

TRAVEL JOURNAL – J. HAROLD BANKS
FOUR HUNDRED MILES BY SOLO CANOE FROM THE TALLAPOOSA RIVER AT
FORT TOULOUSE TO THE GULF OF MEXICO AT FORT MORGAN

Sunday, April 1, 2012 through Friday, April 20, 2012

PROLOGUE

In 2009, I paddled my solo canoe the entire length of the Tallapoosa River from its major tributary McClendon Creek in Paulding County, Georgia to its merger with the Coosa River at Fort Toulouse in Elmore County, Alabama. My claim to be the first to make that 258 mile total descent of the Tallapoosa River remains unchallenged. However, when I pulled my canoe out of the river at Fort Toulouse on April 26, 2009, I felt the trip was really incomplete. Although the Tallapoosa River lost its name when it joined the Coosa River to form the Alabama River, the same water I had followed from a tiny stream in Georgia continued to flow and I resolved to someday follow that flowing water until its final dissolution with the salty waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Three years later, I finally got the courage to make the attempt.

THE PLAN

My intent is to launch my canoe from the Fort Toulouse boat ramp on the Tallapoosa River. One mile below I will meet the Coosa River and the beginning of the Alabama River. I will then follow the Alabama River until it joins the Tombigbee River to form the Mobile River, turn onto the Tensaw River and meander through the Mobile/Tensaw Delta until I reach Mobile Bay. Then, weather and waves permitting, I will hug the eastern shore of Mobile Bay until I reach the Gulf of Mexico at Fort Morgan. If a crow were foolish enough to make such a trip, he would only have to fly 189 miles. But the river hates straight lines, and according to the mapping program on my computer, my proposed path is 400 miles. I have put a lot of thought into making this trip but don't start seriously training until one month before departure. I get in the best shape I can in this short time frame after a lazy winter and months at a desk job and try to prepare for every conceivable contingency. I have told too many people I'm making this trip to back out now, but inside my head a nagging voice keeps asking if this is too ambitious a trip for a man about to turn 64 who should be in better physical condition for an odyssey like this.

THE JOURNAL

April 1, 2012 – Day One

Hi 86, Lo 60, sunny

Sunday Night – Mile 19 – Montgomery Marina

I planned to get up at 5:00 a.m., take a quick shower and get to Fort Toulouse in time to put in the water by 7:00 a.m. Those plans are shot when the dawning light wakes me and I see it is already 6:30 a.m. Oh well, I'm not skipping breakfast and at least two cups of coffee.

Amy and I arrive at Fort Toulouse about two hours behind schedule, but it is less than 20 miles to my camping spot at Montgomery Marina so I should still be OK. I give my wife a quick kiss and paddle the last mile of the Tallapoosa to its junction with the Coosa River. On my Tallapoosa River descent, I had more than 1,000 feet of elevation drop over the course of 258 miles. But the Alabama River is only 150 feet above sea level when it begins, and much of that drop is contained by three U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dams. Except in times of flood, most of the Alabama River today doesn't have much flow at all and could almost be called the Alabama Lakes. There will be little help from the current on this trip, and I'll have to earn every mile.

This bright spring day is perfect for fishing, and the belted kingfishers and great blue herons are busy doing just that. They will protest my infringement on their favorite fishing spots all day long. Turtles are sunning on every limb sticking out of the water, and they plop clumsily into the safety of the river whenever I draw near. A couple of miles downstream I see a water moccasin, the Florida cottonmouth subspecies I think, swimming across the river. I intercept his path with my canoe and force him to stop and pose for a few nice pictures. Many people on hearing of my outdoor excursions ask if I'm scared of snakes and if I carry a gun for protection against them. The answer is no and no.

Close to shore in shallow water, I paddle through a school of three-foot long gar. They splash violently and give me a good wetting. I pass by an elderly fisherman wearing a big straw hat who jokingly shouts, "If you're going to Mobile you're headed the right way." "I thank you for your directions," is my reply. Little does he know I'm going further than Mobile.

As I approach Montgomery, I begin to see a lot of recreational boaters out on this pretty Sunday afternoon. I come to a big sandbar that is obviously "the place" for young people to hang out. There are more than a dozen boats there loaded with loaded people. Each boat has its own music-making device playing different tunes at full volume. Civilization is a lot noisier than the comparative wilderness I just paddled through.

I arrive at my night's camping spot at the Montgomery Marina at 3:30 p.m. Considering I didn't start until after 9:00 a.m., I covered the distance in good time. I should have taken it a little slower because as I unload my boat I realize just how tired I am. I set up my tent in a weedy spot just in front of the Harriott I, a retired riverboat replica now permanently docked at the Montgomery Marina and only used for parties and special events. Several floating piers are attached to the old boat including a gasoline dock with pump and tank. The Harriott I is named after the first steamboat to reach Montgomery from Mobile in 1828, but regrettably it is only a tacky looking representation of the grand old steamboats that formerly plied these waters, and I am glad it now rests in relative obscurity. Its replacement, the Harriott II, is a larger, more elaborate riverboat replica that makes excursions from its dock at Montgomery's Riverfront Park, and I can see it from here less than a mile downstream.

This is not a great camping spot, but I will be able to eat supper at Capitol City Oyster Bar just up the hill. I take a swim from the riverboat pier which is the best I can do for a bath in this very public place. I call Amy at 6:00 p.m. for the essential two-day weather forecast: Hi's, lo's, rain chance, wind speed and direction. Shortly after, I'm surprised by two friends I know only through Facebook and e-mail. John Hayes and Sam Lentz are young adventurers who contacted me after finding my Tallapoosa River trip journal online. They repeated the same trip described in my journal, in less time I might add, and in sections, they have paddled the same route I am taking now. Their advice has been most helpful in my planning and I'm honored they have made the effort to meet me on this first and most accessible camping spot of my trip. Sam and John treat me to a big meal of fried grouper, slaw, and a baked potato with all the butter and sour cream I can get on it, washed down with at least a quart of sweet tea and a fine Sam Adams beer. We exchange adventure stories, and I am impressed how eager these young explorers are to experience everything the outdoors has to offer. They remind me of myself at that age when they lament how the necessity to hold down a job interferes with real living. When I was a young man I used to think leisure time was wasted on the old. Now, I think youthful vigor is wasted on the young. Case in point: I regretfully have to excuse myself about 8:00 p.m. because I am tired and fading fast from paddling hard in the hot sun.

I want to take another look at my maps before I turn in and start for my canoe that I left on a floating pier attached to the bow of the Harriott I. I halt when I notice the gangplank from the riverboat to the pier is now raised about four feet above the floating pier. At first I think maybe the marina raises the walkway at night for security purposes, but when I take a closer look I see the stern of the old boat is obviously very low in the water and that has raised the bow. I watch for a few minutes and realize this boat is going down. I hurry up to the bar and grill to announce that I think the riverboat boat is sinking. The word spreads quickly and soon several people are shouting, "The boat is sinking, the boat is sinking." The restaurant empties with about half of the people running at full speed down the hill while others scramble for cars and trucks. Someone has the presence of mind to cut off the electricity to the boat and its party lights. Pickup trucks

pull close to provide illumination with their headlights. Several restaurant employees board the boat and start recovering a sound system, chairs, and a few other valuable items. The boat is going down fast, stern first, and there are creaking and groaning sounds as moorings and connected walkways bend and break. The order is given for everyone to abandon ship and someone says, "If that boat sinks all the way, the gas dock is going to float out in the river." That prompts me to exclaim out loud, "Drat, I guess I'm going to have to swim over there and retrieve my canoe." A lanky young man about 20 years old overhears me and says, "Heck man, give me a paddle and I'll get that canoe for you." I give him one of my paddles that was serving as a pole for my nearby tent. He runs down the aluminum walkway leading to the bow of the boat, now raised high out of the water, and ignores a woman who yells, "Get off of there." Despite protests from the crowd, he gets to the boat and makes a dangerously long jump down to the floating pier. Clumsily, he manages to get my canoe to shore. Some people were calling him a fool, but I will call him brave and am most grateful because I really didn't want to go swimming that late. Someone then assures that the gasoline dock is permanently anchored to more than just the sinking boat and that it cannot escape. Eventually, the stern of the old boat settles on the bottom and someone of assumed authority announces that everything is stable now, there is nothing more that can be done tonight, and everyone should go home. Everyone does leave except for bewildered Harold Banks who has nowhere to go.

Finally alone, I retreat to my tent located just 50 feet from the boat, much later than I had planned. I quickly go to sleep but am soon wakened by more creaking and groaning from the dying boat. Awful sounds of metal bending, cables popping, and water gurgling continue to wake me through the night.

April 2, 2012 – Day 2

Hi 86, Lo 67, partly cloudy

Monday Night – Mile 35 – Gunter Hill Corps of Engineers Campground

I rouse wearily from my tent at first light and survey the cause of the noises that interrupted my sleep all night. The main hull and most of the first floor of the old riverboat are completely underwater and the entire boat is listing heavily on its side toward the river. The gasoline dock has been ripped to pieces by the tug between the sinking boat and the dock's permanent anchor. The supposedly empty gasoline tank has fallen into the river. It is floating high, but I notice a sheen on the surface from something that has leaked. I fix my breakfast and some strong coffee, break camp, and pack my bags. I'm surprised no one has shown up this morning, but there is nothing I can do to help and I want to get the heck out of here. The floating dock that I parked my canoe on the afternoon before has broken loose and is resting against the shore. That makes it easy for me to move my canoe and gear to it and launch. In a little over one-half mile I pass by Montgomery's Riverfront Park where the Harriott II is looking proud and spiffy, unlike its sad predecessor.

