday features appeared in the Los Angeles Times with Mr. Litton’s stunning pictures and lively text. Titles such as “Reclamation Bureau Plan Perils Scenic Wonderland,” “U.S. Dams Threaten Land where Dinosaurs Roamed,” and “Children in Boats Run Utah Rapids,” reached an audience of 400,000 people. “I wanted to stop the dams in Dinosaur National Monument. I didn’t mince words. I was an advocate,” he says.

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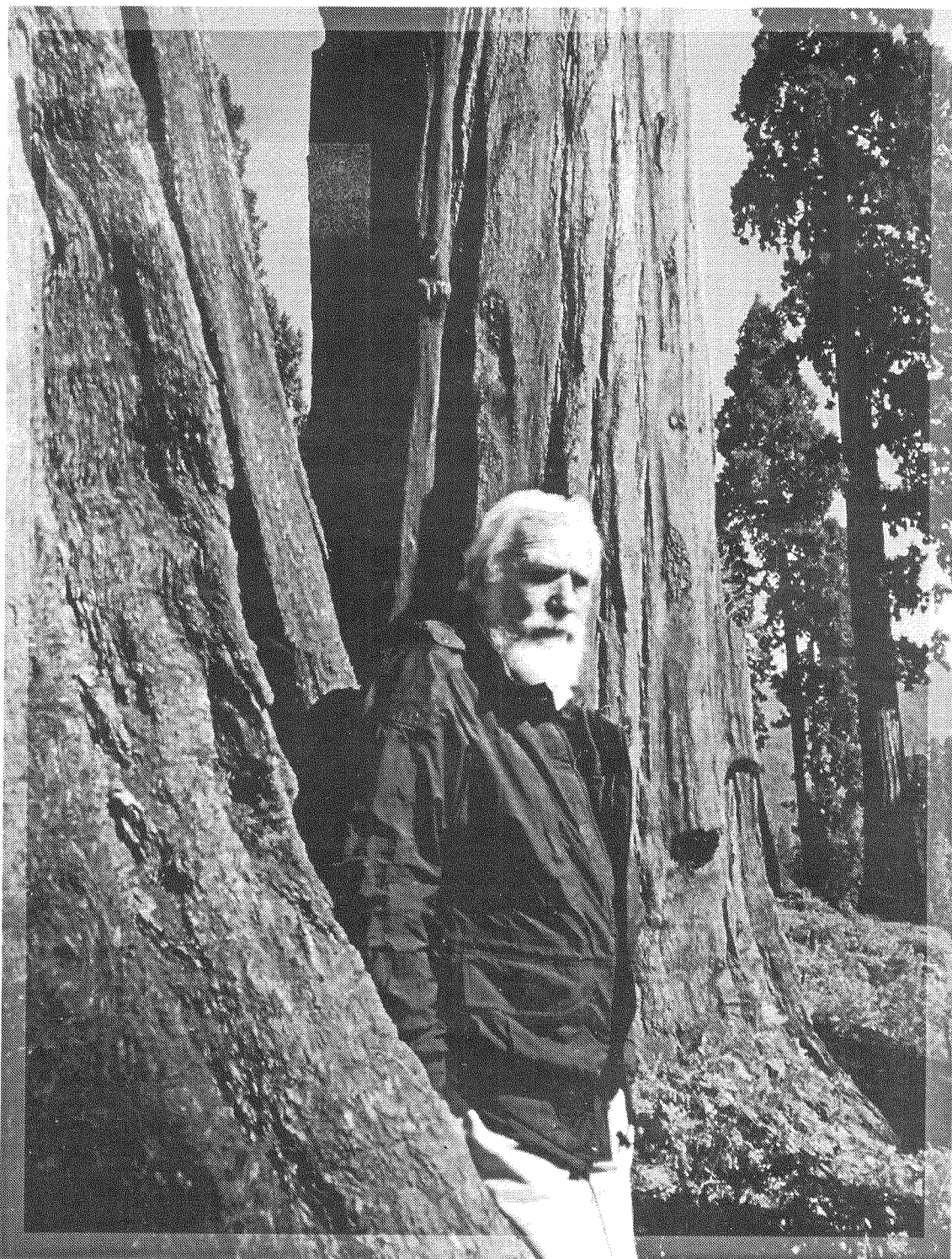


