

DOWN THE BUFFALO...



...PONCA TO WHITE RIVER, JUNE 2010

A modest adventure

©Jack Butt

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Prologue...

To celebrate my 60th birthday, I traveled afoot and afloat Arkansas's Buffalo River, the nation's only National River, from its point of highest navigability at Ponca, Newton County Arkansas down its 125-mile, free flowing, wilderness length to its mouth at the White River.

It was a capstone celebration of my relationship with the out-of-doors, river floating, and the Buffalo River in particular.

When I returned, one of my friends said, "tell us the tale..."

"There really isn't one", I said, "it was just 8 days of doing what I like best in a special place, for longer and further than I've ever done before".

"Surely, there is a tale in that," he said.

I'm not so sure, but maybe so.

So many artists have photographed the River, in so many of its aspects, there is nothing I could add to that bounty of art and inspiration, so I determined not to waste my time trying. In addition, the smiling faced photos, which normally draw a reader's attraction, were limited to my single countenance, and lacked a photographer for even that! As a result, there is very little photography with which to embellish this remembrance.

Finally, there are those journalists and naturalists and adventurers who have devoted major parts of their careers to describing with all of their skills and time, the River. I can't match that. This is just the tale of a guy who loves the River, and took a long week of his life to float it, in celebration of the fact he could.

Coming to know the River...

The Buffalo River, cutting its valley some 140 miles through the heart of the Ozark Plateau in North Central Arkansas, has perhaps never been fully civilized, and hopefully never will be. Hill folk from the Virginia, Carolina, and Tennessee Appalachians were the first Europeans to settle those parts when they in-migrated during the 1840's. Finding some fertile farmland in its bottoms, and abundant timber and wild game throughout, their mountain ways were adequate to settle and survive in the breathtakingly beautiful valleys. However the Buffalo River Valley

was never effectively penetrated by railroads, was too seasonal and small a mountain stream to support steamboat commerce, and building and maintaining passable wagon roads and bridges across it and in and out of its rugged hollows was so problematic, that for the most part those first settlers became isolated in a state of persistent frontier. The railroads, riverboats and highways, and the towns and cities they built, simply passed it by, staying well north and south as the frontier continued its westward, civilizing march on through Arkansas into Oklahoma.

The Buffalo River Valley settlers had their schools, and churches, and communities, but they never permanently flourished. In most cases they left after only one or two generations, their passing presence marked only by tumbled in chimney stones with March daffodils outlining the dooryard of a disappeared cabin, or the foundation stones of the small community churches and schools, abandoned barns, and old fencelines remaining to outline what had been, for a fleeting few years, an active family farm or mountain community. Brief periods of active timbering and zinc mining built and then abandoned towns like Erbie and Rush. It was simply too hard to get by and too unpredictable, between the drought and floods, and too isolated from viable centers of commerce, to flourish.



Bluff below Woolum

By the 1950's, this was not an isolated problem in the Ozarks but existed to some degree throughout the isolated, rugged, mountain South. The answer became, "dam the mountain rivers" – it was a solution with many good results. The alternate devastation of floods and drought were resolved; permanent water supplies to

support and build towns were created; reliable transportation by waterways was opened; the lakes brought tourists and fishermen and created an economy where none had existed; and the civilizing effect and economic boost of electric power was manifested.

Of course, dammed rivers do not flow wild and free, riverside farms are drowned and their owners evicted, so it was not without its cost. But again, and again, throughout Tennessee, Alabama, Missouri, and Arkansas, in the mid twentieth century, the social cost of this was trumped in the public's eye by the benefits. And the mountain rivers were dammed, and tamed, and harnessed.

It was at this point in its history, the 1950's, that the Buffalo claimed me. By then, its hardy settlers had struggled for more than a century to simply persist, decimated by the hard times of the depression and then most of its children drawn away by the post-World War II boom of cities. The Buffalo River Valley in the 1950's was a place out of time. The White River into which it flowed, and its North Fork tributary, had been successfully dammed, again and again, as had its Missouri cousins, and were enjoying economic booms and growth. Probably only its remoteness and small and diminishing population had kept the Buffalo off of Congressional and Corps of Engineers agendas.

There was another force at work, also. Recognizing the beauty of the River, and its potential for recreation, the CCC and WPA programs of the Great Depression were directed in the 1930's to build a State Park on the Buffalo. It was a modest mountaintop development of only 3 guest cabins, an office/headquarters, and a small restaurant and store, which overlooked from a high bluff a bend in the River, along with access to the River by a reliable dirt road. Its capacity for those first 30 years or so was limited to whatever the three small cabins could accommodate, along with however many people might choose to camp at its undeveloped river-side access.

To get to the State Park from a city of origin required, besides navigating a hundred miles or more the winding, single lane highways through the Ozarks, enduring the final 20 miles or so south from Yellville on a dirt road.

It was an isolated, quiet, out of the way place at a time when most of the few people who had time or money to spend on vacations were not spending it to push deeper into their own, underdeveloped rural areas.

At the same time, a very modest tourist economy had built on the Ozark Rivers, catering to wealthy city denizens from Kansas City, Springfield, and St.Louis, and sometimes further, providing them guided fishing trips through the majestic bluffs and clean gravel bars, with fishing that became nationally famous.

This modest number of visitors grew a steadfast and fierce allegiance to this little, wild, beautiful river.



It was to this rustic State Park that my family came for a week's vacation in the summers of 1959 and 1960. Our family and those of three close friends of my father from his days as an ROTC instructor just before World War II, were the Park's total clientele for those weeks. There were some 9 kids among the families, and it was great fun. Every day we would get up at the break of dawn, to drive miles and miles over rough dirt roads, down through a hollow to some fog-shrouded remote river access, to be put on the River by the sole, local outfitter, Leon Dodd, whose brother ran the state park facilities. Canoes were practically unheard of and unseen in the Ozarks then. River running was all done in the long, stable, shallow draft johnboats. We would float all day, on some occasions overnight, to be taken out by the Dodds at our down river destination, and return to our cabins to clean up and recharge for the next day.

To sum in a sentence what could be a chapter, I was totally enchanted: by the awesome bluffs, the deep clear water, the excitement of the rapids, the magic of fishing, the abundance of wildlife, the sense of wilderness out of time, and the overwhelming beauty of the River. There was also a feeling of ghosts along the river; the old, abandoned homesteads, the fallen-in swinging bridges, the defunct mines. People had lived and flourished here at some time, but they mostly weren't here now except for perhaps their lingering spirits in the few and windowless homesteads.

In addition to ourselves, in a full day we might see at most one or two other float parties; either the well heeled patrons of the guided floats, sitting regally in their canvas backed director's chairs as their guide sculled them by, or locals in overalls, long sleeve shirts, straw hats, in leaky john boats.

So it was thus that I bonded with the River.



It was also at this time, that the juggernaut of river damming in the United States met the infant but growing realization of society, that clearing, and damming, and controlling wasn't necessarily always the highest and best use by civilization of its wild places, and thus started the "Battle for the Buffalo", where those who loved the free-flowing River, fought long, hard, bitter, political battles with those who would dam it. And it was a momentous and unique outcome, that those who wanted it left wild, won the battle and thus it became the country's first National Park River. The details, and outcome, and retrospective of that are themselves the subject of books, so not to belabor it here. But it too caused the condemnation and removal of hill families from their ancestral farms. As a twelve year old, I took part in the battle, spending hard earned lawn mowing money to join the Ozark Society which had been formed to preserve the River, and writing letters to my Congressman, Jim Trimble. As the Buffalo remained wild and free, my bond with the River motivated me even as a youngster, to join the fight to save it.

Those two years' vacations were followed for the next 4 years by a week each summer along the River with my Boy Scout troop at the very rustic Boy Scout Camp Orr, some 70 miles upriver from the State Park, followed by two summers as a teenager spending practically the whole summer at the Camp as a member of its junior staff.

Hardly a night went by that didn't find us using the camp canoes to fish the deep holes, frog gigging, and running limb lines along the River as it ran through the camp. We climbed the bluffs, explored the caves, and reveled in the midsummer's heat standing under the frigid spring-fed waterfalls of tributary creeks. It was an easy place for a teenage boy to fall in love with. It became to me then, and has remained throughout my life, a place I could go in my mind when I was depressed, or lonely, or distressed, to find peace and comfort as a spiritual refuge.

In the intervening 50 years, I have floated, and fished, and camped, and whitewater canoed rivers throughout the United States: Not only the other Ozark float streams such as the Kings, War Eagle, Mulberry and White, but the Shenandoah, branches of the Potomac, and Rappahannock of Virginia; the roaring Nantahala of North Carolina and Chattooga of Georgia; the Brazos of Texas; the Skyhomish, Wenatchee, and Snohomish of Washington, and the Boundary Waters of Minnesota and Canada. It was the Buffalo that brought me to them, and against which all are compared, none withstanding the enchantment of the Buffalo.

The Buffalo properly was the first National River. Its combination of clear waters, wilderness environs, high bluffs, extensive clean gravel and sand bars, good fishing, quiet holes and rushing shoals, all navigable by paddle without whitewater equipment or skills for its entire, 125 mile floatable length make it, by my informed comparisons, the best all around floating river in the United States.

Many times since then, I've spent days floating or camping or fishing the River. But never have I had the time and opportunity to float the whole river. This, despite what I wrote in one of my journals decades ago: "Places to go and things to do before I die: Float the Buffalo River top to bottom".



So it was when I turned 60, in April, 2010, that I confronted that I am mortal, life is not forever, nor am I growing any younger; and this was a gift I would give myself, while it could still be given.

After my April birthday, I secretly marked off on my calendar sufficient days in late June, prepared to abandon the quest if necessitated by urgencies of office or home. Fatefully, none occurred. On a Wednesday evening I loaded my gear, purchased food, and departed home on a June Thursday morning, break of dawn, for an anticipated 9-day trip; it took 8.

Having spent literally years of my life camping and canoeing, I expected little or nothing extraordinary of this trip in the way of new adventure or learning or novelty. This was just kind of a victory lap, that I had lived long enough to find the time, means, confidence, and desire all intersecting to celebrate the River and its place in my being. I was not disappointed. But I did, indeed, learn some things; one always does.

How to Float A River

The dimensions and character of any river are so deep, wide, and varied, that it cannot be assimilated in a single trip. The Buffalo perhaps more than others.

One can seek to paddle many miles a day, and thereby see much of its beauty and diversity and nature. But in doing so, the opportunity to fish every potential eddy and hole and riffle must be sacrificed, along with the lunkers, varied species, and fresh fish dinners that come from that studied approach. And certainly, anyone who has not simply drifted with the current, reclined to watch the sky, is missing a spiritual experience.



Not to mention the exploration of side creeks and waterfalls. And too much time fishing sacrifices the chance to jump from all the streamside bluffs that have been discovered over the years which have the perfect combination of deep water below, scalable walls, and challenging but tolerable heights to provide a thrilling 5 meter descent; and leaves no time to test the rope swings that have existed to my knowledge for decades from their special overleaning river birches, tied, and retied,

and repaired from 40 foot dizzying heights, until they look, with all their knots and loops and varied ropes, like the tail on an elaborate Chinese kite.



And how can you cover much river if you are “heavy camping?” –making sure that each night’s camp has the luxury of a home with ample tents and dining flies and comfortable cots and chairs and elaborate camp kitchens, with food and drink to rival a gourmet restaurant – that requires an early stop, and a late start to each day, but how delightful to enjoy those comforts amidst the wilderness.

And if you swing the ropes, jump the bluffs, and fish all day, where is the stamina to sit the nightlong campfire, running limb lines, blind fishing the dark banks with jitterbugs and other noisy lures, tending set poles for catfish, and catching bullfrogs for the breakfast pan?

And with a bird and plant guide in hand, one can spend 4 hours within 100 yards of the river, at least scratching the surface learning the names, and uses, and life habits of the diversity there – and a good set of goggles and a snorkel opens a vast and exciting underwater world to explore.

So how do you take a float trip? For several years in my 30’s, a good friend of mine, David Buckley, who was equally Buffalo addicted and I took a long float trip

on the River each June for four to six days, sometimes with other companions, sometimes not. Our first effort anticipated 12 miles a day over five or six days. By the end of our time, we found ourselves 20 river miles short of our destination, and had to hitchhike 50 miles of local roads to pick up our car where we'd intended to take out. Each year, we shortened our anticipated distance, in light of how much we engaged the River, and still always came up short. As I recall, the last year we went, we planned 4 miles a day; for the first time, we made it all the way to our cars after 5 days, and 20, fully indulgent miles on the River.



In the end, I had hard choices to make; while I could paddle the whole length of the River, short of full retirement there would be no opportunity to fully engage the River, which would require a several week trip. The outfitters recommend to their clientele about 8 miles as an average and tolerable day. I calculated that 15 miles per day would be necessary to get the 125 mile length done in the 9 days allotted. But for the few times I'd coursed down flood swollen rivers 20 miles or more in a single day, 15 miles per day would be more than I'd ever done in a day, much less for 9 straight days. And for that, I mentally prepared to forfeit most of the many pleasures of a more leisurely trip. It was worth it, to string the entire necklace of jewels together, even though I had to forsake specially coveting each of the jewels along the way.

Floating companions

It is an adage of floating, that whatever goes wrong with a boat, is obviously and always, always, caused by the other person in the boat, who wasn't balanced, or leaned the wrong way at the wrong time, paddled too much, too little, or the wrong way, at the wrong time.

It is a doctrine of expeditions of any kind, that they move at the pace of the slowest participant.

And it is a characteristic of any float trip, with so very many things to do on a river, that there is a continuum of decisions, which if you have a companion, are necessarily shared decisions: Whether to stop (to fish, for the bathroom, to eat, to swim, to camp for the night, etc. etc.), when to stop, how long to stop, when to go, which channel around an island to take, etc. etc. Sometimes, these can lead to debate, disagreement and even dispute.

For this special trip, I needed special companions to address these characteristics and the conflict that can arise from them. But with family and suitable friends spread throughout the country, engaged with careers, competing with other vacations, it was an impossible task to figure who to ask first – what if dozens said yes, swamping the trip with its logistics? What if the two who said yes weren't compatible with each other? What if nobody said yes?

I've spent months, probably, with my wife in a canoe, all of it wonderful. But she had no interest in spending 9 days on a river under any circumstances, including these.

So it came to a selfish and indulgent resolution: Go by myself, but invite everybody that might have been a suitable companion, a few weeks ahead of time and leave it

to them to arrange their own logistics. That I did. The invitation, on the following page, triggered many interested comments but no takers. It would be a solo trip.

EMAIL TO 50 CLOSEST FRIENDS:

Float the Buffalo

I turned 60 in April. Hoped to have an appropriately elaborate and grand Sextadecennial celebration bringing together all facets of my life, family and friends, but hard to fit such a thing into one evening, though it was a most excellent cocktail party.

So I figured I'd make it an all year celebration. I'm working out the details, but next up...

It's been on my bucket list, since my parents first introduced me to the Buffalo River in 1959, to float the whole thing. I've done it in pieces many times, but never enough time, never eager to get off, and never done the whole thing in one, literal, sitting. So I'm putting on The River at Ponca at 7 a.m. sharp, Thursday, June 17, pulling off the river Saturday, June 26, at Buffalo City, 130 miles downstream.

You're invited. It's definitely a "bring your own boat" event, so I don't expect too many to join me, but I'm sure that if I really do this, the next dozen or so friends I see over the coming months will say, "gosh, wish you'd let me know, I might have come!" So, you are indeed, really, truly, sincerely invited.

I've been planning and doing float trips like this my whole life. Just getting one kid, or one fishing buddy, or even Anne and me on the river for a day is a serious logistical feat – increasing that to a family, or 6 college buddies – weather, equipment, boats, racks, schedules, water levels, car ferries, meals, etc. etc. - it's a logistical problem having exponentially increasing difficulties for every additional person. So by the time I invite and effectively plan for my hundred closest friends (or even a dozen)...well, it would be easier to go to the moon, and I'd have to write it off my bucket list.

