

TRAVEL JOURNAL
DESCENT OF TALLAPOOSA RIVER BY J. HAROLD BANKS
Thursday, April 16, 2009 through Sunday, April 26, 2009

April 16, 2009 – Day One

Hi 70, Lo 40, sunny

Thursday Night – Mile 6.5 – one-half mile below Coppermine Road, Paulding Co, GA

Amy and I arrive at the McClendon Creek Bridge on McGarity Road in Paulding County, Georgia at 9:15 a.m. This location is about 12 miles north of Villa Rica, Georgia. My intent is to launch my little red solo canoe in this tiny creek that meets Mud Creek one-half mile downstream to form the beginning of the Tallapoosa River. I will then follow the river 258 miles to its very end. Although I have done considerable scouting and planning, there are a lot of unknowns. An old man stops to see what's going on as I unload canoe and gear. He is a lifelong resident of the area and tells about the McClendon family who first settled here and built a corn grist mill on this site, hence the name of the creek.

I am apprehensive about the trip. Am I truly prepared? Did I train hard enough? I'm trying to go ultra light, but am I leaving out something I'll need? I will be on my own. Have I planned for every contingency? I know I'll really have to push hard to average the 25 miles per day I've planned. This will not be all fun. It will be very hard work. Am I too old for this sort of venture? These are the same heebie-jeebies I always feel before I start any of the adventures I've taken. I put the canoe in the creek and Amy takes a few photos. Then I'm off. All doubts fade away with the first few paddle strokes and I feel exhilarated. It's the same feeling I always get when I finally start an expedition. I know that I'm now committed, there's no turning back, and I'll deal with whatever comes. It's a great feeling and the thrill lasted about 75 yards. That's when I hit the first log jam totally blocking the creek.

I knew I would face some log jams on the creek and early part of the river, so this first one is no surprise. Nothing to do but get out and haul over. Boy is the water frigid. The air temp dropped to 38 here last night. I can take the chill on my legs OK, but then I step in a hole and the cold water goes over my... well, you know what I mean. Log jams keep coming every 50 yards or so, sometimes every 50 feet. Sometimes the jams are in series, back to back. That is to be the story all day long. Miserably slow progress. Big fat beavers slide in the water all day. I lose count but begin to hate the jokers for the way they compound the log jam problem. They use many of the log jams as the basis for their dams. I didn't see an effective dam all day, but the mud and sharpened sticks they add to the tangle of fallen trees adds to the mess and misery. Some of the jams are simple logs across the water that I can haul over fairly easily. But others are huge piles that I either have to break through or else haul out on the bank to drag the canoe around. I am usually meticulous about keeping myself and my gear clean, but the canoe quickly becomes a pigsty with sticks, mud, water, muck and spiders everywhere. I slip, slide, and fall down several times trying to scale muddy banks and am sometimes thigh deep in muck. I don't feel cold water any more. I worried about the waterproofness of my packs because they were getting tested, but the contents were bone dry at the end of the day.

In addition to beaver sightings, I jump a few deer, and cruise real close to a green heron and a nice multicolored fox squirrel, but can't really enjoy anything right now. I finally pull off the river just before 6:00 p.m. I have worked and pushed as hard as I possibly could all day long and only have 7 miles to show for it. If the river doesn't clear up soon, this trip is going to take a lot longer than I thought.

I find a nice camping spot though I have to walk a hundred yards from the river to get to it. Nice and flat, clean and leaf covered. I turn on my cell phone and give Amy a quick call to let her know I'm alive and get the weather report for the next day. We keep our calls very short so my cell phone battery will stay charged should I need it. I then rush to get the tent and sleeping arrangements set up, wash myself and the canoe, and get supper cooked before dark. I start a fire on a gravel bar to burn my lunch trash and keep me company for a while. As I close this journal entry, I'm really exhausted and apprehensive about how much further I'll have to fight beaver dams and log jams. But for now, I'm going to add a little snakebite medicine to my hot chocolate and turn in.

April 17, 2009 – Day Two

Hi 72, Low 44, partly cloudy

Friday night – Mile 26 – one-half mile below Monroe Mill, 5 mi. NW of Buchanan, GA

I only got sporadic sleep last night. I kept thinking it should be light soon and checked my watch about every 30 minutes. I got up at 6:00 a.m. fired up my collapsible wood burning stove, and cooked my standard breakfast fare of coffee and two packages of instant oatmeal with a pack of Carnation Instant Breakfast mixed in. I don't try to get fancy for breakfast when traveling, just quick nutrition. Heavy dew is on the tent and the interior walls are wet with condensation, but I can't wait for it to dry. It still takes me too long from the time I get up to the time I get back on the water. I'll have to work on that.

I finally get off and make it a full 200 yards before my first log jam. I'm having a bad feeling about the upper part of this river. But I know it does clear up eventually so I will just persevere. After a few miles, the character of the river changes. There are steep rocky hillsides, boulders in the creek, rhododendron hells, blooming wild azalea, pretty shoals and occasional light rapids. Deliverance country and I'm loving it. The faster flow here prevents log jams. But the good times don't last very long before the valley widens and I have the dreaded obstacles again. They aren't as numerous as yesterday though.

I hear a loud ruckus ahead and when I round a bend I come upon a great blue heron rookery. I count 27 nests high in one huge sycamore tree. Although there are other big trees right beside it, for some reason they all want that one. A single blue heron can make a very loud squawk and 50 of them protesting an intruder near their nursery is a choir fit for the devil. I don't see another beaver all day, but do pass several nice dams on feeder creeks. I think the river is finally getting too big for them to try to take on, but some of the dams on the small creeks entering the river must be six feet high. I see big river cooters sliding in the water ahead of me. They can spot me

from far away even when I'm moving silently. Map turtles aren't as shy and let me get close. I see two hornets' nests hanging over the river today.