Photo by Mojgan Azimi

Martin Litton, a key player in establishing Redwood National Park in 1968, is now battling to save from logging the Sequoia National Forest — and the new Giant Sequoias National Monument.

► **CRUSADER**

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took two gallons of gas at 20 cents per gallon — except during price wars when it could get down to 6 cents. "We went to college because there weren't any jobs," he says.

During college, Martin began writing conservation articles and learned the power of photographs. He also took ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps) and became a lieutenant about the time that war was coming.

In July 1941, Mr. Litton reported for duty at Hamilton Field. He was turned down for pilot training because he was color-blind. Later he bluffed his way through the test and became a glider pilot. Towed by other planes, he carried men and equipment into battle during an aerial invasion of Holland, and later during the Battle of the Bulge. He received the Air Medal with Oak Leaf Clusters.

Meanwhile, Mr. Litton mar-

ried Esther Clewett in 1942. They met in adjacent seats in college French class. Fifty-eight years and four children later, they are both still going strong.

"Esther was the best thing that

"I'm boycotting computers because of what Silicon Valley has done to the Bay Area."

— MARTIN LITTON

ever happened to me," he says. "She's unbelievable. She raised great kids, and put up with me all the years."

■ **MAKING WAVES**

Mr. Litton's career as a conservation crusader really took off after he went to work for the Los Angeles Times about 1950.

After giving up engraving because he was color-blind, he went

to work for the circulation department, and freelanced — taking pictures for \$10 a picture, writing articles for 75 cents an inch. And the Times published them. "They were hard up for copy," he says. "Anything I wrote, they would print."

Mr. Litton still keeps the yellowed pages of the Sunday second sections where he wrote the lead feature and illustrated it with striking photos and titles. "Rub-bish Marring Southland Beauty" tackled litter in Los Angeles. "Yosemite's Beauty Fast Disappearing" reported on a family camping trip, which documented the messy campgrounds, piles of garbage, bears eating garbage, and traffic jams that were already polluting Yosemite's fabled beauty.

Things happened as a result of Mr. Litton's articles. Shortly after he published "Famed Sugar Pines Periled by Loggers," about the threat of cutting down the ancient sugar pines at Calaveras, the state, which had been dragging its heels, bought the forest.

"We shamed the state into buying the groves, which are now Calaveras Big Trees State Park," he says with relish.

Two other important things happened to Mr. Litton while he was at the Times.

David Brower, the new and aggressive executive director of the Sierra Club, recruited him in 1952 to join the fight against the dams planned for Dinosaur National Monument that he had already written about. While Mr. Litton had little use for the Sierra Club at the time, Mr. Brower convinced him that things would be different from then on.

"The Sierra Club never was great until he got his hands on it," Mr. Litton comments.