So thanks for your indulgence in bringing your own boat (and food, drink, gear and transportation). Otherwise the trip just wouldn't work. I will be at these places, at these times, waiting for 15 minutes at each, for you to join me for the downriver sexadecennial birthday party, and then I'm downriver again. Join me for a day, or two, or the whole thing:

Ponca, Thursday, June 17, 7 a.m. (mile zero)
Erbie, Friday, June 18, 9 a.m. (mile 16.3)
Hasty, Friday, June 18, 6 p.m. (mile 30.7)
Woolum, Sunday, June 20, 9 a.m. (mile 50.3)
Tyler Bend, Monday, June 21, 9 a.m. (mile 65.6)
Highway 65 Bridge, Monday June 21, 10:00 a.m. (mile 66.6)
Gilbert, Monday, June 21, 1 p.m. (mile 70.9)
Maumee North, Tuesday, June 22, 9 a.m. (mile 82.5)
Buffalo Point, Tuesday, June 22, 6 p.m. (mile 93.7)
Rush, Wednesday, June 23, 11 a.m. (mile 101.2)
Arrive Buffalo City Saturday, June 26 10 a.m. (mile 131.4)

No presents or cards, please. But I'll be traveling light, so fresh ice, cold beer, or a steak would be welcome. Hope to see you on the river. As a precaution, if you're really coming, call my office, 479-521-7600, before you leave town for the river, to ask if I'm still on the river; if I'm not, they'll be the first to know. Hope to have you join my bucket list sixtieth birthday party!!

If seriously interested, check out <http://www.nps.gov/buff>, and give me a cal before I leave: 479-521-7600. Jack



As it turned out, I was a wonderful companion, blamed myself for no errors in boatmanship, reached immediate, unanimous decisions throughout each day affecting the expedition, and best of all, was always on time in accordance with my own expectations. It was a trip wonderfully free of any stress that companions, however compatible, might create.

The dangers

My wife, who was wonderfully indulgent of this, as she has been of many, many of my expeditions to the woods over our marriage, wasn't too concerned. She reported, however, that many of her friends (most of whom have spent less than a week of their lives on rivers or in the woods), thought I was crazy, as was she, for indulging this unnecessary jeopardy. It occurred to me that I may have spent more days in the woods and on rivers, than some of those concerned have spent at the Mall, and personally, I am far more comfortable in the former than the latter.

Indeed, if an accident occurred - struck by lightning, struck by snake, struck by food poisoning - having no companion in the wilderness makes it a bit dicier. But then again, those are mostly controllable dangers and the essence of outdoor safety is not rescue, but learning how to avoid the risk at all. And to the extent a companion would provide any effective help to such an emergency, even on the slowest day, there would be traffic on the river to get the word, or my damaged self, out. Curiously, during the trip I myself become involved in a couple of "disasters" of others who did not know, and thus did not control, the jeopardy they brought to themselves. More of that later.

However, these indirect criticisms of my sanity caused me to mull all of that over, and I finally determined that it fell in the category of driving on the interstate, operating a chain saw, or driving a tractor, all of which I do, regularly, each with some trepidation and excessive care, and which I long ago resolved were not unreasonably dangerous for the results obtained.

To me, the four real fears were rain, flooding, the White River, and myself.

Myself? My trip anticipated that I would solo paddle a loaded canoe more miles per day, more days in a row, than I ever had. I certainly didn't train for that other than being regularly, physically active. So there were serious concerns whether I would be physically up to paddling 7 to 9 hours per day, day after and day, and whether my hands could survive the beating and avoid trip-ending blisters. One outcome I had come to grips with was that I might have to pull off the river after only a day or two, begging a ride, begging a cell phone, to have the outfitter who ferried my truck rescue me in disgrace from a dysfunctional back, or hands so raw as to be useless. I armed myself with gloves, and plenty of blister first aid, and of course the obligatory roll of duct tape, which may be the most effective blister-protecting substance known to man. But, surprisingly, I was up to it. My hands held up without the first evidence of a blister, and without gloves, tape or bandaids; the only medication needed was a few ibuprofen now and then to overcome morning aches and midnight soreness.

Rain? Training as an Army Ranger, we jauntily called the incessant rain we encountered on extended, long-range tactical training patrols in the wilderness of the Southern Smokies and Florida swamps, "Ranger sunshine". It was noted that the noise and disturbance of the rain covered the noise and movement of clandestine patrols. Thus being out and on the move in the rain was, tactically at least, a good thing.

Seeking to make the most of short hunting seasons, I have bought the best waterproof gear on the market and many times used it so I could persist, all day, in the rain to make sure I wasn't missing a day of the season.

And in many overnight hikes, when overtaken by rain, there's really nothing to do except walk and camp through it.

Which would lead one to expect that with the right equipment, right skills, right experience, and right attitude, a persistent rain is, indeed, just "Ranger sunshine".

After 50 years of right equipment, skills and attitude, I'm here to tell you that persistent rain is unabated misery. It shrivels your hands, it makes your skin crawl under the sweaty and soaked garments. No matter how much waterproof stuff of what degree of technical advancement is worn, you either soak yourself sweating from the inside, leaking from the outside, or both. It runs down your neck; it fills

your shoes, it shrivels your feet, it runs into your ears, drips in your eyes and totally disables your glasses. You are either uncomfortably hot, or uncomfortably chilled, and little things, like trying to use toilet paper outside in the rain...it just won't make it dry and intact to where it needs to go to do its job! Over several days such rain can lead to trench foot, and on an otherwise moderate day, can lead to hypothermia. I saw and experienced both in Army training.

While there is temporary relief in a tent or under a tarp, unless you simply hunker down for days to wait it out, ultimately those shelters have to be struck and packed, wet, to remain wet, inside and out, the rest of the trip. And somehow no matter how hard you try to protect them, the little cache of dry clothes and the dry sleeping bag become damp, dank, and chill. With rain usually comes lightning, which anywhere near a river is dangerous.

And there can be something of a terror to it. An Ozarks outdoor writer of about my age, Larry Dablemont, who was lucky enough to spend his working life as a float guide, Park and Wildlife Officer, and journalist of those things, noted in his book, *Rivers to Run* that, "some floaters, after enduring a storm on the river, choose never again to make another float. It's a humbling experience, but something all men should experience. As you sit in a tent that's suddenly far too flimsy, listening to lightning crackle about you, followed by deafening roars of thunder and tree limbs cracking with the wind, you realize what a powerless insignificant creature man can be."

I've had that experience, several times, when my first time had been more than quite enough.

However, there was really nothing I could do, except pack everything in waterproof bags and boxes, include a tarp, tent, gore-tex suit, and hope. The hoping worked best. In eight days on the River, I literally enjoyed two, 30 minute thundershowers, both after my cozy camp was pitched in the evening, I in my lawn chair under the spread tarp, cocktail in hand, enjoying the roar of the rain on the stretched tarp, and the drama of clouds, thunder and lightning. The storms quickly passed on through after freshening the air, and left starry skies.

Flood. It is a surprising thing to an inexperienced gravel bar camper to fall asleep watching the clear, quiet, star studded heavens, and awake at 3 a.m., still under those quiet, starlit heavens, with their canoe adrift, tent full of water, and unsecured gear floating away in a 3 foot river rise, all caused by an unseen, unheard, unknown deluge 20 miles upriver.

Presuming that the canoe has not floated away by the time this is all discovered, there then ensues the hurried, chaotic striking of camp and packing the boat in ankle deep water and darkness, to tie to a limb in the shallows until dawn lights the downriver path – which has turned from a gentle, three foot deep channel moving two miles per hour, into a six foot deep roaring torrent of muddy water, moving four

times that fast. However, camping each night to be ready for such a flood, and hoping otherwise were my only alternatives, and again, the hoping seemed to work best. The River remained for the duration at a constant, easy, level.

This below was the last night's camp, and as bucolic and peaceful as it appears, an extraordinarily risky camp. It sat on a gravel bar island, only 6 inches above water level. A midnight rise would very quickly leave me camped, literally, underwater in the middle of the river with no escape route. It was otherwise such a great spot, that I resolved to chance it, with preparation. Before turning in, all of my gear (except the tent and my sleeping bag) was packed in the canoe, and my canoe tethered to the tent and icebox, so if the water came up, I could readily throw my tent and myself into the boat and be underway, with the gravel bar downriver to the right as my bailout. Happily, those were unnecessary precautions.



The White River. In the old days, before dams were everywhere built on the White River it was, much like the Buffalo, a grand float stream – much bigger of course, but easily navigable by paddled johnboats. Once one has left the mining ghost town of Rush on the lower Buffalo, it is 26 miles of roadless, designated wilderness with no access whatsoever by which to exit the River, until the Buffalo runs into the White River at Buffalo City. That is the only way out, once one has pushed off from Rush.

In its time, Buffalo City was the highest point of steamboat navigation on the White River. State Highway 126, winding south through the Baxter County mountains from Mountain Home dead-ends there. The remnants of its tiny village survive as

summer homes and fishing camps, and a modest resort has built and grown there, all nourished by the favorable trout fishing.

There is trout fishing there, because some miles above, the Bull Shoals and Norfolk Dams periodically release water from the bottom of the impounded White River and its North Fork to drive their turbines, providing electricity to the Arkansas and Missouri Ozarks. Going back to the success story of the southern mountain dams, besides flood control and electricity, the icy cold water emerging from the bottom of these impoundments proves perfect habitat for trout not native to these rivers. The trout stocked by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission in turn gave rise to a vibrant tourist industry, which builds special boats, ties flies, and feeds, shelters, supplies, and guides the fishers of trout.

Leaving but a single problem. Buffalo City is an eighth of a mile across White River from the entry of the Buffalo River. Having traversed the last 26 miles of the Buffalo, there is no exit except to cross that water. And when the turbines of Bull Shoals Dam are open and running, the White River is very, very deep, very, very swift, and very, very cold. Such that a swamped canoe and all of its gear would certainly be lost, and the survival of its occupants dependent upon their having life jackets, and not suffering such extreme hypothermia in the cold water, as to prevent them from making it to one side or another to be rescued.

There is no way to predict when or how many of the turbines will run, or how long they will run. I had run this traverse twice before, both times at high water with a companion in the canoe, both of us paddling upstream and across, literally for our lives, to get to the final destination.

I had serious concerns about whether, and how, at age 60, I alone could or would make this final 200-plus yards at the end of 125 miles.

With 6 turbines of cold water rushing downstream, I made it. That 30 minutes, paddling up the White on the Buffalo side a quarter mile, to then ferry across, was the only real adventure of the trip, and more adventure than I really wanted; but what an adrenaline surge to end 125 miles and 8 days that way!

This picture is me safely arrived on the Buffalo City side of White River. An hour earlier, I entered from the Buffalo, which comes in to the left of my right elbow, paddled frantically several hundred yards up the far side clinging to the bank to avoid the strongest current, before gaining enough distance upriver, to ferry to this side without being swept through the shoals further to my right.



Christmas morning

The eve before and morning of my departure came with all the anticipation of a six year old's Christmas. On my life dream list for 40 years, and my calendar for 3 months, this was it. The night before departure, I gathered my canoe and gear in my garage and carefully packed and arranged it all, cherishing items of outdoor gear that had served forty years, and others bought the day before, sorting, packing, arranging, thinking through how to maximally balance the tension between cutting weight and having all the necessary gear and provisions; how it should be when I embarked, what would happen if I broached on a midstream rock, how fast could I get to and set a tarp in an unexpected summer deluge, where the weight would balance in the canoe, where and how should I pack what I might need at a moment's notice.

Following simple principals makes a vast difference in the pleasure, safety, and even the completion of a float trip:

Everything thing which would be impaired if wet, is waterproofed. This was done through a combination of latching plastic chests, boxes and duffels, easy to load, unload and carry: My boxes included one for all of my breakfast and supper food and cooking gear for nine days; a second smaller one with all of my lunches, snacks and first aid kit; a third, small one, with my camp tools: Tarp, groundcloth, rope, stakes, duct tape, small ax and saw (these more for rescuing a pinned canoe than cutting logs for camp); and the smallest, toughest box, a totally waterproof surplus ammo can, which sat at my feet with my billfold, cellphone, camera, car keys, extra matches, flashlight, maps, and nature guide books. And then two duffels: Army surplus duffel bags, lined with heavy duty plastic garbage bags tied shut when loaded; one with my sleeping bag and clothes, one with my sleeping pad and tent.

Surprisingly, the real risk of wetness is not from an overturn or swamping, though indeed that is a risk. The unavoidable risk is, throughout the day, moment by moment, water is constantly splashed into the canoe and over the packed gear by the paddler, switching from side to side with the wet paddle, and getting in and out of the canoe with water soaked shoes and pants. This accumulates to many gallons per day, which are periodically evacuated by a large sponge; but in the meantime, anything that is in the canoe is regularly splashed from the top down and soaked from the bottom up; thus the conscientious waterproofing.

Put the weight low. A canoe, heavily laden, becomes a very stable craft, if the weight sits low.

Keep a low profile. Most of the boats on the river for more than just day trips are stacked high above the canoe's sides ("gunwales", pronounced "gunnels"), with the excess gear that simply cannot be compressed to keep it below the canoe's profile. Indeed, myself, on what I call "heavy camping" trips, load the bottom of the boat with ice and beer, and by the time I get to sleeping bags, clothes and tents, they are stacked 2 feet above the gunwales, looking something like the Grapes of Wrath on water. This comes with major impairments: the higher profile is trouble waiting to happen in rapids where the canoe regularly must go into and under overhanging trees ("sweepers"). Not only does the higher load get caught in the lower branches, the boat is top heavy and less stable. Of less danger, but far more stress, is the sail-like effect the high load has when paddling into the wind. A strong upriver wind can literally stop a toploaded downriver canoe dead in the river, overcoming two paddlers. It is an endless Purgatory to find yourself in such a top loaded boat against a hearty headwind, at the end of a long day, going through a mile long hole with little current.

When paddling solo, sit in the front seat, facing the rear, in effect making the stern of the canoe the bow – this puts the single paddler nearer the center with more control.

Finally, *the weight needs to be distributed slightly toward the rear of the canoe,* so that the bow will slide over the water, instead of digging into it.

Unavoidably some things have to stay loose for convenience. I kept two spinning rods ready to go, an ultralight with light spinners perched to my right, a heavier rod loaded with a hefty Rapala lure to my left, their pole ends and hooks extending over the back end of the canoe. When approaching shoals, I slid these forward a bit so the hooks would drop inside the gunwales to keep from getting snagged on trees. Also at hand was my fly rod, its 9 foot length sitting just inside the gunwale going forward, with its fragile tip tucked under the foremost thwart. A bungee stretched across the chest in front of me served to secure my fishing net and waterproof map case while keeping both ready at hand. My tackle box sat at my feet, and in a small daypack perched on the duffel nearest me were water bottles and

sunscreen for my hands...the only part of me exposed to the sun. That bag stayed wet from paddle splash, keeping the water bottles inside, from which I consumed a gallon or more each day, cool in the damp bag. There was no reason to store the 5 gallon collapsible water jug, minnow trap and minnow bucket to keep from getting wet; they were tucked under my seat.

Just like starting the day with a freshly starched, cotton shirt, or a newly shined pair of shoes, or a just-washed and waxed car, it is a smug and secure feeling to embark in a perfectly trimmed canoe – and they look so...so canoe. And in my garage, the night before, by arranging and re-arranging boxes and bags and gear I've floated with the better part of my life, I brought this canoe to the most perfect trim I'd ever accomplished. By midnight, the canoe was loaded onto the truck with my gear inside, and the truck aimed out the driveway for a dawn getaway. Christmas was here, Santa's Sleigh was packed!!

Everything waterproof, heaviest on bottom, weight slightly to stern, nothing above the gunwales, important things (fishing poles and camera) at hand, river ready!



The Chair... seen in these many pictures is one of a few, special items of equipment that have come to me from many decades of experience that can and do truly make a

float trip a fundamentally easier, more comfortable experience. I've never been on the river with anyone who after experiencing the chair didn't covet it. It is probably # 1 on my "Top Ten List of Generally Unknown Floating Tips, Tricks, and Essentials". Not only does it provide the obvious: real relief for a tired back during long days on the river; if for whatever reason you don't want it, it promptly folds flat to be tucked under a chest-top bungee. Of secondary note is the fact that this canoe has wicker seats. Again, in long days on the river, the aeration and "give" of these avoid a serious, widely experienced discomfort syndrome, known as "boat-butt" – too many hours sitting in wet pants on an inflexible, impermeable plastic or aluminum seat without air circulation. It's important that this chair has the woven plastic seat and back to allow the airflow and give of the wicker seats to function, avoiding boat-butt. Seriously, it's a big deal.

And of that weren't enough, it easily moves into the gravel bar shade at noon for lunch



and becomes the living room, kitchen, and dining room chair in camp at night.

It works perfectly as a place from which to tend midnight catfish poles, and finally, after an evening or morning bath in the river, it is essential to have a stable, dry place to sit while drying off feet and putting on dry shoes and socks...try that without a chair, sometime! The simple truth of it is that floating without a chair defines "roughing it", and one chair can put you at home, anywhere you set, or sit, it. Years this chair field-tested: 33

The rest of my top ten:

Lightweight Camp Stove and Cast Iron Skillet: The antithesis of each other, these stoves were invented for ultralight backpacking. By the same token, you'll never find a backpacker with a cast iron skillet – but that's the luxury of even lightweight canoe camping.