This will be one of my easiest days as I only have about 16 miles to paddle, so I'm going to take it easy and not wear myself out by paddling too fast like I did yesterday. It will be a nice break and give me a chance to recover before I start hitting high mileage days.

Most of the day I have a headwind as seems to be the usual case when I'm canoeing, but it is not too strong. But by midday the heat is really sapping my strength. It is just not supposed to be this hot in early April. I stop at a sandbar to eat lunch and am disgusted at its condition. There are piles of beer cans and other trash all over the place. Why do people come to pretty places with full cans, and then turn them into ugly places rather than taking the much lighter empties home?

The day is uneventful, and I enjoy the leisurely paddle. At one point, what appears to be a submerged moss covered stump catches my eye. But this stump is moving pretty fast, and I then recognize it as a large snapping turtle. Despite poking along, I arrive at Catoma Creek about 2:30 p.m. and paddle one mile up it to get to the Gunter Hill campground. This is a full-facility Corps of Engineers campground, so after I make three portage trips to get canoe and gear several hundred yards from the boat ramp to my campsite, I set up my tent and head to the bath house. After a proper shower and shave, I wash my shirt and shorts by hand.

I cook a late supper, turkey tetrazzini, but it is still hot and I want to wait until it is no more than lukewarm before I eat it. I call Amy, and she says that Channel 12 news reported the incident of the sinking riverboat. Hopefully, such destruction won't follow me any further downriver. I turn in early and hope for a better sleep than last night.

April 3, 2012 – Day 3

Hi 84, Lo 60, partly cloudy

Tuesday night – Mile 57 – Holy Ground

I set my watch alarm for 5:30 a.m., but if it went off I didn't hear it. That's OK because birdsong woke me at 6:00 a.m. and there wouldn't have been enough light to do anything earlier. I had a much better night than the first. Nothing disturbed the sweet sleeping music played by crickets and frogs except the occasional bold call of a great horned owl, which is always a thrill to hear. I cook a breakfast of freeze-dried scrambled eggs with ham and green peppers and mix in a pack of instant grits for extra carbs and calories, all washed down with two big cups of strong instant coffee. I promise it was better than it sounds, or maybe I was just hungry as a bear. This was a nice campground, but it takes three long roundtrips to get canoe and gear to the boat ramp so I'm tired and sweaty before I even begin to paddle.

I have been generally impressed with how clean and clear the Alabama River has been thus far, but the mile of Catoma Creek I float down toward the main river is anything but with lots of flotsam including cans, bottles, tennis balls, and an ugly scum, all washed down from Montgomery neighborhoods I presume.

I get to the river and immediately encounter a headwind of course, but it is not too strong. I knew at the outset that prevailing winds this time of year come from the southwest. I see my first alligator. Only his nostrils and eyes are out of the water, and as I approach he sinks without a ripple. It is the only gator I see all day, but I'm sure more saw me.

The day is pleasant, and I'm surprised how quickly I cover 22 miles to arrive at Holy Ground. It was here that the Redstick Creeks established a defensive position in 1813 on a river bluff that was supposedly protected by a spiritual barrier that no white man could enter. But in December 1813, General Claiborne and a force of 1,000 soldiers broke through that barrier. However, most of the Redsticks escaped including William Weatherford, or Red Eagle, who jumped on his horse Arrow and rode through a hail of gunfire to make a spectacular leap over the bluff, or so the story goes.

I camp at the Corps of Engineers Holy Ground Park. It is not entirely legal because this park is for day use only, but when I arrive midafternoon, there is no one in the park. I pitch my tent in a remote wooded corner knowing that when I leave by 7:00 a.m., there will be no trace of my having been there. I take a long, leisurely swim in the designated swimming area and enjoy having this pretty place to myself. There are picnic tables and covered pavilions shaded by mature hardwoods, a nice sandy beach, running water, a bath house, and not a soul around. I have plenty of time to cook supper, prepare for the next day, and retreat to my tent before

nightfall. I catch up on my journal entries and look forward to another peaceful night with no sounds but owls, frogs, and mosquitoes. Lots and lots of mosquitoes.

April 4, 2012 – Day 4

Hi 79, Lo 64 – partly cloudy

Wednesday night – Mile 84 – Steele’s Landing

I was wrong about no sounds but owls, frogs, and mosquitoes last night. Coyotes started getting excited about the coming full moon and were yipping all around. I enjoy hearing them though and wonder if they are really communicating with each other or just celebrating the joy of another night of adventure.

After my bird wake up call, I eat a quick breakfast of granola with freeze-dried blueberries and powdered milk, skipping my usually essential coffee. I want to be gone before the gates to the park open at 7:00 a.m. I don’t think the ranger could spot my stealth campsite, but an early exit guarantees I won’t cause him any unnecessary alarm.

I pull out of Cypress Creek into the main body of the Alabama River, and it is dead calm. Great for paddling, but I know it won’t last. There are houses and cabins scattered here and there along the R. E. Woodruff Lake all the way from Montgomery to the Robert F. Henry lock and dam that creates the impoundment. Everything from mansions to crude fishing camps. Eventually, I come to huge bluffs on river right, which I am told are the true southern terminus of the Appalachian Mountains. Of course they are not that tall by most mountain standards, but the underlying geology is the same.

At 9:00 a.m., the wind kicks up strong from the southwest just as I begin a long stretch of the river in that direction. I hate having to work so hard this early because I have a lot of miles to cover today. I take the back side of a long island where the wind is less severe, but that passage is choked with vegetation that drags against my canoe and is a worse impediment than the wind. In this marshy area there are turtle heads everywhere bobbing up and down comically, and it reminds me of an old video game my son used to play that showed gopher heads popping up and down. Eventually, the river turns due south and by hugging the western bank I am out of the worst of the wind. I pass certain spots in the shallows where creatures make big splashes as I pass over, but I can’t see or identify the source.

On a long straightaway, I spot the Robert F. Henry lock and dam from several miles away and it seems to take forever to get there. I finally reach the lock and turn on my cell phone to call the lockmaster.

When the lockmaster answers I say, “I’m requesting permission to lock through downstream sir.”

He asks, “Where are you?”

"I'm at the upstream gate."

"I don't see you," he says.

"I'm in a black canoe with a yellow spray cover."

"Oh there you are. I was looking for a bigger boat. I'll be right down."

Soon, the big gates creak open and I paddle into the lock. The lockmaster walks above me, leans over and asks, "Would you like some bottled water?" "That is mighty thoughtful of you, but I have plenty," I say. "Where are you headed?" he asks. "I'm going to try to make it all the way to the Gulf of Mexico at Fort Morgan," I tell him. "Well good for you young man. I'll tell the folks at the locks below to be on the lookout for you." The monster gates close behind me, and I am now trapped in a huge tank meant for trains of giant barges. A loud horn sounds to warn anyone below the lock that a lot of water is about to be released. The water begins draining from the steel and concrete box I'm in and my canoe sinks deeper and deeper with the dropping water level. It is amazing how quickly the lock drains. Finally, all the weird clanking and gurgling noises cease, and the lower gates swing open, my canoe now level with the water below the dam. The friendly lockmaster shouts, "You be safe now," and I paddle strongly downstream.

Just below the dam there are all manner of waterfowl including coots, loons, ducks, anhingas, commorants, and geese. There is actually a significant current this high above the next dam, and I'm grateful for its assistance against the headwind. After a few miles a big bend in the river takes me on a generally northerly course, and the wind is no longer a factor. But the miles are. I push hard because I want to arrive at my campsite in time to take a swim after setting up camp.

After covering 28 miles, I arrive at my camping spot called Steele's Landing. There is a primitive campsite here consisting of one picnic table and a chemical toilet about three hundred yards up a steep bank from the concrete boat ramp. After making three round trips hauling gear and canoe up the steep incline I am pooped. But the camping spot is actually pretty nice, level with dry, leaf covered ground. There is no one around in this very isolated spot, and I feel somewhat refreshed after a skinny dip. I reassure myself that tomorrow will be an easier day at only about 20 miles, but a call to Amy tells me there is a good chance of strong storms all day tomorrow. I knew I would have rainstorms on a 20 day trip this time of year. I think I am equipped to paddle in the rain, I just hope any rain I encounter will end before I have to make camp.

I close out my journal listening to a shrill chorus of hungry mosquitoes screaming for my blood, but my mosquito netting lets me laugh at the little vampires. Their frenzy to feed usually lets up before midnight, and I hope I can hold off that long before I have to go pee.

April 5, 2012 – Day 5

Hi 76, Lo 56 – Strong thunderstorm, then clearing

Thursday night – Mile 103 – Selma City Marina

I enjoyed a very quiet night, and no one entered the Steele's Landing area the entire time I was there. I have to make three round trips to the boat ramp right after breakfast, but at least it was downhill for the hauling legs. The river level must have dropped three feet last night, and whereas there was visible flow yesterday, today there is none.

