

## Introduction

I have always been a dreamer and a romantic. In the early spring of 2002, I found myself captivated by an idea that caught my imagination and would not let go. Long before the red buds along the white rail fences surrounding my farm erupted into their enchanting bloom, I began envisioning a journey that I hoped would forever change my life. Early one morning I would leave the door of my Middle Tennessee farmhouse, walk to my tree-lined creek, board a canoe, and paddle as long as it took to reach the high riverbanks of New Orleans. I had no idea how much time my journey would require or what it would entail.

Although I was an adequate sailor, my experience as a camper and canoer was extremely limited. I was particularly inept at skills required for an extended outdoor adventure. Divorced for almost four years, I had relied mainly on eating out for dinner and barely knew how to cook. Going home to an empty house to eat by myself after 20 years of marriage seemed far too depressing; sleeping was hard enough. I paid others to clean my house, mow my yard and do my laundry. A variety of restaurants served my dinner. The only things left for me to do were to bathe myself, push the buttons on the remote, and go to work.

For thirty years I had been a successful photographer in Nashville. Although I was trained as a mechanical engineer, my heart always belonged to the arts. Upon graduating from college, despite my father's strong opposition, I took a minimum-wage job processing film at a local photography studio. As my abilities grew, so did my confidence. Two years later I opened my own studio, embarking on a career that was challenging and satisfying. My job was always interesting and often involved photo shoots of celebrities or well-known political and business leaders. Along with my commercial assignments, I began to develop a personal portfolio as well.

My desire to be an artist was strong, and I made photographs for myself as often as I could. Exhibitions of my work were well received, but nevertheless expensive and time-consuming to produce. Other financial obligations had forced me to follow my artistic muse with restraint. Now alone, my family grown, and my obligations not quite so restrictive, I felt I could reach for more. It was time to develop a body of work that didn't have those limitations, to immerse myself in a project that would last as long as necessary. I sought a personal quest, one that would mature me as an artist and help me grow as a human being.

For the last twenty-five years my dream had been to sail single-handedly around the world. In times of stress or disappointment, I imagined the sails full of wind as my yacht cut through a vast ocean of blue water. It was easy to lose myself in the serenity of another time and place. I spent hours trying to sense what it would be like to live for weeks at a time surrounded by nothing but water and air. Because I love to sail and to explore, for me this was a worthy dream. Because the boat I wanted was very expensive, it even gave me an incentive to save money.

In March, 2002, I turned 53 and sadly started to realize the impracticality of that

dream. I didn't know if I could bear waiting until normal retirement age to leave my job. Yet like so many people, it seemed my very existence revolved around my ability to earn a decent living. The world outside was changing rapidly, and I felt the need to change myself. But how?

The obstacles seemed overwhelming. The boat I wanted cost over three times as much now as it did when I was in my late twenties. I couldn't afford it then. I couldn't afford it now. In addition, I was also beginning to recognize other problems with my dream of circumnavigation. Most accounts of oceanic sailing speak of countless days of boredom interspersed with moments of sheer terror brought on by the forces of nature. Would I choose to subject myself to such risk? Also I was a photographer. Realistically, how many unique photographs could I make in the middle of the ocean?

I felt stuck. I needed a new plan.

Finally, a scheme began to emerge. With my love for the water, canoeing on the rivers would be natural. A canoe could hold me and my equipment and would move downstream at about the same pace as a person walking. Once the lifeblood of American commerce, rivers are still full of activity, and I felt I could enthusiastically chronicle and document the stories of the people who live there. I would make pictures in the tradition of the WPA photographers. I would find the real Americans, the ones who live their lives without all of the glitz and fanfare I was used to in the entertainment world. I had wanted an experience that would be uniquely my own. That would be it. The rivers had been canoed before but rarely by someone with an artist's eye.

Fittingly, my journey would begin on my Williamson County farm south of Nashville, where Spencer Creek would provide the perfect embarkation point. The farm, where I had watched my children grow up, is steeped in so much history that I feel more like a caretaker of a sacred place than a land owner. Across the way lies Roper Knob, the signal mountain for the Union forces during the bloody and decisive Battle of Franklin. After the Federal Army repelled General Hood's reckless attack, many of the battle-weary soldiers camped and celebrated in these fields before moving on to defend against Hood in one final onslaught at Nashville. My 1840's farmhouse is reputed to have been the Quartermaster's house. Even though the fields have been perennially combed by treasure hunters, it is not uncommon to find a Civil War relic or some other 19<sup>th</sup>-century trinket. Every turn of the garden-soil yields another archeological treasure—from the mini-balls of the desperate clashing soldiers to the little clay marbles lost by happily playing children, they recall all that we share with generations past.

Throughout the summer of 2002, I took note of the weather in order to determine the best time for my departure. The rains were still heavy in June, while July and August were terribly hot. Estimating that the journey would require at least three months, I decided it would be best to be finished by November before the threat of frost and hypothermal waters. Tentatively setting my time of departure for August 2003, I did little other preparation than to

dream my new dream. Considering my age, I enjoyed the metaphor of the later days of summer as the time for transition into my new life.

Then in early September, my world began to change. I met a woman whose name was Mona Lisa. We dated and fell in love. Mona was young, beautiful, kind-spirited and tolerant. We had similar temperaments and enjoyed many of the same activities. Like me, she was career-oriented. In fact, she was so right, so perfect, that I began to question the wisdom of my journey. What was the point? I had found what I wanted most. Now I could stay in Nashville, marry Mona and make art while she pursued her own profession. Embraced by the peace and joy of my ensuing love, I wanted to forget about my adventure into the unknown. No one would care if I went or not. Why risk losing the love of my life, not to mention my own life as well? But the insistent voice inside would not go away. Telling myself that it was only fair to Mona to let her find out who I really was, I told her of my plans. Naturally, she wasn't thrilled. The closer and more in love we grew, the less she liked the idea. Because she knew of my inexperience, and recognized the dangers, talk of the river distressed her. I began to feel guilty for causing Mona so much pain. Now I recognized the unfairness of allowing someone to fall in love with me and then disclosing that I was leaving for three months.

Other events put my journey further into question. Since Mona was training for the L.A. Marathon, I would sometimes join her on the shorter five mile runs that were part of her training. Early in November, I stumbled on a loose rock while running and fell hard into a ravine. The fall was serious. The doctor said I had shredded an anterior tendon and would never run again. I spent the winter miserably in a restrictive boot that made it hard to exercise at all. I also began to notice that my right shoulder was beginning to catch when I raised my hand over my head. This, I was told, was probably degenerative and would only get worse. What would I do if my shoulder gave out right when I needed it most on the river? In February, I came down with the second bronchial infection in as many months. My lack of conditioning only increased the discomfort.

Illness had always been a defining part of my life. As an infant my allergies and respiratory problems were so severe that the family doctor advised my mother that I might not live to be a year old. When I was eight, my parents put me in a hospital for asthmatics. What was to have been a limited stay evolved into a tenure of more than a year. My family was only allowed to visit me every few months. I doubt that I saw my parents or sister more than six days that year. The isolation probably did more to define my personality than any other event in my childhood. I retreated far inside myself to a place that I have found it hard to leave ever since. For the remainder of my adolescence, I spent endless hours at the doctor's office getting poked by up to six needles every week. My constant regimen of asthma and sinus medicine was laced with frequent helpings of antibiotics and steroids.

After high school, I began to outgrow some of my allergies, and although I was never totally healthy it appeared that I might live a fairly normal life. In my late thirties my health started to regress. My asthma grew worse, and my bronchitis

kept escalating into pneumonia. Since my allergies and asthma were compromising my immune system, the doctor again prescribed weekly injections and daily doses of steroids in the form of Prednisone. At one point I asked my physician how my disease would affect my longevity, and he said people in my condition usually lose their ability to stave off serious infections by their middle fifties. I didn't like that prognosis, so I started to work out and improved my living habits. By the time I reached fifty, I was as healthy as I ever had been and felt confident my life would be prolonged much further. Now in February of 2003, between the pain of my injuries and the severity of my bronchitis, I wasn't so sure. I worried about getting sick on the river, especially in the frequent nowhere-lands along the Mississippi.

Beyond the questions of Mona and my health, other impediments were beginning to emerge. A year earlier, I had started a digital business to complement my conventional photography studio. In the spring, one of my key employees left, taking a good many clients with him. It appeared my entire investment would be lost. I became so preoccupied with the worries of day-to-day life and financial survival that I had no time left to plan or prepare.

Despite all these issues, in June I forced myself to look for a canoe. I had no clue what I needed. Ending up at Blue Ridge Mountain Sports, I told my story to Jed, a sympathetic manager. My needs were unusual because I required a canoe that would perform well on both rivers and lakes. The vessel had to be large enough to hold all of my gear but still small enough to control. He guided me to a brilliant-red 16' canoe. It was the brightest red imaginable. So much for being one with nature. The canoe, which was made out of Kevlar, the strongest possible material, would have to be custom-made. He guaranteed it would be ready for my August 1<sup>st</sup> departure, saying that when I returned he would have all the necessary camping gear ready for me as well. Now all I lacked were the charts, a marine radio and food. I bought the marine radio while on a trip to the California coast. The charts were available locally.

I also had to choose my camera equipment. Whatever I brought would be at high risk. The quality of the images were important so I had to bring the best I could, no matter what the conditions. Eventually I decided on my Nikon F5 for color slides and my stalwart Pentax 6"x7" for medium-format black-and-white photography. The Pentax had been with me since the get-go and had already been rebuilt twice. It was a fitting companion on this new journey. I limited my lens selection primarily to wide angle lenses. Since this trip was not intended to be an exercise in nature photography per se, I did not want to be encumbered with bulky long-range telephoto lenses.

Just prior to my departure, my father learned his special woman-friend of the last ten years had decided to move to Alabama to be cared for by her daughter. At 86, he was confined to an assisted-living residence, and her departure would mean the end of her visits. This compounded his feelings of isolation and depressed him greatly, causing him to become even more emotionally dependent upon me. I didn't have the heart to tell him I was leaving too and waited as long as possible to break the news. Everywhere I turned, it seemed some force was

trying to keep me from leaving.

Despite the many powerful claims on me, in August as the great birds in the north were gathering their flocks for the migration ahead, I too began my own journey. I was unprepared and in questionable health. I was hurting the ones I loved most. I was risking my comfortable financial and professional status. Still I was excited about seeing this country of mine, meeting some of its people and learning a little history along the way. Most of all I wanted to see what I was made of and to photograph whatever inspired me along the way.

My journey had begun at last.

## August 15 – Day 7

Once again I awoke to find an early morning fog enveloping the landscape. The river below ran calmly. By seven the sun began to burn through the mist. Clear sky, no wind. I didn't need the NOAA weather radio to tell me it was going to be a seriously hot day. Surprised by my lack of appetite, I skipped breakfast and was re-packed and in the canoe by 7:30. Even though dinner the night before had been sparse, I was not hungry at all. I had allowed myself to gain an extra fifteen pounds before my departure, easing my anxiety by indulging in favorite comfort foods and foregoing much of my exercise regimen for lack of time. In the rigors of my short adventure I had already discovered an interesting paradox. The more I exercised the less hungry I was. Hard living, it seemed, could be good for you.

The steep slope of the campsite had made it difficult to pack the equipment properly so I paddled over to a nearby gravel bar to rearrange and tie the equipment down. On the way I passed what I thought was a dead fish floating near the top of the water. Instead it turned out to be a large snapping turtle that was now only a few inches from the side of the boat. A good portion of its shell was exposed to the air. I banged around trying to assemble a camera and the ruckus was enough to frighten the turtle away. It disappeared into a cloud of silt. Another missed photographic opportunity forever lost except in memory.

Underway again, I passed the culverts that ran below the highway and had just rounded a slight bend when I came face to face with the biggest snake I had ever seen. It was poised in the center of the river right in front of the bow of my canoe, blocking my passage. The serpent's head, as big as my balled-fist, rose a good foot out of the water, high enough to breach the canoe. I don't know how long it stared directly at me, swaying back and forth as though entranced by a snake charmer. I realized it was a water moccasin, black as night, with a steely stare that was intimidating as hell. As I put down my paddle and grabbed for the machete, it sank down into the water and disappeared. Just as I grabbed for my paddle, the terrifying creature resurfaced, but strangely this time it rose a few feet behind where I had first spotted it. Suddenly I understood why. There were two of them--two of the biggest snakes imaginable right in front of me. With their bodies rising high out of the water, the moccasins stared directly towards me through two sets of piercing, glistening, seemingly evil eyes. I remembered all the stories I had heard about these fierce, aggressive snakes. What a fight this was going to be! I back-paddled the canoe and turned it to the side hoping they would come at me without slithering into the bow first. What a mess it would have been if they wound in and around the gear. They lowered their bodies back into the water and in one simultaneous move disappeared, this time for good. For many yards past the point where I had seen them dive into the murky water, I continued to look back, keeping the machete close to my side.

I continued on, meandering westward, floating under a number of railroad trestles and highway bridges. I remained on the alert for serpents from the deep for most of the morning. By midday, I departed Davidson County and entered into Cheatham. Now I was getting somewhere. Just beyond Bellevue, the

surrounding scenes became more unspoiled. Low banks revealed beautiful undisturbed forests embraced by high rock cliffs that rose in the distance behind them. (PHOTO INSERT?) Reinforced by the South Harpeth and Branch Creek, the river continued to widen even more. Gone were the playful sounds of babbling brooks that accompanied me at the advent of the journey. Instead this part of the river was filled with rapids that gushed and sprayed and danced to a more insistent rhythm. I stopped along a solid rock edge that ran right above the water line. The surface, which was rough-textured and glazed, appeared to be part of an ancient ocean-bed. There was evidence of someone's digging, trying to extract some of the many fossils embedded in stone. According to archaeological accounts, mastodon tusks have been found in some of the caves along this river. By comparison, my small find was ordinary, but it captured my imagination and reminded me of others, ancient and modern, who have passed by this way.

After lunch, I continued on in the stifling summer heat, which had become almost overwhelming. Paddling was exhausting, and I kept having to remind myself the longer I stayed in the boat the further I would go. I began to worry about the slowness of my pace and wondered how or if I would ever make it to distant New Orleans. In what was the first of many pep-talks, I reminded myself that this was not a race, but was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to photograph and explore. If I rushed through the trip, then the whole purpose would be lost. Traveling at a maximum speed of two or three miles an hour, I didn't seem to be in danger of that.

Around mid-afternoon I beached the canoe to walk lazily in a soft grassy field. It felt expansive after the confines of the tree-lined woods bounding the river for the last two days. This would have made an exceptional campsite, and I imagined how soothing it would be to sleep on such smooth ground after two nights on a gravel beach. A number of years ago I was asked to illustrate the cover of Melissa Faye Green's book Praying for Sheetrock. The book chronicles the abject poverty and suffering of a black community in a racially prejudiced South Carolina town. The protagonist's most ardent dream was to be able to live in a room composed of actual sheet rock rather than the scraps normally used for partitions in the make-shift homes.

Lulled into a reverie by this idyllic setting, I too dreamed of something simple: soft ground under my tent. But I was acutely aware of how different my circumstances were from those facing real-life deprivations. I had recourse. My hardship was voluntary. Nobody hated me. At the same time, like everyone in literature and in life, I faced unique if less immediate challenges, had personal longings, sought to find meaning, wanted to find fulfillment. For starters, as a traditional artist lost in the digital age, I found my livelihood challenged. One of the goals of this expedition was to discover just what it was I really needed to be happy. How much of my self-worth was tied to professional success and the material rewards it provided? In the course of many photo shoots, I have often been admired, my life as a photographer romanticized by naïve onlookers. The notoriety could be fun, but was it worth the effort? If not, what was the source of lasting meaning and value? Cars break. Looks fade. Age takes its toll.

Right now that soft ground looked pretty good to me. Stretching my legs, I walked far into the open field. No one else was around. This was my space, my day and my joy. In the expanse of the wide-open sky, I felt completely at peace. The superficial pleasures of success could not begin to compete with this happiness. The spirit of this moment could never be replayed in a Miller Lite commercial. It would never be used to sell sexy cars.