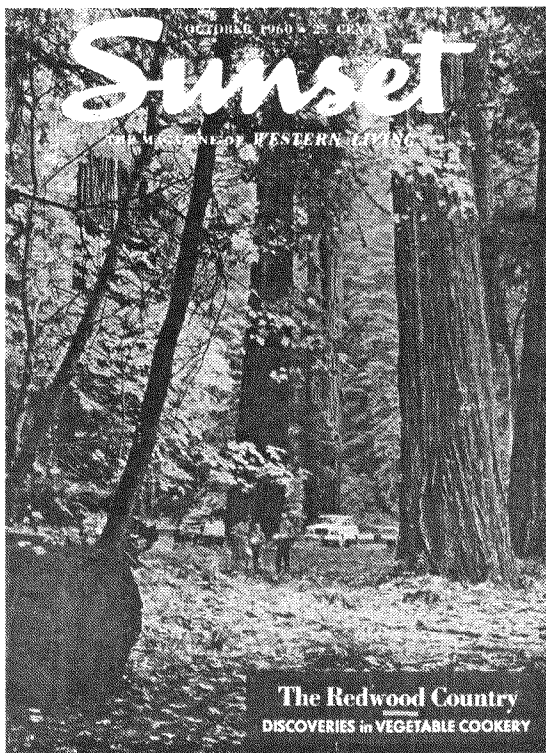
Thanks in part to the Sierra Club and Mr. Litton's articles in the Times, the dams in Dinosaur National Monument never got built.

Mr. Litton's association with the Sierra Club led to many fights, many victories, and some defeats. Mr. Litton served on the board of directors from 1964 to 1973.

In 1954 Mr. Litton received a letter from Sunset magazine in Menlo Park, inviting him to become travel editor. At first, he refused, but, he says, "They seduced me."

■ SUNSET YEARS: 1954-1968

Mr. Litton still remembers with glee a couple of trips rafting down San Francisquito Creek with Mel Lane and some Sunset colleagues.



Especially the last one. They got stuck in the middle of the stream near El Palo Alto, he recalls. A man walking a dog called for help, and pretty soon the bank was lined with police, reporters and a crowd. The next day the adventure was on the front page of the Palo Alto Times.

Mel Lane, who was in charge of Sunset books, remembers that last trip, too. "It was fun," he recalls. "All of us got dumped out."

Mr. Litton's crusading zeal must have ruffled some feathers at cautious, nonpolitical Sunset. He really tried to do his politicking on his own time, he says, but admits flying the Sunset plane on political missions. "I burned a lot of midnight oil. I didn't crusade, but there were occasions where the truth had to ooze through."

Publisher Bill Lane acknowledges Mr. Litton was sometimes a maverick, but says loyally: "Martin was one of the most creative writer-editors Sunset ever had. He's dear to my heart."

One of Mr. Litton's first lessons as travel editor was that writing about a quiet, hidden spot soon made it neither hidden nor quiet. He recalls a piece about a heavenly canyon where wild azaleas, twice as high as a person, fill the air with fragrance the second weekend in July. "Shortly afterward I got a letter from someone saying she couldn't get within three miles of it," he says. "After that, I wanted to publish articles about

See LITTON, next page ►

► FIFTY YEARS OF CONSERVATION

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How did he get away with it? "Los Angeles did not want any dams that would diminish the flow of Colorado River water. So I could write anything I wanted," he replies.

About this time, Mr. Litton hooked up with David Brower and the newly energized Sierra Club, and a major public campaign halted the dams.

Unfortunately, in Mr. Litton's opinion, the Glen Canyon Dam — downstream from and much bigger than the dams proposed for Dinosaur National Monument — slipped through without major opposition from the Sierra Club or anyone else.

By the time the federal government began promoting two dams that would back up water into the Grand Canyon itself, Mr. Litton had his dory business and knew more about that spectacular stretch of river than almost anyone.

In 1964, Mr. Litton led a rafting trip with David Brower, photographer Philip Hyde, and author Francois Leydet on a dory down the Grand Canyon. From that trip came a famous Sierra Club book, "Time and the River Flowing," which, Mr. Litton says, "is given a great deal of credit for keeping dams out of the Grand Canyon."

'Letters started to pour into Congress, and that was the beginning of the Redwood National Park.'

—MARTIN LITTON

Mr. Litton contributed to that fight in many ways. Most public, perhaps, was the 1969 expedition that celebrated the centennial of Major John Wesley Powell's first voyage down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. The Sierra Club sponsored the expedition, Mr. Litton's dories provided the transport, and Mr. Litton, himself, played the one-armed Civil

War veteran. They put in at Green River, Wyoming, where Major Powell and his 10 men started in 1869, and stopped and dressed up in costume for ceremonies at key points along the route.

