

Gators & Freighters Expedition

Dean Klinkenberg: Beauty at the Far End of the River



Lower Mississippi River Dispatch No 321

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For the completion of the [www.rivergator.org](http://www.rivergator.org)

*1 million words describing the Middle & Lower Mississippi River.  
Written for paddlers and any others seeking the “wilderness within”*

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Quick Re-Cap: The 9-member crew reached the Gulf of Mexico at the beginning of November. The 2011-2015 Rivergator Explorations are Complete. Writing and photos will appear online on the Rivergator.org by the end of the year. We have been sharing guest perspectives from some of the team members. Today we are hearing from the the “Mississippi Valley Traveler,” Dean Klinkenberg, of St. Louis.



Beauty at the Far End of the River

by Dean Klinkenberg, the “Mississippi Valley Traveler”

photos by John Ruskey

Some fifty miles downriver of New Orleans, Bohemia Beach comes into view like Brigadoon, an oasis of sandy beach between piles of rip rap. When I met the Rivergator expedition on the west bank of the Mississippi River at Algiers, downtown New Orleans looming behind us, I knew I was in for surprises in the coming week-long paddle, but I had no idea there would be so many that would move me.

At Bohemia Beach, uncooperative weather turned a single-night stopover into a three-night vacation. A few of us went for a swim in one of the willow-lined coves. The scavengers in our crew built a playground from refuse. I sipped ginger tea and watched the world's commerce flow by – busy deck hands keeping watch on stacks of containers or cruise directors tending to exuberant vacationers.

During a break in the weather, four of us paddled about a mile downriver from Bohemia Beach to Mardi Gras Pass. The Mississippi River carved a new opening a few years ago that connects the main channel to a rich labyrinth of waterways and wetlands alive with birds, oyster beds, wild pigs, and boats speeding by with men carrying rifles. Deep in the maze, we pulled up to a coastal marsh where I felt like I was floating across the landscape (waterscape?), my weight supported by the densely packed root systems of the grasses.

Down at the far end of the river, humanity's structures crumble, get rebuilt, and crumble again. A concrete boardwalk at Pilottown makes a convenient platform to spy swamp rabbits and cottonmouths, but it would quickly disappear into the marsh without the persistent efforts of people armed with weed whackers. Buildings that went up after Nixon went down are battered and at the end of their lifespan, their age perhaps better measured by the number of big storms they've endured than the number of years they've stood.

Closer to the Gulf, the original Pilottown – a place known as The Balize – has long since been reclaimed by the marsh. In 1832, the hard-to-impress English writer Frances Trollope described The Balize as “...a cluster of huts...by far the most miserable station that I ever saw made the dwelling of man...” There are no signs today of those huts where river pilots once waited to board ships and steer them to New Orleans. But while it may have been a miserable place for humans to live, it makes a fine home for herons, gar, and a host of other animals better adapted to the bayou.

Down where the river ends, where the scent of salt picks up and Southeast Pass dumps bits of Montana and the Great Plains into the Gulf of Mexico, a thick line of roseau cane marks the boundary between land and sea. A low barrier island that may or may not have a name rises gently from a broad mud flat, a popular spot for pelicans and gulls to hang out and fish. We set up camp along the highest point on the island, which, by most standards, would barely register as a slight incline. Still, it was elevated enough to keep us dry at high tide.

No; I won't soon forget Bohemia Beach or sleeping among moonflowers across from Venice or camping on an island at the end of the river. I suppose you might catch a glimpse of these areas if you pass by in a boat with a higher top speed than a canoe, but I doubt you would really notice them, much less experience their beauty.

- Dean Klinkenberg



For more photos go visit Dean's blog
online: <http://mississippivalleytraveler.com/beauty-at-the-far-end-of-the-river/>

For more photos, and more great writing from Dean Klinkenberg, go
visit his website: <http://mississippivalleytraveler.com/>

Dean's stories often end up in National publications. His last Rivergator
story was re-run in the Minneapolis Star.



About Dean Klinkenberg:

I'm on a mission. I'm exploring the culture and history of the Mississippi River from the Headwaters to the Gulf. It's my obsession. I started this project in 2007 by spending a couple of days in the [Quad Cities](#) in January (yes, you can travel along the river in winter). This led to more days in the [Quad Cities](#), which led to weeks along the river north of the [Quad Cities](#), which led to the passage of a couple of years and the publication of three travel guides: the Quad Cities Travel Guide, the guide to the river between Lansing and Le Claire, and the Driftless Area Travel Guide. You can read more about them [here](#).

Now I'm writing fiction, too. The Mississippi River is too big and has more stories to tell than can fit in a travel guide, so I'm letting Frank Dodge introduce readers to more characters and more places along the big river. In Dodge's first book, in [Rock Island Lines](#), he chases down the legend of a Quad Cities gangster, John Looney, and ends up on the wrong side of an interrogation.

I also write shorter pieces about the river for publications such as [Big River Magazine](#). I post regular updates describing my experiences, progress on the books, or whatever seems relevant at the moment.

Before I began all this, I worked as a research psychologist for a dozen years. For another dozen years previous to that, I was a student. Before I was a student, I was just me.



Dean Klinkenberg

The Mississippi Valley Traveler

Dean@TravelPassages.com

www.MississippiValleyTraveler.com

<http://mississippivalleytraveler.tumblr.com/>

Author of Rock Island Lines (Frank Dodge Mystery #1)

Next week we will post another guest perspective, from guest writer Christopher Wolf E. Staudinger. Also, Mark River will fill in the gaps in his journal to be posted next week as a Thanksgiving "Happy."

For more photos of the Lower Miss and more colorful reading helpful to paddlers and enjoyable to others, please go to www.rivergator.org



The Lower Mississippi River Dispatch

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