Eventually I reluctantly pulled myself away and forced myself back into the canoe. There were still five hours of sunlight, too precious to squander. By 3:00, hunger compelled me to stop again. I pulled my new gas camping stove from its pack for the first time with trepidation. Surprisingly the stove worked without a hitch, and soon water was bubbling in the stainless steel pot. On the other side of the river a wooded cliff rose skyscraper-high. The intense heat and high cliffs gave the illusion of the canyon lands out West. It was as beautiful as any mountain spring I had seen in Colorado or Utah. I found this magnificence even better because it was in my own backyard. The fact that this beautiful river has been used by neighboring communities as a sewer for years and years was difficult to believe, impossible to understand.

The summer's heat was exhausting. After lunch I had to continue to chant my mantra, "the longer you stay in the boat, the further you will go, the more you will see and the better will be your chance of finishing," in order to force myself to back in the canoe. As I continued down the river something really exciting happened. I found my stroke! After three long days of paddling this way and that, I found it. It just happened, and I knew it instantly. It was smooth, precise, and had a wonderful sense of grace to it. It felt just like the picture in the canoe book looked. The accomplishment lifted my spirits and gave me added energy. I marveled at the efficiency of my newfound skill and propelled my craft through the water beaming with pride. My stroke did not improve my judgment, and later that day I ran aground twice in the rapids. Both times my tired body felt the impact as I came to a jarring halt. Each time river passage was possible. I realized my lack of control came more from exhaustion rather than ignorance. Fatigue was going to be a serious concern when traveling alone in the wilderness.

On one small island I noticed a flock of geese nesting and tried to photograph them flying away, while simultaneously trying to traverse the ensuing rapids. The water was swift, and I felt like a cowboy roping a calf while riding at full speed--aimed, focused, composed and ready to shoot. The geese were just a few feet from me filling the frame with motion and color. Wings spread, and their little feet flapped along the waters edge. Droplets of water shot in the air. I could see that this was going to be a great series. I pushed the button. I heard one frame expose and then nothing. I was at the end of the roll. There was no more film. The geese dissolved into the background while I mentally apologized to them for causing all of that disturbance. (PHOTO INSERT)

By 7:00 the light was dimming in the canyon. A few minutes later a sandbar appeared on the right side and it seemed to be an inviting campsite except for a

large resort style house directly across from it high on the bank. I wanted privacy. Fortunately the gravel bar extended around the bend and out of its sight. However, a highway was directly across from me again as was the case the night before. The river had run north up to Highway 70 and then south again after playing hide and seek with Interstate 40 all afternoon. Although I had spent all day and traveled over sixteen miles by canoe, the two campsites were actually less than six miles apart by air.

Near nightfall, the bush hog across the river stopped and all was quiet. I wasn't as exhausted as on previous nights so I lingered outside the tent in the dark to watch the full moon rise in the sky. Suddenly I heard a loud crack. In the purple afterglow of the sunset, I turned in time to see the silhouette of a large boulder fall down a two hundred foot cliff and wallop into the river—another reminder to watch where I placed the tent at night. Finally the mosquitoes chased me inside. As I lay on the mattress that cushioned the rocks, I was pleased to find that my back wasn't hurting. Soon I fell asleep lulled by the sounds of the jumping fish splashing back into the water.

## Tuesday, August 19 -Day 11

Increasingly apprehensive about paddling the Cumberland, I went out of my way to make sure everything was packed tight and tied into the boat properly. The thought of all of those barges was intimidating, and I was especially concerned about negotiating a lock. While on the Harpeth, I had studied Quimby's Cruising Guide, a book that includes a list all of the marinas and locks along the major inland rivers as well as basic information on river navigation. It advised that I needed a 50' mooring line and fender buoys to be allowed into the lock. The line was necessary to play out while making the descent and the buoys to keep the boat from being banged against the walls in the turbulent water. Unprepared for this, I called Mona who brought the items to me along with the other needed stores. I quickly found that fifty feet of one-inch thick rope was a lot for such a small craft, and the mooring buoys were a total nuisance. They took up a lot of space and looked silly dangling from my 16 \_ foot canoe.

Thus adorned I cast off, heading toward the Cumberland, which was still three miles away against an incoming current. Limestone cliffs loomed on the right while endless farmland eased out of the river on the left. Soon the river widened to the size of a lake, an area which appeared to be a favorite fishing spot easily accessed by the high-powered bass boats. Already I was beginning to miss the intimacy of the river's narrow banks. Coming out into such a wide-open space after seven days, I felt as if I were reluctantly being birthed, involuntarily emerging into an unknown world. For the first time, I questioned the size of my craft in relation to the daunting task to come. I was still on the Harpeth and already overcome by the vastness of the water before me. What would Lake Barkley or the Mississippi River feel like? From now on the big boats would only see me as a speck in the water, if they saw me at all.

The river eventually narrowed and meandered along for another few miles. Slowly working hard against the current, I passed Dozier's Catfish Restaurant and dock as I neared the Harpeth's end. Mr. Dozier was out in the yard mowing the grass, and we waved at each other as I passed. Located in the first floor of a brick house near the river's edge, the restaurant was surrounded by an eclectic mix of mobile homes and motor homes raised high on blocks. Resembling a bizarre sculpture garden, the group of about 10 retirement homes circled the main house wagon-train style. (POSSIBLE PHOTO) Each trailer reflected the style of its era, and many of the sites featured retro patio tables and chairs. Mr. Dozier's family opened the restaurant in 1955. It remains a popular hangout for fishermen and the few locals who live nearby to this day.

Past the Dozier's I came upon a small county park that extends into a peninsula of the Cumberland. I decided to take a break for a while, as the sun was already miserably hot, and my stomach was feeling the effects of the greasy, rich food from the previous evening's meal. I tied the canoe to a tree and let it drift in the water. The grounds of the tree-shaded park were deserted, and I photographed the nearby cornfields framing the images between the darkened trees.(PHOTO POSSIBILITY)

Back in the canoe, as I rounded the bend onto the Cumberland, I heard it. My first tow! It was about to pass right in front of me. The sound and vibration of the throbbing baritone engines engulfed my body temporarily replacing my regular heartbeat with the beating of the engine. I was totally absorbed by the powerful sound, too thrilled to be scared. The 200' barge came first, its bow so far from the tugboat behind that it passed in an almost surreal disconnected silence. I watched the parade of sleek metal containers carrying black coal and limestone as they were pushed forward by the sparkling-white tugboat. It was two stories high, and held a galley, a huge engine compartment and crew quarters, all of which were topped with a shaded glass conning tower. It appeared uninhabited except for the billowing smoke stacks. I was pleasantly surprised to find the bow wave relatively small and easily handled by the canoe. Most of the turbulence was created by the ship's propellers directly behind the tugboat. It appeared the mighty barge would pose no threat to the canoe as long as I stayed out of its path. I was relieved. After it had passed, I pushed across the river and ran along the right side of the bank next to the Corps of Engineer's campground.

At the swimming area, I came across a man wading in the water with a precious three year old girl in his arms. After putting up a fuss, she finally posed for a picture. The man, who introduced himself as her uncle, said they had come down from Clarksville. Originally from Morocco, he was extremely outgoing, and asked where I was heading with all of my gear. When I told him I was going to New Orleans, he became quite excited and started yelling to his family that he was going to get in the canoe and go with me. He said he had a survival kit containing all he would need in the car and seemed determined to go. I was taken back by his insistence and didn't know what to do. He countered every objection to his plan. In a way I felt it my fault. I had barged into his world asking to make photographs, and now he was barging right back into mine. Finally, I pointed to the canoe laden to the brim with gear and sorrowfully said that there was really no room for him. That was something he could understand. Finally he relented, and we were able to part friends. Before I left he insisted I beach the canoe and make a picture of his family. This request I happily obliged. As I departed, he helped me push off, telling me I was a good man who he knew was going to make it.

His encouragement was the lift I needed to face the dam and lock a little more than a mile ahead. As his waves and shouts of good luck faded, I was still trying to fathom just what it was I had encountered. What did this man from Morocco mean by saying he could get me anything I wanted? Why was he living next to a major Army post? Was he supplying others with any-and-everything? Or was it just a cultural habit of bartering, an art-form that came naturally to one who came from a country replete with markets? I also wondered if he actually had a clue how far New Orleans was from Clarksville by river or even how long it might take. He had an adventurous spirit in any case.

Near the dam, the banks grew higher, and the few remaining people I saw seemed really distant. The intensity of the August sun was overwhelming, and the rays burned down hard on my shoulders and knees. I have never been one

to wear a hat but I did now. The brim reduced the glare on my face, provided insulation from the heat, and reduced my chances of having a sun stroke.

A six-hundred-foot wall marked the entrance to the giant steel block gates of Cheatham Dam. According to Quimby's I was to canoe to the end of the wall and announce my arrival by calling the lock master with my VHF radio on Channel 16. The lock master acknowledged my call, and stated that she couldn't see me. I told her where I was, and explained that I was in a red canoe. This caught her by surprise, but she didn't hesitate to advise me of the procedure. She said that they were performing repair work on the doors and would fill the chamber as soon as the welder was finished. She told me to advance to the 400' mark on the wall and await her call. The current in this canal was strong, and for the first time I had some concern about losing control of my craft. I moved along the wall to the designated spot and hung on to the ladder awaiting my orders. I waited about 30 minutes resisting the pull of the current, finding that whenever I did let go I had to fight my way back to position. This made it hard for me to make pictures or even to prepare myself for my time in the chamber.

As I was waiting, a barge approached from behind and radioed the lock master to announce his arrival. She said that there was a craft in line ahead of him, and he acknowledged. Then she called me to report that they were almost finished with the repairs and the lock would be ready soon. I told her I had never been through a lock before. Armed with that information, she nonetheless informed me that she planned to put the barge in the lock with me. She directed me to travel all the way up to the left-hand side of the chamber so that she could put the barge in on the right side. No problem, I thought, not knowing any better at the time. The barge was still about a half mile behind, and as it drew closer I could hear her call the captain to advise him of her plan. She said she would put the pleasure craft forward-port and he could follow along the starboard. The captain expressed concern, saying that "locking through" was dangerous and that the turbulence of the water might cause his barges to stray. She replied that he would have all of the space he needed as my craft was just a canoe. "A canoe!" he exclaimed, almost losing it on the spot. He said he definitely would not enter the chamber with a canoe because if one of the barges broke loose, it could easily crush me. He respectfully asked if he could wait and let me pass by myself. She started to say that it would be alright, there was more than enough room, but he firmly declined. She eventually gave in and called me back instructing me to paddle in once the doors opened. My mind still replaying the runaway-crushing-the-canoe part of the conversation, I radioed the captain of the barge and thanked him for his concern and courtesy. He radioed back saying that too many things could go wrong and that it was not worth taking the risk. Knowing that commercial boats had right-of-way over pleasure craft, I understood that he could have made me skip my turn. His concern for my safety cost him over an hour of his time in a business in which time is money. I was grateful.

Eventually the large gates opened, the stop light flashed green and a whistle beckoned me inside. The lock, too small for the Mississippi barges, seemed cavernous. Its size, equal to that of almost four football fields, accentuated the

smallness of my canoe and gave me a sense of proportion that I have never experienced before. I was a mere speck in the vast pool. The lock master came out and showed me the cleat to which I was to tie off. It rose and fell with the water level so my 50' line was totally unnecessary, which was fortunate since it lay hopelessly tangled in the floor of the canoe. We talked for a while, and she finally concluded our conversation by asking me to send them a postcard when I reached New Orleans. The whistle sounded, the giant steel doors closed, and the water gently left the lock—nothing to it! Once the water had emptied, the whistle sounded, the large downstream doors opened, and I went merrily on my way. The current was strong, and the canoe was easily flushed from the lock. My first big test on the river was complete.

The river was brisk, and I estimated my speed at three to four miles per hour. Now, this was fun. I was moving as fast as when propelled by the rapids in the Harpeth, but with hardly any effort at all. A man on a bass boat was fishing as he drifted down river. I dogged him for a long way and finally passed him, asking if he knew of any campsites. He said he did not. The banks looked pretty much the same all the way to Clarksville. Now I had a new concern: where to sleep. The steep banks rose twenty to thirty feet. The ground was level enough on top, but there was no place to land a canoe. I knew that tying it off in the river meant the canoe would almost certainly be swamped. The sun was starting to settle, and I didn't know what to do except to enjoy the ride.

Close to dusk I found a perfect spot right where a small creek fed into the river. A large flat gravel bar lay next to the little tributary. Slightly off the river the canoe would be protected from the wakes of the barges that were sure to pass through during the night. Excited, I slid the canoe onto the gravel and was immediately overwhelmed by an incredibly foul stench. Someone was dumping raw sewage into the creek. The odor was especially rank and rancid in the intense heat. I was stunned and wondered who would do this. Waterways are protected by law so I knew it had to be illegal. Yet there was no denying what it was or that it was impossible to stay. Disappointed, I continued down the ever darkening waterway. A few yards past the foul creek a large wooden sign on the bank stated, "Warning, do not anchor, water intake pump for the city of Clarksville". I wondered if the locals knew they were drinking that sewer water. Didn't anyone check these things? I knew the water was treated and filtered but this seemed outrageous.

A few hundred yards down the river a number of trees lay stranded on the river. Behind them was a small ledge just barely wide enough to pitch a tent. It was getting dark so I decided to give it a try and landed the canoe between two trees. As I pulled it half way onto the hard mud base, immediately I was besieged by a giant swarm of moths, apparently attracted by the red of the canoe. I swatted them as best I could and grabbed my camping gear. The most level spot was behind a huge tree trunk only a few feet off of the water. If the water rose at all during the night, I would be in trouble but at least the tree would break the waves. The tent was finally pitched in the last remaining glimmer of light. Exhausted, I climbed inside followed by a group of persistent mosquitoes. I tried to kill as many as I could before I fell asleep listening to the

drone of the intake pumps and thinking about the sewage.

Around 9:00 at night I heard a large barge making its way upstream. Afraid its waves would wash into the tent, I braved the mosquitoes to peer outside. I could see the behemoth coming right at me. Its twin halogen spotlights blazed away piercing the hazy night air with laser-like sharpness. Suddenly one of the spotlights landed on a tent and the fabric erupted into a brilliant blinding light. I felt like a filament in some supercharged lantern. Soon the forward load of the barge pushed silently past long before the tug appeared in view. The darkness gave a false sense of perspective, and I felt I could reach out and touch the colorfully lit tug as it passed. The dials of my watch glowed for a long time afterwards. As I tried to sleep on the uncomfortably hard and uneven ground, the mosquitoes feasted on my sore and sunburned body. Sleep was difficult, but when it came the dreams were vivid. Thus far, every night of the trip had been rewarded with the most incredible dreams I have had in a long, long time.

## Tuesday, September 2 – Day 25

The same two egrets greeted me as I rose from the tent in the early morning mist. Their positions had barely changed from the night before. I wanted to photograph my travel companions but they were too far away to be interesting, and I knew any movement toward them would cause them to take flight. It was better to stay put and enjoy them, two bright-white figures in an otherwise drab grey environment. The view across the water reminded me of a lake I had photographed in the highlands of Guatemala almost 15 years earlier. Steely blue and gray clouds lay in the distance over the water. The lake was placid and seemed infinite as the horizon dissolved into a low lying mist. In Guatemala I photographed as a ferry approached the landing I stood on. Today there was no such vessel to break up this morning calm. Except for the two white-plumed birds, still as statues off to my right, this cloud-covered panorama was a study in quiet desolation.