Mr. Litton remembers the final celebration where the Virgin River meets the Colorado, now

at the head of Lake Mead. He had donned Major Powell's uniform, with the sleeve pinned to his jacket, for the final approach.

"Kids came running down the slope with a watermelon (just as they did 100 years ago for Major Powell and his exhausted crew). They stumbled and fell on their face, and broke the watermelons."

The Grand Canyon dams were never built either. Now Mr. Litton and many others would like to get rid of the Glen Canyon Dam, which he believes is useless, dangerous, and should be drained. "The water that is lost by seepage is worth more in money than the electricity generated," he says. "It makes sense to get rid of it." ■

► LITTON

continued from previous page

cities. I didn't want to destroy the West."

The Littons still live in the house they designed and built in 1959 on four steep Portola Valley acres. "We've been sitting here for 50 years. We paid \$9,000 for four acres," he says.

Two of Mr. Litton's prime causes — saving redwoods and the Grand Canyon — also matured during his Sunset years.

Sunset's cover story for October 1960, on "The Redwood Country," with text and photos by Martin Litton, helped launch the campaign that eventually led to the establishment of Redwood National Park almost a decade later. While the travel article was carefully descriptive and nonpolitical, some of Mr. Litton's passion "oozed through" in pictures of a giant redwood cut log, a freeway carved out of virgin forest, and an aerial view of a clear-cut "tree farm" bordering unspoiled state park.

Bill Lane recalls that after eight years of battles, the final meeting took place at Sunset. It was attended by the secretary of the interior, Congressman Pete McCloskey, state and federal officials, timber representatives — and Martin Litton. "We finally hammered out a boundary," Mr. Lane says. "It was a long battle."

During this period Mr. Litton also began his love affair with the Grand Canyon. He first went down the fearsome rapids in 1955, with Esther, in a fiberglass boat. They were the 185th and 186th people ever to do it, he says.

■ DORY STORY

"In 1962 I began to feel a yen for the river again," Mr. Litton says.

That was the date of his first trip with two dories down the Grand Canyon. Bill Lane went along on the first half of that trip, on dories that had been enlarged and redesigned from the wooden boats that were used on the McKenzie River in Oregon.

The trips were popular, and dories soon became the connoisseur's way to experience the Grand Canyon. "Friends wanted to come, and friends of friends, and people we didn't even know," Mr. Litton says.

In 1971 he incorporated Grand Canyon Dories, and later expanded to other great white-water rivers. But the business, while popular, never made money. Mr. Litton sold it about 1990. "We could never bring ourselves to charge enough," he says.

The dory folk remain scornful of the inflated boats that carry thousands down the Grand Canyon every year. "A raft is a blob of rubber. It has no character," says Mr. Litton

