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'River Gators' chart lower Mississippi mile by mile

FIRST IN A SERIES of articles on a Mississippi River canoe trip from Natchez to St. Francisville, La.

"Paddles up!" John Ruskey ordered his canoe crew. "Hoo-WOOO!"

Their shouts of farewell echoed off Natchez-under-the-Hill, then were swallowed up by the sound of rushing water as our 30-foot canoe swiftly approached the Mississippi River bridge, where brown current gnashed the pilings.



LEATHER BRITCHES

ERNEST HERNDON



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Paddlers watch sunset from an island. Below, Ruskey warms his hands over a campfire. At bottom, a towboat pushing barges passes the beached canoe.



JOHN RUSKEY | QUAPAW CANOE CO.

This is part of a map of the Mississippi River from St. Louis to the Gulf painted by John Ruskey.

It was late morning on Wednesday, April 16, and we were headed to St. Francisville, La., 100 miles and several days downstream.

Now, I know from experience that no matter what I say, write or do, many people will insist that it's crazy to canoe the Mississippi River. It's useless for me to argue that Native Americans paddled it for millennia. Or that Ruskey, owner of Quapaw Canoe Co. in Clarksdale, has led trips down it for 16 years. Or that I have made a few trips on it over the years and written about them in the Enterprise-Journal.

Admittedly, the Mississippi River can be intimidating, especially when it's approaching flood stage, as it was now. But it's canoeable if you know what you're doing, and these guys definitely did.

Ruskey, 50, in the stern, has led hundreds of trips down the river. He has also rafted most of the Mississippi and paddled the Missouri in a dugout canoe.

In the bow were two of his "river gators," Mark "River" Peoples, 45, and Brax Barden, 39, along with former employee Chris "Wolfie" Staudinger, 25, of Metairie, La. Peoples is a former New York Giants defensive back and strong as all get-out. Barden is a retired Navy chief who races dragsters and canoes for fun. Wolfie writes for Canoe & Kayak and other magazines and is a natural on the river.

Also with us was freelance writer of Stephanie Artz of Lake Village, Ark., a yoga and dance instructor who had been on a previous float with Ruskey and company.

Following us was a 23-foot Wenonah canoe piloted by outfitter Adam Elliott of Natchez carrying photographer Josh Hall and his writer wife Christie Matherne Hall, both of Country Roads magazine. Elliott, who just opened a Natchez branch of Quapaw Canoe Co., has paddled the entire Mississippi. Ruskey had invited us writers along to document his "River Gator" project, a mile-by-mile description of the river from St. Louis to the Gulf of Mexico especially geared for paddlers (www.rivergator.org).

Ruskey is halfway through the four-year task.

"The river is safe for paddling," he declared. "And the River Gator is a new resource available for anyone who's ever thought about the river, how to do it, when to do it, where to go."

We slid past the bridge into calmer waters. At 30 feet long, 4 1/2 feet wide and weighing over 400 pounds, the handmade cypress wood-strip canoe, based on Voyageur design, handled the turbulence easily. Elliott in his lighter, sleeker Wenonah also had no difficulty.

Sure, the river is dangerous. Sure, it can kill you. But it's a type of wilderness, and people venture into wildernesses everywhere.

Ruskey compares it to the Appalachian Trail since it transects the country from north to south.

"Every year we see more and more paddlers coming

'Every year we see more and more paddlers coming down the river long-distance, like the Appalachian Trail.'

John Ruskey

River guide



down the river long-distance, like the Appalachian Trail, and you see more local people using it," he said.

Ruskey started Quapaw Canoe Co. with one Grumman canoe. Now he has five big wooden canoes and numerous smaller vessels, five full-time and 12 part-time employees, and offices in Clarksdale and Helena, Ark., as well as Elliott's new Natchez outpost.

Ruskey has taken as many as 90 people on day trips and as many as 30 on multi-day outings. Customers range from school children to foreign tourists. The only requirement is a willingness to paddle.

We passed the Port of Natchez on our left, along with another public boat ramp. All the sandbars were underwater at this stage, but we found an island with some high ground and stopped for lunch.

The crew set up a table with a selection right out of a delicatessen. As an outfitter, Ruskey doesn't stint on food or equipment. He uses top-of-the-line bent-shaft wooden paddles, cast-iron and enamel cookware, whitewater-guide life vests, high-quality tents, neoprene boots and, when necessary, wetsuits.

After lunch we dozed, chatted and walked around the island in the cool spring air. I stood on a bank and

watched a pair of geese floating and clucking.

We were on river time: no more rushing.

After lunch we paddled along the back side of the island past willows and sycamores. Re-entering the main channel, we encountered a towboat pushing a line of empty barges upstream.

More than any other danger on the river, towboats cast terror into the hearts of people. The wakes thrown up by their big screws, or propellers, can be enormous, especially when they're battling strong current, like now. But their waves usually turn into rounded swells, which a canoe rides over easily.

Some people think the safest strategy for floating the Mississippi River is to hug the shore, but that's not feasible for very far. The channel moves from side to side in bends, with eddy currents running upstream along the banks.

Plus, when the water is lower there are all sorts of jetties and other structures that will force you out into the current. And the main channel has more speed, which paddlers want.

The trick is to know the river, know your canoe, stay at a safe distance from towboats — or go with an expert like Ruskey or Elliott.

Liberty HERITAGE DAYS

May 2 & 3, 2014

Schedule of Events

Time	Event	Venue
5:45 p.m.	Welcome National Anthem by Lyn Brockett	Town Hall/Civic Drive 484 Civic Dr
6:00 p.m.-7:00 p.m.	Free Will Gospel Singers	Town Hall
7:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.	Soney Hood	Town Hall
8:00 p.m.-9:00 p.m.	Veal Brothers	Town Hall
9:00 p.m.-9:00 p.m.	Arts & Crafts & Food Vendors	Air Crafters parking Lot
Saturday May 3, 2014		
7:00 a.m.-10:30 a.m.	Fun Run/5K Run	Town Hall
7:00 a.m.-9:00 a.m.	Pancake Breakfast	Cotton Gin Restaurant 335 S Gilburg Rd
8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.	Arts/Crafts & Food Vendors	Air Crafters parking Lot
9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.	Adults & Kids Space Walks, Rock Climbing Wall, Mechanical Bull, Jousting Ring, and more!	Air Crafters parking Lot
10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.	Amite County Historical & Genealogical Society Civil War Tent, Membership drive table, Merchandise	City Library Little Red School House
10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.	Open Car Show	
11:00 a.m.-12:00 a.m.	"Cabe Jackson Day" Mississippi State two-time All American Offensive Guard and Amite County native will be on hand to sign autographs. Please come out and watch him well in the NFL draft on Tuesday May 6, 2014.	Town Hall
12:00 p.m.-1:30 p.m.	Music by Charles Rider & The End Results Old Time Rock & Roll, Blues	Town Hall Civic Dr
2:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m.	Book Signing at Liberty Emporium	316 W Main St
2:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m.	Music by Barbara S. Company singing Motown, Top 40, Pop, Rock, Jazz and Blues - Regular performers at Beau Rivage Hollywood Casino, Treasure Bay and many others	Town Hall
4:00 p.m.-5:30 p.m.	Power Sleds Wrestling	Town Hall
5:30 p.m.-6:15 p.m.	Barbara S. Company	

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