My gear was soaking wet so I decided to let it dry while I made a breakfast of oatmeal and honey. By 9:00 the sky had darkened considerably and the first droplets of rain began to fall. Obviously everything was as dry as it was going to get so I hurriedly went about packing, leaving out my rain gear. Thirty minutes later the rain came in earnest as I pushed my canoe back into the water. I hurriedly put the rain coat on over my life jacket. My chest and head remained dry but the rest of my body quickly became soaking wet. The rain was hard and steady, and the multitude of droplets splattered loudly on the Confederate-gray lake. As I pushed my way downstream, the constant sound of the rain striking the water became mesmerizing. This persistent splatter even obliterated the sound of the waves splashing on the shoreline, a noise which had pervaded the previous day. The main channel continued to hug the opposite shore line, and with the wind heading south I would have floated backwards if not for my paddle. My body was exhausted from the previous two days of hard paddling, and I did my best to beat my way north in a slow methodical pace. The rain grew so intense I found myself bailing as much as paddling. The sponging of the boat broke up the routine, so that the mindless busywork was actually enjoyable.

The penitentiary continued to face me off my starboard bow. Its cold, foreboding façade loomed at me out of an otherwise pristine environment. A constant companion, it reminded me of my slow pace, and made me resentful of its dark presence. Second only to the steam plant along the Cumberland, it was the largest landmark on the river. By now I was close enough to see individual windowpanes and wondered if any of the inmates could see me. If so, did they think about our radically different circumstances? In the confines of the prison, they were captive but safe from the capricious forces of nature. In my canoe, I was the embodiment of freedom yet completely vulnerable to the dangers of the ferocious storm. Unlike my incarcerated counterparts, I had a choice in the matter and was able to push forward ever so slowly past the gloomy structure. Its grim façade was the incentive I needed to put the penitentiary behind me once and for all, almost 24 hours after first sighting it.

Nature didn't share my exuberance at this achievement. Skies didn't open up, birds didn't begin to sing. Instead, it grew even darker and just when I thought it was not possible to rain any harder, it did. Except for two osprey that flew overhead toward the almost invisible opposite shore, I was in total solitude. Around 10:00 a barge followed by three large pleasure craft passed along the distant channel, but after that it seemed as if all life had ended. Nature had turned recluse, the fish stopped jumping and any sounds on shore were overwhelmed by the rain. The weather report predicted thunder and lightning so I stayed close to the western edge of the lake. The meandering coastline further decreased my already slow paddle-speed as I wove in and out along the coast. Yet the scenery was so visually exciting I really couldn't worry about my pace. This was what I had come for, after all.

By now my feet were terribly wrinkled and shriveled. I wondered if they would ever dry. Of all my extremities, my feet and legs have suffered the most on this trip. Intense sunburn, constant mosquito and fly bites, exposure to mud and ooze up to my knees as I waded through foul and murky mud, and being immersed in water for entire days took their toll. I had become very respectful of skin's resilience.

At 1:30 the rain stopped as quickly as it had started. The sun peeked through the clouds and I could actually see a patch of blue in the sky overhead. However, the horizon was thick with dark, boiling clouds and I had the eerie sense of being in the eye of the storm. More trouble was on its way but even so I enjoyed the reprieve. I finished the last of my cookies entranced by the intensity of color the heavy rain had brought out in the trees and rocks lining the banks. The hazy light from the soft cloud-dampened sun added a sparkle to scenery, all of which shone as though lacquered by the rain water. I thought all nature photography should be made only after a thoroughly saturated rainstorm. I recalled when the well-known Life Magazine photographer Ed Clark told me the secret of his famous 1945 Paris photographs. He said he only photographed after a rain storm, and now I understood exactly why.

Natural beauty is ephemeral, and today was no exception. The dark rain clouds eclipsed the sun and the sparkle on the landscape disappeared. As I continued downriver, I scared a large river rat into the water and then saw a large snake draped along the rocks. Later I herded a flock of wild turkeys along the shoreline. A family of four black-hooded night-herons greeted me at the entrance of one cove. Perched in a tree that overhung the water they behaved like the heron family I had seen a few days earlier. First, both the adults flew away to the left and were soon followed by one of their offspring. The remaining adolescent waited until I was nearly upon it and had cutoff its route to rejoin its family. Finally it decided to fly to the right and ended up circling directly overhead. Good thing I wasn't a predator.

Soon the rain started again. I couldn't believe it possible but this time it fell harder than before. The sky grew dark as twilight, grayer and more menacing. Everything was in an indiscernible haze except for the bank nearest to me. As I passed out of the cove, I encountered a series of huge bronze-colored boulders

that seemed to break out of the water lining the muddy bank. Darkened and glistening from the cascading rainfall, the stones reminded me of Henry Moore sculptures. Globules of tobacco color quartz poked out of the otherwise smooth surfaces like ancient fossils and the yellow lichen covering much of the surface was reminiscent of ancient petroglyphs. The sensual beauty of the forms were enough to distract me from the building forces of the storm.

Around 4:00 the channel shifted to my side of the lake and I could feel the current starting to push me along. I appreciated the help but the current signaled other dangers—heavy rain and strong wind. Now all the barges and large boats would be headed straight toward me, and I would not be able to hear them unwittingly slip up behind me. Since I was not even a blip on the radar, I doubted whether they would be able to see me in the low visibility. Who would expect to find a canoe out in the middle of this fury? By 4:30, the storm was at full force. The wind had picked up considerably and the entire lake was awash in choppy waves and whitecaps. As the river changed its course heading west toward the Tennessee River, the waves from the southern storm came across my beam. The wind and waves started to have their way with me, constantly pushing the canoe away from the shore into the middle of the lake. Though the roll of the waves was high enough now to raise concerns of capsizing, the strength of the wind occupied most of my attention. I was using all of my energy trying to wrestle back the control of my boat from the unforgiving force.

The waves were hitting me from all directions while the rain pounded down hard from above. I began to worry about the safety of my film and equipment. The bottoms of my two Pelican cases were awash on the floor of the canoe with the bilge water rising above their metal seams. Water was quickly filling the boat, but it wasn't possible to control my craft and pump water at the same time. Now I was starting to get cold too. I was fearful of hypothermia, but there was nothing to do at this point. Any clothing I pulled out of my dry bag would be drenched before I could put it on. The situation was beginning to get dangerous. Just when I thought things couldn't get worse, I happened to look behind me and spotted two large cabin cruisers approaching fast. The wind had pushed me far out into the middle of the shipping channel. Even if they didn't hit me directly, their huge waves would surely capsize the water-laden canoe.

Using every ounce of my reserve strength, I forced myself against the wind and made my way out of the channel just as they passed. I turned the canoe to ride the swells. I was so heavy with rainwater, there was very little freeboard left. The waves broke across the bow splashing even more water into the boat. Since the oversize sponge was no longer effective, I finally put my paddle down and pulled out the yellow hand-pump. I remembered halfheartedly buying the bilge pump from my outfitter, who insisted that I would need it. How right he was. Pumping water was almost as hard as paddling, and it seemed to take forever to clear the boat. The entire time the waves were pushing me this way and that. Once the canoe was reasonably bailed, I took back control and pushed my way out into the lake.

A large bay opened up on my left. It was too deep and long for me to follow. I had to make a decision whether to stop for the day or to risk cutting across the wider bay. Since it was really too early to make camp, and I didn't like the idea of trying to set up in the fierce rain, I decided to continue on. The shoreline faded as I went deeper into the lake and soon it was more than a mile away from me. The rain was coming down as hard as ever and the furious wind formed white-capped waves taller than the sides of the canoe. Every now and then one would crash against the side with a resounding thud. The haze from the intense rain obliterated almost everything, dissolving even the tree-lined hills on either side of me into the faintest of shadows. The Lake Barkley Dam loomed about four miles to the north, making it seem as though I was heading into a giant abyss where the swirling water met the darkened dangerous sky. This was as close to an open ocean experience I had ever had, and here I was bobbing about like a cork in my small red canoe. The downpour refused to lighten up. I couldn't believe it was possible to rain so hard for such a long period of time.

Now positioned almost in the middle of the lake I felt the angry storm was out for me personally. Was this to be my Perfect Storm? The weather report had said that the remnants of tropical storm Gail had collided with a high-pressure zone from the north. Alone on the vast lake, I was the only one to feel its power, and our contest seemed personal. Oddly enough I wasn't afraid, and I still don't know why. I should have been terrified. Had my canoe capsized, I doubt I would have had the energy to swim to shore. Even if I had made it, I probably would have died of hypothermia in the wilderness. Instead of fear, I found myself strangely moved by the solitude and was surprised to feel not terror, but profound awe. In that boat, all my surroundings obscured except for the closest waves and the falling rain, I was totally isolated from the rest of the world. It felt as if I might as well been traveling in deep space.

By 6:30 I was done and almost done-in. I was close to the canal that connected the two lakes and saw no reason to make my way through it till morning. I headed to shore and by 7:00 found a suitable campsite on the northern tip of the Land Between the Lakes. The shoreline was rocky, but I found a gravel spot where I could land the canoe, pulled it out of the water as best I could and tied it off. It was still raining. I was so exhausted I couldn't remember how to set up my tent. I struggled for the longest time, and finally succeeded in putting it up though something didn't look right about it. I didn't care. I jumped in and dried off, climbed into my sleeping bag and fell fast asleep. Two hours later I was startled awake by a thumping sound. When I made my way out of the tent I noticed the lake had risen considerably. The boat had floated free and was banging against the rocks. I pulled it back up to shore and went back to bed. All night long I heard strange, unnatural noises. Sounds one could only find back in civilization.

## Tuesday, September 9 – Day 32

Energized by my sound sleep, I set up the stove and made a full breakfast of spinach tortellini. Three barges passed while I ate. The first barge heading upstream stopped on the other side of the river as the two downstream vessels passed. The second barge overshot the channel at a point right next to my camp. He had to stop, back up, and start all over again. His error bore witness to the treachery of the water I was navigating. By then I had pulled the marine radio from my canoe and began to listen to the crew call out the depth readings from the bow of the forward container. “Fourteen decimal two,” a crewman bellowed as the large tug whined full-throttle in reverse. “Sixteen decimal zero,” as the tug slowly angled backwards pointing its cargo away from the bank. “Nineteen decimal three.” “Okay,” replied the skipper. “Let’s go on.” Gone were the days of lead lines and fathoms. Back then a crew member would throw a rope with a piece of lead anchored to its end. The line was marked with fathoms each measuring six feet apart. As the lead hit the bottom of the river the boatman would call the markings up to the steamboat pilot. When water’s depth grew to two fathoms or twelve feet, that was considered safe passage for river boats and the crew member would yell to his captain, “Mark twain,” and the threat of running aground would be momentarily forgotten. Samuel Clemens, who grew up along the Mississippi knew the significance of this call and famously adopted it as his pen name.

After breaking camp and pushing back out on the river, I headed to Hickman, Kentucky about five miles downstream. Along the way, I met Jason and his wife catfishing from a sturdy motorized johnboat. They fished the river often and were a little surprised to see me. Coincidentally, their only canoe-sighting in a long while had been just the week before. When he told me the frustrated canoers had capsized twice in a short period and pulled out for good, I felt proud to be still afloat. I asked him about the river and upcoming dangers. He told me about the stone-rubble wing dikes and warned me not to try to go behind any of the islands. They were blocked all the way across to the shore by dikes that kept the river flowing on the channel side. It would be all too easy to get trapped by the current and extremely difficult to paddle back out. As he spoke, I realized how lucky I had been the day before. I also realized how ignorant I was even in the reading of the charts.

I told Jason about all of the whirlpools I had seen and reported that someone told me they were 90' deep below Baton Rouge. He said, “Hell, we have water deeper than that here,” pointing to a spot below Hickman harbor entrance where there was a giant hole reputedly 130' deep. Whatever else I did, I should not get near it as it was likely to drag me under so deep that I might not ever emerge. Just then a fish soared out of the water like a ballistic missile and jumped nearly five feet straight in the air before gravity had its way. “See that,” Jason said, “It’s a flat-head carp, an Asian fish that’s not supposed to be in these waters and wasn’t till recently. Now they are everywhere. They are a tough fighting fish, very hard to kill. Easily spooked by the sound of an engine, they are also dangerous. If one is swimming close to a fishing boat, it will jump in the air the second the engine starts for the trip home. Most likely it will end up

landing in the boat, flapping around trying to get out.” He reported that one fish actually jumped out of the water, slapped a man in the face and injured him necessitating more than \$5,000 in dental work to repair the damage. Whirlpools, sinkholes and now jumping alien fish. What a strange world I had entered.

The course to Hickman was difficult and the canoe spun around a number of times. Now that I had finally made the big turn toward the south, the sun shone in my face constantly. The glare really didn't bother me but the back-lighting of the landscape downstream cast everything in shadow, making it appear one-dimensional. The river itself breathed patches of fire as the sunlight jumped off the ripples in the turbulent water. Around noon I landed at the base of the Hickman-Dorena Ferry. This would be the last of the ferries for a long way, and the first I had seen since Cumberland City. Traffic was understandably slow, but the large grain silos close by were doing a brisk business unloading semi-truck after semi-truck filled to the brim with soybeans. It was harvest time in the delta. After stretching my legs, I left the landing and paddled up the harbor to the city proper a mile away. (PHOTO OR MAP.)

I paddled against the current, passing a number of empty barges anchored along the way. Nearby a harbor tug stabilized a barge being loaded with grain. On the other side of the harbor, a forest of trees stood in floodwater. I could see a number of large birds, egrets and herons, resting on interior branches. I paddled over and enjoyed making photographs of the birds, framing their delicate bodies against the tapestry of branches in the woods behind them. The birds showed the patience of rock stars and allowed only a few frames before deciding the session was over. (PHOTO OP)

Back towards the dam, a workman sitting on top of one of the empty barges motioned to me, and introduced himself as Rich. A man in his forties, he towered high above me on his thick steel-plated platform. He was a tough guy who had worked the barges all of his life. When I told him where I was heading, he said, “Man, you must have balls as hard as rocks to get out in that water.” Coming from a man who had forearms as big as my biceps, this made me feel pretty good. He went on to say he had always wanted to do something like that but was too afraid. When I asked if I could make his picture, he protested but finally consented. Unfortunately the lighting was poor, and I was disappointed not to capture such a specimen on film.

Finally arriving at Hickman, I pulled up to an empty and somewhat flimsy boat dock. Giant floodwalls lined the harbor making the area feel desolate and deserted. The bright red greeting, “Welcome to Hickman,” did little to alter that impression. I tied up the canoe feeling a bit concerned about leaving it unattended. Having little choice, I packed up my cameras, grabbed my valuables and wandered through the large gates to see what lay beyond. If Cairo was dying, Hickman was already dead and waiting to be buried. The downtown lay practically deserted with most all of the buildings in disrepair or in some cases rubble. Founded in 1819 on the banks of a natural harbor, Hickman once prospered as a major river port for Kentucky's thriving tobacco

industry. An overland stage route between Hickman and Nashville carried passengers on their way to New Orleans. All that remained of the famed LaClende Hotel was the forlorn façade, a crumbling witness to a bygone era. Today, the only thing thriving was memories.