I bought two of these stoves about 1970 for backpacking in Glacier National Park when I worked there as a college student. They're very light, very small, put out a lot of heat, and will cook on medium for well over an hour. Camp stoves aren't that new or exciting, but represent a philosophical compromise for me. There is nothing more authentic than a gravel bar campfire, frying fish and hushpuppies over the coals, cooking a Dutch oven cobbler dessert, sipping whiskey, trading stories, memories, feelings while the sparks from the fire flitter skyward, leaving its emotional warmth occasionally throughout the night to check fishing poles or drop lines.

But fires have become, with the saving and the popularity of the River, a difficult thing. Wood has to be gathered, and while the spring floods replenish the wonderful stacks of driftwood for each summer, those are rapidly consumed by the early crowds of floaters such that by June, the only driftwood remaining is protected by impenetrable stands of tick, snake, and poison ivy infested weeds. I can say with certainty, it was indeed better in the good old days, because it was easier to find ample, nearby wood for a fire. So campfires have become a luxury, and camp stoves almost a necessity. Otherwise, it can take a couple of hours to find the wood, build the fire, and let the fire settle to cooking coals, just to get the frying pan on. It

is too tempting these days to just fire up the gas stove. These still work well after 40 years.

The skillet I inherited from my mother's kitchen, and I think she got it from my grandmother's kitchen. There is no other cooking vessel that spreads the heat to cook so consistently, and cleans so easily. It's the centerpiece of my camp kitchenware and is worth every ounce of extra weight it brings along.

Camp table



I guess I have about 6 different camp tables that share the common characteristics of being light, sturdy, impervious to water, and collapsible: ranging from several that fold out to include 4 bench seats, down to my smallest, chairside version above which I bought at Wal-mart the night before I left. Setting things on tables not only insures they won't tip over, get lost, get dirty, or be walked on, the table simply adds a civilizing air of furnishing and functionality to even the simplest campsite. Years field-tested: 30.

Sunsuit: The sun on the river cannot be ignored. The options for dealing with it are limited: 1) Unprotected, one will certainly burn with short term sometimes extreme discomfort, not to mention long term vulnerability to melanoma; or 2) one can persistently slather with sunblock, which smells bad, feels bad, acts as an attractant and adhesive for the omnipresent river sand, congeals with sweat to stink, has to be

periodically replaced, stains clothes, and in some varieties seems to attract flies and gnats; or 3) one can cover up with clothing.

I've tried all three, extensively. In my first ten-year-old summer on the River with my parents, they made us cover up. Unfortunately, the only long pants I had were blue jeans, the only long shirt I had was flannel, and those were alternately (and sometimes concurrently) hotter than an oven, and wet and clammy. My description of sunblock above also articulates my displeasure in its use. To the extent I may forget how totally and pained my childhood and teen sunburns were, every time I'm on the river I see those of lesser experience who are being cooked alive which clarifies my memory of the unpleasantness of that option. So what's one to do?

There is an answer: Cabela's and other outfitters make shirts and pants of extremely lightweight, quick drying, tightly woven materials, with high sunblock ratings and resistance to most bug bites except the biggest horseflies. They dry quickly, have sleeves that roll up and pant legs that zip off to convert them to less pervasive covers in the early morning and evening when the sun isn't a factor, and have a gazillion pockets in all the right places and sizes.

They are extremely comfortable, and on a hot day, full immersion in the River can provide total refreshment during the 30 minutes or so as the outfit dries out. Typically at the end of a long day when my outfit had been submerged a dozen times or more, and absorbed lots of midday sweat, I'd just launder the outfit while I was taking my evening river bath, and hang it out to dry, ready, fresh, and clean the next morning for another day.

I wouldn't brag on it so, if it hadn't proven itself to me on weeklong trips on the Amazon, Boundary Waters, and through the Grand Canyon. Before I discovered these, I tried ripstop jungle fatigue pants, with an old, white cotton dress shirt; they worked, but this technology is far, far better. Years of field testing: 10

Hat: Pretty simple that a hat outdoors provides some practical protection from sun and to shade the eyes, and as a style matter, most folks wear hats for most outdoor sports: baseball, fishing, hiking, golf, you name it. But moving from style to practicality, a wide 360-degree brim saves your face, ears and neck (and my rapidly balding pate) from the ravages of the sun without the gook of sunblock. People talk about "cool" summer clothes. That's a contradiction in terms. Other than being soaking wet, I've never been "cooled" by summer clothes as I conceive being cooled by a fan, air conditioner, fresh breeze, or a gin and tonic. But one's head can get a damn sight more claustrophobic, hot, sweaty and sunburned in one kind of hat than another. A high, very ventilated crown is the "coolest" design. Finally, there are gusts of wind, and overhanging branches that will snatch the tightest fitting hat from your head, which seemingly occurs at the moment in time when you are least able to make a saving grab. A loose drawstring (cowboys call them "stampede straps") makes the save when that random gust of wind otherwise would cause a de-hatting;

and when paddling into a steady ten mile per hour wind, the string cinched tight frees total attention to the task at hand of keeping the canoe into the wind and moving – with the hat firmly in place.

This model cost less than 10 dollars at Wal-mart, had great crown ventilation and handy spots to stick all the neat bird feathers I found; note the deep shade at high noon on face and neck:



Yes, there is the appearance of a grizzled, half-witted, drunken pervert, but I've yet to see a set of flattering river clothes of any kind on anyone, other than a bikini on a shapely twenty-something, and that's just not a style suitable to most of us. The point is, these make you feel like a million dollars, even after 10 hours in the sun.

Ice: I've attempted, on heavy camping trips, to load an entire refrigerator of cold beer, steaks, chilled vegetables and fruit, fresh milk, colas and even ice cream into a canoe loaded with several ice chests, block ice and dry ice. It lasts about 2 days in the River's summer sun. For this trip, I obviously couldn't do that. I took a medium small ice chest, and several days ahead of time, filled three emptied gallon milk jugs with water and froze them solid in my home freezer. I limited the ice chest contents to these jugs, a half gallon of milk, two pounds of venison steak, half a dozen eggs and a two pound block of cheese – the last two having a non-freezer survival rate of several days after warming up.

There is nothing that beats, on the summer river, having a glass of ice cold milk with breakfast, an icy Gatorade in the 100 degree noonday heat (according to Rudyard Kipling, suitable only for mad dogs and Englishmen), a slug of ice water when setting up camp after 10 hours in the summer sun, and a chilled 4 ounces of Wild Turkey 101 before dinner. The venison provided the meat portion of my evening meal for four days. The real bonus here is that as the ice melts, there is an abundance of ice water – to drink straight from the milk jugs or mix with Gatorade, other favorite powdered drink mix, or whiskey. The frozen blocks lasted more than three

full days, and kept the water and icebox items cold for a full fourth. Price of ice: zero. Cold milk, iced toddies, and fresh venison four days into the River: Priceless.

Icing the ice chest: Covering the top of the ice chest with a camp towel, covering that with the life preserver, periodically wet both down, and when stopping for lunch or the evening, set the ice chest into the water. These steps, along with block ice in jugs, buy those extra two days of function for the cooler.

Tarp tricks: Twenty bucks at Wal-mart buys a large, plastic tarp with reinforced grommets. I've been through a dozen or more, and as they fatigue, they progress from rain covers, to ground cloths, to painting dropcloths, to handy ways to drag bushels of fall leaves from all over the yard to the mulch pile. You'll get your money's worth - I'm still using tarps I bought 35 years ago. On the River they have two important functions. In a summer mid-day squall, they can be rapidly erected streamside to provide some dry shelter to sit out the storm. Having a chair to sit in (see above) greatly increases the utility of this function.

When camping for the evening, they provide shelter from the rain and dew for sleeping, but probably more importantly provide a spacious and comfortable "living room" to cook, sit and "camp" in without the confines of a tent. Tents are problematic for all kinds of reasons. They're hot, clammy, small and confining. If you don't take off your shoes when entering, they rapidly accumulate all kinds of sand that finds its way into your underwear and sleeping bag where it becomes manifest at 2 a.m. in the morning. If you do take off your shoes, entering and exiting the tent becomes a three minute exercise in bending, stretching and crawling to put on and take off shoes going either way. You can't stand up in them, and it's extremely dangerous to cook in them. Once they're wet, it takes a lot of sunshine and time to dry them, and if they're not dried, they become extremely clammy. Other than that, tents are okay.

As a critical adjunct to the tarp, I found in an outdoor store in Shreveport in 1979 some lightweight, sturdy, telescoping tent poles, that expand with a simple self-locking slide from 4 to 7 ½ feet. These poles, aided occasionally with gravel bar trees, allow the tarp to be quickly set up, adjust to a high ceiling for a gravel bar lunch, or low for sleeping cover during a rain, almost effortlessly and instantly. I've seen those poles a few places since here and there in camping stores, and always want to buy more because they're some darn functional; but the two I have are a long way from wearing out after only 31 years.

The tarp corners are rigged with sturdy nylon cords to stake them out when set up, and attaching very short, looped bungee cords at the end of each rope gives them flexibility to stretch in high winds without pulling stakes out, poles down, or tearing out grommets. Finally, a long cord strung through the middle grommets on what will become either end of the erected top, serves to stake the poles down at either end. And with that cord running through the center and underneath the tarp when erected,

it becomes a convenient “inside” clothesline to keep wet clothes drying during the camp, despite rain or heavy dew.



A tarp spread to cover a sun baked gravel bar will catch all the evening breezes, making it tolerable, despite the heated ground, to sleep while keeping the inevitable dew and possible rain off; while a tent will hold in all the body and gravel bar heat from beneath it like an oven.

But the winds of a severe thunderstorm can carry a tarp away, and if there are bugs, then it's a hard choice between the Dutch oven of the tent which nevertheless has its mosquito netted windows, or the nightlong buzzing of the little bloodseekers trying to find some juicy, exposed flesh under the open shelter of the tarp. So I carry both, and frequently set up both, retiring to the most suitable bedroom when bedtime comes.



Putting on the River

As I drove through the early morning mists east from Fayetteville into the rising sun, up the King's River Valley, over into the upper Buffalo River Valley, turning downriver towards Ponca, the anticipation and excitement was overwhelming.

Finding time for a float trip makes them rare. While the River always runs, in its upper half during the warm months it drops to a level that the shoals become more rocks than water making it for practical purposes unfloatable, especially with a laden canoe. From late fall throughout the winter, when there is "leafoff", and the forests have stopped absorbing millions of gallons of water to feed their summer foliage, the River gets its water back and becomes floatable, but in the cool seasons its temperature makes it neither swimmable, nor very fishable, and the problems and dangers of cold weather and hypothermia multiply the planning and gear and diminish the pleasure. Indeed, taking all of this into consideration, the heart of the float season watermelon is early May through the end of June – about 9 weeks – when the River is warm and floatable in its entire length, when swimming and fishing are good, and when weight and complexity of packing for the cold doesn't exist.

Within those 9 weeks, most people only have the weekends off, so that brings it down to an 18-day float season. Temper that further by the days when the River is unseasonably low, or flooding, or the weather is predictably bad, there remain only a

few days of ideal floating potential each year. So perfect float days are rare, and cannot be planned because of the unpredictability of the water levels and weather.

This was of course in my planning considerations, and the end of June when I planned to start was the beginning of the end of the customary upriver float season. I thus monitored the River level and rainfall daily beginning weeks ahead of time. I also called the Buffalo Outdoor Center outfitter, which would ferry my truck from my starting place to the terminus, for their opinion about how high I could start.

I resolved that if I couldn't start at Ponca, I would have the outfitter at Ponca take my truck to the highest place the River was navigable, and I would walk through the Buffalo wilderness along the River, from Ponca to my downriver truck to start my float, and thus still accomplish the transit of the full distance from Ponca to White River.

Actually this notion considerably intrigued me. During my years at Scout Camp, the now nationalized upper Buffalo River Valley was all privately owned and sparsely populated, most of the farms and homesteads abandoned. In our hikes up and down that part of the River, we followed what we called the "old Jeep Road", because it could only be traversed by a jeep, it was so washed out, rough and rutted. That had been the main highway to serve the River community, such as it was. It was that road that provided the trail upriver from the Scout Camp for single day and overnight hiking expeditions to Mud Cave, Indian Creek, and Hemmed In Hollow. On two different occasions we hiked the 12 miles from Ponca downriver to Scout Camp. The road ran through many open fields, and past several abandoned farmsteads. It crossed the river at fords frequently. The only occupied homesteads along that stretch that I remember were an old stone cottage at the mouth of Hemmed In Hollow, reportedly inhabited by a hermit, and the (then) recently built Yarborough Horse Ranch – a very nice outfit which only a few years later was condemned with the rest of the River and became the Park's Steel Creek campground and river access.

I had some interest in revisiting that old byway, the Old Jeep Road now named the Old River Trail, to compare its "now" with my 45 year old memory of "then". In the meantime, the Park Service had constructed a new trail, the "Buffalo River Trail". The name is somewhat of a misnomer, because while it generally parallels the River, it stays high on the bluffs, and from it, you can rarely see the River and rarely cross it. The Buffalo River Trail is for hikers only, no horses. The Old Jeep Road preserved as the "Old River Trail" was open for horses – making it prospectively unattractive for hikers, because of the deep ruts, mud, manure piles and painfully biting horseflies and deerflies commonly found on such trails.

In any event, this gave me the means to accomplish, afoot or afloat, the entire 125 miles. I wouldn't make up my mind about exactly how to proceed until I arrived at Buffalo Outdoor Center early the morning of the departure, based on the conditions that morning.

That morning, the outfitters urged me to not put on the river above Pruitt – some 25 miles downstream – “too low, too much dragging, you’ll never make 15 miles a day”. However, I had floated that stretch a couple of times in mid-summer low water to fish, and knew that even at low conditions, while the shoals would create a lot of dragging, the majority of the River would be the longer, quiet, deeper “holes” which could be paddled. Against their suggestions, I directed them to take my truck and canoe 10 miles down to Kyle’s Landing Access. If I had to hike more than 10 miles, I’d do it in the River, dragging my canoe. They agreed to have the truck there by noon, and pick it up later that afternoon (once I’d offloaded my gear and canoe) and move it the remaining 115 miles downstream to my ultimate takeout on the White River.

They dropped me at the Ponca low water bridge, and the trip was begun.



As between the Old River (horse) Trail and the Buffalo River Trail, I opted the latter, to see how the Park Service had done with its new trail system. It was a beautifully built and maintained trail, rising several hundred feet above the river through the early morning sunshine.



It quickly climbed to the bluff top level,



and creatively worked its way through some delightful little waterfalls and outcroppings.



But it didn't come near the River, and only rarely gave a clear view of it, many hundred feet below, from some bluff overlooks. At the next intersection of the trails, about 3 miles downriver at Steel Creek access, I switched from the Buffalo River Trail, to the Old River Trail; I was going to experience the effect of a 45-year *deja vu* of one of my first, favorite hiking trails.



Fortunately, it was very interesting, making it just barely tolerable, because it was also very unpleasant. The Old River trail made its way across gravel bars and the

lowland fields, since I last saw them grown into forests, and lots of riverside canebrakes. It was muddy,



a quagmire in places



close, muggy, poorly marked, and almost grown closed for hundreds of yards through some of the bamboo canebrakes.



It, neither, had views of the river; it's saving grace and additional curse was that it frequently crossed the River, about every half-mile. The river access gave me a chance to see the River and splash cold water on my face during an increasingly hot and muggy day. But walking 10 miles in sodden boots and socks can destroy a pair of feet, so every crossing required that I unlace and remove my boots and socks, hang them around my neck, and cross 50 yards or so of slippery, sharp rocks on tender, bare feet, and then reboot on the opposite side. It was an annoying and time-consuming task.

I struggled to identify landmarks along the way, but the old fields were now forests, the old crossings much changed, the homesteads that had been visible in the old fields were either gone or grown over, so we had become strangers to each other.

However, I recalled at the Hemmed in Hollow ford my first year at Scout Camp. Our regular Scoutmaster could not join us and the troop hired a University of Arkansas graduate student, Fred Berry ("Mr. Berry" to us) to take us to camp. Mr. Berry had grown up in the rural Ozarks and had a delightful mixture of Hillbilly knowledge, accent and expressions, tempered by a high I.Q. and formal education. We all found him fascinating, and did whatever we could to provoke him into telling stories, or just talking about anything in general. One thing we discovered was that, once incited, he could cuss in a most extraordinary way, using common cusswords in such a colorful syntax as to be a remarkable thing to hear.