The log jams are much less frequent now, but I have a couple of doozies. One I cannot get over or through by any means and have to work my way upstream about 50 yards to find a place to unload my boat and then haul canoe and gear around. Another jam is a single big poplar tree all the way across, but barely touching the fast flowing water. These single logs are normally pretty easy to pull over, but this one is dangerous because the flow is so strong going under it that it really sucks on my canoe when I get broadside. I almost let the canoe get swamped which would have been bad. Snags like this can be killers and many people have drowned because they got tangled in underwater limbs in strong flow like this.

A couple of miles downstream I hit another river hazard. I brushed a tree limb and thought a brier vine caught my arm. I look down and there's a plastic minnow staring at me, its hook firmly embedded in my right forearm. I use a variation of the so called "painless" method to remove it. I tie a cord to the curved part of the hook and secure the other end to an attachment point beside my seat. I then press the shank down to the skin with my left hand and yank my right arm so the hook is pulled straight back. It comes out cleanly, but I wouldn't say it didn't hurt. Nothing in my first aid kit will clean a puncture wound and I count the years since my last tetanus shot.

I cross US Highway 27 at about mile 20.5, and I could almost recommend running the river for fun from this point. I'm doing nothing but trying to get down river and not taking time for fishing, picture taking, or my favorite pastime—loitering. I finally call it quits at 5:45 pm and pitch camp. It is not as good a site as last night, but it will have to do. I made 19 miles today which I am proud of considering what it took to do it. It is still shy of the 25 miles per day I hoped to average, but maybe it will get better.

I'm wondering why I feel compelled to push so hard. So what if it takes another couple of days. I've taken many canoe trips before, alone and with others. When paddling strictly for pleasure, I try to limit the day to no more than 14 miles so there is time for photography, fishing, camping early, and loafing. But this trip for me is not about fun or pleasure though I hope to experience some of both. It is a personal quest to accomplish what has not been done before and to test the limits of my physical ability and resourcefulness. That is why it was necessary to do this trip solo. Good thing too because there would have definitely been a mutiny by now if I had a partner on these first two days of Hell. If I complete this journey no one can take away the first descent claim, but if anybody should attempt the same trip, I also want them to have to work very hard to beat my time doing it.

I call Amy. She says the temperature will get into the 30's tonight with chances of rain tomorrow. Oh boy! After supper, I nurse a small fire for companionship and watch a low fog develop over the water. Absolutely gorgeous.

April 18, 2009 – Day Three

Hi 72, Lo 36, cloudy, sporadic light sprinkles

Saturday Night – Mile 56 – Dryden’s Mill, Cleburne County, Alabama

I woke up last night to the sound of several beavers having a tail slapping contest very near where my canoe was beached. The commotion went on for a good 15 or 20 minutes. I don’t know whether it was some weird beaver mating ritual or if they were mad at the red canoe on their picnic beach. I started worrying about the wood gunnels on my boat. I’ve heard of muskrats and beavers chewing wooden paddles for the taste of salt on their handles. But my paddles are carbon fiber and are currently being used as my tent poles.

This morning after breakfast, I watched a turkey hunter cross a field behind me. He walked within 30 yards of my tent but never noticed my camp just inside the tree line. It was cold last night and I see light frost in the field, but my down sleeping bag was plenty warm and cozy. It is still quite chilly when I break camp and put on my shorts, short sleeve shirt, and river shoes. I then wade right in to load and launch my canoe. I figure I can paddle hard and warm up. And I did warm up—about 10:30 a.m.

The river is almost free of obstruction. I only hit two log jams all day and they were single trees across that I could easily pull over. I did hit an unexpected small dam just before GA SR 100 above Tallapoosa, GA. Apparently Haralson County, Georgia gets their water supply from the small pool the dam creates. It is not too bad to carry around though. I paddle under three bridges within the city limits of Tallapoosa, Georgia, but no one takes notice. It is not often these days that someone can go for three days without running into a single person. I do have a short conversation with two friendly dogs that rush down to the river bank to greet me.

I chase wood ducks down the river all day. I think they are the most handsome of all ducks and I also like them because they are year-round natives. A chubby woodchuck whistles at me as I parallel the Norfolk Southern/Amtrak railroad. I see several beavers slide out of holes in the river bank. I cross the Alabama/Georgia state line at mile 45.3 by my calculations. I look closely for any sign but see none and the river does not care about political boundaries.

I’m making up for a lot of lost miles from the first two slow days. A short solo canoe is not as fast as a longer tandem canoe, but I know how to move one if obstacles are not placed in my path. I have good flow and pretty scenery. I wish I could take more pictures, but it just takes too much time when you are trying to pound out mileage. To take pictures, I usually have to stop, go back upstream to where the good view was, take the camera out of the waterproof box, snap the picture, and then pack up the camera. It is also hard to hold a solo canoe steady in a current with one hand. The best pictures I have taken on other canoe trips were when I had a partner in a tandem canoe. One person can keep the canoe steady while the other takes pictures at will.