**Ironically, the only building showing much evidence of upkeep was the old city jail. Still bearing iron-barred windows, it was now a fishing-tackle and video-rental store called Jail Bait. (PHOTO OP) Once inside, I asked if it would be possible to use the phone to call Mona, who I knew would be eager to hear from me. The proprietor said she didn't have a pay phone but her husband, who liked boaters, would be back in a little while and would be happy to take me wherever I needed to go. Soon in walked her husband, Wayne, who was tall, slim and very energetic. Besides a few lines in his trim athletic face, the only thing that gave away his age was a long gray ponytail that ran half the length of his back. He and his brother James, a pilot on the river tug, Gladys Ford, were raised in Hickman. Wayne had graduated from the local high school before making his way to Cincinnati to find employment as an ironworker. Now, almost 40 years later, he had returned to his roots. What others perceived as ruin, Wayne saw as opportunity. He bought the city jail hoping to start a revival of downtown Hickman. His plans hit a snag when many of the old buildings toppled as the ground gave way underneath. The dredging in the harbor had eroded the town, causing the buildings to sink. His son, who formerly had a good business in one of the buildings, lost everything. Now like so many other communities, downtown Hickman had been abandoned in favor of the highways on the outskirts of town.**

**Wayne offered to drive me to a pay phone and to the store to get whatever else I needed. He was open and disarming, and almost immediately we fell into conversation as if we had known each other all of our lives. As he drove me around town, he kept telling me he couldn't believe how depressed the real-estate values were. He pointed out houses we passed as examples. "That one just sold for \$9,000, and that one I could have bought for \$14,000," he said in reference to two fairly decent houses. We passed one that looked almost brand new and was in perfect condition. Another ranch house with a full garage and a finished den had just gone at auction for \$40,000. Wayne said he didn't even attend the sale thinking the price would be bid out of his range. He kicked himself saying anywhere else that property would sell for three to four times that.**

**He drove me up the ridge, miles away from the river, out towards the main highway to the strip malls where all the stores now operated. While there, I made my call to Mona and told her how much I was already missing her, but didn't let on about the danger I was encountering on the river. Instead I spoke of my wonderful campsite and the generosity of my new friend.**

**On the return trip to Jail Bait, Wayne graciously took me on a small sight-seeing excursion. We stopped at a park that sat above a high bluff offering a spectacular view of the Mississippi and the forested plain below. The entire face of the bluff was completely covered in an ugly, thick concrete blanket, which**

was designed to abate the erosion that was eating the ridge away. The covering of the steep earthen bank was such an expensive and difficult engineering accomplishment that the process warranted its own book. I thought to myself, “Can anybody say pork barrel?” Considering the decay of the city, I couldn’t help but wonder if the expense was justified. It would have been a lot cheaper to have relocated the few affected residents and let nature take its course, which is what it will do in any case. The eroding ridge would have been a lot easier on the eyes than this incredibly long wall of concrete.

Next to the park sat a perfect little building illuminating in architecture and immaculate in construction. After seeing that monotonous wall of concrete my eyes took refuge in its grace and simplicity. Constructed primarily of limestone and brick, each block was cut with laser-like perfection and lay perfectly square on top of another. Mortar seemed almost unnecessary. Upon learning it was a Carnegie Library, I was bemused at how I could be touched by a man who lived so long ago especially in such a remote place as this. The legend of Andrew Carnegie is well known to everyone in the steel industry. I knew from my own childhood that Charlie Schwab, Carnegie’s protégé, formed Bethlehem Steel, my father’s company and U.S. Steel’s largest competitor.

Arriving back at Jail Bait, we returned to our respective tasks, Wayne to his work and me to my canoe, which was undisturbed where I had left it. I tied down my cameras and paddled back down the harbor rested and refreshed. Wayne and I had become good friends, and I promised to come back to make a two-day paddle up one of his favorite rivers to see the waterfall he had so fondly described. I could already see that my Mississippi River adventure was not going to end on the banks of New Orleans.

Outside of Hickman, the deep-water channel moved back to my side of the river and ran close to the eastern shore. I had intended to paddle to the other side to get out of the way of the barge traffic, which was visibly heavy in both directions. Uncomfortable at the prospect of risking a crossing, I decided to wait for the traffic to clear. I proceeded down the left side of the river hugging the banks as closely as possible. Past the security of the harbor, the willful current grabbed me and whisked me downstream before I knew what was happening. The river, it seemed, had its own plans for me.

Up ahead the water boiled with unusual velocity, but unlike the whirlpools, this turbulence was stationary. All of a sudden I remembered what it was. Ahead of me roared the giant sink hole I had been warned to stay away from. Too late, the river had me. The powerful flow was way beyond my control. I managed to keep from turning broadside but I could not pull away from the invisible waterfall. The closer I came to the powerful hydraulic the more the canoe shook and rocked back and forth. I felt as if I were a passenger in an airplane heading into a line of thunderstorms. Finally I was over the sink hole and the canoe came to a stop. All the time I was bobbing and pitching and no matter where I tried to go, the water filling into the hole sucked me back. The hole was inside the shipping lanes, and when I looked downstream I could see a barge heading right towards me. I had to get out of the way but lacked the

confidence to try to cut in front of the tow and cross to the other side of the river. Instead I decided to try heading to the nearest bank and making my way downstream from there. I paddled as hard as I could, nearly exhausting myself in the process. I finally broke free but when I neared the bank, I discovered the backwater current was as strong as the downstream current and found myself being pulled right back toward that damn sink hole. There was nothing I could do about it. I was caught in a loop and didn't have the strength or the energy to get out. The current pulled me by a cluster of bushes sticking out of the high water so I grabbed onto some of the branches and held tight. I couldn't bear to go over that hole again. I was afraid the hydraulic would pull me under, and if I capsized I doubted my life jacket would be buoyant enough to counter such a powerful force.

Holding onto the bushes provided temporarily safety, but I couldn't stay there forever. Behind me the steep banks made it impossible to land. If I succeeded in making it to the bank, I would undoubtedly fall into the water trying to get onto shore and that could be equally deadly. My only chance was to head to open water and somehow get past that hole. The last barge was engaged in its own struggle against the flooding waters and took its time making its way upriver. By now it was close to 4:00. Clouds had been forming all afternoon and the thick gray sky made the river with its silver and black surface seem even more menacing. As the skies grew darker, my situation grew more desperate. All I could do was watch as the large barge lumbered toward me. It was hugging the Kentucky side of the river and at one point looked as if it were going to run me over. When it passed, I hung on as the bow waves rolled through the thicket of brush in front of me. Once passed the tug altered its course swinging its stern directly at me. The large turbines were spewing out waves five or six feet high, and they were now coming at me fast. Fortunately the brush broke up the swells enough to keep me from capsizing.

In the ensuing chaos, water swirled everywhere. Suddenly I noticed all of the turbulence had temporarily broken the pull of the sink hole, and knew instinctively this was my chance to escape. I let go of the branches and paddled as hard as I could toward the barge's stern. I rode through the swell that loomed high overhead and struggled to meet the waves dead on. Lost in the struggle of paddling, I gave myself no opportunity to think about what I was doing for fear I might panic. Safely out of the hole at last, I cautiously veered away from the tug and entered the wide open water of the Mississippi. Now I had yet to face the demanding paddle to the other side.

Finally across, I pointed the canoe downriver with some sense of relief. The river made a wide bend and almost headed back north for a moment. I glanced at the charts and saw Island Number Eight a few miles ahead. The back of the island was completely blocked by dikes so I was forced to paddle hard to the left in order to stay in the main channel. The huge island narrowed the river considerably, and I could feel the strength of the current increasing. Small whirlpools from the dikes spun me around a couple of times forcing me to travel further out towards the middle. As I approached the island, I was excited to see a giant river boat off in the distance heading upstream. The sun

momentarily broke out of the clouds and dappled its orange light on the side of the charming craft. When it turned out to be the Delta Queen, I maneuvered the canoe to make a picture.(PHOTO OP)

The image of the legendary vessel grew in my lens as we drew closer. More intent on the photograph than on navigation, I allowed critical seconds to pass before recognizing the reality of the situation. The Delta Queen was heading right toward me, and we were closing fast. When I saw it run over a green channel buoy, I realized it was every man for himself. Even if the captain was able to see me, watching him take out the channel buoy made me realize that he was not in any better control of his vessel than I was of mine.

Since the Delta Queen was clearly out of the channel and my canoe was fast approaching the island, I was about to be sandwiched between the two. During the day the water level had dropped so that the tops of the dikes were protruding menacingly out of the water directly in front of me. They blocked my passage to the right, while the huge riverboat bore down on me to my left. I could imagine the headline, "CANOER KILLED BY THE DELTA QUEEN!" My amusement at this thought relaxed me until I realized that by avoiding being run over, I had positioned myself to be smashed into the jagged rocks of the dikes. Just as I was about to slam into the first rock, the current slowed enough to allow me to swerve the canoe. I was able to make a broad arch and momentarily headed up stream. Like someone trying to run up a down escalator, I inevitably found myself worn out, involuntarily returned to my starting point again and again. I struggled as hard as I could. The further I paddled away from the dikes, the stronger the current became. My progress grew less and less, until finally I was paddling as hard as I could just to keep from losing ground. Once the Delta Queen had passed, I peeled off as soon as I could to take its wake head-on and paddle out into the river away from the island. As I cleared the island, the river's strong current grabbed the canoe forcing it towards a giant green channel buoy. This time I knew I had it. The bow of the canoe slammed hard into the metal obstacle. I had to quickly pull my paddle out of the way as I careened by. Somehow I stayed afloat. Now alongside the island, the whirlpools started up, one grabbed me and instead of swinging the canoe totally around, turned it broadside to the river holding it fast in place. As the river rushed underneath I could feel the canoe start to tip. Time stood still as I watched the canoe roll to the side. Water was up to the black metal gunnels, about to spill inside when suddenly the force that was holding me let go. The canoe righted itself, and I was able to point my vessel down river once again.

This was getting to be too much. By now it was after six and the gray skies were ever darkening. I paddled close to the bank of the island looking for a place to get out but found none. The narrowing river continued to run faster, and as I hugged the island I realized someone on shore would have to be in a dead run just to keep up with me. I was floating at least six miles an hour. I didn't know such speeds were possible on such a giant river. I was going so fast I didn't know how I was going to stop. If I slammed into the shore, my canoe would have capsized for sure. The rock-lined banks were uninviting so my only

choice was continue on. Halfway down the island, I spotted a logging operation. A large barge with a building on top lay in a shallow harbor. I thought perhaps I could land safely in the lee of the barge and spend the night there, but then I started to wonder how my intrusion would be received. By the time I decided it would be alright to land, it was too late as the current had already drug me too far downstream. I realized that from now on decisions on the river had to be made quickly, without hesitation, if I wanted to survive. The sun had almost set as I neared the end of the island. I had no idea what to do. I was about to be thrown out into the giant abyss of the Mississippi in near darkness. I had no plan, and all I could do was to keep paddling waiting to see what might happen next. Then I spotted it, a tiny slit of white sand beach at the end of the island. This time there was no hesitation. I paddled as hard as I could towards the point and didn't stop until the canoe slammed hard into the soft clean powder. I was already on shore before I noticed two motor boats anchored nearby. Across the river I could faintly see a landing ramp and figured the craft were owned by some of the lumber crew. I felt a little sensitive about intruding but after what I had been through someone would be hard pressed to send be back on the river that night. (PHOTO OP)

While I set up my camp, the cloud cover started to break. I watched the last rays of the purple and mauve sunset with wonder and relief. Below me the river had opened to lake-sized proportions and the dangerous waters appeared calm and peaceful. I was already in my tent when I heard the lumberjacks motor off to the opposite shore, as they made their way across the river in total darkness. Soon afterwards I was fast asleep.

## Wednesday, September 24 – Day 40

I had camped for the night on the southern end of what the map identified as the Ensley Bar. Even though the bar was connected to the Arkansas side of the river, the Tennessee state line still lay a few more miles to the west. Once the legal boundary between the border states, the Mississippi River now meanders willy-nilly through the rich Delta soil as though trying to straighten itself out. While breakfasting, I watched the sunrise transform the gray early-morning sky into a panorama of oranges and crimsons. The river reflected the gaudy tapestry of color enveloping the whole landscape in an electric spectrum of light, and beckoning me to explore.

After my meal, I walked along the river bar for several miles making photographs as I went. Rising high above the riverbank, powder-white sand dunes were surrounded by low valleys of thick sun-cracked mud. The jagged mud plates were interwoven into an enormous mosaic of sandy brown fragments bounded by darker dried-mud “grout.” I hated to walk on them as my weight crushed the delicate formations underfoot. In the lowest areas the rainwater still formed puddles in the mud so that as I walked barefoot through the caramel ooze, each step became increasingly precarious. I knew that a foot-wound at this stage of the journey would be disastrous yet I was drawn by the beauty of these natural formations. At the edge of the sand, thick strands of trees and brush grew high out of the banks. The throaty din of the passing barges reverberated among the trees sounding as if there was a mysterious factory hidden among the bushes. By 8:30, eight barges had already passed, maintaining the illusion of an industrial park.

Since the morning remained cool and for the most part bug-free, I was still making photographs around 10:00. I had found a series of old wooden posts sticking vertically out of the ground. The timbers were old and weathered and looked like an ancient ruin or fortification in the desert. I had seen many of these wooden posts, splintered and worn, along the banks of the Mississippi. The Corps had placed them there to anchor the sand bars and stay the erosion. These spikes were merely a remembrance of a bygone era as crushed rock is the barrier of choice nowadays.

Photographing in a ravine barely visible to the river, I heard the distinctive putt-putt of an outboard motor. I turned just in time to see the strangest sight yet—a floating caravan of make-shift watercraft carrying two unkempt guys and a dog. One of the men was standing on some kind of a homemade pontoon boat with a chartreuse canvas top while the other one was driving an old red runabout with a dog sitting uncomfortably on its bow. The runabout had a large pole rising out from in front of its windows with what appeared to be a green and white sail furled around it. The two craft were tied together with the runabout providing all the power. They passed without seeing me. I knew immediately that these guys were going to stop and reconnoiter when they came to my campsite downriver. They looked too crazy not to—and too crazy for me to ignore.

I grabbed my camera and tripod. By now my canoe and tent were over a mile away. With all the gear I was carrying, it would take me some time to get back. For the first time on the journey, I felt vulnerable to theft. Everything I had was there for the taking, and I was here, unable to prevent it. After more than ten minutes, only one sand dune remained to block my view of the vagabonds and by then I could hear their voices. The raspy-voiced one was saying, "They must have gotten him in the night. Maybe we should look through his things." The other younger more even-voiced man replied, "No, you'd better wait a little longer." With that I cleared the top of the dune and yelled down to them. They turned and waved and the raspy-voiced one said, "Hi, John. I'm River Bill. Dude, I saw those ATV tracks by your tent and thought they murdered you last night. It happens you know." I wasn't so worried about the murdered part as I was curious as to how he knew my name. They said they ran into my new friends, Taria and Chester, while fueling up in Memphis.

Together River Bill and his companion, Mark Bloquive, looked a lot like Mutt & Jeff. River Bill had the look of a homeless person, which it turned out he was. He was short and wiry, standing about 5'6" or 5'7" tall. He had long brown hair and sported a full, unkempt beard. On his head he wore an old baseball cap with a worn and thread-bare brim. Mark was just the opposite. Tall and strong, his head was shaved clean and on his face he had a well-groomed goatee. While Bill spoke in the vernacular of a street hood, Mark's conversation was polished and articulate. This was not to say that Bill wasn't smart. He had a glimmer in his eye and a knowing manner that made it clear he was a guy who knew what was going on. Although no gray showed in Bill's hair, his face was weathered and worn beyond his years. I was surprised to find out he was actually ten years younger than me.

Bill introduced the third member of the party as his dog, Doc. Part German Shepard, part Alaskan Husky, Doc was as big a dog as I have ever seen. He must have weighed in excess of 110 pounds, not that much less than his emaciated master. Doc's intense blue eyes were so radiant that you would swear the gray in his coat had the same distinctive cool blue tint. When I first saw him, he was prancing about enjoying his temporary freedom from the confines of the bow of the little runabout. As soon as he noticed my presence, he came running at me with a growl. Bill told me to stay cool, indicating that Doc just needed to get to know me before befriending me. Bill and Doc seemed made for each other and had been together since the abandoned dog was given to the homeless drifter. According to Bill, he was a good watch dog, who, he went on to say with a laugh, would make a hell of a good dinner if things got really desperate. Although he tried to make a joke of it, I could hear enough seriousness in his voice to know that he would not hesitate to do whatever he had to. Whatever else Bill was, he was clearly a survivor. Something about him reminded me of my father making the best of his life in the assisted-care residence. Although both seemed depressed by their circumstances, each one had a strong lust for life. Both men would be fighters until the very end.