It was in fact Mr. Berry who taught us, on an upriver hike, the wisdom of having dry feet on a prolonged hike. None of us, of course took his advice, splashing with great glee through all of the River fords fully booted, as he carefully unbooted, and rebooted, at every crossing. It was at the Hemmed in Hollow crossing, where the first scouts across found a delightful bank of dark, smelly, well congealed mud, perfectly suitable for forming mudballs to throw at those of us still crossing. Unfortunately, this discovery didn't occur until Mr. Berry was mid-stream, boots in hand, barely balanced on the slippery river bottom, and the ensuing mud ball fight found him in the middle of a cross fire.

It was more than he could take, and he unleashed a barrage of profanity that remains unequaled in my experience to this day in its outrage and eloquence. I would give much to be able to recite it all here, but the phrase which became iconic was, that we blankety blank boys were throwing that blankety blank mud about to hit him in the blankety blank face, while he was trying to cross this blankety blank river in blankety blank barefeet when "these river rocks are just SLICKER THAN BY GOD OWL SHIT!"

We stopped throwing the mud, but laughed, whooped and hollered til we practically cried at hearing an adult use so many cusswords so artfully, and when I see my fellow scouts, some 50 years later, we still remember that the River bottom ford at Hemmed in Hollow is "slicker than By God Owl Shit!" And it remains a mystery to me to this day, just exactly how slick is that and did Mr. Berry, in his Hillbilly wisdom, really know how slick owl shit was?

Anyway, just before crossing that ford, I looked for the hermit's old stone house, but where it had sat in a field above the ford, there was a dense forest now, and I didn't have time to look for it. In the middle of the ford, in memory and tribute to Mr. Berry, I shouted out, "THIS IS BY GOD SLICKER THAN OWL SHIT! And promptly discovered (re-discovered?) that the river bottom at that point, uncharacteristically is not the conglomerate of smooth, round river stones which though slick, give some purchase for balance, but indeed, is a very flat, very smooth shelf, made very slippery by a membrane of some kind of moss, with no relief to brace against to keep from sliding or falling. It was thus 50 years later, still very much indeed slicker than owl shit, and only by some wild gyrations and extraordinary luck, did I avoid going down in my passage.

I meant to keep track of the number of fords I made that morning, but I lost count. It was at least 10 crossings, each requiring 5 to 10 minute to deboot, reboot, and gingerly navigate the stream in my tender, bare, feet. By the time the map and my memory indicated I was within a mile of Kyle's Landing and my truck, I reverted to my youthful ways, and plunged through the last 3 crossings, fully booted.

During that ten miles, I encountered no one for the first 8 miles, and then a single backpacker camped near Hemmed in Hollow, and shortly thereafter when a gaggle

young teenagers, led by some college looking kids, came chattering past me lightly loaded with only day gear, presumably headed the 2 miles from Kyle's up to Hemmed in Hollow; they said they were from Texas, so I presumed some church group.

Of the many sacrifices made for this trip, was the forsaken chance to explore for old homesteads, caves, and tributary waterfalls, some known to me, some only marked on maps; there simply wasn't the time. I passed by Hemmed in Hollow itself, a mile detour that I'd made many times before to the "highest waterfall between the Appalachians and Rockies". The truth of this widely made claim is, as far as I know, no better verified than the reputed source of the Hollow's name: That in the "early days" (whenever that might have been) a gang of bank robbers fled up the hollow to escape the law, but found themselves, upon encountering the waterfall, "hemmed in" and without escape. As these stories were told at Scout Camp, the admonition was, "the legal records of all of this are at the courthouse in Jasper (the village composing the county seat of Newton County) if you want to verify this". No one ever did verify it to my knowledge, and by my second year on staff, I was spinning with robust authority all of the local tales, admonishing them to "check the records" if they didn't believe me. Of course, I've never myself checked the records, so make no claim as to the veracity of either the height of the waterfall, or the source of the name.

But Kyle's landing was a place where I could visit the memories without a detour. About a mile and half upriver from Camp Orr, it had a shallow cave on the bluffs facing it known as Mud Cave, and it was a destination for dayhikes from the camp. The River hole below the bluff was a "best kept secret" among the staff as a honey hole for lunker brown bass, and we would take short expeditions up there in our short times off to fish. On one such trip, we were surprised to see some other people there, who had driven down from Mt. Sherman via an almost impassable jeep road – this was a remote place where we never saw other people. They told us they were from Texas, and had bought this land to establish a home for wayward boys, believing that this wilderness would be a great place to reform them as productive young men.

It sounded like a reasonable idea; we figured Camp Orr was already somewhat in that business. We weren't very excited however, about any one else sharing our River. At that time, almost no one used that part of the River except the scouts, and a very, very, few locals. The contemplated boys ranch was built, and operated for a very few years by Mr. Kyle, or Kyle somebody, and thus "Kyle's Landing", but it either went bust or was condemned by the Park and had a very short existence. One would presume that the official Park name for this Campground and access came from an ancient family homestead, but they were, to my perception Johnny-come-latelies, who washed out quickly; but I did meet Kyle in one of his first trips into the country.

There was no cell service at Kyle's, and the Park Service provided there only a single pay phone which made only local calls – the only “local numbers” in this rural area being the being outfitters. I called my outfitter who was moving the truck, and asked them to call Anne and relay that I was safe and on the river.

My truck with boat and gear were there at the established Park campground and river access as arranged, and it was quick work to get the canoe and gear from the truck into the river, making me ready to begin the remaining 115 miles afloat, the 10 miles afoot being behind me. A family swimming at the put-in was kind enough to take this picture.



I knew the shoals in the mile and half from Kyle's to Camp Orr well, and was pleased, despite the warnings of the outfitter, that I had to get out and drag very little. This short stretch of the river was full of memories of times and people. At Camp Orr my last summer on staff I was 16, and drove our old Willys jeep over from Fayetteville and brought my canoe from home, making me fully mobile in the River valley. My staff tentmate and I each carried a canoe on our shoulders, upriver from Camp Orr all the way to Kyle's so we could float down again...a feat I could not now replicate. Buzzard Bluff above Camp Orr is a precipitously high and beautiful edifice, facing a gorgeous gravel bar, where I brought my bird dog to camp with me and harden my mind and body for several days before leaving for Army Ranger School at 21. As a scout leader, I'd brought my own son and his troop over for winter camping, and joined his troop during their summer camp, sneaking off in the evenings to some of my favorite fishing holes.

This first day on the River, I cruised past the two River holes the Scout Camp uses to teach canoeing and swimming; both river holes were full of both my memories, and the present boys, leaders and camp staffers going through their paces. I was tempted to stop, strike up a conversation, and bridge the years and experiences between us, my having been exactly like them 50 years ago; but they seemed disinterested in a single old guy paddling by, and I couldn't persuade myself they would conceive this was as remarkable as I did. I don't think people take much stock in 50 years of experience, unless they're the ones who've had it, so I just enjoyed my side of it, and paddled by that microcosm of my past.

Fifteen miles the first day contemplated hiking 10 miles in four hours to arrive at Kyle's landing by noon, and then the balance of the afternoon to go only 5 miles in the shallow upper Buffalo before camping around five in the afternoon. I had no trouble with that schedule and found a nice site by late afternoon with all of the desired attributes; clean gravel bar, nearby rapid for fishing, holes above and below for fishing, on a north-south stretch of the River.



After I'd pitched camp and bathed, a thunderstorm rolled in, which I enjoyed from under the tarp. It was short-lived and freshened the air. This was dinner, and typical

for the trip, a “one pot” meal in the iron frying pan, stir-fried venison, green peppers and onions.



Finding Home, a suitable place to camp each evening, becomes the focus in the mid afternoon. In the hot summer (and the days of my trip were all in the mid to high 90's), finding early afternoon shade after 8 hours in the summer sun makes itself a priority. Not only is the present shade critical, but the gravel bars bake in the sun all day to radiate heat all night, and the shorter time a bar is in the sun, the lower its evening temperature.

This all really comes down to the points of a compass. One side of the River is almost always a high bluff, the opposite side a low gravel bar, backed by forest giants on the bar's upper edge away from the river. If the river is running east and west, the first morning sun, and the last rays of dusk, and everything in between fall on that bar. There is no shade until sunset, and the heating begins at dawn and ends at dusk.

The notion of getting beyond the bars, and into the woods to camp for shade, makes you an easy dinner for the many kinds of carnivorous insects, and invites all the rest of the infinite woods loving critters of all sizes to join you in your eating, sleeping and lounging. That would be a last, and desperate resort.

That makes the informed resolution a north and south run of the river, where the bluff on one side, and trees on the other, cut out the first and last three hours of the sun as it rises in the east and sets in the west, halving the time that the bar bakes, doubling the time it has to cool, and provides these additional hours of shade for the camper each day. In essence, about half the river is unsuitable for comfortable summer camping, and by the same token, a quick look at the map shows where, how far, and how long, the next north/south reach of the River is, to be considered for camping.

One of the many unique facets of the Buffalo is its number of large, clean, level, gravel bars for camping. Novices will select sand – it's so soft, and smooth. And one night on sand leaves its tiny, crystalline grains fully integrated with everything you are and have, from your most intimate orifices, to your food, to your sleeping bag, to your clothes, etc. etc. where it will grate and itch and irritate for the rest of the trip.



A good sleeping pad, and pushing a few rocks around to get the surface under it mostly level, solves the only problem a gravel bar has – its potential for a lumpy bed. Thus, a gravel bar, on a good north-south run of the river provides the basics. With time to look, one can find a gravel bar along shoals. The fishing is great in the shoals, and the deep quiet holes above and below it provide frog hunting, jitterbugging for pan fish and set lines for catfish. And the sounds of the shoals are an all night lullaby after a long river day. That is indeed a river camp worthy of remembrance, and the River has hundreds of them.

The work of the River is unavoidable. I have deceived myself all the years, believing that with enough experience and expertise and the right equipment, I could find a way to pitch and strike camp almost instantly, to leave more time for the recreation of it: fishing, cocktails, eating, a refreshing bath, time around the fire. This trip, bringing with it my entire life of experience and chosen equipment, with ample time to discover and implement a perfectly efficient routing, conclusively instructed me that no matter how efficient one is, it takes about half an hour to unload the boat and properly put camp up, and about half an hour to take it down and pack it. Frankly, that discovery dissolved much of my stress that if I hurried a little bit more, multi-tasked more efficiently, I would instantly “presto” have a camp. Realizing the effort was inevitable, I paced it, which fully absorbed a relaxed attention, comfortable in knowing that at the end of pitching camp there would be ample time for a relaxed evening in the peace of dusk; and at the end of striking camp, another day’s adventures started.

So between 5 and 6 each day, when I found a suitable camp, I would land and pitch camp, unload the boat, erect the tent and tarp, arrange table, chair, stove and food boxes into a comfortable kitchen/living room, and lay out supper. This followed by an evening bath, changing into dry, clean clothes, half an hour; then cocktail, supper, clean up and put away the food and kitchen, altogether, a relaxed hour and a half, so from landing at my shaded campground around five, to the end of this routine, would be two and a half hours later.



Now, with dusk arrived, the wind and water quiet, I took the unloaded canoe back out to work the banks with my fly rod, the bluffs with my jitterbug, and the shoals with heavy minnow lures.

On such an after-dinner outing, flyfishing at the head of a shoals, something slammed my popping bug lure and took off, large enough to strip line against the drag. Unfortunately as I was fighting the fish, the canoe drifted into the shoal, the fish crossed under the boat, the boat broached on the rocks (such chaos is not unusual when fish are hooked on float trips), and the line broke. Before I had stopped shaking, I switched rods, and casting a big Rapala minnow lure across the fastest part of the shoal, hooked and landed the largest smallmouth (“brown”) bass of my lifetime, 2 ³/₄ pounds, 17 inches. After it was duly adored, measured, weighed and photographed, I turned it back to the River; the pleasure was the catching, not the eating.



(The difficulties of taking a self-portrait in the dark of night are evidenced in the quality of this photo)

By full dark each night, I turned in, about 10 PM, for a hard night’s sleep, drifting off to a symphony of bullfrogs, cicadas and whip-poor-wills, until awakened to the raucous cacophony of the dawn greeting birds at 6 AM.

My breakfast routine was leisurely. First, fish a bit in the still of the morning, often in the mist rising from the river.



To say “still of the morning”, does not suggest quiet; the racket of early rising birds was deafening.

After some fishing, I started breakfast, brewing a pot of hot coffee to sip while cooking up some oatmeal which garnished with a handful of walnuts and ample honey, made a healthy, easy, breakfast, as the morning mist cleared from the River.

Wash the nominal dishes, brush teeth and wash face, dress for the day, to then strike camp. Eight a.m. found me heading downriver for a new day.

Row, row, row your boat...

To go 125 miles (or really any distance at all) the canoe has to be moved down the River by paddling it. That of course requires a paddle. The design and construction of paddle is not complex – a flat blade to push water, connected by a long shaft to a handle around which the hand comfortably fits.

For the first part of my life I used “Feather Brand Paddles.” It’s what my father had always bought for our family johnboat. I had a paddling friend who called them “stack ‘em in a barrel two buck paddles”. They cost in the neighborhood of \$3-\$5

new, were brightly varnished, pretty, blond wood, sold practically everywhere, and worked fine. Pretty soon the varnish wore off and they'd get a water soaked and heavy on a long trip, and after a few years of hard use, the laminated blade would split and break apart, or the shaft would break, and if duct tape and wire couldn't repair them, they made good kindling.

By nature, I'm not an ostentatious coveter of things. My car of choice is a plain white pickup truck, and I trade in for a new one about every ten years; Zebco \$10 fishing reels suit me fine, and I haven't spent \$500 (the cost of an upscale fly rod) on all of the fishing rods I've owned in my life. But about 30 years ago, I saw a Sawyer brand paddle, and it was the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen. It was just a canoe paddle, but the blade was somewhat longer, and wider than a Feather Brand, allowing it to push more water (i.e. be more powerful and faster) and made of alternating sections of light and dark wood exquisitely laminated together. The shaft and handle were likewise beautifully laminated. The very thin paddle blade was fully protected by a clear fiberglass coating, which did nothing to hide the beauty, but increased its strength and durability many fold. Finally, the tip of the blade, which frequently gets used to push off of rocks and thereby wears itself out and splits, was protected by an inch wide edge of hard fiberglass.

Without even thinking, I picked it up to marvel at its design, beauty and function, and as I hefted it, it felt as light as balsa. Strong as iron, light as air, and beautiful. I bought a pair of them, one for Anne, one for me, for about \$50 apiece. One of them finally started delaminating after about 25 years, so I was down to one. On the eve of my trip, I bought another. A canoe always carries at least one extra paddle, in case one is dropped in the river or breaks. I now had my paddle for the trip - my 30-year-old Sawyer, and my reserve - a brand new, pretty, pretty one.



Novice paddlers are quickly, easily identified, by their lack of ability to simply keep a boat proceeding straight down the river; rather they snake and careen, weaving widely from side to side, traveling twice or thrice the distance by boat that the course of the River takes.

Elementary paddling teaches two, very workable solutions to a straight path downriver: Either paddle every one or two strokes on alternating sides, or stay on one side with the “J-Stroke”. Both have minor problems. Alternating sides requires a rather awkward and time consuming switching the paddle from right to left hands and back, dropping a few tablespoons of water into the canoe with each pass of the paddle. In a day composed of hundreds, probably more than a thousand strokes, the delay and extra physical motion of this switching, and the water brought into the boat, are not insignificant.

Alternatively, the J-Stroke contemplates at the end of a long, forward stroke, when the blade of the paddle is behind you and just about to come out of the water to recover forward for another stroke, the blade is kept in the water, turned parallel to the boat and pried slightly outward, which has the effect of pushing the front of the boat back on line, correcting the deviation from straight caused by the long, forward part of the stroke. The blade of the paddle during the entire stroke makes a “J”, the long part of the forward stroke being the vertical leg of the “J”, the short pry at the end being the bottom hook of the “J”. The problem with J-strokes is that they unavoidably slow the forward momentum of the boat down a bit, as it is pushed back into the straight line. And again, in a day of a thousand strokes, give or take, this impediment to momentum is not insignificant.

I was subconsciously prepared for this dilemma, which is omnipresent when paddling a canoe, and usually find myself alternating the two methods, never entirely satisfied with each; but “it is what it is”.