The miles go by, and several times I think I see alligators, but they all turn out to be drifting sticks. Later I see a big log floating in my path, but when I get near it thrashes like no piece of wood can to get out of my way. That was one monster gator, but he must have thought I was an even bigger monster.

I like to get out and stretch my legs now and then, but for many miles the only places to get out are covered with gooey muck. I get out in some of these places anyway when I just have to stand up and move around. It feels good to walk barefoot in soft mud, but then I have to go through some tricky gymnastics to relaunch my canoe and clean my feet without getting any mud in my boat. This is a very isolated section of the river, and I go long distances without seeing any signs of habitation. As a paddling friend once told me of this stretch, the solitude is as thick as the humidity.

I pass by an Alabama State Docks facility. It looks impressive, but I have seen zero commercial traffic so far and wonder if it is worth its cost and maintenance.

The sky is becoming increasingly overcast, and I know there is a good chance of strong storms today. I hoped I could at least set up camp before it rained, but I don't think I will make it. As I come out of a big bend to a westerly straightaway, I see a big squall line rapidly approaching. The first wind blasts hit me immediately, strong enough to move the canoe around. I turn out of the main river into a small stream channel where I'm protected from the wind and building waves and pull out my rain gear. My canoe is fitted with a two piece nylon spray cover with the front piece normally partially rolled up to give me an open cockpit. I snap the spray cover fully around me and cinch up the spray skirt. The storm hits fast and furious, and it is a good thing I am out of the main river channel. Big white capped rollers are racing upriver just a few feet from my sheltered little cove. I look around to see if there is anything that might fall on me and to make sure I'm not under the tallest trees around. The rain is pounding and thunder is booming, but the lightning strikes don't hit too close. I am snug and dry, and when I realize I am fairly safe and secure, I enjoy the power and majesty of the storm. What a show for all the senses! I savor the smell of rain cleansed air, relish the feel of cool raindrops on my face, thrill to the sounds of rolling thunder and wind rushing through the trees, and marvel at the sight of

rain sheets sweeping across the river in ever changing patterns. This grand performance is definitely worth the price of admission.

After about 15 minutes, the wind and waves die down a bit, and I decide to go ahead and paddle in it. It is actually quite pleasant and cool for a change. The rain gets lighter but doesn't completely stop for a long time, so I skip two of my normal rest breaks. The rain finally quits just as I pass under the U.S. 80 Selma bypass. But instead of taking a long overdue break, I push on since I am only about four miles from my campsite at Selma City Marina.

In a couple of miles I am in sight of downtown Selma and the Edmund Pettus bridge. I had initially hoped to stay at the historic Saint James Hotel, sitting high on the bluff here, but it was not available. This hotel was built in 1837 and is one of the few surviving pre-Civil War structures downtown. It was spared from destruction during the Yankee occupation because it served as headquarters for the invading officers. The famous outlaws Jesse and Frank James also spent time here in the 1880's. I pass under the Edmund Pettus Bridge and think about what a spectacle I would have seen if I had paddled under it on Bloody Sunday in 1965.

I arrive at the Selma City Marina at 2:30 p.m., early because of my short lunch and skipped afternoon breaks. This city-owned facility has very nice docks and motorboat launching ramps, but there is no store or other amenities. Although it is an official primitive camping spot on the Alabama Scenic River Trail, I don't like the looks of it. It is way too public with people just cruising around in their cars looking for something to do. I'm glad I didn't sweat much today because there is not a good place to take a swim. I spread damp gear out to dry on the sole picnic table and try to ignore the people gawking as they drive around my tent pitched on a small grassy island surrounded by road and parking lot. But I am concerned about what it will be like here after dark.

April 6, 2012 – Day 6
Hi 74, Lo 52 – Mostly cloudy
Friday night – Mile 124 – Till’s Landing

The Selma City Marina area was as I feared—way too public. In addition to being the only decent boat launch facility for miles, it is the local youth cruising spot. Nobody intentionally bothered me, but until well after midnight, cars came prowling through playing what some people consider music at full blast, always with a reverberating, tooth-loosening bass rhythm going “thoomb boom ka choomp, thoomb boom ka choomp,” repeating ad nauseum. I’m just glad I wasn’t there on a Saturday night.

The fishermen started showing up before 6:00 a.m., but that was OK because I was ready to get up and leave as soon as I could see. I did take time to cook a good breakfast though before packing up and moving gear and canoe down to the boat ramp. Just as I was getting ready to depart, a nice man who had taken the time to talk to me yesterday about my trip stopped by to watch my launch. He bid me bon voyage and said he wished he had brought his camera. I wish I had been more thoughtful at the time. I should have asked for his name and address so I could send him some pictures and a copy of my journal.

It is much cooler now that the front has moved through, and with rare winds from the west northwest, I will actually have a tailwind most of the day. After about six miles I come to the end of a fishhook bend and what was once called the Selma day use boat ramp. But the river has reclaimed that ramp and most of the paved road that led to it.

I am now in a very remote area, but see some sort of monument on river right, not far downstream from a large sandbar. There is a cross set in concrete and a similarly set sign that reads:

SHANA COLE
11-19-66 6-22-08
“GOD’S MERMAID
IN HEAVEN”
WE LOVE
&
MISS YOU

Glued to the top of the sign is a plastic porpoise. The sign caption leads me to believe that poor Shana Cole is still at the bottom of the Alabama River, and I paddle solemnly for a while in honor of her and the family that obviously loved her.

I see a lot of pretty great white egrets, but they are camera shy and know just when to fly every time I try to zoom in for a picture. I come to the Corps of Engineers Six Mile Creek Campground and stop to have my lunch at a picnic table, an upgrade from my normal lunch dining facilities. I steal the opportunity to also go to the bath house for a quick hot shower and shave. Bliss!!! Are humans the only animals that can't stand their own odor? How odd that is when you think about it.

Another five miles and the Cahaba River runs into the Alabama on river right. I paddle up the Cahaba and stretch my legs on the ground of Old Cahawba that was Alabama's capitol from 1820 to 1826 and for many years was an important distribution point for cotton shipped down the Alabama River. The Confederates housed a large number of Yankee prisoners of war here, and many of the ones freed at the end of the war were on the steamboat Sultana when it exploded on the Mississippi River, killing 1,600 men. Cahawba became a ghost town shortly after the Uncivil War, and for many years the old buildings and monuments were scavenged for their marble, bricks, and lumber, leaving little to see today of what was once a thriving antebellum city.

As I reenter the Alabama River, I see a red-bellied water snake swimming next to shore. To many people, any snake in the water is a water moccasin, thus leading to the unnecessary end of many a harmless water snake. One way to identify a cottonmouth or water moccasin at a glance is to see if the ridge of the back and the head are entirely out of the water. That is the usual case of cottonmouths but not so with other water snakes.

Mid-afternoon, I arrive at my camping spot for the night, and I must say it has been a very pleasant and easy 21 miles. To a long distance paddler, having overcast skies, cool temperatures, and a moderate tailwind is equivalent to picking the trifecta in a horse race. It is sweet when it happens, but don't count on it very often.

My overnight spot is a cow pasture owned by Buddy Till who graciously allows Alabama Scenic River Trail paddlers to camp on his property. It is easy access, though a tad muddy along the shore. I set up camp on a level spot at the edge of the pasture under a thick canopy of trees. This is many miles from any major road or significant habitation, and I am assured of a much more peaceful night than at the Selma City Marina. I leisurely go about my camp chores, have a delicious dinner of beef stroganoff, and get a fantastic weather report for the next few days when I make my 6:00 p.m. call home. The sky is now perfectly clear, the temperature is dropping, and the wind has died completely. That means there will be very heavy dew in this pasture tonight. Hopefully, the tree canopy will keep me a little drier than if I were in the open field. As twilight ebbs to darkness, I hear some of my favorite night sounds of frogs, crickets, and owls, along with an occasional moo.

April 7, 2012 – Day 7

Hi 76, Lo 52 – Clear

Saturday night – Mile 146 – Bogue Chitto landing

I had worried about the dew in Till's cow pasture, but when the bird calls woke me at 6:00 a.m. it was worse than I thought. A river fog had settled in so thick I imagined I could see it inside the tent. I eased back into the sleeping bag for another 30 minutes. As the sun rose, visibility improved somewhat, and I couldn't wait any longer. By the time I fixed and ate my breakfast, the fog was starting to thin. Everything outside was as wet as if there had been a torrential downpour. I stuffed everything into my waterproof packs except my dripping wet tent which I crammed into a net bag I brought along for such occasions. I loaded my canoe and slid it down a muddy slope.

I launch barefooted in these conditions, so only my feet get muddy. I then dangle my feet over the side of the canoe after I put in and wash before I let them in the boat. I have been on multi-day canoe trips with others who are amazed several days out that the inside of my canoe is clean enough to eat off of while theirs are full of mud and crud. For me at least, accumulated gunk and grime on gear and person makes a camping experience more miserable than necessary, and the only way to prevent it is to remove every speck of dirt as soon as it appears where you don't want it.

The air is dead calm and the glass-smooth river is still shrouded in thick fog, wisps of which curl around my canoe as it knives through the low cloud. It is a beautiful, mystical scene. The fog gradually clears, and the day turns out perfectly clear without a hint of cloud the rest of the day. For two overcast days, I have avoided the dreaded sunscreen, but my fair Irish skin burns under a full moon so now I slather it on. It is an expensive brand, and the tube says "non-greasy, ultra light, clean feel." So why do I feel like a greased pig and can hardly grip my paddle?