Mark was much younger than Bill, probably in his thirties. He was also a photographer as well as an adventurer. Like me, he was determined to write his

own story on the Mississippi. During the previous winter, he decided to raft the Mississippi in order to raise funds for the veterans along the way. The people in his community got behind him and donated all the materials to build the pontoon boat that he had designed. Instead of a motor, he had fashioned two extremely long wooden oars, which he intended to use to control his craft as he rode the current to New Orleans. The craft was ingenious. He bought two pre-made aluminum pontoons upon which he built a platform and a super-structure composed of tubular aluminum rods and connecting joints. Everything came apart making it easy to transport. Once he was ready to go, he and his buddy loaded the craft to on a trailer, hauled it to St. Louis, and off he went. His plan was simple—paddle down the Mississippi, stopping at all the towns along the banks to raise money for veterans while also raising awareness of his own project. Once completed, he intended to use the success of this trip to help raise money for other adventures.

Mark's knowledge of the Mississippi was as limited as mine, and his only rationale for attempting such a journey was the memory of reading Huckleberry Finn. He figured if Huck could do it, then so could he. He had forgotten that Huck was a fictional character. Unfortunately Mark, a real man with all the requisite vulnerabilities, had hell to pay from the very beginning. Sitting so high on the water, the canvas top of the pontoon boat easily filled with air, leaving the wind to have its way with him. It pushed the boat this way and that, on some days even pushing it so far backwards that he could not make any progress at all. When the wind stopped blowing, the currents took over, corkscrewing his poontoon down the river and out of control. Wherever the current went, he and his craft would go too, sometimes directly into the path of an oncoming barge. I asked if he had tangled with any whirlpools. "Yeah," he said. "One opened up and swallowed the entire front of the boat. I was standing in back and it kept sucking the boat down until my ankles were covered in water. I was about to jump and swim for my life when all of a sudden, the whirlpool let go." He had decided to give up completely when River Bill appeared in his little red motorboat with the make-shift sail. Bill offered to tow Mark and his pontoon-boat down the river in exchange for gas money. So away they had gone, beginning a trip filled with one adventure after another.

The two vagabonds said they would make at least 60 miles that day, and I was envious of their progress. They seemed to be having so much fun that I thought seriously about asking if I could tie up with them and ride along for a day. The wind was picking up hard from the south, and I new I was in for a struggle. What a ride, what a great story it would make to go sixty miles with Mark and River Bill. But somehow I felt that tying up with them for a tow would be cheating. And, after all, I knew now from experience that I was capable of having adventures of my own.

Anxious to get going, they reported that Taria and Chester would be along in a day or two and encouraged me to look out for them. Before departing, Mark asked me if wished I had a canoeing partner. I said no, that I thought it would be too dangerous. By now Doc had warmed up enough to allow me to call him to my side. I saw a big gash on top of his head and asked what happened to

him. Bill said he had revved the engine too fast causing Dock to hit his head while falling off the boat. I had a feeling Doc had to be pretty patient to put up with Bill. When the guys were ready to go, Doc was reluctant to join them. Bill had to use all his might to drag Doc back to his small sliver of deck at the bow of the boat. Mark pulled up the anchor as Bill started the engine. He hit the throttle hard, swinging both boats, whirling around and heading out towards the channel. As they motored away, they looked very much like a bunch of characters from a Mad Max movie.

By twelve, I hadn't yet broken camp and was feeling frustrated by the delays. Determined to make at least twenty miles today, I knew this was an awfully late start. But what could I realistically expect of myself if I hoped to encounter the people of the river, to write and to photograph? A normal camper would be up and packed by 8:00 or 9:00 every morning. But I needed time to do my work, which was, after all, the purpose of my journey. I realized that freedom to be open to whatever might come was an essential part of my experience. And it was the main reason I didn't want travel companions. I didn't want to hold others back, and I certainly couldn't afford to adjust my own pace.

Once I got on the river, I found that the wind was up and the barge traffic was heavy, making the water choppy from all the turbulence. The canoe, which was laden with fresh food and water, was extremely low in the water. This helped control the buffeting of the winds. The boat tacked well and the only trade-off was that the weight made it much harder to paddle. It made me curious about how the craft would react to the high seas.

The sky shown as I had never seen before. Overhead, the panorama was split evenly down the middle. One half of the sky was completely overcast while the other side was perfectly blue—gloom and doom to my right while bright and sunny on my left. The cloud line was amazingly straight. This configuration remained into the early evening. As the river snaked around the extreme bends, I could feel my mood swing as the route took me from brilliant sunlight into a dull cloudy sky and back. I paddled hard, only stopping once to photograph some of my black-and-white winged pelican buddies.

Toward the late afternoon, I witnessed something else I had never seen before. Emerging almost magically from the brush to lap at the waterfront was a group of miniature deer, the size of the average dog. The six of them looked like a family, with two adults and four adolescents. I watched for a while, photographing as they walked timidly around the brush. I tried to paddle closer without success as they shied away immediately. I wondered where these little creatures might have come from and how such small, delicate animals could possibly survive the coyotes.

By 6:30 I had made my twenty miles but had exhausted myself in the process. I found a perfect sand knoll on the Arkansas side of the river directly across from the gambling halls of Tunica. Too tired to worry about my urban location, I set up camp and watched the lights of the city come alive. A few of high-rise casino hotels reached over the trees and glowed in the ever-darkening light. A paddle-

wheel riverboat was loading at the dock of Tunica's new river front park for the sunset cruise. Silently I set up my tent and called it a night.

## September 30

A crisp cool breeze was already kicking up from the east when I emerged from the tent. Sleep had once more been difficult, interrupted repeatedly by the chill of the cold night air. My campsite was a long flat crystal-white sand beach on the northern end of the five-mile-long Choctaw Island Bar. The original Choctaw Island is now fused to the Arkansas mainland where Arkansas City, once a thriving river port, lies hopelessly landlocked about four miles inland. I spent the early morning hours exploring this remote paradise where I discovered an interesting assemblage of natural and human detritus. Driftwood lay tangled in the frayed matting of a nylon tarp. Chunks of coal fallen from the barges lay embedded in the sand. Abandoned Styrofoam ice chests, which clutter almost every beach where I make camp, were scattered about. My paradise was not pristine.

When I returned to the campsite to make breakfast, I noticed a tree larger than the canoe slowly floating downstream. One jagged severed limb stuck straight up out in the river, simulating a mechanical shark as it silently glided by. Already the island was teeming with swallows on their morning foray. From a distance these graceful birds seemed like dancers in a finely choreographed ballet. Closer observation told a different story. Driven by the necessity of hunger, they attacked the air from every direction, strafing for bugs in whirlwind patterns. Starting their runs a little above eye level, these determined hunters flapped their wings hard, glided towards the sand and pulled out of the dive at the last possible second. Rising into an arching turn, they tirelessly began the whole process over again. After a number of swipes through the air each bird would land on the sand exhausted, chest thumping, beak open and panting like an overactive dog. Though artful and athletic, the birds' enterprise was clearly neither art nor sport. It was all about survival. I decided to photograph them at work and was pleasantly surprised to find they were attracted by my presence and flew increasingly closer to my position. Some swooped so close I could feel the wind in my hair from their wings. Their small size and speed made it impossible for me to think, frame, focus and shoot. I was not quick enough to capture their images and berated myself for missing such an opportunity. My frustration transported me to an earlier time.

In the back of my head I could hear the voice of my father bellowing, "Why are you wasting your time? Film is expensive. You know you're not going to get anything." I remembered him yelling at me whenever I tried to take a picture out of the back seat of the car during our long cross-country vacations. He never understood that the rain-splattered window-pane or the speed of the car didn't matter when capturing a thought or an emotion. He couldn't grasp how such obstructions and imperfections might mirror a teenager's feeling of isolation. An engineer by training, he thought all photos must be literal documents taken under optimal conditions. At an early age, I learned the futility of trying to make photographs in his presence. By the time I was in my late twenties I refrained altogether from showing him my pictures. Since his move to Nashville in the mid-90s, he had attended a number of my art openings, but we had a tacit agreement not to discuss his opinion about my work. "Don't ask. Don't tell."

Though he did on occasion tell me how proud he was of my accomplishments, I suspected that he was referring to the financial success of my commercial studio. No matter how strong my convictions, he could never have endured my being a starving artist.

Today the birds offered me more than photographic opportunities--a display of the free spirit of beings completely at home with themselves and the task at hand. They energized and uplifted me. How could I feel a sense of loneliness while in the presence of such irrepressible creatures? Above me my pelican companions circled high in the pure blue sky. Swirling like smoke out of a chimney, they rose ever higher riding a thermal wind. I wondered why they seemed so directionless. Why were they going so high in the air? Perhaps they were just trying to signal it was time to leave.

I returned to the campsite in high spirits only to be brought back down again by my fickle camp stove. Though it worked perfectly yesterday, this morning it went on strike. Was it sand? Carbon build-up? Whatever the cause, I lost 45 minutes coaxing it to light. Remembering that I would be enjoying a hot meal and a warm bed in Greenville later made the oatmeal more palatable. By 11:00, I started hauling my heavy cases down to the canoe. I'd forgotten I had been using the cases as ballast to keep the tent from blowing in the soft sand. Walking back to the campsite for another load, I sensed something was awry. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement--my tent cart-wheeling over the island sand dunes! Though I hadn't run in ten months since my accident, I took after it as fast as I could go. Barefoot, cutting my feet on stone and debris, I ran until my lungs felt like they were on fire, the sand catching in my throat. The tent spinning faster, I was keeping up with its progress but was unable to close on it. Finally the semi-circular nylon dome met the western horizon of the island, and I felt certain my mobile home was gone for good. Just before being blown into the deep water lagoon that separated the island from the mainland, the tent miraculously stopped short, held by a diminutive rise at land's end. Not trusting it would stay put, I raced on until I had it in a firm hold. Feet bloody and in pain, I walked the truant tent back and then proceeded to pick up all the contents that had been strewn from inside it--a garbage bag, a towel, an aluminum camp stove reflector. In another world these articles might seem insignificant, but for me they were irreplaceable.

It was after 12:00 when I was finally packed and ready to depart. I realized that it might not be so easy to get to Greenville after all. The wind, which had been picking up all morning long, caused white caps to dance across the water. After the exertion of the morning, I knew that fighting the increasing wind and waves for 26 miles would be challenging.

Once past Choctaw Island Bar the river turned into the wind, and I had to paddle constantly just to move forward. Every time I tried to rest the wind blew me so far off course that the effort to regain my position required more energy than I had gained. Eventually my energy level picked up, and I accepted the challenge ahead. I needed to paddle over four miles an hour in order to make the Greenville Harbor before dark. The thought of staying in a nice hotel,

showering, resting in a warm bed and not having to cook gave me the motivation I needed.

I didn't photograph much while on the river, choosing instead to concentrate on my goal. I did see some boys working on an oil depot dock and paddled close enough to chat for a moment. Otherwise I stayed out by the channel buoys to catch the current, all the time fighting the wind.

Six hours after I set out, Greenville Harbor came into sight. The turbulent current coming out of the harbor was strong, and as tired as I was, I knew I could never make the turn. Instead, I headed the canoe into the riverbank a short distance above the harbor. Inching my way along the shallows, I encountered little resistance as I slipped through the calm water along the bank into the harbor. Further out I could see agitated whitecaps bubbling in the center of the bay as the two water sources collided. Triumphant, I made my way up harbor towards the Greenville Marina—the only pleasure-craft marina on the Mississippi south of Memphis. There wouldn't be another full-service stop until I reached the Pontchartrain almost 450 miles away. Fuel could be found along the way, but little else.

To my left, the peninsula side of the harbor was lined with anchored barges. Many were empty but others were laden with telephone-pole-sized logs. The mainland side of the harbor, on the right side going upstream, was a hot bed of activity like Paducah. Harbor tugs scooted back and forth along the dry dock and loading facilities that ran along the shoreline. Since the late afternoon light was turning golden, I took time to make colored photographs of the surrounding industry. The currents and gusty wind made positioning and focusing difficult but I was determined not to let the stunning light go unused. Subject and light are always the photographer's greatest challenge because a good photograph requires them both. When the good light appears we scramble to find a worthy subject. When a subject appears we pray for good light. Some photographers circumvent this dilemma by taking their subjects into a studio. I had done that for 30 years, and this journey was one way of demonstrating that I had left the studio behind. Now I wanted to show people only those subjects found and chosen by me, preferably at the precise time of discovery.

The fading light reminded me of the necessity of making the marina before it got too late. Around dark when I asked a man at one of the dry docks how much further I had to go, I was stunned by his answer—another three miles. The harbor was still active and the thought of paddling three more miles upstream amid busy traffic in the dark, chill air was disheartening. Though the cold brought out the soreness in my muscles, and I was clamoring to get out of the canoe, I had no choice but to paddle on. Around 9:30 I spotted the marina after almost three-and-a-half hours of paddling upstream and a total nine-and-a-half hours of sitting stationary in the canoe.

The marina lay between two riverboat-style casinos. Lights were glaring and blues music was blaring over the loud speakers. The music wasn't all that good, but believe me I could feel the singer's pain. As the dock rose over my head, I

found myself feeling terribly weak and wobbly trying to tie up the canoe. By now the temperature had dipped into the 40s, and I was shivering uncontrollably. I threw the dry bag containing my coat on the deck and scrambled up to the top to put on some more clothes. The marina was quiet as everyone had gone home for the night. Everything was shut down. Not even a bathroom was available for late arrivals. The gates to the shore were secured with an electronic lock, and I knew once I went out I could not get back in. I felt trapped, miserable, and tired. Happily, I was pleased to find that Maria and Chester's catamaran was parked not far from me. The lights were still on, beckoning visitors. Not much in the mood for a chat, I had no choice but to board their craft and knock on the companionway door. When Chester opened the door, I was surprised to see Mark from the pontoon boat sitting at the galley table with Maria. They had just been talking about me, wondering if I was going to make it. Surprised I had arrived in such good time, they were clearly glad to see me.

River Bill and Mark had much worse luck it seemed. Somewhere below Helena, Bill's engine had quit leaving the two men and the dog adrift down the middle of the Mississippi. Fearful of being run over by a barge and hoping for a tow into Helena, they finally flagged down a local towboat. Saying that towing wasn't allowed, the boat's captain was on the verge of cutting their little craft loose. Fortunately, Mark was able to talk them into towing them to a sand bar, where they would at least be safe. Stuck together on the sand bar, the two vagabonds came face-to-face with the improbability of their partnership. Landlocked, without the diversion of common task, they could not avoid the natural friction between their two contrasting personalities. Mark's hyper Type-A -personality was making Bill really nervous. Bill needed a drink, bad. Since there was no alcohol to send him into a blissful stupor, he asked Mark for some water to make coffee. Mark freaked out. "No, we can't make coffee. We have to ration the water. We don't know how long we will be here." Bill said the hell with that and, to Mark's horror, dipped his pot into the river and started to boil his own coffee. Mark couldn't believe what he was doing. "You can't drink that. You're going to die." Bill told him to leave it alone and the relationship deteriorated from there. While Mark worried and planned, Bill kicked back and tried to chill out. Untroubled by human sensitivities, Doc was the happiest. He was off the boat and free to stretch and roam. Mark tried to talk Bill into scuttling his runabout and hopping on the pontoon boat with him. But since everything Bill owned in the world was on that boat, he wasn't going to leave it behind. Completely at odds, the two of them pretty much kept to themselves after that.

Eventually Chester and Teria had come along and kindly agreed to tow the stranded compatriots to Greenville. Now here they sat. Mark, still unable to get past Bill's attitude, kept punctuating his conversation by continually exclaiming, "And he even drank the river water." In the meantime Teria mothered me with chopped fresh fruit and warm tea, increasing my need to find a bathroom. Informing me the closest one was at the casino next door, they gave me the combination to the electronic lock on the gate so that I could get back in. The contrast between a deserted clean island and the stimulus overload of the casino was quite a shock. The facility was saturated with cigarette smoke, loud music

and dizzying, flashing lights. Incongruously, seemingly lifeless, robotic human beings occupied the seats next to the banks of slot machines. Kept alive in this room of artificial life supports, even those who won met the clinging bells with little enthusiasm. A temporary win inevitably leads to yet another loss, leaving the gambler caught in a cycle of ups and downs, mostly downs. At first I felt self-conscious about my appearance but soon realized I didn't look too different than some of the other people there. The smoke was oppressive, and the mood was depressing. I left quickly. Back outside the night air seemed colder but cleaner. The evening breeze was rapidly dissipating the day's heat leaving a clear night sky.

