

Lower Mississippi River Dispatch No. 286

Friday, April 17th, 2015

“Mr. Melvin, Take Me to the River”



RIP Melvin Carpenter 1949-2015

Anyone who has been on one of our trips in the last decade will fondly remember our shuttle driver Melvin Carpenter. He took us to the river and brought us back. Mr. Melvin was well-loved by many in Clarksdale, especially by his doting wife Miss Martha (Carpenter). Originally from Port Gibson, he moved to Chicago where he drove taxi amongst other occupations. He returned home last decade to get away from the chaos of the city, and enjoyed being with us in the heart of the south. He was a hustler of sorts, and had more lives than a cat. He would have outlived all of us if he could have given up that tough nicotine habit. “Mr. Melvin” also known as “Mel” was best friends with another Quapaw shuttle driver Ellis Coleman. Whenever they were together laughter, stories and good-natured pranks were sure to follow. See below for a couple of heart-felt reminiscences from Ellis Coleman other Mighty Quapaws. Our sympathies and condolences to Miss Martha and all of Mr. Melvin’s Family. Visitation is today 1-5pm at Royal Funeral Home in Clarksdale. Funeral is tomorrow, Saturday April 18, 2015, 11am, at Union Grove MB Church, also in Clarksdale, the Rev. L.C. Tyler II officiating.

Special Notice: Canoe Outfitting & Guiding 101

Ready for a career change? Want to start your own small business focused on Canoe/Kayak/Paddleboard Rentals, Guiding and Outfitting? Nature Tourism is a budding industry just beginning to flower throughout the greater Mississippi Valley/Deep South. We are teaching a 2-day workshop called Canoe Outfitting & Guiding 101 at the University of Louisiana in Monroe during the weekend of May 2-3, 2015. If you've ever entertained any dreams in this regard, we'll help make it a reality! Come join us for a helpful and fun workshop. Keep reading below for signup and more info.

ALSO In this Issue:

- **Arkansas Delta Exploration April 22-26**
- **Canoe Outfitting & Guiding 101 - University of Louisiana, Monroe, May 2-3**
- **April 15th was the 1st Anniversary of Quapaw Natchez!**

Melvin James Carpenter, Sr.

January 1, 1949 to April 10, 2015



My Friend Melvin

I am going to miss him from the things we used to do together. We went fishing, canoeing, and up and down the Mississippi River on canoeing trips. I am going to miss him from sitting in the yard under the trees laughing and talking. He was a good man and like a brother to me. Rest in peace, brother, and May the river be with you.

Ellis and Brenda Coleman



My Man Melvin

When I moved to Clarksdale, one of the first people to invite me into their home was Melvin. He provided me with my first Delta home cooked meal and introduced me to some of the locals in the community. He drove me out to a juke joint in the middle of a cotton field called "The Mighty Ones!" To this day, I still have no idea how to get there. I miss his weekly call saying, "You don't know how to call nobody!" All in all, he made my transition to Clarksdale smooth and I will never forget his unique, jolly laugh. Quapaw Canoe Company lost a fine member of our diverse team and his soul will forever be with us. Who-ute!

Mark "River" Peoples



Mr. Melvin Take Me to the River

I am enamored by the kind of people who won't trade a cigarette for anything but an oxygen tank, and Mr. Melvin, in all of his goodness, complexity, and struggles, was one of them.

He never could quit smoking, but his life was full of other victories, which he liked to share over a drink of VSOP brandy. He didn't spare much when he told stories about himself, about his old addictions, about winning the woman who would "set him straight" and love him for the rest of his life. He and that strong woman, Ms. Martha, welcomed me, a newcomer, into their house like I was family. They also dogged me, like family, for not coming to visit when I ducked into Clarksdale, and now I kick myself for not sitting on that couch in his smoky living room and eating more of his smoked pork ribs and learning more about his life.

It was there in his living room that he told me he never learned to read as a child of Jim Crow Mississippi. He still hadn't learned when he moved away to Chicago, but he was shrewd, nobody's fool, and he wasn't going to let old missed opportunities get in the way of several good and steady jobs - one with the Postal Service and another in a plant where he managed production and supervised numerous employees.

Aside from too much time stuck in the hospital, he spent a damn good retirement in Clarksdale. He grew a backyard full of beautiful vegetables, which Ms. Martha has combined with various animal renderings to fill a massive deep freezer in the back of their house. And as he drove the Quapaw vans around Coahoma County, he would point out the lakes and little waterways where he liked to fish with a group of ancient women from the country.

