**Paddles up!**

John Ruskey ordered his crew: "WOOOO!"

That shout of excitement was echoed by the sound of rushing water as our six-paddle crew swiftly approached the Mississippi River Bridge, marking the current's first piling and the beginning of our journey.

It was late morning on Wednesday, April 16, and we were headed to St. PETERSBURG, Va., 110 miles and several days downstream.

Now I know from experience that no matter what I write I will insist that it's crazy to canoe the Mississippi River. It's useless for me to argue that Native Americans paddled it for millenniums. Or that Ruskey, owner of Quapaw Canoe Co. in Clarksdale, has trolled down it 16 times. Or that I have made a few trips on it over the years and written about them in the Enterprise-Journal. But John Ruskey believes that canoeing the Mississippi River can be exhilarating, especially when it's approaching flood stage. As it was soon for it's now if you know what you're doing, and these guys definitely did.

Ruskey, 50, in the stern, has sailed hundreds of trips down the river. He has also rafted most of the Mississippi and paddled the Tennessee in single canoes. He's a natural on the river.

In the past two of his "water gators," Mark Ross Peoples, 45, and Brian Barnett, 39, along with former employee Chris "Wolfie" Shaddox, 25, of Atoka, La., Peoples is a former New York City detective and strong and as all get-out. Barnett is a retired Navy chief who races dragsters and earns extra by building and selling hot rods and other magazines and is a natural on the river.

Also with us was free lance writer of Stephenie Meyer's the Lake Village, Ark. "I'm a yoga and dance instructor who had been on a previous float with Ruskey and completely hooked," she said.

Following us was a 23-foot wooden canoe piloted by outfitter Adam Elliott of The Natchez outpost. Ruskey invited us to join him in his "River Rafter" project, a mile-high cypress log taken from St. Louis, the chief of which was especially good for paddlers (two strokes per foot). Ruskey is halfway through the project.

"The river is safe for paddling," he declared. "And the river is a resource available for anyone who's interested in the story of the river and how to do it."

We slid past the bridge into a crimson sunset. At 10 feet long, 3½ feet wide and weighing over 400 pounds, this Louisiana cypress wood-strip canoe, based on Voyagers’ designs, handled the turbulence and speed of the river like a champ. People call it the "toughest canoe" ever. Steve, the river’s danger one of the most hailulfill. But it’s a type of wilderness, and people feel wilder in wilderness everywhere.

The Natchez outpost is on the Appalachian Trail since it traverses the country from north to south.

"Every year we see more and more paddlers coming down the river long-distance, like the Appalachian Trail," said Ruskey. Ruskey started Quapaw Canoe Co. with one Gramman canoe. Now he has five big wooden canoes and many small soft canoes. The full-time and 1½ 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 50 on multi-day outings. Customers range from school children to foreign tourists. The only requirement is a love for the river and the odd paperwork.

We named the Port of Natchez on our left, along with another public boat ramp, as the mouth where we encountered the Mississippi River, and found us island with some high ground and sheltered launch. The bayou contents a couple of chutes and a mouth with a wading area. There, the water is warmer and the current is more relaxed and calm.

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