I make it to Dryden’s Mill at mile 56, a good 30 mile day and I’m quite pleased. There is an unsupervised park here built by Cleburne County with picnic tables, a covered pavilion, and pit privies. There are several people around fishing but I’m the only one camping. I hope this is not a Saturday night drinking spot. Just as I’m unpacking my gear I get a visit from a sheriff deputy. He’s courteous and quite interested in my trip. Shortly after, a lady in a mud covered jeep drives

up and talks to me. She is amazed at my story and wants to know a lot of details. She goes back to her jeep and brings me a Jesus trinket made out of a wooden clothespin that she tells me to carry to keep me safe. I thank her and put it in my canoe thwart bag. While I'm cooking my supper, I notice the lady keeps sitting in her jeep talking on the cell phone. Just when I'm starting to eat, a crowd she has summoned comes by to visit and I become a reluctant celebrity. They want to know all about my trip, my gear, and how I do everything. They study my maps, take pictures of me with their cell phones, tell me how cool I am, and declare they would all love to do something like this. I honestly believe two of the girls would have joined me the rest of the way if I'd had a tandem canoe. Another advantage of a solo boat--or disadvantage depending on your point of view. I appreciate the compliments and they are all very nice and well meaning, but I am dog-tired and just want to eat my supper in peace. I hope I didn't seem too unfriendly.

At dark, I am the only one in the park. There is a fire pit with plenty of wood around, so I make a nice blaze to sit by and write in my journal. I've really worked hard the past three days, but my spirits have improved with the river conditions. I made 7 miles the first day, 19 miles the second, and 30 miles today. Does that mean I'll make 50 miles tomorrow? No way. Not with these aching arms and shoulders. I'm taking three ibuprofen tablets with my snakebite medicine and then it is straight to bed.

April 19, 2009 – Day Four

Hi 70, Lo 55, occasional light rain in the day, severe thunderstorms at night

Sunday night – Mile 87.1 – Abandoned warehouse 3 miles above Hollis Crossroads

As I feared, late nighters prowl this little park on Saturday night. Nobody bothered me, but several cars drove through with their loud music and headlights shining dead on me. None of them ever stopped, but one driver with excess rubber on his tires tried to burn it off as he left.

It is much warmer this morning. It's a balmy 55 degrees after breakfast as I change into shorts and river shoes. I wade right into the river to load and launch my canoe. Nary a shiver. It is amazing how quickly your body can adapt when you really push it.

The river in this region is very picturesque. Shoals and light rapids at regular intervals make it interesting, gravelly sand bars make nice non-muddy picnic spots, and steep hills with bare rock formations extend to the water. Yesterday and today I pass under several one-lane steel truss bridges, some of which are still being used. Such bridges are becoming rare and I'm glad to see so many fine examples still standing. There are high-end homes here and there that have spectacular backyard views.

After about four miles, I cross under Interstate 20 with cars and trucks hustling toward Atlanta and Birmingham. Thousands of people cross this bridge every day totally oblivious to the much older transportation byway beneath them. They're all in such a rush to take care of business that is so doggoned critical and important. I've been a part of that rat race, and probably will be again. But today, the concerns of the artificial world we create fade from my mind as soon as the traffic noise becomes muffled. I have at least temporarily unplugged from the "matrix" and I like it.

There is a light rain as I paddle, but I am quite comfortable and don't bother with rain gear. My wide brim hat keeps my head dry. I spot the largest river otter I have ever seen. At first I thought it was a beaver until its snakelike slithering over a log and skinny tail gave it away. It surfaced very near the back of my boat and just watched me fade away. I see more entrances to beaver dens in the banks and now and then one of the chunky fellows slides out with a noisy splash.

At 11:00 a.m., I cross AL SR 46 and stop to visit Tallapoosa River Outfitters who operate at the ramp above that bridge. The proprietor had given me some advice about the upper river and I had promised to tell him about the river conditions above US Hwy 27 which he is was not familiar with. Due to the time and the day, no one was there so I left him a note on the door of his shop. He has a nice looking campground and I almost convince myself that I need an easy day and should take advantage of this place. But it is just too early and I don't wimp out. I notice that he has a broken white Mohawk canoe filled with dirt and planted with roses by his mailbox. I saw a similar white canoe earlier today wrapped and hopelessly pinned on a rock at the head of a light rapid. A striking reminder of how much pressure the current can exert on a broadsided canoe.

The rain has ended and a brisk wind kicks up from the southwest. Of course that is my general direction of travel and I have to lean on the paddle to make much progress. I'm looking for a suitable gravel or sand bar for a lunch spot to eat my beef jerky and other vittles and think I've spotted one. But closer I see a big cow wrapped up around a snag in front of the sand bar. The carcass is quite ripe so I go another mile before stopping for lunch and several more miles before refilling my water bottles.

The terrain has flattened and I see more and more cow pastures. Most ranchers wisely leave a hardwood buffer strip between their pasture and the river. But not all do so, to the detriment of the river banks and their own fences. Hence they risk escaped cattle that don't know how to navigate swift river current.

Late afternoon the skies grow darker and it starts to rain again. This time it's enough to make me pull out my rain jacket. I want to squeeze out a few more miles when I come to an overflow dam and the site of a small hydroelectric plant that no longer operates. It is located just before the river crosses under CR 36 and just a stone's throw from SR 9. This dam would be very dangerous if a paddler did not see or chose to ignore the warning sign 500 feet upstream. I get out on river right to scout the portage route and I find it will be longer and more difficult than I expected. I carry the packs about halfway to the put-in spot and peep into an abandoned warehouse at the old mill site. There is nothing in it but some old loose hay. It has a concrete floor and a good roof. The darkening skies scare me and I decide not to push my luck. I go back for the canoe and carry it inside the warehouse too. I make another run to the river to fill my water bottles and then it is time for my 1 minute phone call to Amy. She is almost frantic wanting to know if I have made camp and set up in a safe place because severe storms are headed in my direction.