I come to some enormous white bluffs called, imaginatively, White Bluff. These amazing cliffs continue for several miles. It is a fine Saturday, and many more fishermen are out. Some are in small aluminum jon boats quietly catching fish under the shade of overhanging trees. But more conspicuous are the slick fiberglass bass boats with glitter paint in race car colors and 250 horsepower motors roaring up and down the river at 60 miles per hour, chasing very fast fish I presume.

At lunchtime, I'm lucky to be at Elm Bluff Public Use Area that has a picnic ground near the boat ramp. I spread my wet tent out on a picnic table, and it dries quickly in the wind and low humidity.

At the end of what is called Middle Bend, there is an imposing mansion with enormous columns facing the river. I have not seen anything approaching this grandeur so far, but when cotton was king, such sights were not uncommon.

I finally come to Bogue Chitto and must paddle up it a mile and a half to my primitive camping spot. The lily pads, cattails, reeds, and cypress remind me of some portions of the Okefenokee Swamp and soon I spy a big alligator. I am able to snap one quick picture before he makes a sudden thrash and disappears. I am camping at a seldom used boat ramp and pleased that even though it is Saturday no one is here and there are no boat trailers parked. I had hoped for a swim to remove some of the slick sunscreen, but the water here is less than inviting, and I don't really want to paddle back down to the main river. But at least I didn't sweat much today, and I can get by with a sponge bath.

After I eat my supper of beef teriyaki with rice, I remain outside and try to write in my journal as I watch a pretty red sunset, but the mosquitoes are so bad I must retreat to my tent. Red sky at night, sailor's delight.

April 8, 2012 – Day 8

Hi 80, Lo 50 – Clear

Easter Sunday night – Mile 172 - Miller's Ferry Campground

My Easter morning sunrise was a glorious golden one, bathing the foggy waters of Bogue Chitto with an enchanting light. It will be a long paddle today, 26 miles on the main river after I paddle over a mile to get to it. The morning is cool and dead calm, and it is a beautiful start paddling through the low mist covering swampy Bogue Chitto, a name meaning big creek in the Choctaw language.

I will have to call this coot day. I see them in singles, pairs, groups, and whole rafts, often with cute coot chicks. I also spook a couple of larger ducks who fly off and leave a single young duckling. I try to paddle close to photograph the young fella and he starts running on top of the water with amazing speed. I follow thinking he'll soon tire of that nonsense and settle down so he can have a proper portrait made. But he keeps up the strenuous water walking for a good three or four minutes while I paddle hard, barely gaining on him. I had almost decided to stop this cruel game when all of a sudden he took off flying like an eagle. I don't think he was just playing with me all that time, so I take credit for teaching that young'un how to fly.

So far, I have not seen any commercial craft, but this river was once busy with steamboats carrying merchandise upstream, cotton bales downstream, and passengers both ways. Hanging on my living room wall is an 1830 map showing Alabama steamboat routes with a chart listing mileage between major landings from Mobile to Montgomery. Steamboat travel was not without risk and many wrecked, exploded, or burned. Just a few miles after I enter Wilcox County, I pass by the site where the steamboat *Orline St. John* burned in 1850. Of the 120 or so passengers, no more than 50 survived. Harvey H. Jackson, III devotes an entire chapter of his excellent book, *Rivers of History*, to describing that tragedy in horrid detail.

As I get almost halfway around Gee's Bend, I see the famous ferry leaving Ellis Landing headed toward the Gee's Bend Landing. Gee's Bend is best known today for the quilts made by the community women descended from former slaves and sharecroppers. Bend residents were isolated for many years when Wilcox County ended its ferry service to the bend in 1962. Although the county claimed otherwise, many think the ferry was closed to prevent the largely black populace from registering to vote. Without ferry service, residents had to drive over an hour on poor roads to get to the Wilcox County Seat of Camden located just a little over two miles across the river. In 2006, the Alabama Department of Transportation finally reestablished ferry operation to Gee's Bend.

The 12 miles of river from Gee's Bend to Miller's Ferry campground is wide and lake-like due to the impoundment created by the lock and dam. The bright sun is bearing down, temperatures are

back in the 80's, and I'm beat by the time I get to the campground right at 4:00 p.m. At least this is another full-facility campground, so after I haul gear and canoe to my reserved spot and set up my tent, I can shower, shave, wash some clothes by hand, and charge my cell phone and camera batteries. Most people camp in RV's these days, so a tent is a curiosity, especially when the only vehicle is a canoe parked in front of the tent. A nice lady walking a Jack Russell terrier stops by to admire my canoe and chat. She asks the usual questions such as how do I get over the dams, aren't I scared traveling by myself, and how can I possibly carry enough food and supplies for a 20 day trip. However, I always enjoy answering those questions to people like her who are truly interested.

I try to write in my journal at the picnic table after dark, but again the mosquitoes drive me into my tent. It's just that time of year.

April 9, 2012 – Day 9

Hi 80, Lo 52 – Clear

Monday night – Mile 194 – Pursley Creek

Thus far, I have known exactly where I was going to stop for the night, but this morning I leave for my first unknown camping spot. In two miles I come to Miller's Ferry lock and dam. It takes well over an hour to lock through because the lockmaster has to reverse the lock. It would have taken less than half that long if the water inside the lock had been level with the upstream pool. Though I hate the long wait, it sure beats having to portage around. As I leave the lock, I pass by dozens of gulls, terns, and other seabirds flying and feeding below the dam. The Gulf beckons.

I am soon churning out the miles with ease. After nine days I am approaching the paddling condition I should have been in to start this trip. Although my arms and shoulders have certainly had their strain, it has been my knees that bothered me most. My solo canoes only paddle efficiently from a kneeling position, and I foolishly went over 6 months without paddling before I started training in March. I was then shocked to find I could no longer kneel more than five minutes without excruciating pain. In aboriginal and many eastern cultures, adults are able to kneel, squat, and sit on the floor comfortably well into their 90's. They sit on cushions or mats instead of chairs and eat at very low tables. American and European adults never squat, kneel, or sit on the floor and because they only sit in chairs, they lose the flexibility in their joints. I resolve never to let that happen to me again. I wonder what Amy will say when I saw the legs off of our dining room table.

The river is fairly monotonous in this stretch, wide with low banks and vegetation extending to the waterline. I pass a boat landing at AL Hwy 10 where I had originally planned to camp, but John Hayes, who has paddled this route, advised that it might not be a pleasant site so close to this heavily traveled, rural highway. Not far below Hwy 10 I see the first large sandbar suitable for camping that I have seen in days, but I want to go a few miles further. I hope that sandbar is a sign of things to come. For much of this trip, access to suitable camping ground other than at boat docks and ramps has been difficult due to muddy shores, and often when I can get up the banks, I find the woods to be an unwelcoming tangled jungle dominated by poison ivy.

Five miles further downstream I start looking for a camping spot in earnest. Just before Pursley Creek I see open ground that looks like it might do. I pull ashore and find that this is a dirt bar rather than a sandbar, and it looked open primarily because it has been so heavily rooted and plowed up by wild hogs. I don't want to pitch my tent in the mud and pig poop, so I follow a pig trail, literally, to the top of a low bluff and find a site that looks good. A dense canopy of mature hardwoods has choked out the undergrowth and there is level leaf-covered ground. I haul gear up the bluff and pitch my camp in what feels like deep wilderness untouched by humans.

After a supper of chicken with rice, the temperature cools as the sun sets, but the mosquito activity heats up. I suddenly realize this is my ninth day out and I haven't built a fire yet. What kind of camping is that? I build a small fire and occasionally throw in a punky piece of wood that makes a lot of smoke. By sitting near the edge of the drifting smoke, I can write in my journal without skeeters buzzing in my ears.

On this bluff in a V between Pursley Creek and the river, the numerous night creatures announce their presence with vigor as twilight fades to dusk. First the birds publicize their roosting spots, then the spring peepers and tree frogs start singing. Later, bullfrogs add bass notes against a drone of chirping crickets and other noisy insects. Several different owl species are hooting, chuck-will's-widows are calling on both sides of the creek, and I hear a distant coyote howl. This is a lively place.

By 8:00 p.m., it is fully dark, and the cheerful evening noises begin to abate. I soon crawl in my sleeping bag and wonder what else might be wandering in these remote woods. From experience I know that very late at night, most of the familiar creatures become silent. That is when I am most likely to be startled awake by something unusual—the crashing of something heavy in the undergrowth, the yowl of a bobcat, or some unidentifiable rumble that seems strange and sinister—the sort of sounds that spark legends and scary stories.

April 10, 2012 – Day 10

Hi 80, Lo 48 – Clear

Tuesday night – Mile 216 – Tallatchee Creek

I awake to a place as lively and noisy as it was last evening. There is more variety of bird song than I recall hearing at any one time. I am not too good at identifying many bird calls, but even if I were it would be like trying to pick out a single conversation in a full auditorium before a show. I eat a leisurely breakfast, pack, and leave this happy ground along the pig trail to my canoe. Like many mornings, there is a blanket of fog on the river. It is cool, cold in fact in my damp swim trunks and short sleeve shirt as I launch my canoe a little after 7:00 a.m.