Back at the catamaran, I found that Mark had left to attend to his boat just as River Bill made his entrance. Assuming that Mark had spent most of his time harping on his weaknesses, Bill proceeded to return the favor. "He's just too damn hyper. He won't chill out for an instant. Hell, he acted like we were going to die out there. We weren't going to die. Mark doesn't have any sea sense. Hell, the whole time he wouldn't even wear a life preserver. And if you ask me I think he was scared." Bill turned to me and said "Bro, what is the safest part of the Mississippi?" I replied without much thought that it was the middle of the river. "Right you are," he confirmed. "Mark wouldn't get out in the middle. He wanted to stay by the wing dikes where all the whirlpools and crazy waters are. He was afraid."

I knew Mark wasn't afraid but instead just had another plan. He thought he could ride the current in an ark from one tip of a wing dike to the other. I could understand why this might seem like a good theory, but the Mississippi defied all logic. In truth, the only way to avoid the horrible turbulence caused by the wing dikes was to get as far away from them as possible, which of course was the middle of the river. Each in our way, Bill and I had come to learn firsthand this great paradox of the mighty river. The safest place on the water was there in the middle, where one felt the most vulnerable and alone. In my diminutive canoe, unnoticed by all but the most observant, I experienced this sense of vulnerability daily.

Mark's real problem was that he had built his craft too light with pontoons that were way too large for the platform. Instead of tracking in the water, creating steerage, his pontoon sat on top of the water, skidding around the surface like a water bug at the first sign of wind. The canvas roof acted like a sail, and the giant oars he built were no match for the forces of the river. The minute he put in the river around St. Louis, he was out of control, and in the back of his mind, I think he knew it. All he could possibly have done was to load his platform with rocks, or as I had done on my canoe, with water, partially flooding the pontoons. No matter, Mark was pulling out tomorrow. He had another adventure in the wings. Now he would be following the Oregon Trail on horseback. Since he wouldn't have to build his own horse, I was more hopeful of success this time.

Both Mark and Bill invited me to stay with them on the beach in front of the marina. At first, I resisted since the lure of the hotel was still in my mind. But since it was getting really late, and I was too sore and tired to lug my gear over

the levy, I had little choice. I would've preferred to stay on board the Catamaran, camped out in the warmth of the galley, but since no offer was forthcoming I paddled my boat to the beach. Setting up camp next to the hull of a burnt-out houseboat, I pulled all my valuables into the tent with me. By now it was after midnight. The wind was blowing hard, shaking the tent, while blues music blared from the casino next door. So much for the comforts of Greenville.

Wednesday, October 1

River Bill woke me at 7:00 and invited me to breakfast. He wanted to get an early start as the welfare checks came on the first of the month. Already the casinos were crowded with local recipients of similar largesse. As an alumnus of a mental institution, Bill gets a disability check of his own—one thousand dollars per month for the rest of his life, however long that might be. Before breakfast, we walked through Greenville to Bill's bank so he could withdraw some of his welfare money. The bank had set him up with a bankcard so he could withdraw cash from an anytime teller. The government check was direct-deposited into his account, and as long as he held onto his bankcard, he could get the money anywhere in the world, or in his case, along the Mississippi. Unbelievably, the bank also gave him a line of credit for \$600 for emergencies. For Bill or any other welfare recipient, who is living so close to the edge, any day of the month can bring an emergency. Within the first week, he had spent the entire line of credit, a debt on which the bank charged a hefty interest fee off the top of each future welfare check. Assuming the banks have the same arrangement with most welfare recipients, then our policies have made it possible for the banks to get rich at the expense of poor. The ones who can afford it least seem to get fleeced the most.

Walking with Bill that morning, I had a sense of what it would be like to be homeless. Wearing a layer of four shirts, cut-off shorts and sandals, not having bathed in days, and hardly eaten for that matter, I was dirty and unkempt. Bill, with his full beard and matted hair, well-worn baseball cap, baggy pants, and stained sweatshirts looked the part also. But of course, Bill not only looked the part, he lived the part. We found the anytime teller located at the drive-thru at the bank, and lined up between the cars, breathing the exhaust as we waited our turn. There we were, two people, our backgrounds so incredibly different, and now due to an unusual set of circumstances, we were standing as equals in the middle of a line of vehicles waiting our turn at the magic money machine. The only difference—a life-defining one—was that I had a way out.

On the way to the restaurant, I was pleased that no one treated us like pariahs. Despite our ragtag appearance, people addressed us politely on the street in the same way I had always been accustomed to in Nashville. Heading into Jim's Place, we ordered breakfast. While we waited for our meal, Bill told me his story. This was his fifth passage down the Mississippi since beginning life on the river in 1999. He said that although being on the river gave him the greatest sense of freedom he had ever felt, he found it lonely as hell. A self-described people person, Bill's exuded a boundless friendliness, one that I sensed might, however, disappear if one were to cross him. Spunky and energetic, he claimed he just wants to have a "good time," which in his case involved copious amounts of alcohol and other drugs. Surprisingly, although he seemed upbeat most of the time, he revealed that his real wish was to die, a desire thwarted by the fact that it couldn't be by his own hand. He has little formal education, yet was very savvy, knowing how to survive in the most tenuous of situations.

Prior to 1998, he was a successful businessman with a family and a home in the suburbs of Chicago. He was a craftsman who was part owner in a sign company, which made large wooden marquis for churches and other businesses and also custom built offices on the side. Bill did the actual work, while his partner was in charge of the sales and administration. Things were going so well that he was in the process of investing in a tattoo parlor. Then one weekend in the winter of 1997 his wife announced that she was leaving with his best friend. On Monday, Bill went to the bank and withdrew their life savings of over \$100,000, after which he went on a binge of drugs, alcohol and womanizing that lasted months. When he had spent all but \$500 of his money, he knew he had to stop or else he would die. He bought a canoe, drove his van to the Mississippi, walked into a bar, traded his van for a generator and off he went down the river. Not one to look back, he never spoke to his wife and children again. Since his father had been a commercial fisherman in Maine, Bill knew his way around the water. It was his salvation, his refuge. When the first canoe gave out, someone gave him another craft, until that gave out as well. One time, he even received a twenty-six foot Columbia sailboat, which was his joy. Unfortunately, the boat lost its anchor and was smashed against the rocks during a particularly bad storm on the Pontchartrain. At the time, Bill was off getting drunk, and upon his return, he found that his beloved boat had sunk. Whenever he lost a boat, he would ride the rails back to his sister's place in Iowa, where he would do day work at a local marina until eventually, someone gave him another craft. Then off he would go on another adventure. Bill knew the ins and outs of all the river towns along the way, including which ones were friendly to transients and which ones were not. In some of the towns, the police would let him shower at the local jail and fill him with military-issue MREs, the infamous "meals ready to eat," before seeing him on his way. In other towns, the police threatened to arrest him for vagrancy, to which Bill responded that wasn't much of a threat, since he could easily get three square meals and a roof over his head while incarcerated. To a transient, that's really not a bad deal. The police usually walked off in frustration.

Jim's Place was Bill's favorite restaurant, where credit was regularly extended to him when he was out of money. It was important for Bill to pay his tab while he was flush. Bill knew his money would be gone again soon, so it was necessary for him to make good on his debts while he was still able. He might be down and out, but nobody would ever call him dishonest.

Jim greeted us warmly at the door as he had all his other customers for the last fifty years. Founded by his father in 1926, the restaurant was taken over by Jim in 1959. By the look of the place, things hadn't changed much through the years. The dark pinewood walls were covered in framed pictures and newspaper articles, most of them decades old. The tables, covered in red-and-white-checked vinyl cloths, completed the decor in this still-life of a time long past. The pecking order, which hadn't changed either, harked back to the segregated South. The waitresses were white, and the kitchen help were black. Jim, a real character in his own right, was gracious and charming. People frequently telephoned to ask him about old-fashioned country and Cajun recipes. Most of the recipes, which he willingly shared, originated with his mama. Although his

personal specialty was concocting myriad hot sauces, he was also adept at making jams and jellies. Today he wanted everyone to taste his elderberry jam. Afterward chatting with Jim, we were joined by Teria and Chester for a delicious breakfast. We talked about our lives, and I was especially impressed to learn that Teria had joined the Peace Corps when she was fifty. She was a woman full of adventure, and I truly admired her spirit. Somewhat to my surprise, I was discovering a whole sub-culture of tough, self-reliant and fascinating people who made their lives on and along the river. It was a slice of American life completely unknown to me before my journey. I wanted more.

On the way back to the canoe, I passed two really nice hotels at the base of the levy. It was tempting to leave the canoe at the marina and chill out at one of them for two days to recover. But I was enjoying my adventure as a squatter on the beach between the casinos. Also, I liked Bill and didn't want to abandon him. Jim had let me charge my cell phone batteries at breakfast, so I spent the rest of morning making and returning phone calls. I had twenty-eight messages, some more than a month old. Most were from people expressing surprise that I had just "up and walked away" from my successful commercial career. To be honest, I hadn't quite yet. I had agreed to do one more job, a three-week catalogue shoot, when I returned. Once I would have given my eye teeth for such a concentrated amount of work since most assignments comprise photo sessions of a half day or a full day leaving gaps of days or even weeks in between. This time I had accepted the job reluctantly knowing I would need an income to get through the winter while I figured out my next steps. Now a call came in telling me they needed move the shoot schedule up from the middle of November, as agreed upon, to the middle of October. Reluctantly I agreed to get off the river in Vicksburg and join the shoot.

By 1:00 Mark was ready to leave. With the help of a buddy from Atlanta, the two had loosened a bunch of screws, folded the raft up like an accordion, and fit it onto a special trailer. The design was ingenious, and it was really too bad the craft wasn't equally seaworthy. Mark and Bill good-naturedly cussed each other out one more time. Chester and Teria were there to say goodbye. Everyone hugged, and then Mark and his friend hit the road. Soon afterwards, Chester and Teria headed down river, leaving Bill and me with nothing to do but go back to Jack's for lunch. Bill was excited because Mark had given him his solar panels, which would allow him to play his radio whenever he wanted. He was disappointed that Mark had promised him other things, a marine band radio and some extra gas money, that were not forthcoming. Bill really wanted that radio because he missed his own. Like most everything else in his life, it had somehow gotten ruined along the way.

Bill, as a sober person, is as competent and skillful a man as there is. However, when he gets drunk, anything can happen. Bill is an alcoholic and only his poverty keeps him alive. Back at Jack's, Bill sweet-talked a waitress named Judy into driving us both to the Wall-mart for supplies. Her shift ended at five after which she promised to meet us at the casino's parking lot. After lunch, I spent the remainder of the day catching up, writing or talking on the phone. I was thrilled that I didn't have to ration my cell phone batteries. For once, my

available usage was as unlimited as was my desire to talk.

Judy picked us up as arranged though she almost didn't come because everyone at the restaurant gave her a hard time, making innuendos about taking two strange guys out in her car. Judy was such an attractive, petite woman that it was hard to believe she had two teenage children. She was a single mom, but it wasn't hard to predict that her status would soon change. Trying hard to fight back the onslaught of middle age, she wore a form-fitting blouse and the tightest jeans I'd ever seen on anyone. She sure got Bill's attention though I knew their relationship was friendly but platonic.

While downtown Greenville was almost desolate, the Super Wal-Mart parking lot was a hotbed of activity. Rudeness seemed to be the order of the day, and some of the people actually showed open disdain for Bill and Judy, so much so that she finally asked, "Why do they act like that?" I had never been inside a Super Wal-Mart before and was overwhelmed by its size. The grocery section held an astounding number of selections, and I compulsively bought more than I needed. Once outside, I got a chance to learn more about Judy while waiting for Bill.

Judy used to be a trucker, co-driving a big-rig truck cross-country with her husband. The kids lived in the bunk behind the seats. One too many harrowing experiences led her to give up life on the road forever. Once when they were hauling furniture to a house high in the mountains in North Carolina, they dropped the load and returned down the mountain following another moving van in front. The road, steep and full of hairpin turns and switchbacks, was too narrow for such large trucks. The eighteen-wheeler ahead of them rode his brakes so much that fire started shooting out of his wheels, and Judy didn't think they would be able to stay on the road. Inside the cab, they were jostled about until the kids started screaming in fear. Whenever she looked in the mirror, she could see the rear tires hanging off the edge of the road over the cliff. She swore to God that if she ever made it off the mountain, she would never risk her babies' lives again. The next day, she left her husband for good and moved her children to Greenville. She got by working ten hours a day minimum wage as a waitress. Her life was austere but she was doing the best she could.

Bill returned with an incredible load of goods, including a number of steaks and dozens of eggs. How he could keep them from spoiling, I don't know. Mixed in with his goods was a big bag of dog food for Doc and a pair of knee-high waders. As a thank you, I filled up Judy's car with gas, and she took us sightseeing. Finally, after visiting a cemetery and a number of mansions, she returned us to the casino. Then as a gesture of appreciation, Bill took me as his guest to the nicer of the two casinos and ordered a light meal at the bar.

Every time we talked, I learned something more about Bill. This evening, he told me he thought he had stomach cancer. He'd been having stomach pains for a long time, and when he went to a doctor in Mobile, the doctor recommended a biopsy and possibly chemotherapy. Bill had seen his father, reduced to wearing diapers and living in extreme pain, suffer a similarly painful illness and eventual death. If he himself was going to die, he preferred to do it on the river, not in a

hospital. When the woman he had been living with found out that he had refused treatment, she kicked him out. She said she didn't want to just watch him die. He rode the rails back up to Iowa, where he hung out with his sister until someone gave him the runabout he was living out of today. Now, he was ready to die, but only on his own terms

The more he drank that evening, the less coherent he became, until finally, I just had to leave. Before I left the casino entirely, I sat in the warmth of the lobby and talked to Mona for an hour and a half. When I finally made it outside, the moonless sky was pitch black and the winds were blowing cold air in from the north. Tired, I climbed down the crushed rock levy to the protection of my tent. To my surprise, River Bill was already there, and he wasn't alone. He was there with a hooker. Bill interrupted the lovemaking process to be his cordial, friendly self. He said she was afraid of the water and wouldn't get in the boat, so he hauled his sleeping bag on shore and they were going at it just a few feet from my tent. Before continuing, he took time to add, "Guess what? She's a grandmother." Fortunately for me, it was too dark to see them clearly, and I quickly retreated to the tent. The moaning and groaning went on for another ten minutes, and then all was silent.

After she left, Bill came to my tent all smiles, exclaiming what a wonderful day he had had. My day took a turn for the worse when he reported, "Bro, I think you should know I compromised our campsite. Her pimp was over there watching us the entire time." Hopefully, the pimp didn't know about all the expensive camera equipment I had. Bill did like to brag about me. What if he said something about me to the hooker? We were isolated, easy prey. Genuinely concerned, I shuffled through the duffels until I found Paul's Buckmaster and lay it by the sleeping bag next to me. I had spent the day trying to decide when to leave and this episode was the sign that I needed. Bill said the hooker would be back at twelve. Time to say adieu.

Thursday, October 2

Bill woke me again at 7:00 for breakfast. He wanted to cook, but I wanted to photograph at Jim's Place. He decided he wanted the company, so he went with me

Business was brisk at Jim's. Beside the faces of the locals, the tables were filled with retired Air Corps men and their wives returning for a reunion at a now defunct Air Force base. Once a strategic facility during the Cold War, now all that remained was a museum and a few reconditioned buildings. In the back, a large round table was reserved for the city fathers. The mayor, the police chief, a prominent doctor, the owner of a large beverage distribution company, among others, who came every morning to do crossword puzzles and drink coffee before going to work. These were serious players, each armed with dictionaries and books of obscure facts and curious information. Of course, there was River Bill off in the corner, finishing his breakfast and chasing his coffee with a Budweiser. For almost two hours, I photographed employees and customers. Nobody seemed to mind my camera. Eventually, the shots became redundant and my sense of intrusion grew stronger. All my life, I have struggled with that feeling, a shyness that resulted in the loss of some really compelling photographs. For that reason, I would've made a lousy photojournalist. Through the years, I have tried to learn to overcome my shyness. My love for photography and exploration has been my real salvation, allowing me to grow in ways I never thought possible, putting me in places I never would go otherwise, and forcing me to leave the deep recesses of my head.