Skull Bluff above Woolum

A couple of weeks before I departed, I was visiting by phone with Mike Mills, the long time proprietor of the Buffalo Outdoor Center, the outfitter who was to move my truck, picking his brain for information and guidance that might help on the trip. I noted to him my uneasiness about crossing the White River at the terminus of this trip, and he agreed it was a scary and hazardous crossing.

He suggested that if I arrived when the White River was up, begging a favor from one of the long, stable, motor driven johnboats which trout fish the White, to tow me across; or simply waiting out the totally unpredictable drop in the water after the turbines shut down. The latter solution could mean a 10 hour wait, ending at midnight or 6 a.m. or who knows when; as to the former, I wasn't comfortable with the notion of standing in my canoe, at the mouth of the Buffalo, waving my arms in distress to such trout johnboats as might motor by, to beg a favor.

Mike noted that he had run the car ferry for another person who had done this total transit a month or two earlier, which adventurer told Mike he was taking a kayak paddle to overcome the White River. Mike suggested to me, "Maybe that would work."

A kayak paddle is simply a paddle with blades on either end, so that at the end of one long stroke with one blade about to come out of the water behind you, the blade

on the other end is poised well ahead, on the other side of the boat, to begin a stroke on that side. With a single bladed canoe paddle, of course, there is the time and effort to recover the paddle once it's been pushed back and behind, to pull it out of the water, reach it forward, and dig in for the next stroke.

This recovery time is completely omitted with a kayak paddle, because each stroke in the water is in effect the recovery stroke for the other side. In addition, this solves the problem of wasted time and energy of switching sides with a single bladed paddle.

In an earlier life, Anne and I spent a summer in the Pacific Cascades, making our way by picking fruit, cleaning irrigation ditches, and (just me) working on a logging crew. Our friends that summer were big into kayaking, and had extra gear, so we spent a lot of time on white water streams and rivers, both in our canoe and their kayaks. I was thus completely familiar and comfortable with a kayak paddle, and that proposal made perfect sense to me.

The day before leaving, I bought one for the trip. It was a two piece paddle, that quickly slipped together in the middle, locking to make the functional, two bladed kayak paddle, and then easily unlocked to make two, very short, stowable ends.



It was a huge, and serendipitous discovery, equaling any single technique I've learned in a lifetime of paddling.

On the first two days on the upper River, I simply experimented with it, getting its feel, as I imagined using it to power across the White River 8 days downstream. As I would approach shoals, I would unlock it into two pieces, stow it, and grab my trusty Sawyer, single bladed paddle, to navigate the rapids.

However, I discovered two things: the forward power and speed that were created with this kayak paddle, where every recovery stroke was itself a fully powered stroke, were simply astonishing. I could power through rapids to a favored route, in ways that I couldn't with a single blade paddle, and on flat water it was as fast as I have ever paddled a canoe, loaded or unloaded, with one or two paddlers.

Gaining confidence in the rapids because of its power, I also discovered that the more complex draws, pries, pushes, and backwaters that a single blade accomplished for quick direction change, could be executed even faster with the kayak paddle, because at any given time, it had a blade on both sides of the boat, ready to execute whatever stroke was necessary on either side to guide the canoe through complex routes and currents.

After the third day, I never picked up my beloved, single blade Sawyer for the rest of the trip, with only one exception. When fishing, especially if fishing alone, in a canoe it becomes necessary to work the rod with one hand, while working the paddle with the other, to maneuver the canoe to accommodate the fishing – getting the boat closer or further from shore or other cover, moving in into deeper water if a big one is on the line, moving toward a hung-up lure while keeping the line taut, etc. It is beyond me to explain, but the configuration of a single blade paddle and its handle, allows one to wrap their arm around it to apply paddling pressure in practically any direction. The kayak paddle simply did not work as a one handed paddle.

It was a true epiphany. On long flat holes, I am satisfied that I made 50% more speed with the kayak paddle, with about 2/3 the effort, as I could have with a single bladed paddle. Again and again, I caught, cruised past, and left long in my wake, unloaded day tripper canoes with two, young, strong paddlers, who were obviously paddling desperately to shut down this single old man in his fully loaded canoe; I may never use my Sawyer again, except for fishing.

A float trip also requires a boat. I am still waiting to buy the most beautiful canoe of my dreams, but probably never will. It will certainly cost more than a Sawyer paddle and closer to a small car. To my knowledge, the Old Town Canoe Company of Maine has been the Rolls Royce standard for canoes since 1898. It was then that they copied the design of Indian birch bark canoes by creating a ribbed structure of thin cedar, covering that with tightly joined cedar planks or strips running lengthwise and perpendicular to the frame, glued and waterproofed canvas over that, and then painted the exterior canvas to a smooth finish. The dimensions,

configurations, and proportions were exactly what any one would draw, if they drew their concept of a “real” canoe.

My first expedition in a canoe was in fact in such an Old Town, though hardly by careful intention and even without realizing my virgin trip was in such style. In 1963 I was thirteen, in eighth grade, and when spring break came, no child that I knew of left for the Colorado Slopes, Caribbean Resorts, or Mexican beaches. We hung around and invented things to do, because our parents were all working and even if they could get off, no one dreamed of having enough money to do what has now become commonplace for middle class youngsters.

My boy gang of seven (naively and grandiosely self named, “The Magnificent Seven”) conceived that a float trip would be an exquisite adventure, and indeed it was. To outfit ourselves, we scrounged from parents, neighbors and relatives in much used but still serviceable condition, a square stern aluminum canoe, an aluminum johnboat, and a 13 foot cedar and canvas Old Town Canoe, and such an assemblage of used, mis-matched and unsuitable boating and camping gear that would have embarrassed a mob of war refugees.

Our parents dumped us off at the old Tisdale Ford on Richland Creek, 10 miles East of Fayetteville, with the arrangement to meet them there four days later. The stories of that first, major, unsupervised, camping expedition are legion, epic, and burned into memory...at least for the Magnificent Seven, anyway, but that is for another journal.

I ended up in the Old Town, which belonged to the father of Carie Buckley, my number one running buddy and now bowman, and found it quicker, quieter, and prettier than the rest of our rag tag fleet, but discovered that its bottom did not take well to being bounced off of and drug over the riffles, shoals, and rocks. Its vulnerability was bared when in a rapid, we cruised broadside into a log jam, and I found a pointed branch, some two inches in diameter had easily, totally pierced the hull below the water line. Though we made do by stuffing a sock into that void, a review of the hull when we brought the canoe home showed that its bottom half had suffered grievously.

Carie and I spend many hours sanding, patching, painting and otherwise refurbishing the hull, but never quite finished the job. We couldn't scrape up the money for a the very expensive fiberglass patch required for the “big” hole. We found out several years later, when we realized that we'd actually been in possession of a true diamond, that Carie's father had donated the not quite repaired Old Town to a local Boy Scout troop. That would be my first and last ride in an Old Town for about 30 years.

This and other trips persuaded me that I need my own canoe. By this time, the “innovation” of replacing birch bark with cedar and canvas, had itself become somewhat a victim of succession to the Grumman Corporation, a pioneer of using

lightweight, strong, aluminum to surface airplanes in their World War II production lines. With the demands of World War II winding down, Grumman developed in 1944 an aluminum canoe: lighter, much stronger, cheaper, much more durable and maintenance free than the cedar and canvas models, and Grumman became the Rolls Royce of aluminum canoes which by the 1960's had a strong share of the canoe market.

Fiberglass canoes were and still are produced; they are certainly prettier as painted than aluminum, but quite heavy, and prone to serious splintering of the hull in collisions with shallow bottoms and lateral log piles.

I determined my best bet was an aluminum canoe, and found an off-brand, "Richland", which cost less than half of the price of a Grumman of the same size and specifications. This I bought, at age 14 after much study, with money saved from mowing lawns and selling concessions at University of Arkansas football games, which in those days were a goldmine for Fayetteville's enterprising street urchins.

The purchase was from a young man named Fred Hanna, who had a start up boat retail shop; he later became a very successful and prominent businessman, and mayor of Fayetteville for several terms. I remember that I was intrigued by this boat because it came with a 10-year warranty to "repair or replace this product from any damage suffered in normal use". Having seen some number of boats wrapped around trees and irreparably split asunder on the Buffalo, I told Fred that I considered running rapids on Arkansas mountain streams to be "normal use" for a canoe, and asked him if I so destroyed a boat, would it be replaced under warranty. Fred was canny – he said, "the warranty means what it says, if the canoe is damaged by normal use they will repair or replace it." He would not agree, nor disagree, that wrapping a canoe around a tree and splitting it in half during a Buffalo River float trip was normal use.

At age 15, 10 years was 2/3 of my life, and I hadn't even guessed whether I would be around in 10 years, much less what I'd be doing that far into the murky future (I wasn't even driving yet, and that would be way after college), but I was pretty sure, that given 10 years, that canoe would end up wrapped around a river willow tree and split, and I would have a real chance for serious dialogue between the manufacturer and myself over the validity of the warranty.

I was sinfully proud and covetous of it, especially after I hand-painted with delicate care an Arkansas flag on one side of the bow, and a Confederate flag opposite; this was in the days of at least my innocence when a rebel flag still conveyed something vaguely chivalrous and honorable, and certainly "cool," without the later imputed, raw, politically incorrect overtones of racism.

The warranty has proven moot. I still have the canoe; its warranty expired more than a third of a century ago. It is pretty beat up, and lacks a front seat, but it was a

damned good canoe that has floated me many, many wonderful miles over several decades and has a couple of nice design features that are lacking in current state-of-the-art canoes.

I took that canoe to the east coast with me for college and law school, and back and forth a few times. I ended up buying a second canoe on the east coast, also an aluminum cheap imitation of a more expensive Grumman. That indeed did wrap around some rocks pretty badly...it didn't have that good, Arkansas warranty... but pounded straight with a rubber hammer, it still sold it for respectable salvage - there has always been a good market for used canoes in any condition.

The aluminum canoes had their drawbacks: They get hot, hot in the summer sun; they clang clamorously from every movement in the boat; and while they tolerate a vast amount of being drug across shallow riffles, when they strike a rock of any size, they grind into it requiring a right strong tug to free the boat. One mixed blessing is their deep keel, which is the structural component that runs lengthwise down the center of the boat and in most aluminum boats is a dull blade an inch or so deeper into the water. Such a keel, on quiet, flat, slow water helps hugely in keeping the boat straight. In rapids, however, its merit becomes its nemesis, as it works against any effort to slip the canoe from side to side to maneuver through the currents and obstacles, in essence locking it into a straight downriver course which can be for better, or usually, worse. It also adds an inch or so of additional depth to the boat, such that the boat will ground on rocks that it might otherwise float or slide over.

By the late nineteen seventies, which put me in my late twenties, married, and earning a real living, I was doing a lot of day tripping, overnighing and white water canoeing throughout Virginia, in one or the other of my aluminum canoes. A friend of mine whose canoeing skills I admired had just spent a huge amount of money on a sleek, Kevlar canoe. I was asking him how he could justify paying that for a canoe. His answer moved me to action: "You make three times what I do, spend every weekend with your wife on a river, and are paddling a piece of crap canoe that looks like a beat up tin can. Why don't you spend a little money on at least the things that are important to you?"

At that time, white water canoeing was just coming into its own, with specially designed canoes, flotation inserts, and other special equipment adapting them to heavy rapids, which traditionally had been avoided by portaging around them. A company out of Sunbright, Tennessee had developed a canoe along traditional lines but somewhat adapted for whitewater. It used a "new" material: An ABS plastic laminate, which was very hard on both sides, with a flexible core in the middle. Its brand name was "Blue Hole", which was the slang term that river runners used to describe a deep hydraulic wave which would suck a boat down. While the material was probably 20 times thicker than canoe aluminum, it weighed about the same, and had the amazing attribute of being able to allow the canoe to bend double around a tree, without breaking; and once removed would spring back to its original, functional shape. It could withstand incredible blows without being pierced or

broken, and its smooth, plastic finish allowed it to slip easily over rocks and be cool and quiet on the water. It cost more than a brand new Grumman. I proudly bought one.

The salesman admonished me to break it in carefully:

“How?” I asked.

“Strap it on top of your car, drive your car to a very rocky road, unstrap the canoe, and heave it as high and far as you can to fall on the rocky surface”.

“Why”?

“Because it’s indestructible and that will persuade you to avoid a lot of unnecessary trouble babying it to protect it”.

I replaced the solid plastic seats with lawn chair type webbing, an innovation that my Richland canoe had, and dropped the seats a couple of inches for stability. We bought flotation bags, and Anne and I took that canoe down a number of rapids that I never before conceived a canoe or its paddlers could survive.

On just its third trip, I begged a couple who was considering buying one to try it out; we swapped boats, and within a half mile they had broached the boat; a very destructive and dangerous position in a half sunk boat, where the bottom is centered against a rock, with the open part facing upstream - which with a 4 mile per hour current filling the boat, has the same effect as a semi-truck in compound low gear pushing a tin can against a telephone pole.

To our horror, our new boat wrapped deliberately around the rock, almost turning inside out until the bottom of the bow, touched the bottom of the stern. It took 5 grown men using long driftwood logs to lever the boat off the rock in that current, but when it finally popped off, it rolled over several times until the current washed it ashore about 100 yards downstream – sprung back to serviceable condition. I thus came to believe in ABS plastic canoes.

One of its design features was having a rounded bottom, with no keel. This made it incredibly maneuverable in white water, where one may need to zip from side to side quickly, but when loaded high and paddling into the wind, its rounded, smooth, keel-less bottom made it feel like a hog on ice, creating a vast amount of work and frustration to keep it headed downriver into the wind. The bottom line is that on a single river, within a single mile, the characteristics of any single canoe may be at times perfectly good, or perfectly wrong, for the conditions. No single canoe can be properly designed as ideal for all the conditions on any river.

Somewhere along in here I bought a little 13 foot ABS canoe called a “pack” canoe, only weighed about 25 pounds, and while it was cute as a bug, it was as unstable as

paddling sitting on a cork, had no capacity for people or gear, and I sold it within a year.

By the mid 1990's, now in my forties, the "me" in the canoe, had become "we five", and I needed to add to the fleet. Persuaded by thirty years of paddling that I would get my money out of whatever canoe was bought, I determined money was indeed no object and bought Old Town's ABS plastic version of its classic canoe design, designated the "Tripper". At 17 feet, it can carry about a thousand pounds, has enough keel to track, and a smooth enough bottom to be responsive in the rapids. Its smooth, slick plastic hull slides right over rocks, it is light enough that by myself I can load it onto a car or truck or portage it several hundred yards, it has wicker seats and is quiet on the water. And it looks like a canoe. I'll happily paddle any canoe, but given the choice, I'll never paddle other than my Tripper.

Oh, the canoe of my dreams? A new Old Town cedar and canvas canoe, 17 feet long, retails with shipping for about \$9,000. So pretty and graceful it'll stop your heart. But use it on an Ozark stream? Might just as well take your Rolls Royce to a demolition derby. Such were built for the deep northern lakes, to be portaged around the rocky waters that connect them. Maybe in my next life.

Disneyland...

... has nothing on the River. A number of my friends reasonably asked, "what are you going to do with yourself?" or, "won't you be bored?" Bored? Yes, just about like a 10 year old at Disneyland gets bored.

The first time I floated the Buffalo with my parents in a johnboat, the stunning bluffs, crystalline water, dashing rapids, and shining white sand and gravel bars enchanted me; all the rest was a background blur or invisible to my perceptions.

Though I never tire of the simply dumfounding beauty, like an informed and excited gourmet of food, connoisseur or wine, or patron of the arts, informed by now a lifetime of wandering woods and steams, I gorge on the depth and breadth of sensory perceptions.

All day long, birds well familiar by their song that I never saw, sang to me: cardinals, blackbirds, red eyed and white-eyed vireos, Carolina wrens, tufted titmice, wood peewees, phoebes, pileated woodpeckers, blue jays, catbirds, warblers, wild turkeys. Each one, as a oenophile might remember where and when he tasted his first Chateau Lafite Rothschild vintage, would bring back to me separate memories: My grandmother telling me with true disdain on her face her dislike for catbirds because their call was so annoying; my mother pointing out to me as a four year old

the cardinals on the bird feeder and their unmistakable “wood-cheer” spring call; three hours stalking with binoculars and a bird guide a peculiar riverside call on a gravel bar up from Woolum 20 years ago to learn what a white eyed vireo is – and how incredibly shy these dense foliage, slow moving birds can be; the Kingfisher, first seen up close when as a teenager on a family float trip, we tried to rescue one from a trotline line where it had taken the baited minnow, hook and all. We cut the line, but could not remove the hook. “Chuck” as we named him was exhausted from his struggle, and seemed content to join us as we headed downriver, hunkered on the mid-boat gear for a couple of hours before he migrated to his next life.