He loved driving the Quapaw shuttles, and he loved meeting the people who came from all across the world to paddle the Mississippi. If you've ever paddled from the St. Francis River to

Helena Harbor, then you know that “The Low Road,” the first part of your journey, is a journey unto itself - with a bird-filled, jungly canopy that completely blocks out the sun from the winding gravel road below. It’s a good way to spend an hour of your life, and Melvin spent many an hour on that road. Deep in the summer, when long spells of dry weather fry all of the moisture out of the dirt road, a huge cloud of dust will envelop the van for the entirety of the trip and (if the A/C is broken and it’s 104 degrees and the windows are down) cover everything in a solid layer of dust.

One day after a particularly dusty trip, I was commiserating with Melvin about all of the dust. “Yeah,” he said, laughing, “I was so white, I was gonna go get me some credit!”

I laughed, but those words have haunted me. He was one of the ones who make me think and re-think about what it meant to live in Clarksdale, the South, America... and what it might mean to live a good, just life in the first place. I’m devastated not to have had more time listening to him, but I’m glad to be inspired by him.

Mr. Melvin, thank you for taking me to the river. We’re going to miss you.

Chris Staudinger

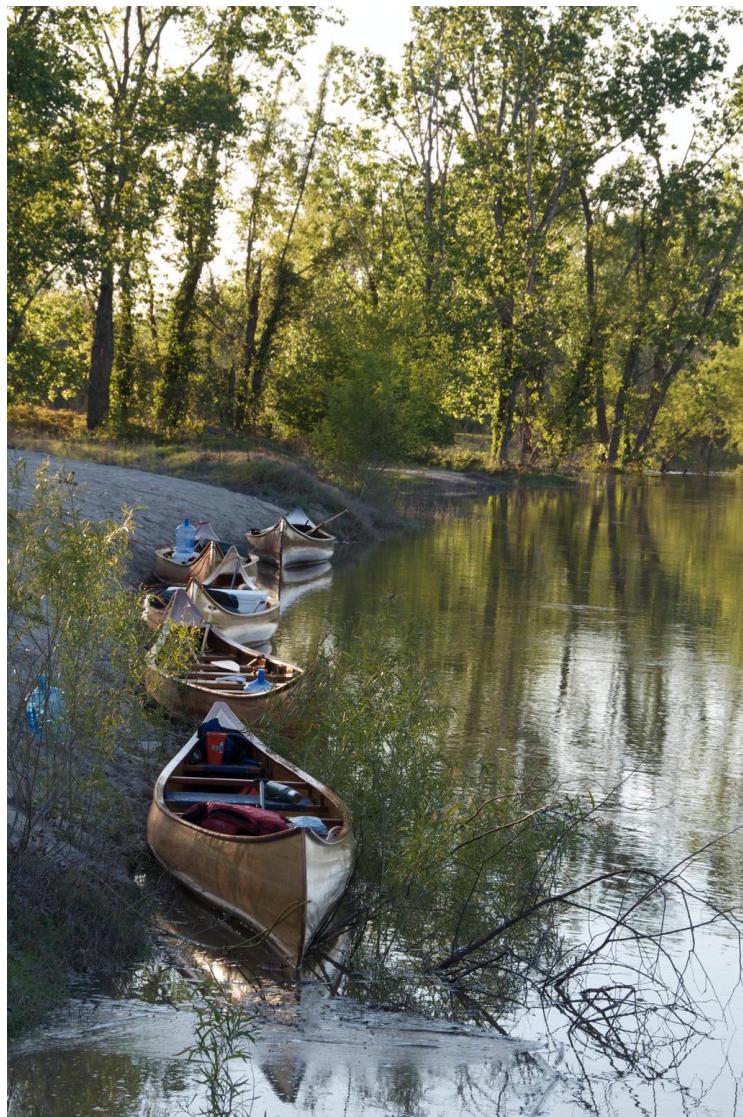


White Meat or Dark Meat?