I paddle hard to warm up, and it feels good. I keep up a good pace and don't stop until my normal 9:00 a.m. break and realize I've covered over 8 miles in less than 2 hours. I'll have to slow down or I'll soon burn out. The increasing heat is giving me the incentive to slow down, however. In a while I come to very high bluffs on river right called Yellow Bluff. Swallows are numerous and perform amazing aerial acrobatics as they appear to alternate between feeding and darting in and out of their nest holes dug into the bluffs that make great places for them to hide their eggs and young from predators.

I paddle on the shady side of the river when I can even though this means I sometimes have to take the long way around a bend. But between 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., there is no shady side and the intense sun with no wind wears on me. I remind myself I prefer no wind to headwind. Eventually I come to Tallatchee Creek that purportedly has good camping ground. Some have described it as a beautiful place, but I find the creek exceedingly murky and the surrounding land low, wet, and uninviting. I paddle about a mile up the creek until I can proceed no further. I am very close to Bell Landing with its primitive campsite, but unusually low water levels prevent me from quite reaching it. Maybe I could force my way up, but then if the river dropped further overnight like I have seen it do before, I could be stuck. I paddle back down to the second old pier I had seen coming upstream and decide to make camp there. The old pier is covered with an inch of dried mud and it looks like no one has been here in years. There is some fairly decent ground to pitch my tent on and the woods are open and kind of pretty, but this place obviously floods often. Silt and mud three feet up tree trunks show the height of the last flood. A layer of silt on the leaf covered ground tells me the flood occurred after the last of the leaves fell. I set up camp and paddle back down to the river for a swim. Tallatchee Creek is just too dirty even for a sponge bath.

I cook supper and build another smoky fire to keep mosquitoes at bay. I try every alternative before I resort to putting DEET on my body, though sometimes that is the only thing that works. As darkness approaches, I'm struck by how silent it is. Few frogs, no owls, and only an occasional bird now and then calling from roost. I don't even hear many crickets. How different

from last night. Where are the critters? Is this place haunted? It is too warm to sit close to the fire and too early to turn in so I decide to take a night stroll through these silent woods with my headlight. I come to a spot where I see glitter on the ground everywhere—spider eyes. I know of nothing that reflects light as well as spider eyes and the ground here is crawling with zillions of them. They look like baby wolf spiders, but I'm not sure. I eventually spook something that must be large because it breaks sticks as it scampers off and I decide it is time to go back to my fire and tent.

Inside my tent as I get ready to close out my journal, I hear something of size moving slowly towards me. I estimate it is 30 feet away when it stops and makes a long, low, rumbling grunt. I hold my breath and strain to hear another sound. I wait and wait. Nothing. The night is absolutely still and I wonder how an animal that sounded so big could be so close and then move away without crunching a single twig or leaf. Wild hog or something else? I'll never know.

April 11, 2012 – Day 11

Hi 77, Lo 52 – Partly cloudy, brief light rain

Wednesday night – Mile 234 – Isaac Creek Campground

I heard fewer birds this morning than any day on this trip. There is something ominous about this spot on Tallatchee Creek, and I hurry to leave it to the "swamp hain't" or whatever it is that haunts this cheerless place.

When I emerge from narrow Tallatchee creek into the Alabama River channel I see something I haven't seen in a while—clouds. They are low hanging stratus clouds and don't look too thick, so at first I figure they'll burn off with full daylight. Instead, they thicken and a light rain starts to fall, but not enough to make me don rain gear. After about thirty minutes, the sky clears amazingly fast, and a brisk wind picks up from the north, but that's OK with me because I'm headed south.

The day is uneventful, and I'm burning up the miles with a cool wind to my back. I look up at some point and a small, moving dot catches my eye. I have to watch a while before I realize it is a bald eagle. It is almost straight overhead and so high it fades from view now and then, but when it turns just right to the sun, the white head and tail provide positive identification.

Even with normal snack and lunch breaks, I make the 19 miles to Isaac Creek by 1:30 p.m. I was able to make such good time because of ideal weather and eagerness to get to this full-facility campground. Brother Ralph meets me here with a resupply box, quarters for the washing machine, and makings for a supper different from my normal freeze-dried fare. I discard gear I don't need, refill my food pack, and swap my favorite canoeing tent for a standalone tent that won't require staking and is thus better suited for the sandbars and beaches where I will be camping below here. Then it is time to get the showering and clothes washing out of the way so I can kick back and enjoy a little civilized camping: sitting at a table, talking to human beings, hearing a little news, being lazy, drinking a cold beer.

Ralph cooks lamb chops with taters, onions, and gravy and afterwards surprises me with Butterfinger pie for dessert. What a brother! He even brings some spirit lifting spirits which I savor sparingly. We sit around a campfire that feels good on an unusually chilly night and discuss shared adventures past and yet to come. Our conversation is interrupted at one point when three nearby owls get into a heated argument and a donkey across the river starts braying in protest at the ruckus.

April 12, 2012 – Day 12

Hi 76, Lo 52 – Clear

Thursday night – Mile 254 – One mile below old Dale Ferry Landing

Ralph perks a pot of cowboy coffee over the campfire and makes his version of Egg McMuffins. I wish I could stay and let my little brother spoil me longer, but I must break camp and begin what will be very primitive camping for the next several days.

Just below Isaac Creek Campground, I lock through Claiborne lock and dam and though it is my third such experience on this trip, I marvel that the Corps will operate this mighty contraption for the benefit of my little canoe. Below Claiborne dam, the river is no longer constrained and is free to run its natural course. Large sand and gravel bars are numerous. Many of the upstream bars are now underwater though their names still remain on the map. Early steamboat pilots named every one and relied on them as navigation markers.

I stop for lunch on a big gravel bar and find a paddlefish washed up on shore, the first one I've ever seen outside of books. It is almost four feet long and hasn't been dead long because the eyes are still clear. The skin is barely broken, but one side appears to have suffered a heavy blow, probably from a motorboat. Paddlefish are bizarre looking creatures with a long paddle-like snout that comprises a third of its length. They look almost shark-like and remind me of a sawfish without the teeth, but are more closely related to sturgeons. They are filter feeders and have a huge gaping mouth to suck in the plankton they feed on. They will not bite a baited hook, but people used to snag them with big treble hooks for their tasty flesh and caviar. They are now threatened in Alabama and illegal to catch.

Despite a late start and having to go through the lock, I've covered 20 miles by 3:00 p.m. and decide that's a pretty good day. I stop at an abandoned boat landing no longer accessible by road and find a decent camping spot not too far uphill. Almost two hundred years ago, Alabama's most famous canoe trip began and ended near here. For just downstream in November 1813, a black man named Caesar paddled Sam Dale, Jeremiah Austill and James Smith in a small canoe to overtake a large canoe occupied by nine Redstick Creek warriors. When the two canoes collided, Caesar locked them together with his mighty grip while Sam Dale and his other two companions, though outnumbered three to one, dispatched the Redsticks in brutal hand-to-hand combat amid cheers from spectators on both sides of the river. The skirmish was of no strategic consequence in the Creek War, but it elevated Sam Dale to legendary status as a frontier hero and many places in Alabama still bear his name.

All is at peace on the frontier now, and I explore my surroundings without fear. A big bonus of this campsite is a patch of ripe dewberries that make a great compliment to my freeze-dried beef

stew. A good campfire and a few coyote calls end a pleasant evening in this remote part of the world.

April 13, 2012 – Day 13

Hi 82, Lo 52 – Partly cloudy

Friday night – Mile 284 – Sandbar one mile below the Dixie Cutoff

It is a little cool this morning, and as I eat breakfast I dread having to strip to nothing but swimsuit and short sleeve shirt. It is a bright sunny day, and I seek the sunny side of the river to warm up. I will wish for a shady side by afternoon. There are now huge sandbars on the inside of all the river bends and they all have names on my maps. Today it was names like Pigeon Creek Bar, Mistress Gray Bar, Flynn Bar, Shackelford Bar, and California Bar. They appeared on all the old steamboat navigation charts that told just how to navigate around them for the deepest channel.

Midmorning I see the first tug pushing a barge. At first I thought I was finally seeing some commercial traffic, but it was actually a Corps of Engineers tug pushing some kind of maintenance barge with a large crane. There are a lot of people fishing today, by boat and on the banks. Near a stream called Waller Creek, I see what appears to be a community gathering or a big family outing, many fishing with cane poles. There is a large woman cooling her feet in the water by sitting on an overturned bucket right at the edge of the river. She is wearing a pretty, bright green dress that strikes me as odd attire for cane pole fishing. When I pass nearby she waves and then surprises me by yelling, "Hey mister, I saw you yesterday 'bout 20 miles upriver. Where you goin'?" I say, "Ma'am, I'm hoping to make it all the way to the Gulf of Mexico at Fort Morgan." She exclaims, "In that little bitty thing?" There is no use trying to respond to that so I just say, "Will I see you again tomorrow another 20 miles downstream?" She chuckles and adds, "You just can't never tell."

Early afternoon the sun is really bearing down, but I laugh to myself when I pass Shomo Creek. I don't know the origin of the name, but it seems like something I would see on a T-shirt or homemade sign during Maris Gras in New Orleans. But there is no one around for me to Sho' Mo' to.