And for every birdcall I recognized, there was one I didn’t. Without time to stop, I was constantly searching the streamside bushes and trees, hoping for a hidden singer to cross the river, or even hop to the next treetop, so I could match one more song to one more bird.

And there were the more obvious visuals: The kingfishers chattering up and down their territorial holes, occasionally plunging into the water for prey; and buzzards aloft, hundreds of feet above, soaring effortlessly, endlessly, without a flap of the wings.



The buzzards I found streamside were remarkably unthreatened by my approach. I paddled within ten feet of one, which was inspecting and pecking at a candy bar wrapper; it crow- hopped slowly away as I got almost close enough to touch it with the paddle. My presumption that it was sick or wounded moderated as later, I passed many more, in Riverside trees and on the bank, who seemed unperturbed by my presence.



To my great surprise, I saw an osprey among the soaring buzzards at one point, a bird of bigger waters, which must have been on a lark up from the White River. The gabby crows were up and down the river, but not using the “caw! Caw! Caw!” I was used to, but guttural, short phrases, as though they were talking to each other - nesting parents to their young, I guessed, remembering pet crows we had as children, and their adolescent sounds.

I found two things markedly different between the birds of now and then. First, when the Buffalo River 50 years ago still had farmsteads and fields, abandoned or not, the distinctive call of bob white quail was heard up and down the river. An easy call to imitate, one of the many distractions sitting long days in the boat was to call back and forth to those on the shore. Realizing about the third day into the trip I’d not heard any friendly bobwhites, I began periodically calling, when it looked like old fields lay near the river. Not a sound, anywhere along the River. With the fields

bought by the Park, and turned back to wilderness, the habitat no longer exists and the quail are gone.



The second was the abundance of great blue herons. Decades ago, we might see two or three great blues a day. I now saw one in every riffle, sometimes several in a single hole. Why there are more, I don't know.

Probably the tallest North American Bird, and but for the California condor, the longest wingspan, they are inevitably encountered standing motionless in the shallows, to ambush unsuspecting fish. Somewhat shy, when a boat approaches within about 100 yards, they execute a long, lumbering takeoff downriver, and settle in the next riffle.



One heron may tolerate being chased half a dozen times, a mile or two down the river before it will fly into a high, streamside tree to let the offending boat by, and then with a raucous, annoyed "Awwrrnk!" wing its way back up river. Not as frequently would I spot their much smaller cousin, the little green heron, which preferred perching on riverside logs, to stalking the shallows.



Late in the trip, my eye caught in the distance a mature bald eagle making its stately way up the river. Resting my paddle to watch in awe as it proceeded towards me, it powered its way not 40 feet over my head, returning half an hour later downriver again. I realize they eat fish and carrion, and Ben Franklin urged that the wild turkey be the national bird, but the beauty of a bald eagle in flight is unquestionably a heart-in-throat thing of power and grace.

Of similar familiarity and comfort is the fauna of the river. It was green background to me 50 years ago. It is now a collection of “forest friends”. The trunks, or leaves, or crown shape, all quickly evidence, from hundreds of yards away, the streamside sycamore, or box elder, or sweet gum, or river birch, recognizing each for how it burns as firewood, whether it would make good lumber, how heavy it is, and how hard it would be to put an ax or saw through it.

The trees of course are the first line of defense in preserving the clarity of the waters, and the integrity of the banks. Rivers such as the Buffalo were literally, and perhaps permanently ruined by excessive logging in the 19th and early 20th centuries, filling the rivers with mud, and loosing the river to flood without limitation to the ruination of everything that otherwise had always been far from its banks.

I loved the character and tenacity of this sycamore, which states in the most graphic way, “never say die” to its job of defending the River banks:



I've come to know many of the smaller plants, too, and enjoy re-acquainting with them. There was nothing spectacular blooming this time of year, but as William Blake aptly penned, it is possible, and good,

“To see a world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour.”

The River is a window through which that vision flows. The lowliest of flowers, those of the common river reed, are passed without notice by most of the thousands of river floaters each year; but who is to say that these, upon careful perception, are less than a rose, or an orchid?



Especially when they occur in a miniature “meadow” of thousands, adorned by a festival of spicebush swallowtails?



The other obvious riverside bloom was the elderberry, with its foot wide, creamy white, flower clusters.



The elderberry blossoms are edible; dip them in a sweet frying batter, deep fry them, coat with powdered sugar, and they make a good funnel cake. With enough pectin and sugar, elderberries cook down into a good jam. I've done both. But for the novelty of it though, I wouldn't recommend the trouble. I understand, that as with practically any other berry, they can be made into wine; again, if it had been that great, Gallo would be bottling it. In validated medical studies an elderberry plant extract has proven to resolve flu, but its leaves and unripe berries are poisonous; altogether, an interesting plant to contemplate in passing on the Disneyland downriver canoe ride.

Acquaintances seemed concerned about snakes. I've had water moccasins drop in the canoe, swim right in front of me while I myself was swimming, and dart out of a reed bed as I slipped in to catch maybe the very frog they were stalking. This doesn't suggest that I have anything different than the basic human instinct, bred through eons of evolution, evoking a visceral reaction to any serpent to either flee or destroy. My experiences simply suggest that to see a snake is not to die from the encounter. I do indeed have a vast, healthy, informed respect for where snakes may be along the river and how to see and avoid them.

I only saw two snakes in 125 miles – I used to see that many in a day. Those two were large, banded watersnakes, a non-poisonous species which are almost universally mistaken, to their extreme prejudice, for the poisonous cottonmouth water moccasin. I suspect that despite its rules against killing wildlife, the National Park status and the thousands of rambunctious and mostly uninformed boaters it

brings to the River each spring just as the River's snakes are emerging from winter sleep to enjoy a little sun, have taken care of the River's snake population, poisonous or otherwise.

I have yet to see a male of our species between the ages of 12 and 40 who isn't totally drawn to the exciting danger of finding a snake in the wild, usually with the outcome that the snake is beaten to death with paddles or stones.

I've always been a bit ambivalent about that, though I've taken part in my share of reptile lynchings. I've never been snakebit; quite the opposite – a number of times I could have easily been bitten by a snake I discovered a second too late, which apparently chose not to victimize me. And certainly by the time a snake is discovered, it can be passed by, or chased off, so each time I encounter a poisonous snake, I have this little moral debate among the parts of my personality: the evolved caveman (“beat the evil thing to death now!”) and the evolved human (“it's a creature of nature which has its place and has done me no harm”) mixed in for total confusion with a little superstition that the snake gods will take note if I kill this serpent – and that even gets more ambiguous, because if there are snake gods, do they put out the word among the snake kingdom that I'm a mean mother trucker to be left alone by snakes, or a heartless son of a gun who should be struck at the very next opportunity? Or a kind-hearted soul who by virtue of having let snakes walk (er, crawl) away from a confrontation, should be spared?

Thrown in with that is a little knowledge that many snakes starve to death. A five-foot timber rattler (native to this region, the skins of several of which hang on my hunting cabin wall) takes the better part of 20 years to get that big. It has not the speed to chase prey at all, and must thus find a rabbit run or mouse path by smell or temperature, and simply wait there for its prey. It can wait for days, and weeks, for something to come within the very short kill zone; but if the mice have figured it out, or moved elsewhere, it will lie there until it simply starves to death. So a five-foot timber rattler is an elderly, adept, patient and lucky being which lives only to rid the world of rodents – so stone it to death?

I find that as I get older I leave, rather than kill, a lot more poisonous snakes than I used to. And killing a non-poisonous snake is simply a crime of ignorance and ill directed fear – but most folks kill them all. It's an instinct, after all.

The only two snakes I saw weren't patient enough to stand for a portrait, informed I suspect by prior, bad experiences from canoe encounters. However, stopping

momentarily to explore a beautiful little tributary creek (“bathroom break” was my excuse) I found this beautiful little trail across the sand, evidence that “Mr. No Shoulders” had slithered that way, very recently.



In most holes, I would come upon one to a dozen turtles sunning on a log, which upon my approach would scramble and plop into the water. Sometimes whole families, ranging in size from an inch or two in diameter to well over a foot would be stairstepped up a long log, like musical notes on a scale. In the clear water, I could pursue them quite a distance, and often saw them scabbling along the bottom as I floated over.

Of the many things that with good sense and science have now long passed, was the marketing of tiny, one inch painted turtles for pets. For less than a dollar one could buy from the local five and dime store one of these brightly colored, benign reptiles,

which required only a shallow pie-sized dish with a bit of water, a rock to climb out on, and a few sprinkles of boxed “turtle food” per day.

More personable than a gold fish (they would actually eye our approach, as if waiting for food), they tolerated being “petted” on the back. We had a series of “Toby the Turtles” growing up, and they usually lived for at least a couple of years. I was surprised to see these on the river during my first trips, and we captured some and brought them home. Then it became known that they held or passed some kind of dreaded disease (salmonella if memory serves?) and they disappeared from the American cultural scene as family pets.

Easy enough to catch with modest pursuit on the river, a larger one can lead a fast-swimming, goggled diver on quite a pursuit. Totally benign (though the larger grown ones can bite) there’s not much to do when you catch one, except celebrate the victory and just let it go.

Some, mostly the younger smaller ones, are brilliantly colored and marked; I’ve not disciplined myself to learn the difference between the various kind of map turtles, painted turtles and sliders, but they are easily distinguished as a group on the River from the larger soft shell turtles, which have very round, very flat shells with funny, pointy noses.

And of course, neither is to be confused with the stinky, ugly, vicious, and considerably larger and dangerous snapping turtles. These can grow to almost two feet in diameter and weigh up to 50 pounds. My tome on reptiles asserts that the record for an alligator snapping turtle was 218 pounds, which by my sights evokes enough real terror to create a horror movie about the Alligator Snapper That Ate Woolum.

While they live in rivers, snappers rarely bask as the other turtles. I’ve found them several hundred yards from water, apparently moving to new habitat. They have the strength to cleanly bite off a human toe or finger, or even a larger appendage, and have a flexible neck which allows them to reach around and clamp onto someone who might erroneously think they were safe in grabbing the turtle by their shell or long tail. I feel a lot safer, any day, teasing a cottonmouth moccasin than a snapper.

I saw no snappers this trip, but recall one trip when, having heard stories of snappers being served as delicacies in big city restaurants, we captured and butchered a big one. At the same time we found on a sand bar where a turtle's trail back to the water from laying and burying their eggs to incubate in the hot sand, clearly marked where we could find the freshly laid eggs.

We did so, and made a meal of fried turtle steak and eggs. As with the many uses of Elderberry, but for the novelty of it, I don't think I'd go to the trouble again.

In discussing this with an acquaintance, he remarked how some fellow campers and he once had been "lucky" enough to capture two large snappers at the same time – not sure what else to do with them, they confined them to the bottom of a beached and empty canoe, where they promptly fought viciously and vigorously to their mutual deaths. Not at all pleasant, the tale didn't surprise me given the bad tempers of snappers. And maybe that explains why they are found walking cross country looking for new digs – better to move from a claimed waterhole than die fighting for supremacy.

Before moving on from my muse on reptiles and amphibians, I will reflect on bullfrogs. I was hugely, and doubly, comforted to hear, every night, in every hole, the booming grunt of mature bullfrogs: Comforted by its bass song, and comforted that they were still in abundance. Not only a lullaby for River-loving ears, it is a wonderful game species. Fortunately, the abundance of frogs demonstrated that bullfrog hunting hasn't been taken on by the crushing populace of weekenders and day-trippers such that it would diminish the bullfrog populations. It makes for an exciting and productive hunt that several can join and celebrate together.

Ogden Shirley, one of my father's closest friends, the one he did his hunting and fishing with, taught me when I was about 10 on a float trip on the Illinois River, to gig frogs, and then how clean them for the legs. The legs, deep-fried as one would a chicken drumstick, have much the same size, consistency and flavor of chicken.

Frog hunting involves a dark night, a long, quiet hole full of the big frogs grunting out their love calls, with the rear paddler very quietly sculling the canoe along 30 or 40 feet from the bank, and the bowman working the light. The canoe is moved in darkness (which is wonderfully spooky on a river) to get proximate to the last heard grunt, before the bowman flicks on the light aimed along the shore, right at water's edge. It is there that the big ones sit with their huge, light collecting eyes, to blast out their mating call and snatch with their long, sticky tongues any near flying insects.

The light readily picks up the shine of their eyes or their big, white chest or both. It is then for the paddler to quietly nose the canoe towards the frog, while the bowman

holds dead steady the light, blinding the frog's sensitive eyes. Any noise, banging of the paddle against the boat, splashing or ripples will trigger a quick and powerful jumping escape into the river. If there are 3 in the boat, the third readies the gig, moving it steadily and quietly to the frog as the canoe approaches, closing the distance to an inch or two, and then jams with speed and force as though trying to pierce an anvil. Any hesitation in this deadly thrust will find the gig deep in the mud, sans the lightning-reflexed frog. If only two in the boat then the bowman must handle both the light and the gig; and a one-hunter boat requires true dexterity and skill handling all three of the light, boat and gig.

Later on, another frog hunter taught me that a frog, like a squirrel or rabbit, could be skinned in the whole, providing the additional meat from the tenderloins and forelegs. Of course, that provided an interesting problem if you undertook to chicken fry it whole, as specified, in hot oil because the yet active nerves will have the headless breakfast literally jumping out of the pan. There are many folks, and I understand them completely, who want their meat only in a tidy package from the grocery store, where they can avoid the contemplation of how this geometrically sized chunk of protein was cut from a previously living cow, pig or chicken. So skinning and frying a frog whole, needs also to contemplate the sensitivities of your floating companions.

The final evolution of my frogging skills came during or sometime shortly after college, when Bill McSherry, a college friend raised to an outdoor sporting family in Louisiana ("Sportsmen's Paradise" was then the slogan on all Louisiana license plates) joined me on a Buffalo River float. He was disgusted that we would use a long pole tipped with pronged, barbed points to stab our quarry, insisting that the only way to do it was catch them with your hands. We thought he was hoodwinking us into foolish behavior, so insisted he go first. But by golly, after he had three big ones in the bucket, we were believers.

This development in technique would seem a small thing, but it was huge in its ramifications. First, it added to the adventure. As if being on a river in the black of night wasn't sufficiently adrenaline inducing, hands-catching, except in perfect circumstances, requires that as the boat nears the frog the catcher get out of the boat – otherwise you can't get close enough. That involves a great deal of grace and dexterity, because not only does one have to exit the tippy boat, it has to be a quiet, stealthy exit, without splashes and waves to spook the prey. That means stepping into Hell black water, against a brush grown shoreline, under overhanging trees,

where the imagination, if not reality, has found a dozen snakes in all directions poised to strike. Finally with the light paralyzing the frog, the hand is reached to within inches, and then punched as with a karate chop “through” the frog to pin it down against the sometimes slippery mud it is sitting on, but also to grip it as though it were a rope by which your very life dangled; and then, despite its wild and desperate kicking, to overcome the fear reflex to let it go. A good size frog is as big as a small cat, and no less powerful, so to have one gripped in your hand, that doesn’t want to be there, is a shocking experience.

Besides being a more skillful, courageous and adrenaline inducing hunt it solves the many problems of gigs: their tongs bend and break off when jammed into rock and logs under and behind the frog, and sometimes hold fast in the wood into which they’ve been thrust, leaving a chaotic situation of a wildly kicking frog threaded onto a gig which is inextricably stuck into a huge streamside log. And then getting the frog off the gig, with all of the barbs, is not a happy or neat task; finally, the wounds to frog are almost never immediately deadly, but in the long run are mortal. So there is the mortally wounded frog to deal with emotionally for the rest of the evening – there is no letting them go back to the River, for they are done.

A hand-grabbed frog is not wounded, the gig is not broken or stuck, and after a night of grabbing, the prey can be kept alive overnight in a minnow bucket, to either be quickly killed for breakfast in the morning, or released to the River, hale and hearty, if there isn’t time or inclination to clean or cook the game.

Strange to have this discourse about frogging on a trip where I hadn’t the time for it; but it pleased me greatly, in both memory and anticipation, to hear the bullfrogs roar, every night, through the night.