After 10:00, we went back to the campsite where Bill attended to his affairs, and I started to pack. Bill said someone in Greenville had offered him a sailboat, which he would be able to pick up shortly when the guy returned from a business trip. At 12:00 sharp, the hooker showed up as promised. She was short and pudgy and missing most of her teeth. She asked me where her sugar was, and I pointed to Bill around the burnt-out houseboat. She asked if Bill had made it to the bank yet, informing him that ten dollars would be an acceptable price today. He had paid her with a roll or quarters from the slots the night before. This time, Bill managed to politely send her away and came over to me. "Man, she's kinda hard on the eyes. I must have been pretty drunk last night because she didn't look so bad then. Good thing I wore a rubber. I'll drink the Mississippi river water, but I won't mess around with that stuff." I couldn't help but recall the old expression about the pot calling the kettle black.

Afterwards I walked to the post office to mail in my film and headed back to Jim's for lunch. Bill was to head up harbor away from the city to camp and fish until his benefactor with the sailboat returned. I said my goodbyes and was paddling down the river by 2:00. Getting back on the water was a relief. Working with a gentle breeze in a following current made for an easy immersion back into the wilderness. I photographed long, blackened tree stumps laced with white egrets along the rim of the harbor. At one dry dock facility, brash young

workers struck the latest hip-hop poses as I raised the camera to my face.

Nearing the harbor, I tangled with a tug as it scooted from one job site to another. Although the skipper was a courteous seaman, I could not get him to return my waves or acknowledge me in any way. I'm sure he thought I was just another nuisance. By the time I passed the harbor and crossed the Mississippi to the less populated side of the river, it was already 6:00. I settled on a deserted beach between two wing dikes and decided to call it a day. After setting up camp, I couldn't wait to call Mona. I talked to her until my battery ran out, regaling her with my Greenville experiences.

**Friday, October 3**

Another unseasonable cold spell fell during the night, and I woke shivering. Once more my lungs were congested, and I felt that I was getting sick. There was no place to pull out of the river for at least five days so I simply had to press on. Unfortunately I wasn't prepared for the cool weather. I should have bought some warmer clothing, especially a stocking cap, at Wal-Mart but I was too cheap. I had all that stuff at home, and I couldn't bring myself to buy duplicates.

The stove malfunctioned and had to be taken apart. I was becoming an expert at camp stove repair. There is no Zen in the art of camp stove maintenance, especially when the cook is tired and hungry. The pressure to keep moving never abated, but today I felt especially tired. I needed to journal while the memory of my two-day furlough was still fresh. Greenville had taught me a good lesson. I didn't need the luxury of a hotel after all. In fact, my life was enriched for not giving into my initial desires for comfort. If I had taken a hotel room, I probably would've spent the good part of the day watching CNN or CNBC and would have become so involved in the mindlessness of the world news that I would've missed what was really going on around me.

The restaurant-owner, Jim, had told me the upstream side of the wing dikes was a good place to look for fossils. The long rock walls act as sieve for the chocolate colored water, catching pieces of stone from the alluvial soil rushing through it. Since I camped out next to one, I decided to give it a try. No fossils. In fact, I was surprised to see how little of anything there was, natural or manmade. Instead, on top of the rocks hidden in a tangle of sticks and twigs I did notice the six-inch-wide head of a plastic elephant dislocated from the rest of its body. The sight reminded me of a Hindu shrine I had visited in India so I paid my respects to Vishnu and proceeded on my journey. Since I had allowed myself more than enough time to make Natchez, I decided to take it easy today. Still congested, I took my time paddling, munching on treats from Wal-Mart and enjoying the river.

Soon I stopped on a sandbar to photograph the dunes in the afternoon sky. Back on the water, I passed the Greenville Highway 82 bridge. Sighting a dredging operation downstream, I readied my cameras to make some close-up photographs of the work barge and crane. Just then to my right, I saw a steel workboat zooming from the bank directly toward me. The driver stalled his engines, blocking my passage. A guy who looked like a foreman started yelling at me to get away from the barge. He said I would be swept under it and would not come back up. He finally asked me if I were in control of my boat. Angered by his interference, I said, "Of course, I'm in perfect control of my vessel," and waved him off. He frowned and directed the driver back to where he had come. Too tired and sick for a full-fledged confrontation, I eased my canoe away from the operation, passing too far away to make any meaningful photographs.

Later that day, the Coast Guard broadcast low-water warnings, also reporting some of the channel widths were as narrow as 700 feet. This was not good news.

Around 5:30, I came to a dead stop myself. Even though it was early, I was really tired. Thirteen miles was not far, but at least I had made some progress. I made photographs until dark on the island and then proceeded to pitch the tent. The mosquitoes were as excited to get inside as I was.

**Saturday, October 4**

Last night the coyotes lined both sides of the Mississippi and howled into the night. The cries were so eerie that I wondered if some of them might actually have been wolves. I thought of the Jack London novels I had read as a child and wondered if I should've brought a gun after all. Now that I was officially in alligator country, my imagination was on high alert.

Although I had my heart set on noodles today, I decided to eat whatever was on top of the duffel bag. Like River Bill, I was learning not to be picky and to accept the easiest available option. While eating, I listened to the radio to catch the latest weather and river news. The NOAA announced the end of the cold snap and forecast night temperatures in the 50s. The Coast Guard reported that a barge had broken its tow not far away and warned sailors to be on the lookout for loose barges, confirming once more that the Mississippi is a dangerous river even when the water is calm. Lately I had been trying to listen to all the Coast Guard river reports at 9:00, 2:00, and 8:00 on Channel 22a. The 2:00 pm broadcast reported river stages, information which was very helpful to me in choosing an appropriate campsite. After having been flooded out already, I made it a point to be informed.

I eased into another slow, pleasant day on the river. The weather was sunny, with temperatures in the low 80s. The wind blew gently from the South with just enough force to keep me honest in my paddling. Later, I passed another logging camp, which was quiet in the weekend lull. Afterwards, I saw an incredibly large flock of white pelicans, hundreds of them. I had yet to hear them making any noise, even when frightened. I landed on the tip of their island refuge, hoping to get a good black and white image of them. I thought they might pose for me but they allowed me to approach just so far before moving away. From then on, every inch I moved, the whole flock moved in kind. I slowly followed them down the entire length of the island, never able to get much closer than I had when I first left the canoe. At the end of the dry land, some entered the water while others shuffled their wings in preparation for flight. I decided not to torment them any more, and slowly retreated to my canoe.

While I was walking back to my craft, I noticed a group of guys on the levy across the river from me. Dressed the same, in white baseball caps, white tee shirts, and dungarees, they were walking around in a circle with their heads down. As I boarded the canoe, a pickup truck drove up, and still others got out and joined in the dance. The heat waves lifting off the water made the figures jump, adding to the strangeness of the ritual. Paddling out to the middle of the river so as not to disturb the storks, I paused and pulled out the binoculars to have a look. One of the men broke rank and headed back to the pickup truck. Soon, I heard the strum of what appeared to be an electrically amplified instrument. Three long chords like a Buddhist chant, OMMM---- OMMM---- OMMM, and then a long silence. Then the same three chords blared again, followed by more silence. All the time, everyone else walked around with their heads down as though they were patrolling the area beneath their feet. Finally,

one guy looked up and pointed towards me. I saw him walk to the cab of his pickup truck, from which he pulled out his own pair of binoculars and began watching me watching him. His action drew a crowd, and soon everyone had stopped what they were doing in order to have a look. A number of the men walked to the edge of the levy and started to yell at me, their fists waving in the air. Although I couldn't make out what they were saying, they did not sound very friendly. This was not good. The levy top was wide and flat and very drivable. It was getting late in the afternoon, and we all knew I would soon have to be stopping for the night. I waved one more time, which brought more shouts and raised fists. Then I paddled on, concerned.

About two miles further down the river I fortunately spotted an island where I could camp undetected from the mainland. A large flock of pelicans were resting on the beach, so I canoed directly toward them. As I approached, I noticed a coyote that had stealthily crossed the sand and was about to close in for the kill. In the dusk, his coat blended well against the sand as he crept closer to the inattentive birds. About to breach their outer perimeter, he was momentarily interrupted by the motion of my boat and the sight of me made him turn tail and run. I felt somewhat redeemed hoping I had made up for all the nuisance I had been to my white-feathered companions. Apparently ungrateful, they flew away yet again. The water was shallow, and I had to pull the boat a long way to shore. By the time the canoe was beached, my hands and feet smelled like the guano they left behind. Feathers and stork droppings were everywhere.

It was dark by the time I set up my tent, but the moon cast a strong shadow as it cut through the clear night air. The night was still warm, and the mosquitoes, back in full force, bit my legs as I worked. Later the coyotes returned to the riverbank for their nightly confab. One howled, then the others joined in. When it was over, silence again filled the night. My mind reverted to the events of the day including another sighting of the mysterious miniature deer. I had asked Chester and Teria if they had seen the tiny animals, and they had not. When our conversation turned to bear track, Chester thought that bears might indeed inhabit the area. Above Greenville they had anchored in the bay of a seemingly isolated island only to learn that it was an exclusive private hunting reserve. According to the caretaker, there was even a runway down the middle of the island. Attempting to frighten them into leaving, he said bear inhabited the island. Chester thought perhaps the deer and the bear were runaways from someone's private hunting reserve.

Sunday, October 5, 2003

This morning the stove worked too well, scalding the powdered milk, burning the bottom of the pan, and turning my breakfast into a distasteful mess. Fresh tracks ran by my tent revealing that the coyote I had scared returned during the night. While I slept, the river had receded, and the canoe was mired in a puddle of frothy, yellow bird guano. Barefooted, I pulled the boat out of the mess, scum foaming around my ankles. My hands smelled of the awful pungent odor of wet feathers. In comparison, the rest of muddy Mississippi felt bathtub clean.

As I started on my way, the clouds grew thicker indicating that rain was imminent. The winds were light so I was content to drift. Although from the shore the river had looked calm, the water bubbled and churned around me forming small whirlpools formed everywhere. They would spin for awhile and then dissolve as mysteriously as they appeared. The darkening of the clouds and the calm stillness of the air, and the vast emptiness of the river were eerie. I would almost have preferred some little struggle as a diversion to break up the void.

A few houses lined the riverbank breaking the monotony of the monolithic levies. All these buildings, which were made of wood veneer, were on stilts. I couldn't tell whether or not they were full-time residences or vacation cabins. There was some industry, but the primary human presence was in the form of grain-loading facilities. The sound of shotguns could be heard sporadically, mixed with the occasional, barely audible distant singing of the shore birds. Generally, it remained so quiet that I could hear the beating of the pelicans' wings as they dried themselves on the river's edge. In the absence of winds, I was making good time and had gone more than three miles in less than an hour. An oncoming barge awakened me from my daydreams and forced me back to reality. I had to concede the center of the river, and then it was time to start paddling again. A motor yacht called the Y-Naught passed graciously slowing its wake. Later, a thirty-five can barge passed, and the captain went out on the bridge to wave. It was turning out to be a very peaceful day.

Soon I spotted a single-masted sailboat passing me downstream on the opposite side of the channel. The sails were furled, and it was powered by an outboard motor. I tried to raise crew on my radio, and they responded. The boy said, "This is the Lilliput. What is your handle?" I told him I was the Red Canoe. He said he couldn't see me even though I was directly across from him. When I gave him my position, he still had a problem but eventually said, "Oh, I see you now." We talked for awhile before the radio started to break up. He and his buddy, who were from Tulsa, Oklahoma, were heading for the Bahamas but were uncertain if they were going to make it because their stove had broken down. I could sympathize and told him so. Their plan was to lay over in New Orleans, try to find replacement parts, and go on from there. Otherwise, they would have to turn around. I asked if they had met up with River Bill in Greenville, and he said no. They offered me a cold dinner if I could catch up but that was impossible.

After the Lilliput had passed out of sight, I had the river all to myself and defiantly, I ventured back into the middle of the channel looking for the swiftest water. I came across a family of coots and was surprised that they didn't seem to mind my presence. As I lazily drifted alongside them, they seemed to accept me as one of the family, a Baby Huey in a red canoe. When I allowed the canoe to drift, it had a tendency to point upstream in the face of the light winds. Oddly, the ducks were doing the same thing. So there we were, all content to float backwards down the middle of the vast river, enjoying the warmth of a cloudy fall day not caring what lay ahead of us.

Just as the river started to narrow, making a wide sweeping bend to the right, a fishing boat came by to chat. The driver's name was Virgil, and he was out with his two grown sons, Jeff and John. Virgil didn't look old enough to have two grown sons, and when I told him so, he smiled, saying it made his day. After I introduced myself, he called me Mr. John and said I was in the delta now where formal manners were customary. Yesterday I had passed into Louisiana, and I could expect flat terrain for the remainder of my journey. To think, only six weeks ago I was excited to make it out of the county. Now I was paddling entire states. Virgil told me two barges were on the way, and I might want to clear the channel. I already knew as I had been watching their smoke from behind the trees. We said goodbye, and reluctantly I pressed on as they went off to fish in one of the side channels I had been dying to explore.

The tugs were now in sight. I started to paddle out of their way toward the red buoys on the outside of the bend. The wing dikes were doing their job, and the strong river would not let go of my craft. The two tugs were approaching fast now, and in between them I spotted a large wave-cranking motor yacht. Now, I had to paddle with all my strength just to break the pull of the current. I finally made the buoys as the first barge lumbered by. The two barges were part of the Ingram Fleet, and on the radio I could hear as the first barge captain call back to the other to be on the lookout for me. By the time the second barge passed, it was already dusk. Darkness came quickly in the overcast sky, and there was no moon to light my way. As the days grew shorter, my travel time became more limited. When I started the journey, skies remained light until 8:00. Now, the sun was setting about 6:30. Before I finished, it would be down by 5:00. I found a campsite right at sunset. The sand was low to the water, but since the river was predicted to drop, I decided to chance it. The forecast was for rain, but as I made my way into the tent, the skies cleared and out popped a spotlight-bright moon.

## Monday, October 6

The rains came later that night and lasted long into the morning. Since the heaviest downpour didn't come until 5:00 in the morning, I knew it would be light before I had to worry about being washed out of my campsite. As I stuck my head out of the tent, five barges were in sight. A number had passed during the night in sharp contrast to the day before. The rain let up about 9:00, and instead of cooking I decided to hurry on to the river. The sand was wet and stuck to every thing, and I just didn't want to waste time coaxing the stove to light. Packed and on the water by 10:30, I was hoping to make at least thirty miles in order to make up for the poor showing of the last few days. At the rate I was going, I wouldn't pass Vicksburg until late tomorrow afternoon, which only gave me four more days to make it to Natchez. The rains returned, and I donned my full raingear, mainly to stay warm. The temperature hovered around 68 degrees and was a little breezy. The river lay almost flat, mirroring an infinite gray sky. The 100% humidity, along with the dense clouds shading the sun diffused all the color, and I found myself awash in the panorama of a living black and white photograph. Only the sepia of the sand islands interrupted the cold sterility of the moment. A good black and white photograph should contain a solid black and a good white to complement the gray tones that lie in between. The vista before me was totally lacking those values and seemed to be composed of a palette of low contrast colors, as if someone had made the image by placing a soft-focus gauze over the lens.