Mr. Melvin always looked for the humor in all situations. One time we were pulling off the river down at Arkansas City. It was dark. As we drove down the remote highway we realized we needed to tighten down some straps over the big canoe on the trailer behind us, so Mr. Melvin pulled over and Charles and I jumped out to do that. As we began to tighten straps some mean dogs ran out from a nearby country house barking aggressively, snarling and snapping at our legs. "Go Mr. Melvin!" we hollered out and jumped on the trailer. He accelerated down the

empty road while we hung on to the end of the trailer. The dogs chased us for a while snarling and clicking their teeth, first on one corner of the trailer where I held on, and then over the the other corner where Charles clung tight. After about a mile or so the dogs gave up the chase, and Mr. Melvin pulled over to let us back in the vehicle. We were all thrilled by the chase. Mr. Melvin commented wryly at our adventure saying "those dogs couldn't decide if they wanted white meat or dark meat!" Something we replayed over and over again and laughed about during the long drive home through the darkness of the Mississippi Valley.

John Ruskey



Canoe Outfitting & Guiding 101 - University of Monroe - May 2-3, 2015

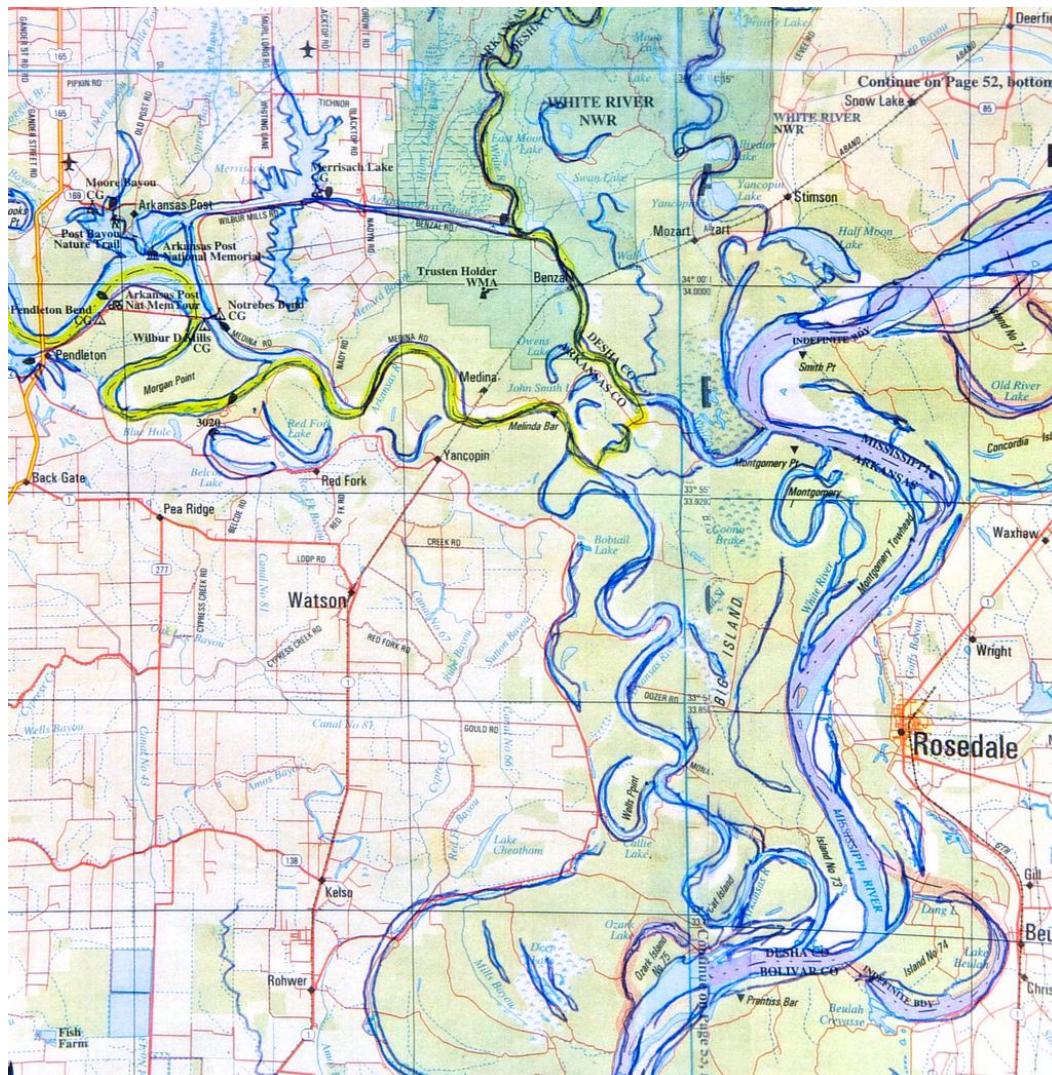
Always wanted to start your own canoe/kayak river business and didn't know how or where to start? This 2-day workshop is for you!