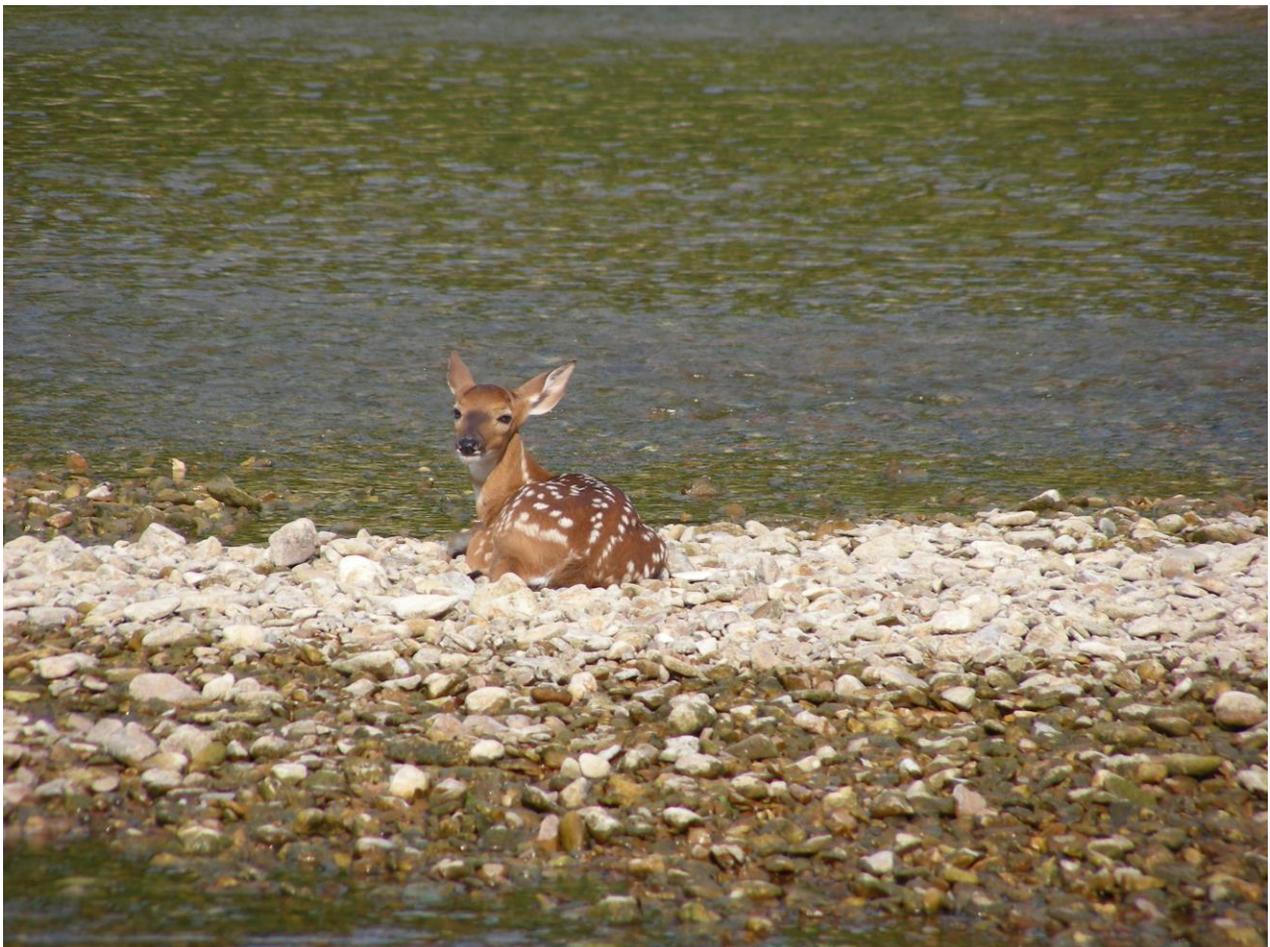
While it takes time and study to get to know the green growing things and the flying, crawling and swimming things, mammals, simply because they seem most like us, and have been in various species domesticated to be inseparable from humans, always attract the most interest to most floaters.

Deer have become so populous in many suburban neighborhoods, that they are as common as squirrels. But growing up, deer had been almost eradicated in Arkansas, and I still go to full alert when I see one – though by now I’ve seen thousands and harvested dozens over the years. I don’t remember seeing but one or two deer in my younger days on the River, most likely because they’d been hunted near to extinction up through the early 20th century. So I was a bit surprised to see several

deer, every day, swimming across, wading in, or drinking from the River. Despite having studied and pursued deer for 25 years, I learned two, amazingw things on this trip.

Typically, the mother deer, or doe, during the day will leave its fawn while still in the suckling stage, hidden in deep cover – overgrown fields, briar patches, thick cutovers – where it cannot be seen nor easily smelled by coyotes, bobcats, feral dogs and other such predators. The fawn will remain there throughout the day, still as a rock, while the doe voraciously feeds, sometimes hundreds of yards away, to maintain its milk and own health. Then at dusk, the doe will recover the fawn from its hiding place, give it dinner, and stay with it through the night, to feed it a last time and leave it hidden the next morning. The key to this survival is the fawn’s hiding place because it has neither the instinct, strength nor speed to flee a predator.

With all of this mind, I found this fawn, “hidden” at midmorning on a small, gravel island amidst a shoals, visible for hundreds of yards!



I saw no other deer around, until I spotted two does watering some 300 yards downstream. Bored? That alone gave me half an hour of musing about whether it was lost, escaping horseflies, or despite its visibility was that really a safe place? But I learned that apparently deer consider such a place an adequate refuge for a fawn,

Several deer I found standing in the river drinking – it was very hot and very humid, and it didn't surprise me they found this refreshing if not necessary. However, it seemed that some of them had their heads under water. I thought the distance and heat waves off the water were toying with my vision, until I got close upon this doe, and discovered that she was actually eating moss or seaweed off the bottom! Once I informed my vision of its accuracy, I saw several more, downriver, doing the same.



My fourth night out, camped at the confluence of Calf Creek above Tyler Bend, my ice chest goods were down to a couple of eggs and the remainder, after previous lunches, of a two pound chunk of cheddar. I was sleeping in the tent, in deference to the carnivorous bugs that night. In the wee hours of the morning, I was awakened by the distinct sound of something opening, and then closing my ice chest, some 30 feet away under the tarp. Shining my light from the tent disclosed a fuzzy, ringed tail disappearing behind the ice chest into the willows just beyond.

A quick inspection found the broken, empty shells of my last two eggs next to the ice chest, and the chunk of cheddar, nibbled all the way around its every edge, with little cheesy coon tracks on the smooth rocks leading to the willows. The cheese was a goner, so I gave it up to Mr. Coon, removing what was left of its plastic wrap and flinging it as far as I could the direction of the cheesy little pawprints. I carefully re-secured with bungees and heavy rocks my other two food boxes and retired.

Two nights later, on a gravel bar four miles above Rush, I was hosting for a single night Anne and my German Shorthair, Dixie. They'd joined me early that morning 13 miles upriver at Maumee, for a 17-mile overnight to be dropped off at Rush the next morning.



Sleeping that night under the tarp, I awoke in the wee hours to the clatter of cans; my spotlight showed the shining eyes and ringtail of Mr. Coon, heading for the woods with our garbage bag. My hollering woke my guests but as hoped, it compelled the coon to abandon the garbage. Again, I re-secured my food chests, brought the small garbage bag under the tarp and went to bed.

Surprisingly, my hyper-active, hunt-anything-that-moves birddog, didn't awake until the raccoon was gone. She had enjoyed "too much birthday" the day before -

swimming for miles down the river, chasing minnows through the shallows and sprinting along the gravel bars - to perform any watch dog duties that night.

After dropping Anne and Dixie at Rush the next morning, I had a long, steady day of Paddling; the lower river has many more slower, deeper, holes than the upper river.



By mid-afternoon the heat and exertion were taking their toll. I'd seen absolutely no one else on the River since Rush, and began anticipating the relief of what the map showed, just downriver around the bend, to be a perfect, north-south gravel bar with bluffs and rapids for my campsite. As I rounded the bend, watching the perfect campsite roll into view, it included five, beached, 20-foot johnboats with outboard motors, and spread out along the gravel bar and river, a fully erected campsite with all of the gear and people such boats can carry. Some other River-wise party had staked their claim.

Despite its reputation for being crowded, this was the first time that I had been preempted on the River, in eight nights, from having a perfect campsite on a beautiful

gravel bar, all to myself. Disheartened by the prospect of making another couple of miles before camp, I made passing courtesies as I drifted by, washing into the shoals

below the camp. Not a hundred yards below the camp, this little fellow was scurrying down the bank; it was obvious that the johnboat camp was going to have their own coon in camp tonight!



A couple of days earlier, just above Maumee, an otter popped up and swam alongside for a while. The otters I've encountered on rivers don't seem to be shy, almost the opposite, having a curiosity about boats. They appear cute, but they are voracious, and sometimes ferocious predators. I once observed one for the better part of thirty minutes decimate the fish population in a creek hole at midsummer when the fish in it had nowhere to escape. I watched it catch, and eat, a dozen or more good size sun fish and small bass that it chased into the shallows, trapping them. I've read reports of violent fights among otters, minks, and muskrats, and even of an otter attacking a fawn, not unlike the fawn I'd seen "hidden" on a gravel bar. They certainly have the same wickedly efficient carnivorous teeth that a wildcat or coyote has.

Another hundred yards down the same hole at Maumee, I heard a "chuffing" sound coming from beneath and behind a refrigerator sized riverside rock. My curiosity showed an otter back in the darkness, which seem to be blowing bubbles at me, snorting at the surface of the water. Whether this was a territorial warning, or just playful sounds...well, just more to ponder.

Beavers are nocturnal and shy, and if their actual presence is sensed at all, it is when they have dived in alarm, slapping their paddle-sized tale against the surface of the water hard enough to sound like a rifle shot. But their presence is evident: bankside den holes, cut trees and stumps, and below, a willow tree cut high on a gravel bar

and dragged 100 feet to waters' edge where they will feed on the bark and leaves until only the bare skeleton of the tree is left.



The insect world never stopped buzzing either. It is hard to be delighted about the deep biting deerflies and horseflies, except the satisfaction of nailing them with a solid slap before they dig their barbs in. Long sleeves and pants solved a lot of that, along with the usually prevalent breezes on the River and its bars. The singing of the cicadas and locusts, like everywhere else in the wooded southland, was raucous from time to time during the day and night, and brightly colored swallowtail butterflies of various kinds danced on the gravel bars. But the award winning insect performance went to a huge bumblebee that joined me at my Calf Creek Camp. Seated for my evening cocktail, I ducked as it came swarming right at me, only to dodge at the last minute to hover all the way around my large, blue can of Planter's Mixed Nuts – my cocktail hour snack. It persisted for a minute or so, I presumed for the salt or fat of the nuts, until it zipped away 30 feet or so to begin examining carefully my bright blue tent. I finally got it when it swarmed back at me only to drop between my legs where I'd set up my blue camp stove with its blue gas cylinder, which it carefully inspected, before finally leaving for good.

Obviously, it was using its visual senses to find a nectar dinner in a blue flower, and thought it had hit the jackpot with the world's largest blue flowers, only to strike out three times in a row. It finally flew off, disgusted and disappointed, as I laughed out loud realizing what must have been going through its apiarian little bee mind. Better,

in all events, than seeking entertainment during cocktails in the TV evening news or a mindless reality show.

Sometimes there is just irresistible, unidentifiable eye candy to behold, like coming across a stunning abstract painting in an art museum; the artist and his or her purposes are unknown, the meaning open to interpretation, but the effect is just stunning. Such a presentation was this bluff, where a fern unknown to me had gloriously colonized the sheer stone face, whose rock patterns were unique of anything I'd seen on the River; and the shimmer of the sun's reflection from the water below onto the bluff and ferns, highlighted the whole scene:



Finally, though not least among the Disneyland distractions of the River is wondering, as I cruise by, what it would be like to explore what the map promises to be its fascinating features beyond the banks.

The Ozarks at large, and its Boston Mountain subrange, really aren't mountains, but an uplifted plateau through which rivers have cut their way. For every river there are dozens of tributary creeks, and hundreds of "hollows," short, steep sided, valleys "hollowed out" of the plateau by water over time, feeding the creeks and rivers - In the vernacular, "Hollers". As the hollers cut away the layer cake geology of the

sedimentary plateau, there are created the points, knobs, mountains, and by underground acidic erosion, limestone caves characteristic of the Ozarks.

Hollers are places where the tales, myths, legends and true accounts place the moonshine stills, lovers' rendezvous', family feuds, hidden hillbilly homesteads, battles with wild beasts, and so many other of the morality tales of the mountain south. If I had a year instead of a week for this River, I would explore all of these with my feet and imagination, the following being just a sampling of what I paddled by, without investigation, hour by hour each day: Granny Price Hollow, Rattlesnake Hollow (several of such name), Green Haw Hollow, Elm Cave Hollow, Cold Spring Hollow, Clabber Creek, Poison Point, Stillhouse Hollow, Lick Mountain, Lime Kiln Mountain, Log Hall Church, Wildcat Hollow, Sawmill Hollow Mutton Point, Buck Point, Fodderstack Mountain, Bat House Branch, Bear Cave Hollow, Dipping Vat Hollow, Gobbler's Knob, Pea Vine Hollow, Coon Hollow, Panther Creek, Lonely hollow, Railpen Hollow, Sheep Jump Bluff, and Dead Horse Gap.

In the past I have made such investigations. Lulled by the ease and openness of the River and its bars, it is a cruel discovery to encounter the impenetrable streamside flora. Greenbriers, interwoven with honeysuckle vines, reinforced by years of deadfall and driftwood impose an almost solid physical barrier, further reinforced by poison ivy, stinging nettle, ticks, chiggers, spider webs, horseflies, gnats, biting flies, and snakes, real and imagined. Finding a stream or streambed cutting through that to the River, is often the only way to penetrate from the River into the millions of acres of National Park, Forest and Wilderness. The wilderness, having recovered itself from the brief interlude of humans, has protected itself from further intrusions.

Shipwrecks

As usually happens, there were encounters with those who weren't having a good day. It wasn't so much "there for the grace of God go I", like being struck by lightning, but "Been there, done that, wrote the book, glad it's not me!"

The night before I picked Anne up at Maumee had been perfect; an absence of bugs permitted temperate sleeping under the tarp. I marveled that night at the number of whip-poor-wills and the din they made; they are present throughout the Ozarks, especially its rivers. It is a fascinating bird.

Their name is onomatopoeic, in that their call sounds exactly like their name. They nest on the ground, making their eggs and young incredibly vulnerable to predators. However, the species flourishes protected by its incredible camouflage – I have been pointed to nesting birds and staring right at the spot from 6 feet away, said "Now, where did you say it is?"

Then once molested, they immediately feign a broken wing, struggling awkwardly away on the ground from their nest as fast as they can; I've followed such a

distraction thirty or forty yards, the bird staying just out of my clutches. They are confusingly similar in appearance to their close cousins, the chuck-will's-widow (also onomatopoeic) and the nighthawk. The nighthawk doesn't have the interesting call, but are often seen at night in urban settings, flying high under stadium lights, or in the spotlights on top of buildings, calling out with a "bzzzt", feeding on the light-attracted bugs. Indeed, all of them are active, calling and feeding, only at night, and disappear during daylight hours.

Their call must be related to the solar day; when timed at the start of their evening calling, it will start, on the clock, just a few minutes later each evening as days lengthen, and a few minutes earlier as the days shorten. The call is haunting, and is the subject of literature, songs and folk tales, and makes fine fodder for campfire tales as they call from the deep woods.

The folks I saw on the River from my campsite early the next morning apparently didn't enjoy the call of the whip-poor-will the night before quite so much.

Early the morning I was to pick Anne up at Maumee, after a solid eight hours of sleep to my whip-poor-will lullaby, I was sitting in my chair, with my freshly cleaned and dried river suit on, enjoying the solitude, the mist rising from the river, the racket of early morning birds, hot coffee, and cooking my breakfast oatmeal.

I found that I had cell service on this remote bar, and was calling Anne, now enroute from Fayetteville for our 9 a.m. rendezvous, to make sure she had outfitter arrangements and directions, when I noticed two canoes with five people, coming down the river.

Regardless of where they'd put in, or camped, this was very surprisingly early to see anyone on the River at this point.

The oldest of the group, a young man somewhere in his thirties hailed me, "Is that a cell phone?" (yes); "Do you have service" (yes); "Would you call my wife to give her a message?" (yes). However, the complexity of the message, shouted from River to shore, compelled me to invite him to just land and come use the cell phone himself.

That he did, but before calling his wife, related a confused, distraught tale: He and some combination of children, nieces and nephews (they appeared to be early teens) had put on the River yesterday; but what had started as great fun, racing, splashing, pushing, had ended up with both boats overturned, some gear, food and drink lost, the rest totally soaked. They had spent a very long, sunburned, wet, uncomfortable, thirsty, hungry night just upriver, and too miserable to sleep longer, had taken this early start, desperate to end their trip. Their original plan included going the next 13 miles to the State Park, where their camp for the week and his wife awaited; but now they wanted off the River as quickly as possible and needed his wife to come pick them up at Maumee.