I come to Red Eagle landing, and not too far downstream there is a Red Eagle creek. Also nearby is Weatherford road. These are just a few of the many places in Alabama named for William Weatherford, or Red Eagle, the famed Redstick Creek warrior who led a most remarkable life in war and in peace.

A mile further downstream I pass by the site of Fort Stonewall on river right. This was a Confederate fort built to protect river traffic on the Alabama River. A cannon retrieved from this fort sits in front of city hall in Jackson, Alabama. I am told the earthworks for this fort are intact and well-preserved, but it is on private property and I have miles more to paddle and no time to explore.

A mile past what is known as Dixie Cut-off, I come to a very large sandbar on river right. That is where I'm stopping for the night and I have had more than enough paddling for one day. I made 30 miles today, quite an accomplishment for me on this barely moving river. At the back of the sandbar I find a level spot in the shade of a sycamore tree, and my tent can face east to catch the early morning sun. Across the river and just a little over a mile to the east is the grave of William Weatherford, or Red Eagle, along with a cairn memorializing his mother Sehoy, who was the sister of the great Creek leader Alexander McGillivray.

This is a picturesque site, but there is only one problem with camping on a sandbar—the dadblamed sand. I have a sheet of plastic for a doormat and with great care and a bushy limb for a broom, I whisk enough sand off myself on each entry to keep most of the grit out of my bedroom. I take a quick swim and air dry on this remote nudist colony of one. I cook supper and while waiting for it to cool, turn on my cell phone for an attempt to call home. There is no hint of a cell signal though, and I'm not sure there will be for the next two nights. Amy knew this was a possibility, but I think she has confidence in my ability to make it through to more civilized parts and won't worry. By pushing hard these last two days, I've potentially cut a whole day off my trip. Amy, daughter Jennifer, and grandson Jack are not picking me up until the 20th, but I have been worried about what I would do if I encountered unfavorable conditions on Mobile Bay. Now I should have an extra day to play with and can sit tight for a day if necessary.

I am very tired, but feel good about how well the trip has gone thus far. I sit on my doormat and watch the river change colors from the reflected sunset behind me. I own this sandbar and this beautiful scene and could not be less connected to the concerns of the modern world. The night sounds begin, the light fades, and I crawl contented into my sleeping bag.

April 14, 2012 – Day 14

Hi 81, Lo 56 – Partly cloudy, windy

Saturday night – Mile 302 – Sandbar at end of Mims Cutoff

While eating breakfast, the solitude of this sandbar is interrupted by boat races. It is Saturday and there must be a bass tournament because men in logo jackets and hats are racing to get to their prescouted honey holes. I pack all my gear and more sand than I want and join them on the river, albeit at a much slower pace. I am passing another sandbar when a bass boat cuts right in front of me at high speed sending a massive wave that could have swamped me had I not been facing it head on. I get slight satisfaction when the driver utters a string of profanity upon seeing another boat already in the eddy at the tail end of that deep bar he was in such a hurry to get to.

I have seen a lot of homemade shanty boats on this lower part of the Alabama River. Some are quite elegant, some quite primitive. Most are apparently weekend retreats, but a few seem to be full-time abodes. They float, more or less, on aluminum pontoons, steel drums, plastic barrels, or Styrofoam blocks including the constantly shedding beaded Styrofoam. The sad thing is that so many are simply abandoned when they deteriorate beyond usefulness.

It is a pretty Spring Saturday and a lot of people are fishing other than the tournament guys. The wind has been steadily increasing, and soon it is blowing 15 to 20 miles per hour from the southeast. Whitecaps appear on the straightaways facing that direction. It is tough going when I face the wind, and I have to work hard to make forward progress. Of course in this twisty section of the river the wind is sometimes in my favor, but the push from tailwinds does not even out the effort expended fighting headwinds.

Luckily I have a short day of only 18 miles planned and arrive at my campsite on a sandbar early in the afternoon. This sandbar lies at the tail end of what is called the Fort Mims cutoff. Two miles to the east is the site of the famous Fort Mims massacre. On August 13, 1813, almost all the fort's 500 or so occupants were killed by Redstick warriors. The Redstick Creeks also suffered heavy losses with 200 to 400 said to have died in the attack. Some of the few fort survivors fled to the river, and I wonder if any hid near my campsite.

I am not a big fan of sandbar camping for reasons I have already stated, but there is one big bonus here. One side of the bar is covered in dewberries, large, ripe and delicious. I gorge on them for my pre-dinner salad.

April 15, 2012 – Day 15

Hi 84, Lo 71 – Mostly cloudy, high winds

Sunday night – Mile 329 – Mobile/Tensaw Delta 1 mile below I-65

I get a nice early start for what will be a very long day against fierce headwinds, but it begins relatively calm. All along the lower Alabama I have been amazed at the number of jumping fish, large and small. I have seen good sized shad shoot two feet in the air and go 10 horizontal feet, I guess to escape some fiercesome predator fish. Mid-morning, a carp of about five pounds decides to hitch a ride with me. It would not have been so bad had he jumped in front of me, but he went in the canoe behind my seat which made it exciting for both of us before I evicted him.

The wind picks up strong from the south southeast, and as I turn down a two mile stretch headed in that direction there are big rollers hitting me head on. But I am fresh and feel strong as I paddle hard, and the front end of the canoe rises and falls gracefully over each wave, spray going right and left. For a while it is a thrilling ride, and I have the sensation of great speed, though that is only relative to the wind and waves because my true forward progress is greatly diminished. Before long, I meet the Tombigbee River, which spells the end of the Alabama and begins the Mobile River. All of a sudden I am on a huge river. It reminds me of the Mississippi River, and I feel very small indeed. Almost immediately I meet true commercial traffic for the first time on this trip. A large pretty tugboat is pushing a string of barges upstream toward the Tombigbee. A log floats by, and I notice it has barnacles on it. I am now in the realm of tides and coastal influence. The sandbars are all covered with gulf shorebirds of every description from sandpipers and plovers to gulls and terns. I also see pelicans for the first time.

The wind gets stronger and it is no longer fun paddling into it on this big water. I have to paddle for all I am worth to make headway. Small though it is, my canoe can handle the waves as long as I can continue pushing straight into them or just off by no more than a quarter. But I must not let up for a moment or risk getting broadside to the wind and waves with potentially disastrous results. I come to the point where the Tensaw River splits from the Mobile River, and I turn left onto the Tensaw. It goes due east a couple of miles, and I am relatively sheltered from the wind by sticking to the southern shore. But all too quickly, the Tensaw turns south southeast and I again face the worst of the wind. Several miles later and almost exhausted I come to where the Middle River splits from the Tensaw. I had originally planned to take the Middle River, but it turns south into the wind so I take the Tensaw, which goes east at this point. There is a primitive camping spot just a few hundred yards from the juncture of the Middle and Tensaw where I have stayed before, and I will stop there and consider my options.

When I get to that camping spot, I find that the metal pier that was once attached to the bank has broken loose and is now under water. It would be a difficult, muddy task to get myself, gear, and canoe up the bank. I would like to make another 10 miles, and it is plenty early to do that if not

for the 20+ mile per hour headwinds. However, I am familiar with this area and know that Bottle Creek is just a mile ahead, and I figure that small creek will be more sheltered and calmer than this big water. Though it will be a more circuitous route, it will take me most of the way to where I hope to camp.

I turn into the small channel of Bottle Creek, and it is indeed better. I pass near the site of the famous Bottle Creek Indian Mounds. There are 18 platform mounds here, the largest of which is about 50 feet high. The five largest mounds surround a central plaza. There are many mysteries surrounding the ancients that lived here such as why they built on such an inaccessible spot and how they supported a large population on land that does not appear suitable to extensive agriculture. I don't stop to explore though because I have visited before and don't want darkness to catch me in the swamp with no place to camp. I am now in the very heart of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, the second largest river delta in the U.S., surpassed only by the Atchafalaya basin. This vast wetland of cypress, tupelo, marsh, and bottomland hardwood contains a maze of rivers, creeks, lakes, bayous, and backwater sloughs. A careless navigator could get hopelessly lost here. The diversity of birds and animals is unmatched in Alabama and includes the alligator, red bellied turtle, black bear, and, some say, Florida panther. Much of our upper Gulf Coast seafood is born in the waters here. I keep a sharp lookout for creatures but see only one alligator in Bottle Creek. Most birds and critters lay low when the winds get high. Paddlers with good sense do the same.

Eventually, Bottle Creek dumps me back into the Middle River about two miles from my destination. But what a tough two miles it is. My muscles are screaming from the fight once again against wind and waves on big water. I pass under the Interstate 65 bridge and a mile below, the Middle and Tensaw Rivers merge once again. I find the primitive campsite I've been struggling to reach on the east bank just as it is getting dark. This was a 28 mile day under terrible conditions, and I feel like I've been through the ringer. I'm glad I decided to go the extra 10 miles though because that should assure me of reaching Meaher State Park at a decent hour tomorrow. I hurriedly pitch my tent in the waning light and cook my supper. A call home and I get the news I can expect the same wind conditions tomorrow, with rain. But Meaher State Park is only 19 miles away, so surely I can make that now.