God looks after children and fools. I pull out my homemade alcohol stove I brought for backup when fire was not appropriate and cook my supper. Chicken a la king, and I feel like a king in my warehouse as the first of the storms roll in. I don't have to pitch a tent. I simply spread out my plastic groundcloth and roll out my pad and sleeping bag. The canoe serves as my chair and table as I enjoy my hot meal nice and dry despite the rain. I'm not too smug though, because I know I won't always be this lucky. I'm a little concerned that this warehouse with loose hay piled up along the walls will be infested with rats. But I'm willing to share it with them for shelter from the storm if they'll be nice. Fierce winds, pelting rain, and continuous thunder are drowning out a nearby weather siren as I close out this day's journal entry at 8:10 p.m. I don't know whether it is a tornado or severe thunderstorm warning, but there is nothing more I can do about it now.

April 20, 2009 – Day Five

Hi 69, Lo 49, cloudy early, then partly cloudy

Monday Night – Mile 114 – Island on Lake Wedowee 2 miles below the SR 48 bridge

I was sleeping soundly when weather sirens woke me at 10:30 p.m. last night. In about 10 minutes, a wind gust hit that shook the warehouse and I feared it would come apart. Then a pounding rain with hail came that was deafening on the tin roof. All of a sudden water started pouring on me in my sleeping bag. I shined my flashlight up and saw that the rain was being forced through the overlapping seams of the tin by the high winds. I drug my gear to a drier spot and considered crawling under my overturned canoe for some little protection if things started falling. But the wind let up a little bit and I figured the worst had passed. I was again amazed and thankful for how lucky I was not being in my tent tonight. Had I not stopped a little earlier than I planned, I would never have been properly set up by the time of the first rain and the 10:40 p.m. storm would have blown my tent flat. I was shaken enough to need a little more snakebite medicine.

I took my time getting started this morning. I make two trips hauling first gear and then the canoe from the warehouse across the CR 36 bridge, and then down below it on river left. The river is much higher than yesterday and water is pouring over the dam. I put in without mishap and paddle through chocolate milk colored water. Both my water bottles are empty but I'm going to try to make it to Harris Lake a/k/a Lake Wedowee where the water should be clearer. Although the river level is up, there is not a lot of flow. This is broad, flat country on both sides. Cows and horses stare at me in amazement as I pass by their pastures. I see signs of last night's storm here and there with freshly broken limbs and toppled trees. I cross US Hwy 431 after about 4 miles and am soon back in the hill country I prefer. There are a few light shoals and hillsides descending to the water covered with blooming dogwoods and wild azaleas. I pass a couple of more abandoned steel truss bridges. I wish I had kept count with just how many I have seen on the upper Tallapoosa.

After about 7 miles, I hit the beginning of R. L. Harris Lake. No more help from the current today. And from this point to the end of the river, flow rates have more to do with dam releases than with rainfall. But the river is patient. It was here long before we were. And though our

concrete dams seem so permanent in comparison to our miniscule lifespans, the river will live to see them crumble. Despite our grandest efforts, the river will someday flow free again.

For miles, R. L. Harris Lake is a narrow thread, not much wider than the original river bed. I'm impressed with the beauty of it however. There are lots of steep hardwood hills, not much development, and herons, ducks, geese, osprey, and hawks are visible constantly. Because this is a young lake, there hasn't been much erosion of the shoreline. Give them another 50 years of motorboat traffic and it will be like Lake Martin's eroded shores along the main river course.

I spy an animal swimming and at first assume it is a beaver. But when I get closer it is obviously something else but I'm not sure what. The mystery is solved when it hits shore and a little red fox bounds up the bank. I see an osprey nest in a dead tree in the shallows that is lower than any osprey nest I've ever seen. It can't be more than 7 feet above the water. Two adults are attending a fat chick that is larger than either of them. By the time I pull out my camera, the adults are gone but I capture the nest and chick. Shortly after that, I see my first snake. It is in the talons of a perched red-shouldered hawk. I cannot identify the snake and am not absolutely certain about the hawk species.

A man in a jon boat with a trolling motor pulls silently up to me to chat. He asks me where I put in and then makes me say it again. Then he asks me how far I'm going and then asks if I'm serious. He's a nice fellow and we chat for about 15 minutes as I continue paddling. He's a retiree from Northwestern airlines but says he used to build custom fiberglass canoes and laminated hardwood paddles. He claims he was a member of the Georgia Canoe Club and a frequent canoeist, but that he is too old to canoe now. I'm thinking he doesn't look any older than me.

I pass by creeks with interesting names that empty into Harris Lake. Ketchepedrakee, Little Ketchepedrakee, Lost Creek, Gobbler Creek, and Mad Indian Creek. I bet there is a story about Mad Indian Creek and that the Indian had good reason to be mad. The Tallapoosa's major tributary, Little Tallapoosa River, joins on the left just before I cross the SR 48 bridge. I had hoped to turn on the juice and make it all the way to the dam today, but I'm fighting a tough headwind that is wearing me out. It is a little early to stop, but I'm tired of fighting the wind at 5:00 p.m. when I pull up to an island that is an idyllic campsite. It is a small round-topped island that is nice and flat on top and covered with clean pine straw. There is not a cabin or other sign of human existence in sight.

I pitch my tent where I'll have a prime view of the sunset from the back of my tent and the morning sun will come in my front door. Although it is a little cool and a stiff wind is blowing, I need a bath. I strip naked and go swimming. I'm amazed at how little the cold water bothers me as I swim and dive under again and again in the clear water. I walk back to my gear bags, get my razor, and go back in the water. Clean and shaved. What bliss! I climb out and stand on top of the hill in the waning sunlight to let the wind and my own shivering dry me. Tonight's one-pot meal is among my favorite camping concoctions. I first boil a package of Knorr dried vegetables until they start to resemble the real thing. Then I add a block of chicken flavored ramen and a foil pouch of tuna packed in oil. For home use, I always buy tuna packed in water, but I need the extra fat calories here. Delicious!