After his call made the arrangements, he asked how far to Maumee. I assured him it was less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile. I thought he was going to cry with relief. Finally, he noticed my apparent comfort, the hot coffee, hot cereal, and asked, “Where did you start?”

I told him, “Five days ago, 85 miles upriver.”

He looked totally incredulous, and asked, “How did you ever do that?”

Without thinking, I said, “The River is like whiskey – taken a little bit at a time, it’s great, but take it all at once, it’s going to hurt; you all just had too much River in one day.”

Off they paddled, miserable and desperate for the takeout. I picked Anne and Dixie up at Maumee South, as planned.



Shortly after the pickup, we passed them loading his car at Maumee north; I’m sure their family trip will make a much-retold tale, but not one they will ever hope to repeat.

Late that afternoon, 12 miles downstream, Anne and I approached the Highway 14 Bridge over the River, which because of its proximity to the State Park, marks the

busiest part of the River. Among others we passed through was a group of some dozen or more older teenagers, all on float tubes, clad in cutoffs, bikinis and other swimwear. They were having a wonderful time, beer in one hand, cigarette in the other, with an ice chest lashed into a tube carrying their extra refreshments.

Comfortable and fun for a few hours, tubes move very slowly, and despite their apparent buoyancy, butts, heels, hands and anything else hanging over or through the tube, grounds the tube in less shallow slow water than a canoe would ground, and in shallow rapids a tube ride can unpleasantly pound hanging body parts against underwater rocks. Trying to stand and walk through a shallow rapid is very difficult – the water is fast, the bottom is slick, and unlike having a dismounted canoe, which one can lean on for balance and support, carrying the tube just makes walking the rapid that much more difficult and precarious.

I presumed, as we paddled through them, that they were just floating from the Bridge put-in, the short mile and a half down to the State Park gravel bar/takeout. That would provide a leisurely two hours to drink lots of beer, smoke lots of cigarettes, and enjoy their carefree youth.

Anne and I pitched camp about an hour later, on a beautiful little gravel bar about 3 miles below the Park, 4 miles above Rush.



After setting up camp, we enjoyed cocktails, a steak dinner, some fishing and were just getting ready to turn in at dark when, down the rapid came one of the tubers; a few minutes later, another, and then over the next twenty minutes, in ones, twos or threes, the whole group, including the logistical support tube with its ice chest.

I asked one of the first ones through where they were headed; he answered, “Rush – how far is it?”

“About 4 miles”

No response. Whether they were struck dumb by that information, or found it meaningless I don’t know. But the simple math showed that it had taken them more than 5 hours to go 4 miles from where we first saw them to this point, and now at dark, 8:45 p.m., it was going to take them at least 5 more hours to get 4 more miles to Rush – making for a 2 a.m. arrival.

It was a moonless, very dark night. I have no doubt that they were all sunburned and drunk, and but for whatever refreshments they had left in the single ice chest, had nothing else: Not flashlights, matches, towels, clothes, map, nor whatever else might have been, at that point in time, more helpful than a cold Bud.

Other than the misery and fear of being on the River another five hours, somewhat lost, in near total darkness, separated from each other, there was the danger of getting snakebit or falling down and breaking an arm or gashing themselves walking through dark shoals. But the real danger was, that in the dark and exhaustion, they would in the wee hours of the morning simply float by the unmarked, unlit, otherwise unremarkable little beach that marks the Rush takeout.

That would put them into the inaccessible, last 26 miles of River flowing through the Buffalo Wilderness before it reaches White River. Now that would become an adventure, and not of the fun kind.

I calculated briefly whether I could, or should try to rescue them. Presuming that, in the pitch darkness as they were spread out, I could even catch up to and gather all of them in the next couple miles of River onto a single gravel bar, to await morning light before heading for Rush, that would leave me up all night, separated and downriver by hours from my wife who herself would then be stranded in the middle of nowhere. Had I been alone, maybe; but I wasn’t going to try and persuade Anne it was a good idea for me to abandon her on the gravel bar while setting out on a Quixotic effort to rescue them from the foolishness of their youth.

The next day, a mile or two down the River, we found a great pile of cans and plastic bottles (both full and empty), and wet cigarettes, piled onto gravel bar. It was evidence of their trying, at 10 or 11 p.m. the night before, to lighten the load of their cargo tube. Another mile down, we found abandoned on a gravel bar, the cargo tube itself, with its icebox, still loaded with empty and full bottles and cans.

We policed all of this up and carried it to Rush, properly disposing of all the garbage, claiming salvage rights on a few cans of beer, and leaving the cargo tube and icebox there for whoever might come for it.

There was a family swimming in the River at Rush, who said they'd been camping nearby, when the tubers began arriving hours after midnight. There was a great deal of hysteria, screaming for lost companions, crying, Park rangers showing up to patrol the River with searchlights and recover the stragglers, but by dawn, apparently all were accounted for.

Yep, been there, done that, know better now.

Fishing

The Buffalo has always been a great, float-fishing stream. In national outdoor magazines and news articles going back 60 years or more, it has been featured as an unknown and remote jewel, where the number and size of brown bass are extraordinary. It's transformation into a National River pretty much eliminated the "unknown" part of that description, but it's still remote.

Brown bass are generally accorded as providing the most vicious, acrobatic fight of any fish in the world, pound for pound. To my knowledge, they certainly are. I have fished and floated the River for 50 years now, and the fishing seems about the same now as then. You can catch lots of fish, and lots of brown bass, but getting big ones? That has always required a lot of luck, or a lot more skill than I have.

Most of the floaters aren't fishers, which helps the fishery. And it was a great thing, which made a remarkably positive difference in the number and size of fish caught, when the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, some 25 years ago, imposed a limit of two Brownies per day, which must exceed 14 inches in length.

A thirteen inch Brownie is a whole lot of fight, and a whole lot of fun, and if I can catch several of those a day, it doesn't hurt my feelings at all to let them back into the river to grow, and not have a 14 incher for the frying pan at night.

While Brownies are the feature attraction, it is fun to fish for and catch (and tasty to eat if you like) the whole array of sunfish, black bass, goggle eyes, and catfish. Each has its own habitat, preferred lures, and fishing methods. I love 'em all, and while a fly rod with a popping bug is most likely to pull in a green ear sunfish, once in a while it may be any of the others, even a catfish; the carnivorous species of fish themselves aren't as proud as we think they are about what they may try to eat.

Paddling 15 miles a day really didn't leave much time to fish, but I caught more fish, in less time, than I've ever caught before. It required an efficient approach. First, there is an amazingly productive technique on which I stake no claim of exclusivity,

but I've rarely seen or heard of others practicing. Whenever I paddled from a shoal into a long, quiet hole, I simply threw a lure out behind 40 or 50 feet, and let it troll behind as I paddled steadily through the hole. I almost always caught a fish, and sometimes several, in a single hole. However, I gave this up after the second day. I was losing two or three lures a day, from their getting hung on an underwater log or rock, while my canoe was moving away at four miles an hour – that's a lure-losing line breaker every time. Maybe next time I'll experiment with something strictly top water that is less likely to get hung-up. As well, every time I hooked a fish, I had to put down the paddle, play, boat, and release the fish, by which time the canoe was sidewise, dead in the water, all forward momentum gone; it was simply soaking up too much time.

The Buffalo is a series of holes (long, quiet, usually deep pools) interspersed every hundred yards to half mile (or shorter or longer) with drops into the next hole, with accelerated current which, depending on your vernacular, are described as shoals, rapids, or riffles. In these runs of fast water the fish, especially Brownies, feed voraciously. Trying to fish these as you float through dooms you to frustration; the boat simply moves too quickly through to make casts and retrieves, not to mention the chaos of trying to cast and retrieve while turning the boat sharply or running under tree branches.

A simple paddling technique makes the rapids easily fishable. As each rapid proceeds downstream, there are created on either or both sides of the fast water, quite backwater pools, "eddies", where the current rushes past. Instead of driving the canoe straight down the current, the bow of the canoe is pushed right or left into a quiet eddy, and a powerful dynamic is set up. The front of the boat is no longer in the current, and for all practical purposes stops; the stern of the boat however is still very much stuck out in the fast moving current, and because putting the nose into the eddy also leaves the back sideways to the current, the rear of the canoe is swept rapidly downstream, pivoting past the bow, which is stationary, anchored in the quiet water.

These current dynamics can be leveraged or accelerated even more, once the bow of the canoe has nosed into the eddy, by the stern paddler (or solo paddler) backwatering hard on the upriver side, making the pivot happen even faster. The canoe very quickly spins so that it is heading upriver, then actually slips fully into the eddy, where there is no current – or even a gentle current pushing it upstream.



Having just flipped into this eddy, the bow is upstream, stationary, readied to throw a lure across the current.

The net result of this is that a canoe can be stopped practically dead, midway through a rapid, by flipping it around into an eddy. Usually the static nature of the eddy will hold the canoe there without more effort; or perhaps a short, reinforcing dip of the paddle every few minutes is necessary.

Now the fisherman is properly situated to cast out, all the way across the rapids, and retrieve all the way back. I found that I was catching 4 or 5 fish, in ten minutes or less in most rapids this way.

After I had given every monster in the rapids a chance at my lure, it's a quick return to the rapid: paddle the bow, now facing upstream, out into the rapid, where the current quickly catches it and spins it downstream while the stern remains anchored in the eddy's still water; as it spins, push the rest of the canoe into the current with a forward stroke, once again finding yourself in the middle of the current heading straight downstream.

Flipping in and out of an eddy is not a complicated concept, but the sudden transition of current between midriver and eddy, with the canoe half in still water and half in fast current, creates some very sudden, unexpected shifts in balance, and one should not presume that this turn can be perfectly executed (or executed at all) without considerable practice – in an unloaded boat in a gentle rapid.

Finally, I allotted the first and last 30 minutes of daylight each day to fishing from my camp – sometimes from the shore, sometimes taking out the unloaded boat into adjacent holes and rapids. Those are beautiful and usually productive times of day. I estimate I caught 40 fish per day, while making 15 miles per day. It was very efficient fishing.

While the numbers may sound like bragging, I will not exaggerate the size – less than one in five were eating size, and I only caught 3 Brownies of legal size.

For whatever it's worth, I had very good luck with a large, silver Rapala minnow lure in the rapids with Brownies, and great luck with blue and purple Rooster Tail brand spinners on everything, everywhere I fished them – after I lost all four of those colors that I had, the other Rooster Tail colors in my tackle box simply weren't as productive. I was surprised that my least luck came fishing the soft plastic minnow, worm and crayfish imitation lures which have worked so well in the past.

Ten years ago, I hosted a visiting Rotary vocational exchange team from Sweden. The team leader, a Swedish Army reservist gave me as a host gift a spinning lure (and quite a few other interesting outdoor items). The blade of the lure was decorated with his regimental crest. I found this novel and interesting and have carried it for years in my tackle box. Scrapping through my spinners one day on this trip, I came across it and tied it on. It quickly brought in a small Brownie. Not wanting to lose such an interesting lure, but having proved its worth, I returned it to my tackle box where it will probably be found, used, and lost twenty years hence by grandchildren ignorant of its heritage. But I will write my Swedish guest to tell him I productively used his special gift!



The Wilderness...

...really didn't have to be recovered by human effort, it's been there all the time, with just the surface scratched, and a few desired animals, timber stands, and fish briefly overexploited for a passing moment in the grander march of time, maybe one hundred years out of a million? To paddle 125 miles, it is startling to realize mile by mile that probably no one, historic or prehistoric, has stood on most of the stairstepped ledges of the countless bluffs – simply no reason to be there to hunt animals, cut wood, or find plants that have always been so bountiful throughout the River valley.

I was surprised that the Park Service, beyond the 18 or so developed and well publicized river accesses, also had apparently left a number of rural roads unblocked all the way to the River. Dozens and dozens of old rural roads which before the Park's taking used to come all the way to the River are now effectively blocked to any vehicular traffic, at points far from the River. Nevertheless, at half a dozen sites, I encountered, miles from any designated put-ins, groups of people swimming, fishing and picnicking at the River. I asked how they had gotten there: "The Old Zach Road", they would say, or "The County Road".

Sure enough, my maps confirmed that a few of these roads, unnoted on any Park Service literature, preserved local access to the River in remote areas, obviously known to the local folks. None of them would have been worth the trouble for any of us city folk to find and use, being remote, at the end of many miles of dirt road, and far from highway, it being much easier to find and access the well-marked and developed Park accesses.

Despite its reputation for being over-loved and over-used, I saw not a single downriver craft or person on the River in two days covering the 15 miles from where I put in at Kyle's Landing to Pruitt, other than the gang of scouts on the Camp Orr waterfront. After that, I would see about five float or camp parties per day, thus enjoying to myself 9 of every 10 hours on the River in solitude.

Below, at Calf Creek above Tyler Bend, the last of only three other boats I saw on the River that day departs down river, leaving me for the next 12 hours, the only person for miles in every direction.



It was surprising to find the developed campgrounds at Hasty, Carver, Mt. Hersey, Woolum, Tyler Bend, and Maumee spookily deserted, with maybe one tent, or one trailer, in late June. From this I derive that a wilderness lover's friend is low water, mid-week, anytime after the middle of June.

Nevertheless, I planned for and enjoyed the developed access points; I dropped garbage, took on fresh water, and enjoyed the luxury of a real toilet seat about once a day, in my 15-minute stopovers at these intrusions of civilization into the River's valley.

Coming to the End...

...I wondered if I would be tired, or lonely, or hungry, or uncomfortably dirty or otherwise fatigued and ready to finish the trip by its end. Certainly, the lower 26 miles of the River have longer, slower, deeper holes and to my way of thinking this loss of the narrow, intimate, dashing little River loses a bit of its sex appeal. However, it remains a wonderful piece of God's work, and my personal discovery at the end of 8 days and 125 miles was, had the River gone another 125 miles, and had I another 8 days, I would have eagerly embraced it.

But the Buffalo ends, and White River is another, very different river. The trip was finished, and I was satisfied, after 50 years of waiting, with its completion. There now only remained on the 8th day, crossing the White River. One knows well before encountering the White, maybe a mile upstream on the Buffalo, whether the generators are running and the White is up. The Buffalo current stops, the last few rapids are under water, the River has become a short lake, backed up by the abundance of water gushing down the White from the open turbines upstream.

My hopes fell in that last mile, as the current stopped and I found no rapids. With Those hopes dashed, there was another hope: Perhaps the generation was over, and it being only 1 p.m., I had the time to wait as the water dropped. I stopped for lunch at the last little stream entering the Buffalo, and before relaxing for lunch, put a stick in the sand at water's edge, to see how the water level would move during my lunch.



The mouth of the Buffalo into the White is just out of sight around the next bend

To my dismay, during my half hour lunch, the River rose noticeably. I would have to cross the White at high water, very deep, very wide, very cold.

Hoping that my newly acquired kayak paddle would provide the means, I powered into the intersection of the rivers, and struck into the White's current full speed, angled up river and across, hoping to overcome the current, even if by a foot or two a stroke. Paddling furiously, I was losing ground and could not advance the canoe. I had to move it several hundred yards up the White, and then cross, to make the landing.

Concerned if not dismayed, I flipped the canoe around and back into the safety and quiet water of the Buffalo, wondering whether after 125 miles my luck had run out. On previous trips, I'd made a tortured path up the near side of the river, up against the bank where the current was weaker, scrambling through and against bankside trees and branches. That was my last chance. Rather than powering into the main current, I clawed my way up the bank in the lesser current, some 400 yards, and easily ferried across. Thirty minutes later I was safely landed.

As if to bid me a celebratory farewell, as I drifted into the landing, I notice movement at riverside under a high, steep bank: three juvenile minks were scampering in and out of their den, watching me. I made a grab for the camera, but alas, between the current and the timidity of the target, the picture caught only a single, black blur.

Epilogue

Most lucky to avoid rain or flood for 8 straight days, it was the River of my most treasured memories. Like a mountain, it will never be conquered, only survived. But for those who learn it and respect it, it can be a gentle, comforting course. And it will never be truly, fully experienced; too wide, too deep, too long, too diverse. So it was a great deed, that the Buffalo was saved. It may not be for everyone, but it is forever there for anyone; anyone who finds peace, and solace, and excitement, and inspiration in its timeless flow. I was lucky to have made friends with it in my youth, and gratified that it will be there for my children, and children's children.

I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?

---Aldo Leopold