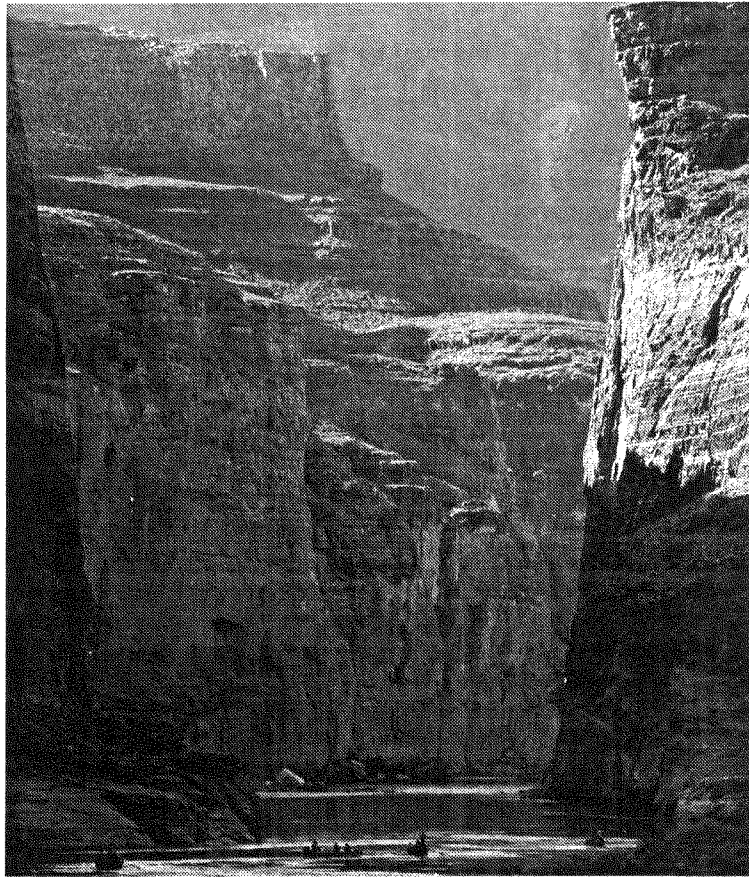


Photo by Rudi Petschek

In a serene moment, the majestic walls of the Grand Canyon dwarf the tiny boats plying the river.

"Dories split the water; they keep you dry. Last September I only got wet twice, not even at Lava Falls."

Asked about adventures and near misses, Mr. Litton is casual. "A couple of times I thought, was I drowning or not?" he replies.

Mr. Litton still rows the dramatic trip once or twice a year.

■ STILL GOING STRONG

Mr. Litton's No. 1 cause for the last 13 years has been saving the giant Sequoias in Sequoia National Forest — from the Forest Service. "And we're losing," he says.

Particularly galling to Mr. Litton is the creation of the new Giant Sequoias National Monument. Hailed by conservationists all over the country for saving the giant redwoods, President Clinton's action actually will free the new area from environmental laws and increase logging, he says. "These laws are all skirted, bypassed, loopholed," Mr. Litton says passionately. "The national monument is a fake in so many ways. It doesn't stop logging; it accelerates it."

Mr. Litton describes his 13 years of fighting logging in the Sequoia National Forest. By relentlessly filing lawsuits, logging opponents reduced the timber harvest from 85 to 7 million board feet a year between 1991 and 1999, he says.

Enter the national monument. Mr. Litton claims commercial logging, in the national monument alone, will quadruple — to 28 million board feet — in the next two and a half years. And in three years the managers must come up with a management plan. He fumes,

"It's so cynical it's unbelievable."

Not surprisingly, Mr. Litton is working with groups who plan to sue to block expanded logging in the Giant Sequoias National Monument.

Warming to a favorite subject, Mr. Litton continues: "The mission of the Forest Service is to get rid of all the nation's forests so they can start over. Under the guise of removing hazardous trees, they are taking out all the dead trees that are serving as home for woodpeckers and owls. Their credo is to remove trees that are dead, dying, or in danger of dying. That's every tree in the world."

Listening to Mr. Litton preach, you can understand why his interview with the Bancroft Library in Berkeley is titled "uncompromising preservationist."

Asked about his views on compromise, Mr. Litton replies: "On some things we must be uncompromising. What if George Washington had stopped in the middle of the Delaware River?"

Mel Lane, a state leader who has pioneered conservation of San Francisco Bay and the California coast, acknowledges that Mr. Litton's zeal could at times be difficult at Sunset. But, he adds: "We need these people. He's done a fabulous job. He's way out there in front of all of us. He was very effective. He still is."

Despite his enthusiastic efforts to save almost everything, Mr. Litton remains deeply pessimistic. "The only true optimist is a pessimist," he says. "You have to realize how bad things are before you can improve them."

"I feel sorry for my grandchildren." ■