I don't build a fire because of the wind and dense pine straw. I used my homemade alcohol backup stove again for the same reason. But I enjoy a nice sunset and am content in my clean and peaceful island camp. Fish are jumping for joy as I close out my journal tonight at 8:57 p.m. I'm quite satisfied with the 28 miles I made today. I'm back on schedule and now confident I will complete this trip. All is right with the world--at least with the world as I know it at this time. And the time is now bedtime.

April 21, 2009 – Day Six

Hi 74, Lo 42, partly cloudy, high winds from the WSW

Tuesday Night – Mile 143 – Tail end of Muleshoe Bend, Tallapoosa County

After I finished my journal entries last night I intended to go straight to bed, but then I noticed how exceptionally bright the stars were. It is rare to find a site in the Eastern US with so little light pollution. There appeared to be many more stars than normal and the fog of stars in the Milky Way was bright and distinct. I picked out familiar constellations and contemplated the vastness of the universe and what an insignificant little speck I am. But sometimes it is thrilling just to be that small speck.

I wake to the sunrise shining in my tent and get up to prepare my breakfast. I hate to leave this pretty site. Everybody knows what an ideal river or lake campsite should look like and I know lots of them that I can go to specifically for camping. But when you are expedition canoeing, you can never depend on there being one where you end up at day's end. On the river, there is not always easy access to the top of the banks. I've passed by many an otherwise suitable campsite because I would have to scale very muddy banks to get there and then have no way to clean up before climbing in my sleeping bag. Since I'm trying to squeeze out mileage on this trip, my rule of thumb is to start looking for an ideal campsite at 5:00 p.m. I start getting less selective at 5:30 p.m. and near the panic mode by 6:00 p.m. That's usually when I find a spot about half as good as the one I passed two miles back.

I had thought that my main challenge for the day would be the portage around R. L. Harris Dam, but I soon become aware of a tougher problem. Shortly after launch the wind kicks up out of the west southwest, my general direction of travel today and I've got to cross some large bodies of water. Soon I'm facing 15 to 25 mile per hour head winds. These are small craft warning winds and I'm in the smallest of crafts. Luckily I am well rested and though my arms and shoulders are still sore, I seem to have more power when I need it. In the more open areas of the lake the waves are starting to whitecap and I am at the limit of what this little solo open canoe can handle. All I can do is point straight into the wind and drive hard. I find a brief reprieve on the lee side of an island and chat with two fishermen anchored there. When they hear where I started and what I am doing, one of them asks for my name and where I live so he can write it down. When I started this trip, I really didn't know whether many other people would care or not, but at least people I meet on the river are interested.

I make it around a point and now I'm headed southeast. Here I almost play the wind to my advantage like a sailboat on tack. But then I have to turn and head due west about a mile and a half to the dam. I'm paddling with everything I've got to make forward progress and hope I can hold out because I cannot skip a single stroke without being spun around which could be disastrous in these waves. Proper feathering of the paddle on the return stroke is vital due to the strength of the wind.

Finally, I make shore above the west side of the dam and am actually looking forward to the portage. It is 10:00 a.m. I had previously scouted the path I must take and know this is to be my longest portage, roughly one mile. I carry my gear first about as far as I think I can carry the canoe. Then I go back, lash the paddles to the thwarts to serve as a yoke, and walk to my gear packs. I leapfrog like this until I get to my put-in spot several hundred yards below the dam. It is a difficult spot to launch on a steep slope covered with large rip rap. There is no convenient eddy and because one turbine is generating at the dam, the current is swift. From take-out to put-in takes an hour and a half, about what I expected. The energy toll is not as severe as I was afraid. I actually enjoyed a different kind of exertion for a change.

I'm hoping that with the more protected river channel and the good current that the wind won't be as big a factor. I am wrong. Whenever I'm running west to southwest, the wind is a stronger influence than the current and I struggle to move. There is more of me and my boat exposed to the force of the wind than boat under the water exposed to the current. I have a few easterly bends and then I can boogie.

The Seaboard Coastline railroad runs along the right side of the river all the way from the dam to beyond Wadley. I bet the engineer loves that stretch of railroad because this one of the prettiest runs on the river. There are a lot of steep hillsides with granite faces extending into the water. Pretty little shoals abound with what I call dancing water. Just below the site of the old Malone Ferry at mile 129, No Business Creek enters on river left. Not only is this the most unique creek name I know, it also happens to be the exact mid-point of the Tallapoosa River. Two miles further and I come to Hodge Island and its nice Class I and II rapids. With my loaded boat, I take the less challenging "chicken" route. When the flows are at this level, this is a nice place to play and learn about mild whitewater, but when the dam is not generating it is more bump and drag. I'm really impressed with the beauty of the river from Hodge Island to the railroad bridge below Wadley. There are lots of shoals and light rapids that keep it interesting without too many calm areas. These rapids are made more difficult for me today due to erratic but powerful wind gusts that make it hard to hold my course.

I haven't seen much in the way of birds and wildlife today, but I did see vultures playing the wind currents. It is amazing how they can seemingly go straight into the wind without flapping their wings. They are the supreme aviators. I passed right beside a pair of Canada geese that don't fly because they are protecting 5 downy hatchlings. I would love to have taken a picture but dared not take my hands off the paddle.

I enter big Muleshoe Bend and on its first easterly leg I am flying with the help of a strong current and a howling west wind. The inside of Muleshoe Bend has some pretty rock formations. After the bend, the last leg of the shoe heads due west and I'm struggling again and

dead tired. Just as the river turns south, I spot a place on the left where I can take out and call it quits. Still I made almost 30 miles today. Not bad considering the portage and adverse wind. I secure my canoe and haul my gear inland about 150 yards to a fairly level spot at the edge of a cow pasture. It will do. Beef stroganoff tonight. I'm unable to make my 6:00 p.m. call to Amy because there is no cell phone service here. I had warned her there would be places like this and I hope she doesn't panic.