April 16, 2012 – Day 16

Hi 84, Lo 69 – Rainy morning, clearing in the afternoon

Monday night – Mile 348 – Meaher State Park

Last night's sleep is broken by rain, a hard rain. I have everything that must stay dry inside my storm-worthy tent, but I am wishing I had the forethought to turn my canoe upside down before I went to bed. I put it out of my mind and resume a good sleep. I don't mind camping in the rain, but I hate packing up wet gear. At first light, I sit inside the tent and stuff all my gear into the waterproof packs, and then roll my soggy tent into the net bag. I scarf down a quick cold breakfast of granola and powdered milk, and then dump an amazing amount of water out of the canoe.

As I shove off, it is starting to drizzle, but I am just happy that there is no wind. I know that won't last, so I try to click off some good miles in a hurry. An hour and a half later I have burned over six miles, but the wind is increasing right in my face and I am once again in very big water for a little solo canoe. It takes me two and a half hours to make the next six miles, and that finds me at Blakeley State Park at 11:00 a.m., or lunch time. I pull up to a pier and enjoy standing a few minutes while I eat a quick lunch. It was on this site that the last major battle of the Civil War was fought. Fort Blakeley was the last Confederate fort defending the eastern shore of Mobile Bay. Four thousand Confederates fended off Yankee troops for over a week before being overwhelmed by much larger forces on April 9, 1865, just hours after Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox.

Just beyond the park, the Tensaw breaks off to the west, but I go south on the Apalachee River facing the strong wind with occasional gusts that scare me. However, I know I am only about six miles from my destination and confident I can paddle as strong as I need to for that distance. I am also motivated to get to a full-facility campground after primitive camping in the extreme for several days. In three miles, the Apalachee river bears southwest, and I turn southeast onto the Blakeley River. I can now see the U.S. 90 bridge, locally simply called "The Causeway." The waves and wind make those last three miles excruciatingly slow and I take several channels through the reeds lining the western bank of the Blakeley River that don't block much wind, but do buffer the waves. I am a very tired but happy canoeist after I go under The Causeway and turn into the cove at Meaher State Park.

I am so glad I toughed it out yesterday to make those extra 10 miles. That gives me time to enjoy the amenities of this campground. First I take care of business. I string a temporary clothesline among trees in the primitive camping section of the campground and hang up my wet tent fly, tent and groundsheet. In the wind and sun, it only takes a few minutes for everything to dry. After my camp is set up and prepared for the night, I head to the bath house with dirty body and clothes. After a good shower and shave, I wash and dry dirty clothes.

I am safe, clean and secure, but physically drained. I can barely keep my eyes open as I eat supper. The last three days of strong headwinds have pushed the limits of my endurance. I am now only a mile from the entrance to Mobile Bay. I would not stick my big toe in Mobile Bay if the wind was blowing like it was today, but the forecast for tomorrow morning is for relatively light winds out of the east northeast. If that forecast holds it will be perfect.

After supper, I stroll down to a pier and see another interesting dead fish, an alligator gar. The name is no mystery when you see the long snout containing two rows of sharp teeth. They have very tough scales that reportedly were used by indigenous hunters as arrowheads. Some specimens over eight feet long have been caught, but this poor guy is less than three feet long. I walk over to the south end of the park where I can watch the sunset and get a good view of the bay. It looks like an ocean, and I wonder if only a crazy person would attempt to cross it in an open canoe. If so, call me crazy.

April 17, 2012 – Day 17

Hi 80, Lo 62 – Partly cloudy, becoming overcast, then heavy rain

Tuesday night – Mile 359 – Baron's Inn, Fairhope

I paddle my canoe from the pier at Meaher State Park and pull into the last mile of the Blakeley River. Interstate 10 is dead ahead. There are lots of reeds and weed beds in the lower part of the Mobile/Tensaw Delta, and in the next mile and a half I see more alligators than I've seen in the rest of this trip combined. There are oodles of busy aquatic birds including some I'm seeing for the first time on this trip such as little green herons and bitterns. I take some good pictures of a reddish brown crane-like bird and hope someone can identify it for me later. An osprey pair building a nest in the top of a stunted bald cypress screams at me as I intrude in their territory.

Entering big Mobile Bay for the first time in a canoe is a humbling experience. Looking to the south southwest is nothing but water as far as my eyes can see. About six miles to the west, the skyline of the City of Mobile looks ghostly through the morning haze. But the wind is gentle from the east and that has laid the waters flat along the Eastern Shore. I could not have dreamed such ideal conditions for my first venture into the bay. I resist the temptation to take a straight-line course and hug the shoreline as close as possible. I know winds here can be fickle, and after all this should be my shortest paddling day of the trip. I should easily arrive at my destination before predicted storms move in this afternoon.

There are a lot of very long piers along this heavily developed coastline, but many of them have been mostly destroyed by past storms, leaving only the pilings, which are coveted perches of the seabirds. There are not enough perches to go around, and there is constant squabbling over possession of the taller pilings with the best view. Gulls squawk angrily when I get near, but the pelicans seem almost tame.

About 9:30 a.m., the wind picks up a bit and becomes more southerly. By 10:00 a.m., there is a worrisome chop in the bay and ominous storm clouds are building to the west. I am thankful I don't have too much further to go.

At noon, I arrive at the pier of American Legion Post #199, located at the south end of Fairhope. The post commander graciously allows me to store my canoe under a pavilion at their nice private park on the bay, and I walk directly across the street to check into a small motel. This will be the first night not spent in a tent in 17 days. I check in for two nights because I am one day ahead of schedule, and tomorrow's weather forecast does not bode well for canoeing in the bay. Something else I do for the first time in 17 days is look in a mirror. Yikes! I'm shocked at how gaunt I look. Although I tried to include a lot of calories in my meals and snacks, I've obviously been burning a lot more than I've consumed. Constant exposure to wind, sun, and

physical strain also shows on my face. Well, I intend to have fun making up for some of that calorie deficit over the next day and a half.

Although rain looks imminent, I make the almost two-mile walk to downtown Fairhope for a good restaurant meal and to buy a few odds and ends I would like to have. I get back to the motel just as the rain begins, and it continues for hours. I could not be luckier to have canoe, gear, and self out of the weather, but I am bored. I spread out my gear over every square inch of the motel room and clean, sort, organize and plan for the two days of paddling I have left, the two days that have concerned me most from the start. I have a great Italian supper at nearby Gambino's Restaurant and finish it off with a big slice of cheesecake. I think I could get accustomed to civilized living with a little practice. I don't set my alarm before I slide under clean, crisp sheets for the night. Tomorrow is rest and relaxation day, and I can sleep as late as I like.

April 18, 2012 – Day 18

Hi 75, Lo 57 – Rain early, then partly cloudy

Wednesday night – Mile 359 – Baron's Inn, Fairhope

I don't get my usual bird wakeup call, but still wake promptly at 5:45 a.m. even though the room is very dark. I try to go back to sleep to no avail, so I get up, shower, and get ready to walk downtown for breakfast. But when I look outside it is still raining. Rats! I would have to walk over a mile to get to a restaurant that serves breakfast and a check of the Weather Channel shows the rain will probably continue another couple of hours. I make do with trail food from my pack.

The rain moves out mid-morning and I walk along the bay front toward downtown. Fairhope deserves its reputation as one of the prettiest towns in the U.S. The city's waterfront park is almost a mile long and very appealing with interesting outdoor sculptures, butterfly gardens, and attractive plantings along shady sidewalks. Strong winds from the north northwest are crossing a lot of water before they get here and waves are crashing against the seawall as I walk through the park. Even if I had not planned a holiday, I could not have paddled in the bay today.

At the huge Fairhope pier, I turn right onto Fairhope Avenue toward downtown. The high-priced homes in this area are all gorgeous and beautifully landscaped. Every street corner has planters filled with flowering plants and hanging baskets overflowing with blossoms hang from corner street posts. Downtown is filled with quaint shops and restaurants, and this affluent town seems artfully designed to extract every dollar from the senior citizen tour groups that frequent here. Fairhope claims to be the world's oldest and largest single tax colony. All the land in the city is owned by the Fairhope Single Tax Corporation. Formed in 1894, the founders stated they wanted to establish "...a model community or colony, free from all forms of private monopoly, and to secure to its members therein equality of opportunity, the full reward of individual efforts, and the co-operation in matters of general concern." Residents and business owners enter into 99 year renewable leases with the corporation and own only the improvements. Rent paid to the corporation is used to cover all state, county, and local taxes and to enhance the community by supporting such things as public parks, the library, and the historical museum. This socialist arrangement seems to have served this proud community well. Arden, Delaware is the only other city in the U.S. that operates similarly.

At 11:00 a.m. I go into Julwin's Southern Country Restaurant and am pleased to find they serve breakfast all day. I get the eggs I earlier craved in the form of a big western omelet. I pile on more needed calories by slathering the whole wheat toast with lots of butter, strawberry jam and orange marmalade.

After lunch I go to the public library that is magnificent for a town this size. An accommodating young librarian helps me find tide, wind, and wave information for the next two days. I then

wander the city streets and boutique shops, but don't really find much that interests me. I have to admit I am bored and lonely. It seems odd that I should feel this way when surrounded by crowds of people but was not once bored or lonely when truly alone at remote, wilderness campsites.

