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MOVIE REVIEW | 'THE SAME RIVER TWICE'

NO CARES, NO CLOTHES, BUT (SIGH) NO MORE

Happy days in the 70's are recalled in Robb Moss's "Same River Twice."

"The Same River Twice" a piercingly poignant then-and-now portrait of five friends who worked as summer guides on the Colorado River in the 1970's, suggests that there may be exceptions to the adage that youth is wasted on the young. As you watch vintage film clips of the five, frolicking naked in the turquoise waters at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, you sense that they knew they were in heaven and were savoring every minute of it.

It was in the summer of 1978 that the filmmaker Robb Moss, who was a member of the group of around a dozen, made a short 16-millimeter movie, "Riverdogs," which recorded a monthlong communal trip down the Colorado. Excerpts from that film make up the "then" portions of "The Same River Twice," which opens today at the Film Forum in the South Village.

As the movie flashes back and forth between that carefree summer excursion and the former "riverdogs" as they are today, the aura of collective happiness in the clips — of the group dancing naked, canoeing and rafting through white-water rapids and singing by a campfire — is so palpable it puts a lump in your throat. Perhaps the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who seems to have inspired the movie's title, said it best: You can't step into the same river twice.

Back then Danny Silver, now a vivacious aerobics instructor in Santa Fe, N.M., with a husband and children, was the girlfriend of Jim Tickenor, the group's bearded unofficial leader and inspirational free spirit. Looking back at those days, Ms. Silver, the only one of the five who still sparkles, describes communal life on the Colorado as "the complete package," and she wonders whether she should undermine her parental authority by telling her children about her hippie past, which included hallucinogens, or if she should lie about it. It's a ticklish question that many baby boomer parents must face.

In cutting back and forth between then and now, Mr. Moss is more interested in contrasting the moods and textures of life at different ages and eras than at compiling a documentary history. We learn nothing about the backgrounds of the five or how they came together. The contemporary scenes plunk us in the middle of family life with the clamor of children, tap-dancing lessons and birthday parties.

Among the five only Mr. Tickenor, who tried studying dentistry for six months but couldn't stomach it, continued living like a hippie. Scruffy and craggy faced with a salt-and-pepper beard and stringy gray hair, the middle-aged Jim is a distant shadow of the glamorous river god he was in his youth. He finds earning a catch-as-catch-can living in agriculture and river work a day-to-day struggle and worries about the future.

Cathy Shaw and Jeff Golden, who were lovers in the 70's and went on to marry and then divorce, bear little resemblance to the beautiful couple they were during their summer idyll. Ms. Shaw, a willowy blonde in the 70's has put on 20 pounds and became the mayor of Ashland, Ore. She is still smarting from the wounds of a breakup with a man she says she once worshiped. Mr. Golden confesses he was more interested in becoming what he calls "a player" (he is a radio host, organizational consultant and writer about environmental issues) than in fully committing himself to raising a family.

Barry Wasserman has faced the biggest personal challenges. Married with a family, he is running for re-election as mayor of Placerville, Calif., over the objections of his wife, who confesses to the camera she is tempted not to vote for him, because winning would keep him out of the house. Barry also endures a bout with testicular cancer.

What leaves you feeling wistful is the movie's exposure of the ravages of time on the human body. Physically and emotionally the five are different people today. If four of the five have found conventional happy endings as solid citizens and responsible parents, their present bliss seems tepid compared with their former life of ecstatic communion with nature. As Ms. Silver proudly sums up those golden summers: "Fun, friends, relationships, food, sex, adventure, beauty, exercise and music. It was all there."

THE SAME RIVER TWICE

Produced and directed by Robb Moss; director of photography, Mr. Moss; edited by Karen Schmeer; associate producer, Linda Morgenstern; distributed by Balcony Releasing.