As I write at 8:30 p.m., I'm hearing more wildlife sounds than any night before. Owls hooting, bird noises I can't identify, deer snorting, something that sounds like a big cat, and coyotes howling. All pleasant company to me. The spring peepers are peeping slower as the temperature drops. I'm about peeped out myself. Time to crawl in my warm down bag.

April 22, 2009 – Day Seven

Hi 77, Lo 41, partly cloudy

Wednesday night – Mile 171 – Jaybird Creek Landing – Head of Lake Martin

Last night I heard something creeping around the back of my tent and I could suddenly visualize a coyote making off with my food pack so I got up to bring it inside. The wildlife interaction continued this morning as I broke camp. I shook my plastic ground cloth to get the leaves off and a turkey gobbled nearby. I shook it again and he gobbled again. I conversed with the old Tom several more times the same way. If I ever take up turkey hunting, I now know the secret of locating a gobbler.

I carried my gear to the river bank and saw my first challenge of the day. Power generation had obviously ceased at the Harris Dam and the river was now at minimum flow. The nice shelf I parked my canoe on yesterday afternoon was now a perch above a 3 to 4 foot vertical drop with deep water below. No way to get in at this spot. I drag the canoe across the pasture to a place where I can lower my loaded canoe by rope to the water. A steep slope but doable. I'm finally off and although I'm not getting much help from the current, at least the wind isn't blowing hard--yet.

I go through some mild shoals and in about 4 miles come to the site of Bibby's Ferry. This was the last old-style ferry to operate on the Tallapoosa River and was maintained by Chambers County until the mid 1980's. I used to drive over here with friends specifically to ride the ferry across. When you got to the river, you would simply blow your horn. The ferry operator lived at the top of the hill on river left and would walk down to take you across. The ferry was a barge just big enough for one vehicle and was powered by an ancient farm tractor whose axle drove a paddle wheel. The ferry was attached to an overhead steel cable to keep it from drifting downstream. Every time I rode across the old ferryman would tell the same story about the time when against his better judgment he carried an insistent man across the swollen river. Halfway across, the cable broke and they floated three miles downstream before making it ashore in an eddy.

Bibby's Ferry is just down the road from one of my favorite community names, Frog Eye. Local legend has it that a tavern there during prohibition days kept a ceramic frog with closable eyes on

the counter. If the frog's eyes were open, it was safe to ask for illegal liquor. But if the eyes were closed, local residents knew to keep their mouth shut because there could be law enforcement nearby.

I know every crook, turn, and rock in the river from here to Martin Dam and feel very much at home. In about a mile, I cross into Tallapoosa County. In a few more miles I pass the older ferry site of Frederick's Ferry at the end of None Such Drive. There must have been some real characters around here to come up with these good names. The river becomes lazy between Bibby's Ferry and the Germany Ferry Bridge and with the exception of a couple of shoals, it would be about as easy to paddle upstream as down. It is a pleasant float though and is reputed to have some of the best fishing on the river. Chatahospee Creek enters on the left and I spot three otters. The two larger ones, maybe Mom and Dad, take off up the creek immediately, but Junior hangs back to look at me. Mom and Dad are chirping and squealing and he finally goes upstream too. I follow slowly and Junior's curiosity gets the best of him and he stops to look at me again. Mom and Dad are now screaming at him as if to say "get away, that thing's dangerous." We play this little game a while longer and finally they all dive under and disappear. I turn around in the creek to head back into the river and am surprised to see the three otters already in the river. Those sly rascals swam right under my boat.

I come to Germany's Ferry Bridge and see my old buddy Skip Turner at the boat ramp. I ask him if there is cell phone service here and he says no, but he can drive me a couple of miles to a high hill where there is. He drives me toward Daviston to the top of a high hill and I'm able to get through to Amy.

A few miles below Germany's Ferry I come to the beginning of Griffin Shoals. This is one of my favorite places, but few get to see it because there is no public access except by water. The river splits into dozens of channels around pretty little islands with rocky shoals singing the river's song. The shoals are long and tricky to negotiate without grounding in low flow, but I take a channel on far river right that goes by an old grist mill. Portions of the old wooden dam and stone foundations of the mill remain visible.

Below the shoals on the left side of the river was the village of Neuyauka, sometimes spelled Niuyaka. This Okfuskee Creek settlement was reportedly renamed after the 1790 Treaty of New York signed between George Washington's Secretary of War Henry Knox and 27 Creek leaders. Among other provisions, the treaty described the Creek's sovereign territory and promised perpetual peace between the U.S. and the Creeks. This site is no longer cultivated, but I have walked freshly plowed fields over this site in years past and was amazed at the profusion of pottery fragments scattered over several acres.

A little further down river and I am entering Horseshoe Bend National Military Park, site of the famous battle that helped launch Andrew Jackson to national prominence. Before the battle in March, 1814, the Upper Creeks had already been besieged since the summer of 1813 on all sides by armies from Mississippi, Georgia, and Tennessee with their villages burned, thousands of inhabitants killed, and remaining populations scattered or in hiding. But the massacre that occurred inside the horseshoe forever broke any chance of the Creeks determining their own fate in the South.

At the end of the horseshoe is the site of the old Miller Covered Bridge, now replaced by a modern steel and concrete bridge. Most of the stone support pillars of the old bridge are still standing. At the time the Miller Bridge collapsed in 1963, it was the longest covered bridge in the world at 890 feet long. It was condemned long before it collapsed, but I have fond childhood memories of riding through the bridge with my father.

To catch fish, Indians often stacked rocks in the river to create fish weirs or traps. I know of several remaining examples, but one of the easiest to view is from the new Horseshoe Bend bridge looking upstream near the base of the island.