I eat supper at Wintzel's Oyster House and find plenty of good conversation at the bar. For dessert, a big serving of bread pudding dripping with melted, buttery icing really cheers me up, and I am ready to take on the rest of Mobile Bay.

April 19, 2012 – Day 19

Hi 82, Lo 56 – Partly cloudy

Thursday night – Mile 380 – Sand spit on Bon Secour

I leave my motel room at 6:00 a.m. with packs in hand and cross the street to where my canoe is stored under the American Legion pavilion. I am disturbed by how rough the bay looks. At first the wind is not terribly strong at about 10 miles per hour, but it is from the north northwest and crosses miles of water before it hits this point on the Eastern Shore. I get the canoe loaded and shove off. The choppy, two foot high swells are hitting me from the stern. The wind gets worse and I begin to worry. It is strenuous paddling into the wind and waves, but it is more dangerous to paddle a canoe in a strong following sea. For one thing, I cannot see the big waves coming, but worse, the canoe wants to surf down the larger rollers, and canoes are not made to surf well. The tendency is for the canoe to broach sideways, and I have to be on constant guard to prevent it. Paddling hard gives me the best control, but sometimes my paddle catches only air when canoe is perched on the crest of a large wave. I wouldn't say I was terrified, but I am remembering all the warnings I received that Mobile Bay was no place for an open canoe.

In three miles I reach Point Clear and the Marriott Grand Hotel Resort. Inside my head a voice of reason says: "You should pull over here. You've made it 362 miles, no bad accomplishment, and why risk disaster? What's wrong with staying in a luxurious four-star hotel until Amy and company arrive on Friday?" But at Point Clear the coast line makes a sharp turn to the east and suddenly I am in more protected waters. Reason gives way to the optimism that maybe I can make it to the Gulf of Mexico after all. After a couple of miles, the coast turns more southerly, and the following seas sneak up behind me again. It is not as scary as an hour ago, but bad enough that reason says, "You missed your chance for a graceful exit back there buddy."

At 9:00 a.m., the winds suddenly cease completely. The bay calms down, and the birds go berserk, squawking and taking to the air from their perches. It is easier for them to see their prey fish when the water is smooth, and the feeding frenzy is on. The gulls and terns dive for their catch gracefully and immediately resume full flight. But pelicans look awkward falling into the water with wings askew and then, fish or no, they sit motionless in the water for a few moments as if stunned by the impact.

The calm I enjoyed signified changing weather conditions but not an end to the wind. Before long the wind starts increasing, this time from the west. As I adjust to wind and waves from a new direction, I am faced with another dilemma—I need to pee. The Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay is very heavily populated with almost one continuous seawall and no break between residences from Spanish Fort to Weeks Bay. There is simply no place to pull over to answer nature's call. Finally in desperation, I pull out a large plastic cup from my canoe thwart bag and

do what I have to do. I rinse it well in the salt water and hope I'll have a memory lapse next time I use the cup for its intended purpose.

The winds get stronger and the westerly direction means big waves build up on the east side of the bay. Before long I'm rocking, rolling, surfing and sloughing in the big rollers. I have now had experience with waves from all directions and have more confidence in the ability of my canoe to handle them as long as the captain pays attention to what he's doing. Paddling in large waves first from behind and then from my right side has been nerve wracking, but it does not impede my forward progress, and I cover the 21 miles to Bon Secour bay in record time. There is a long, narrow, uninhabited sand spit protruding into Bon Secour from the north that is my planned camping ground. According to both Wikipedia and the website of the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, Bon Secour is a French phrase meaning "safe harbor." But I believe the literal French translation would be "good rescue." Both meanings sound good to me, and I am glad to find a good rescue from the waves in this safe harbor.

The sand spit is mostly covered in brush above the tide line, but I locate an open, level camping spot elevated just enough to be safe from high tide. There is marsh to my east, but maybe the westerly winds will keep the mosquitoes away from me. It is a pretty site, and I look forward to a leisurely afternoon. There is a lot of driftwood lumber around, and I use it to pave a little sand free area in front of my tent for my stove and gear. I explore the shore and come to a section of beach sparsely covered with patchy cordgrass where the ground seems to be moving. There are many thousands of tiny crabs that move in unison away from my approach. Depending on what is closer, they scoot into the water, run into the dense undergrowth higher on shore, or drop down their burrow holes in the sand. At their densest there must be 30 per square foot. They look like baby blue crabs to me and, if so, there will soon be no shortage of tasty adults.

Higher up on the beach there are low crawling vines sporting funnel-form flowers, white with yellow centers. I find a pile of bones from some unidentifiable sea creature and enjoy beachcombing a shore seldom marked by human footprints. Looking up the Bon Secour River I watch a shrimp boat, the Becky Lyn, move slowly into Mobile Bay. It looks to be an older wooden boat, but is spic and span with a fresh coat of royal blue paint, ready for the shrimping season that opens soon.

After supper, I sit on the makeshift driftwood patio in front of my tent and watch the big red glowing sun sink into the bay. I enjoy breathing the salt air carried by the westerly wind that also keeps me more mosquito free than any camping night this trip. At bedtime, I have a new sound to lull me to sleep—waves lapping against the shore.

April 20, 2012 – Day 20

Hi 79, Lo 59 – Partly cloudy

Friday afternoon – Mile 400 – Gulf of Mexico at Fort Morgan

I wake to seabirds calling, and the breaking dawn is wind free. But as I'm stuffing my sleeping bag into its sack, the tent suddenly shakes from a gust. That is soon followed by another, then another, until it is strong and steady out of the southwest while I'm trying to strike the tent. By the time I am ready to launch, the waves have built up considerably. I have three miles of open water to paddle before I hit the northern shore of the Fort Morgan peninsula and am a little uncomfortable in the crossing until I get within easier swimming distance from the shore.

The Fort Morgan peninsula extends due west and blocks some of the southerly component of the wind. Running close to and parallel to the shore is long string of big fishing floats about 30 feet apart, and I lift one to find a large crab trap attached. Before long I see a big flat bottom boat rigged with a small crane. A lone crabber on board is methodically checking each trap in this line that must extend for at least two miles.

The day is pretty with an azure blue sky, decorated early with cirrus mare's tails that are slowly replaced with cumulus puffs. The shore in undeveloped areas alternates between snow white sand and marshes where tall but scraggly pond pines grow right to the waterline. Osprey and other raptors are surveying the marshes from high perches. I have a special treat when two porpoises pass by me, and then leap repeatedly in front of the canoe as if leading the way.

The wind shifts to a more westerly course, and I have to work hard to drive into it on this last day. I had told Amy I expected to arrive at the Fort Morgan pier by 2:00 p.m. After all, I paddled 21 miles yesterday to arrive at my campsite by 1:30 p.m., and I only have to paddle 19 miles today. But I had not counted on this strong headwind, and I call Amy at lunch time to tell her I will be later than first expected. After passing by heavily developed Navy Cove, the Fort Morgan peninsula widens and a point juts out into Mobile Bay. My course turns northwest for a few miles and the paddling is easier along this more protected shore. I am passing by the largest portion of the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, and it looks very interesting. The wetlands on my left are intersected with numerous channels and bayous that lead to both salt and freshwater marshes that are havens for a wide variety of birds and animals. I would like to come back some day and explore this area at a leisurely pace, but today I am focused on completing my journey.

As I round the point called Little Point Clear, I am only about six miles to the end, but now my course abruptly turns west southwest and directly into the brunt of high wind and waves. Family is waiting on me, and I don't have to reserve any energy for the next day, so I paddle with maximum effort. It still takes me two and half hours to cover what I could easily do in an hour

and a half on a calmer day. I make it to the Fort Morgan pier just before 4:00 p.m., but force myself to paddle beyond it until I can truly say I stuck the bow of my canoe into the Gulf of Mexico.

I stare at the Gulf a few moments, aware that some of that water came from the tiny Georgia stream feeding the Tallapoosa River where I started three years ago. The river comes into existence moving like a living creature. As it moves, it continues to grow, and on its journey nourishes and harbors more lives than can be counted. Finally, the river reaches the mother of all waters, the interconnected seas, but that does not really end the journey. For the sun is jealous of the earth's water and sends heat to evaporate it and draw the moisture nearer. But the earth will not be robbed without a fight and uses all the gravity it can muster to reclaim the water for its oceans. This struggle between heaven and earth, powers that amazing, continuous cycle of vapor, cloud, rain, stream, river, and ocean that began long before we arrived and will continue long after we are forgotten. The wind aids my short trip back to the Fort Morgan pier, and a good thing too, because I am near total exhaustion.

Amy and Jennifer are at the pier waiting for me. Grandson Jack, soon to be four, is jumping with excitement as I paddle the last few yards to the boat ramp. I am so tired I can hardly hold my head up and seem to be moving in slow motion trying to load the canoe onto Amy's SUV. I get in the backseat with Jack, and Amy drives toward the Gulf Shores beach condo we have for the weekend. I want to savor what I have accomplished. I should be grateful that Providence blessed me with generally favorable conditions and proud that I had the perseverance to follow an ambitious plan to the end. But Jack wants my attention and is talking about the big holes we are going to dig at the beach and the sand castles he wants me to build so he can stomp them flat. I will do all those things with Jack, and I will later reflect on what this journey meant to me, but at the moment I am just fighting to stay awake amid visions of giant seafood platters, key lime pie, and sweet, sound sleep.