When the barges are absent, the only sound in the middle of the river is that of the water rushing past the channel buoys. Today was relatively quiet, as only the geese seemed to be en route to their winter quarters. Lining the beaches at the water's edge, the pelicans stood in a row with their heads curled under their wings. A few pelicans stood sentinel, their erect bodies each pointed in a different direction. They seemed so peaceful that I didn't have the heart to approach them today. In contrast, the geese were loud and aggressive. Beating their way down south with their powerful wings, they made sure everyone knew they were coming, honking "Lead, follow, or get out of the way."

The sun was breaking as I encountered a large island known as Cottonwood Bar. It split the river almost equally in two. As I rounded the end of the landmass, the waters came back together with an unusual force, bubbling and sloshing as if someone were drowning. Over and over, without warning, a gurgling, splashing whirlpool would appear breaking the calm. Once a whirlpool formed, it would take off in what appeared to be an entirely random direction. If I were to successfully avoid one on the right, I might be attacked by one on the left. The sudden and unpredictable eruptions of these organic minefields started to unnerve me. Feeling a bit like an actor in a science fiction movie, I half expected to see a creature emerge from the chaos. Oddly enough, a passing barge with its powerful turbines seemed to calm the river, and the whirlpools quickly subsided.

As the river turned to the left, I noticed a grain mill next to some other facilities on the right. In between the structures, a harbor tug was tied to an old dock with a tin roof shanty on one end, a fifty-gallon drum spewing black smoke and

flames on the other, and a lot of interesting things in between. Captivated by the scene, I decided to give them a visit. I eased along the banks so I wouldn't have to wrestle with the current before I reached the shanty. A powerful young man came off the dock walking along the thick mud banks to greet me. Lean and muscular, he was wearing nothing but jeans and cowboy boots. With his hair cropped close, he reminded me of the cowboys on the bull-riding circuit I had once photographed. At first, he looked so sullen that I expected him to tell me to go away. As he pulled a round can of Skoal, pushing it from his tight jeans, he introduced himself as Robert. He hadn't seen me put in, and thinking maybe I was lost, wanted to know if I needed any help. After I assured him that I wasn't, we started to talk.

Robert said his life was the river. "It's all I know," he said. His father was a fisherman, as was his father's father. Robert said he knew the river like he back of his hand as far as you could see on the left and on the right. "My uncle drowned in the river over there," he pointed. His grandfather had a heart attack on the island upriver. His mother even went into labor with him on a nearby sandbar. Once he and his father lost an engine while fishing and had to paddle two days straight against the current to make it to the boat ramp, not all that far away. His frantic mother called the Highway Patrol and the Coast Guard, but neither came looking for them. According to Robert, the first rule of the river is never to go out with anyone who's scared. "It'll kill you for sure." His daddy said the Mississippi was the most dangerous lake in the world.

When I started asking more personal questions, he held back. He didn't know who I was and couldn't understand why I was making all the pictures. He said he had a girlfriend, but later he said she was his wife. One moment a child was his. Another, it was not. He also told me he was in the process of moving, although his destination kept changing also. Once we made it over to the dock, Robert said he thought the captain would probably let me take a shower if I'd like to stay. Of course I wanted to stay in this perfect setting. The Madison Parish port held everything I had been looking for. The shanty shack on the water, the tugboat Marjorie, and the loading facilities set in a rural Southern landscape, interrupted only by tall grain bins, were all perfect material for my camera.

Then, of course, there was Robert. Under other circumstances, had he been a little worldlier, he could have easily been an A-list model for Polo or Ralph Lauren. His well-muscled body had been fortified by a diet of catfish and ducks from his father's pond and chiseled from the hard work of labor on the river. Every time I raised my camera in his direction, he nervously reached for a pinch of Skoal, quickly stuffing it into his cheeks. The resulting images revealed a man not ready for the big lights of the runway. When I inquired if he had ever been to Nashville, he told me he had but only for about fifteen minutes. All the people made him so nervous, he had to leave. Remembering all the renditions of dueling banjos I heard when telling my friends of my canoe plans, I was reminded that real terror lies in the fear of the unknown. All my sophisticated friends, frightened by the prospect of life alone in nature, were appalled by my plans to lose myself in the wilderness. If Robert was typical, country people,

though experienced in the ways of the wilds, are equally afraid of life in the crowded city.

As promised, Mike, the captain of the little tug Marjorie, invited me to stay and take a well-needed shower. Like many tugs on the Mississippi, the Marjorie was old and in dire need of upgrading. All the fixtures had a 50s appearance. She was a small harbor tug, similar to the one I had visited on the Tennessee. The rooms were compact with few amenities and in each case equipped with toilets no one had bothered to keep functional. Nobody appeared to be in a hurry to clean up the leftovers from lunch that still lingered on the table. However, the shower worked, and the warm water was a blessing. Afterward getting cleaned up, I talked with Mike. He was about my age, a big man with graying hair, rounded in the waist but otherwise healthy. He had started out as a farmer, then become a truck driver, and after getting tired of the road hired on as a sheriff's deputy. Finally settling down to a career that suited him, Mike had been on the river a number of years and liked his work.

After my shower, Robert's wife and his daughter stopped by. His daughter relished the role of a little princess, and it was easy to see who was in charge. After about five minutes in the confined gallery with her, my nerves were shot, and I retreated to make camp. The guys had shown me a flat spot on top of the levy, and I challenged the mosquitoes to a race up the hill.

That evening, the rains came in a deluge. Deep-throated thunder rumbled up and down the river below. Lightning crackled all around. My igloo-shaped lightning rod was exposed on the high ground. Fortunately, the white bursts of light I kept seeing had nothing to do with my passage into eternity.

Thursday, October 7

The rains continued hard into the morning. By 8:30, tired of being cramped in the tent, I decided a good drenching couldn't be any worse and made my way down to the docks. The hillside was a muddy mess, and the rains had awakened the sleeping odor of human waste. The wind did little to dissipate the foul and almost unbearable odor.

Down at the dock, I found my canoe full of water, with my gear floating in the mucky mess. The canoe had collected all of the runoff from the shed's corrugated rooftop and was full to within two inches of the gunnels. I almost sank it entirely when I grabbed for it. Bending down over the docks, it seemed to take forever to bail it dry. The rains continued throughout the morning, hampering my effort. The pack containing my food supply was full of water, causing all the cardboard boxes to dissolve. Soapy, spongy pasta clung to everything, and I figured I had lost at least three days' worth of food. Wal-Mart was turning out to be a blessing. Around 1:00, the rain ceased. The canoe was dry and everything had been repacked.

I paddled my way over to the tug, which had been stabilizing a barge while its contents were being offloaded at a stone company's terminal. Mike used his tug to slide the barge along the dock, making it easier for a large shovel to swoop down and scoop up the rock. Today was Robert's day off. Robert's schedule was 48 hours on and 24 hours off, year round. Today was a moving day for him. He had to accomplish all he could before he came back to work for another two days. Like all the river tugs, the Marjorie was on a constant 24-hour call. So once he was back, he stayed, never being allowed to leave sight of the vessel. The rules were rigid, and there were no exceptions. Jerry, the other captain, was there to take Robert's place. Jerry was the swing man. When Robert was off, he was the deck hand. When Mike was off, he was the captain. The three of them had the sole responsibility of manning the tug 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. If someone wanted a vacation, the others had to fill in.

Jerry was of average height, and his days as a deck hand had kept him limber and in good shape. He once worked on long haul barges, but stopped because the schedule was hard on his family. Routinely away for thirty days at a time, he found that his children acted like they didn't know who he was and refused to respect his authority when he was home. Eventually, he took a job on the Marjorie. At first, he was the only captain on call seven days a week. Later, Mike came aboard, and he was spared some of the workload. Unhappy with the way his kids turned out, Jerry blamed his absence for their shortcomings. He was now taking the responsibility of raising his grandchild. He took his charge seriously, if for no other reason than his own redemption. This was a matter of no small importance to Jerry, a man of deep religious faith, as the crosses tattooed on the backs of his tanned and freckled hands belied.

After Jerry finished pumping the bilge water from the barge, the three of us sat in the pilothouse, talking and watching soap operas while the giant shovel did its work directly in front of us. By 3:00, I decided it was time to leave. The cell

phone batteries were charged. I still had eighty-five miles to Natchez, with at least one more roadside attraction in between. I had planned to be in Vicksburg today but that was out of the question.

**Wednesday, October 8**

I had hardly eaten for the last two days. The immersion of my food sack in the water had ruined all my snack items leaving only food packaged in foil packets that required cooking. Ravenous, I made an enormous breakfast and almost made myself sick trying to eat it all. The sun was out and a warm wind was blowing steadily from the south. Natchez was only a river chart away. As I neared the city, my cell phone came into range. The meandering river was now heading west. I called to Mona allowing the breeze to push me into the shore. After our conversation, I decided to explore the levy. Soon, I found myself in my own private forest of tall black willow trees, which grew out of a bed of platinum ornamental grasses that shimmered in the sunlight. This levy was so similar to the one I camped on at the Ohio, it felt as though the last five weeks never happened. One of the Corps of Engineer's creeds must be function over form, uniformity above creativity.

On the approach to Vicksburg, I had to cross the wide river, which was now heading into the wind. Waves higher than the canoe raced up my sides, and pitched the canoe back and forth, making my path uncertain. As in Greenville, the city docks lay on a tributary of the Mississippi. This time, I only had to travel about a mile up the gentle Yazoo to the city itself. A small dock existed solely for the river-tour boat, which was out on a cruise. I found a place to tie off out of the way on the inside of the dock.

The riverbank now lay paved with asphalt, which was used as a parking lot. As in Paducah, it served as a perfect launching spot for all the locals with their customized bass boats. As I was tying off, I was met by a fleet of seniors, some with their wives, motoring in from a day of fishing. It was quite a site. One guy had caught a fifteen-pound catfish, and after all the rigs were put up, everyone gathered around to admire this trophy. The old angler asked if anyone had any scales. When none were forthcoming, he announced in that case he was proud to say he had caught a thirty-pound catfish. When the laughter subsided, one guy asked me how far I was going and if I had seen any alligators yet. So far the answer was no.

I walked through the towering floodgates into the old part of the city. At once, I was charmed by the old riverboat town. Pummeled during the Civil War, it retained little of its antebellum character. The present landscape was an eclectic collection of different architectural styles. Like most river towns, it had been abandoned by many of its residents who moved out to the interstate, leaving the old town rather quiet and demure. The storefronts now mainly housed antique and knickknack shops, relying on the tourist trade to stave off total abandonment. Vicksburg had the charm and the infrastructure to become a wonderful artists' colony, similar to that of Savannah. At this point, the city seemed content to sell artifacts from its past while relying on its gaming casinos to shore up its future. The Eclectic Art Gallery and Coffee Shop was the exception to this trend. Since the upstairs art gallery was closed, I wandered into the coffee shop out of curiosity. Inside, I met a handsome elderly man by the name of Bill Combs at the coffee bar. At sixty-four, Bill seemed to have lost

none of his zest for living, and I sensed his real purpose in here was not coffee but to make time with the twenty-something year old waitress on the other side of the Formica. I was instantly drawn in by his charm, and with the guilt of a fallen addict, I found myself ordering a double latte', just so I could linger for a while.

Bill had a journey of his own to share and stories to tell. As a young man in the 60s, he traveled to Central and South America looking for adventure. In Brazil, he got in trouble with the law and went on the run to avoid prison. Later, he made his way up the Amazon at a time when foreigners were forbidden passage. He said the government was conducting a campaign to wipe out all the native tribes in the rainforest in order to allow the wealthy farmers unrestricted access. Brazil wanted to conduct the genocide as quietly as possible for fear of outside interference. As far as he knew, he was one of the few foreigners to make it upriver during that time. Eventually, Bill made his way back to the States where he married, and lived on a farm in the Ozarks. When his wife left him, it broke his heart.

Eventually, Bill found his way back to the river and a job laying revetments along the river for the Corps of Engineers whose Lower Mississippi's Headquarters is located in Natchez. The revetments are concrete blocks about the size of tire stops in the parking lot, wired together with rebar to form a long, flexible mat. These mats are loaded onto a barge, where they are moved by cranes and placed along the riverbanks as erosion deterrent. Though they do seem to do the job, the revetments are ugly. I could easily imagine the day when the river will look like a never-ending culvert. However, Bill liked his job because the pay was good, and he was only required to work 90 days of the year. Workers on the river rarely work more than six months out of the year. The only catch is that the days are twelve hours long, followed by another twelve hours of confinement in a bunk room before the next day begins. The pay is good, considering the education and training required, but according to Bill fewer and fewer young people are willing to make the commitment.

I wanted to stay and talk with Bill longer, but I had only rationed an hour in Vicksburg, and already that was long gone. While passing the county courthouse, I glanced at a newspaper in a *USA Today* stand. This was the first newspaper I had seen in weeks, and to my complete surprise, the headline announced that Arnold Schwarzenegger had been elected governor of California. When I was preparing for my journey in July, most of insiders were dismissive of his chances. He was being depicted as a misogynistic egotist, known for speaking openly about his sexual conquests. The last picture I saw of him before I left was of him wiping egg off of his expensive sports coat. This bold and blaring headline reminded me of one of reasons I had wanted to leave civilization behind. Normally, I tried to keep up with the news, but now that was impossible. I had always been taught that information is the cornerstone of democracy and that every citizen has a responsibility to stay informed. Now I was beginning to wonder.

When I returned to the canoe, it was getting late. The sun was starting to fall

behind a veil of thick clouds forming off the horizon, accelerating the sense that darkness would soon be forthcoming. The sightseeing vessel had returned and was snugly latched to its berth. I approached the captain, making sure my canoe had not been a hindrance. He assured me that that was what the dock was for, and we started to talk. Having worked the barges all his life, this duty was more or less a semi-retirement project. Like most everyone else I met on the river, he was drawn to my story as I was to his. He recommended a great camping spot on the sand dunes almost directly across the river. Commenting on how wide the river was, I jokingly said I'd be happy to take a tow from him. Taking my statement seriously, he offered to ferry me across after finishing his sunset cruise. I was taken by his generosity, which corroborated the statement I had heard all along the way: "There aren't any better people than river people."

The tourists were beginning to board his craft for their 5:30 departure, so I took my leave, saying I would see him on the river. I paddled peacefully back down the Yazoo, making photographs as I went. The sun temporarily broke out of its confinement, showering the structures lining the river with a most incredible light, the kind usually reserved for more arid climates. As I passed out of the harbor, the tour boat overtook me and I could hear the captain over the loudspeaker, not only pointing me out, but embellishing some of the stories I had told. Soon, all the passengers had lined the side of the boat I was on, and as I waved my paddle in recognition, a barrage of twenty or thirty flashbulbs went off. For a brief instant, I had reached the status of celebrity. Afterwards, the faux paddlewheel headed upstream while the captain reveled his passengers with stories of life on the Mississippi.

Soon I was left to my accustomed silence. I decided to head upriver before I crossed, knowing the current would carry me far below the intended campsite if I didn't. It was better to fight the current now while there was still light. I paddled at least a mile upstream, struggling with a rather stubborn river. When there was enough distance for drift, I turned the canoe across the river, continuing to paddle as hard as I could. Surprisingly, I made it across the river at least a half a mile upstream from the sand dunes. A little while later, right at darkness, the tour boat appeared. The captain's voice boomed over the loudspeaker. "I came looking for you. I was worried you wouldn't make it across in all these waves. Now that I've seen you make it, we'll say goodnight." With that, he turned his vessel, full of tourists who had become volunteers on the rescue team, and headed back into the harbor. It was completely dark when I landed. I was disappointed to see the white sand beach littered with beer cans and cigarette butts.

Light from the city on the other bank outshone the lights of the night sky. Isolated on the little plot of sand, I could feel the energy and power of the city across the way. Still on a caffeine high from my double latte, I called Mona and talked late into the night. Afterwards, still full of energy, I called Paul and talked until the batteries wore out. I was no longer worried about saving the batteries. Once I left Vicksburg, my cell phone was out of range and consequently useless until I met Mona in Natchez. The effects of the caffeine didn't wear off, and I tossed and turned into the night. Knowing that our meeting was just a few days

away, I couldn't control the memories, images and plans that were racing through my mind.