Most bridges going over the Tallapoosa are not in the most scenic spots and few people realize just how pretty and special this river is. For someone wanting to catch a glimpse of its scenic beauty, it is hard to beat the section from Horseshoe Bend to Jay Bird creek. It is a good half day trip by canoe or kayak that can be turned into an all day trip with a picnic and frequent stops to play. The river has interesting shoals and light rapids most of the way, but it is not too tough for the novice. For those unfamiliar with the river, it is easiest to find clear channels by sticking to the far left side of the river from Peter's Island on down.

Peter's Island begins about one mile below the bridge. This island is so large that cotton was once grown on it. Emuckfaw Creek empties into the river on the right side of the island. The famous Battle of Emuckfaw Creek occurred several miles above here where the Creeks turned back Andrew Jackson's first attempt to invade the area and forced him to retreat to Fort Strother.

I would advise canoeists to keep to the left side of the island unless the water levels are really high. At the tail end of the island, water coming around the right side, now with the combined waters of Emuckfaw and Fox creeks, percolates through a short but spectacularly beautiful shoal. Aquatic water lilies (a/k/a Cahaba lilies) bloom in and near these shoals from late May to early July. The left side of the river is a steep hill with bare rock extending into the water. All these features combine to make this one of my favorite places to stop and I have my afternoon chocolate break here.

In about two miles, I cross under high transmission power lines signaling the beginning of Irwin Shoals. For almost two more miles, the river spreads out very wide with multiple channels and shoals. In anything less than normal flows, the only way a canoeist can avoid running aground in shallow water is to keep to the far left channels. There are a lot of pretty picnic spots here. When the shoals and lively water end, I know I am at the beginning of Lake Martin and just above Jay Bird Creek.

Jay Bird Creek empties into the river on the left, and shortly after there is a concrete boat ramp built by Tallapoosa County. This is a popular fishing spot for good reason. It is also very heavily used by locals as a weekend camping and partying destination. I am a little reluctant to camp here for that reason, but I am dead tired and because it is a weekday, I figure I'll take a chance.

April 23, 2009 – Day Eight
Hi 86, Lo 55, sunny
Thursday night – Banks residence, Dadeville, Alabama

Last night, just as I was trying to get to sleep, several groups of night fishermen drove up. They put in boats, set poles along the river bank, baited trot lines, and shouted and joked to each other. Several times, my tent was lit up by flashlights. More than once I hear someone say they wonder why someone would leave a tent here. They assumed it was left because there is no vehicle. When one guy says he just might have to take that tent if somebody is crazy enough to leave it I shout “this tent is already taken.” There is a moment of silence and then a meek “sorry buddy.” I have a hard time sleeping worrying about what might happen next. I think I caught a few winks, but about an hour before daylight the early bird fishermen start arriving. At first light, I get up, eat my breakfast, and pack up in a hurry. That’s the last time I will camp here.

It is all Lake Martin paddling today, but the first part is very nice. There are a lot of rocky hillsides and no development for several miles. After a peaceful ride, Timbergut Creek enters on the right and in another mile Hillabee Creek enters on the same side. The next four mile stretch to Coley Creek is very scenic, but because of heavy siltation in the upper lake, it can be hazardous to motor boaters who aren’t familiar with the clear channels.

Just past Coley Creek is the historic site of Stowe’s Ferry. This is the point where Yankee Major General Lovell Rousseau crossed the Tallapoosa during his lightning raid through the area. Rousseau’s mission was to cut any railroad and supply lines between Alabama and Atlanta precedent to General Sherman’s march on Atlanta. He reportedly ransacked and burned several buildings in Youngsville (now Alexander City) before crossing and marching through Dadeville on his way to Loachapoka to destroy the railroad from Montgomery to Atlanta.

A little further and I cross under the Central of Georgia Railroad. A mile past the railroad I cross under the U.S. Hwy 280 Bridge known countywide as The River Bridge. The wind is now kicking up pretty good out of the southwest, my direction of travel of course. I can see about five miles ahead and it seems as if I am making no progress. I really am moving, but it is not readily apparent when my destination is so far ahead and I am not close to the bank. I thread my way through the river channel and come to the area I always called The Big Water, a large body fed by Madwin, Manoy, and Sandy creeks. The Smith Mountain fire tower is now my beacon and if I paddle straight toward it, it will lead me right by the island that lies in front of D.A.R.E. Power Park and Young’s Landing where I’m getting out for the day.

I arrive at Young’s Landing boat ramp at 1:40 p.m. and my beautiful wife is waiting for me. We load canoe and gear and head for home. Short mileage and an easy day. That is if you call paddling 16 miles into a headwind an easy day. But there is still much for me to do before starting again tomorrow morning. I clean up my boat and gear, wash my clothes, and restock food and supplies. I sort through all my gear trying to find things to eliminate. I’ve got three mean portages around major hydroelectric dams coming up and possibly a fourth one around the Tallassee falls below Thurlow dam. I want to be as light as I can be for the final part of my journey.

I really needed this brief respite at home. My aching body could use a full day of rest to recover from the demands placed on it without cease for over a week. It won't get it though because I am anxious to complete this little odyssey on the schedule I first set. But being showered and shaved, full of a home cooked meal, and having a soft bed and a warm woman makes me wonder why explorers ever leave home.