For details and enrollment please go to:

<https://webservices.ulm.edu/ce/content/canoe-outfitting-guiding-101>

Title: Canoe Outfitting & Guiding 101: A 2-Day Primer for Starting Your Own Small Business as Canoe Guide and Rental Service

Description: Learn the ins and outs of starting a small business dedicated to canoe livery and outfitting. Learn to safely guide canoeists through our local bayous, rivers and lakes for supplemental income. Introductory workshop lightly covering the many challenges and opportunities for a nature tourism business. This class will set the stage for how to make your dream job come true. This two-day class is ideal for the person who loves the great outdoors and wants to share that enthusiasm with others. Half indoor classroom, half outdoors. Participants will know by the end of workshop whether or not to pursue this kind of business, and how and where to proceed if they so desire. No previous canoe experience required, but must be comfortable in water settings. Most aspects of this program are applicable to kayaks and paddleboards also.



Arkansas Delta Exploration

Wed, April 22nd to Sun, April 26th 2015

Note: Due to high waters below Baton Rouge we had to postpone the Baton Rouge to New

Orleans to Gulf Expedition. Postponed until October. In its place we are going to explore the Arkansas Delta, which needs updating on the Rivergator website. See below for details for this exciting 5-day expedition!

During the Great Flood of 2011 the Arkansas began carving a new outlet to the Mississippi in a violent explosion of water bursting behind Cat Island. In the low water 2012 it was discovered that the new route was completed, and the Arkansas River had once again demonstrated its ability to meander in the way rivers have naturally done in the Mississippi Valley for millions of years.

The purpose of this exploration is to survey Cat Island and the newly formed Mouth of the Arkansas River, and the stretch of Mississippi River downstream to Greenville including the alternate route known as “The Greenville Bends.” The results of this exploration and documentation will be added to the 2015 update for the Rivergator www.rivergator.org.

The explorers will paddle approximately forty miles of the Arkansas River and fifty miles of the Mississippi, down one of the most remote stretches of big river in the deep south, here surrounded by floodplain, deep forests, including the edge of the White River National Wildlife Refuge and Choctaw Island Wildlife Management Area. Various camps will be established for the exploration of some of the most remote bayous and backwaters in the Mississippi Valley. One of the goals is locating examples of giant Bald Cypress, a favorite haunt for bears, raccoons, prothonotary warblers and bald eagles. The rarely seen Swainson’s warbler prefers canebrakes and lowland thickets along this route, particularly on Big Island and surrounding floodplain.

Itinerary April 22nd to April 26th

Wed, April 22nd: Arkansas River

Put in at Nortrebes Dam (near Dumas, Ark)

Thurs, April 23rd: Arkansas Delta

Fri, April 24th: Arkansas Delta

Sat, April 25th: Mississippi River

Sun, April 26th: Mississippi River

Takeout at Warfield Point (near Greenville, Miss)

Please contact John Ruskey john@island63.com for more information.

Congrats to Adam Elliott!

April 15th, 1st Anniversary of Quapaw Natchez

Last year on TAX DAY 2014, a group of adventurers descended out of the north on board a Quapaw vessel *The Grasshopper* and made landing under the gangplank of the *American Queen* (who just happened to be docked there also!) and walked up the ramp at Natchez-Under-the-Hill to declare peace with Natchez people and officially open the NATCHEZ OUTPOST of the Quapaw Canoe Company -- all under the leadership of the erstwhile Adam Elliott. [Adam Elliott](#).

Congratulations Adam! From all of us Quapaws up and down the river, PADDLE'S UP and a resounding WHOOP! WHOOP! HOORAY!!! [Quapaw Natchez : Outpost Natchez](#) You done good. We are proud of you! — with [Adam Elliott](#), and 1442 others at [Quapaw Natchez : Outpost Natchez](#).



RIP Melvin Carpenter, 1949-2015

*Thanks for taking us to the river,
and bringing us back!
We will Miss you!
Love, the Mighty Quapaws*

The Lower Mississippi River Dispatch
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