April 24, 2009 – Day Nine

Hi 88, Lo 50, sunny

Friday night – Mile 210 – Mowed field on upstream side of Thurlow Dam

I slept well last night. I have breakfast and Amy drives me to Young's Landing to put in where I took out yesterday. I start paddling and it feels good. This is lake paddling with no helpful current, but the surface is as smooth as glass and I'm humming along. I disturb a group of Canada geese and they honk in protest. I cross the Big Water and get to Pleasure Point before the wind starts. Another day of 15 to 20 mile per hour winds blowing right in my face. I'm paddling into white caps before I start threading the channels and going between the islands leading to Acapulco Rock and Chimney Rock. It has been a while since I've been by Acapulco Rock and I'm afraid it should more appropriately be named Graffiti Rock now. But this part of the lake is still spectacular with its steep hills and deep, clear water. I round a point and see Martin Dam two miles away. It seems to take forever to get there as I bear down into the wind.

I take out above the dam on the left side and portage my canoe and gear down the road leading to the dam from SR Hwy 50. When I get to Hwy 50, I turn left and go to the bridge over Wind Creek. I understand this was originally called Wynn Creek for the Wynn family that once lived on it, but at some point the State Highway Department started spelling it Wind Creek which causes a lot of confusion because another Wind Creek empties into Lake Martin. But whatever the proper name, the little creek takes me right back into the Tallapoosa River just below the Hwy 50 bridge. I can see the Martin Dam powerhouse upstream.

I have a good current for a couple of miles and then I am in the Yates reservoir, known locally as the Middle Pond. This is a narrow lake, about seven miles long. But it is picturesque and very different from Lake Martin. Because it is fed by water from the bottom of Lake Martin through the dam's generators, the water is clear and cold. I have noticed before that you can be quite comfortable on this lake on the hottest summer day and I am enjoying the buffering effect of the water on the air temperature now. The vegetation has transitioned suddenly also. The banks are lined with lots of cypress trees and Spanish moss hangs thick above the shoreline. There are very few houses and not much access to this lake so it has a wilderness feeling. Significant creeks emptying into this reservoir include Channahatchee and Sougahatchee.

I arrive at Yates dam and exit on river right. This portage will require a walk through thick woods and brush to get to my put-in spot. That is not an easy thing to do with a canoe on your shoulders and I'm happy to do it without breaking a leg or twisting an ankle. I put in on a tiny creek and break the branches ahead of me as I float back into the river, this time on Thurlow or Tallassee Lake as it is called by some. Thurlow Lake is a very short lake, not much over two

miles long. Although Yates and Thurlow are not large reservoirs, the dams do have significant drop to drive generators so the power company can use water released from Martin Dam two more times.

I can see Thurlow Dam from a long way off and it seems like I will never get there. My energy is fading fast. I need a place to camp but have no idea where I'll find it. I arrive at the top of the dam and lug the canoe and gear to the top of the right bank. I just don't feel I can make another portage today and the mowed field there looks like an OK tent spot. The trouble is, my red canoe and bright orange tent can easily be seen by everyone driving over the busy Hwy 14 bridge below the dam and I am trespassing. But I figure I'll try to convince the police that I am harmless and obviously not trying to hide when the inevitable visit comes. I cook my supper and sweat profusely while eating hot food. The temperature is still above 80 degrees at 6:30 p.m. I do not like this early heat wave.

April 25, 2009 – Day Ten

Hi 89, Lo 56, sunny

Saturday night – Mile 234 – one mile below Line Creek, Montgomery County

Open fields look like inviting camping spots in the afternoon, but then you have to deal with heavy dew in the morning. No big deal if you can wait until it dries to pack up. I can't and my tent and gear are soaked. I pack everything up wet and hope I can make enough progress today to justify camping a little early so I can pitch my tent to dry.

I make my last portage around Thurlow dam and it is not too bad except for having to get my canoe and gear over a locked gate. But I am trying to break out of, not into a restricted area. All my portages have necessitated trespassing, but no one has challenged me. Alabama has received a lot of favorable press in nationwide outdoor publications for creating the Alabama Canoe Trail on the Coosa and Alabama River systems. For that waterway system, legal means have been provided for getting around all dams and locks. I would like to see the same thing done for the Tallapoosa River. It would not have to be expensive and would take very little effort. I'm not asking for short or easy portage routes. I just believe that if you are allowed to block a river with a dam, you should provide a legal means to get around it. Not many people would want to paddle the entire Tallapoosa River like I am doing, but all of the river within the State of Alabama is easily navigable and I think it is an unappreciated resource.

A man at the boat dock below the dam asks me if my car broke down when he sees me walking up with a canoe on my shoulders. When he hears my story he is amazed and says he can't imagine anyone carrying boat and gear around all those dams. Nobody seems to understand that the portages aren't the difficult part. He says he thinks I should have the press following me.

The two miles below Thurlow Dam contain some of the most exciting whitewater in Alabama including a Class IV drop known as Tallassee Falls. I have neither the boat nor the skill to run the rough parts and I had feared another portage would be necessary to make sure I didn't get swept over the falls. Fatalities have occurred there. I get lucky in that Thurlow is not generating

for the first day this week according to my new friend at the boat ramp. The water flow is so low that I think I can sneak and bump my way through the shoals and rapids without excessive danger. It is still a thrilling ride and I bump and bobble several times, but strong braces (and lucky ones) prevent capsizing. Over one particularly ominous drop, I stop above and line my canoe over by rope and climb down to join it. Then I take to the left side of several islands and avoid the big falls, but get an exhilarating water chute ride right to the base of them. I am amazed that anyone could run these falls, but there are people who do it every week. But not in an open canoe loaded with camping gear.

The falls represent the last hurrah for the Piedmont's claim on the river and I am abruptly in the Coastal Plain. On river right for several miles is a broad, flat plain of deep, rich soil. For that reason, an Auburn University Agricultural Experiment Station is located here. But this was also the site of the famous Muscogee Creek village of Tuckabatchee which some historians claim was one of the largest towns in North America in early Colonial times. The residents of Tuckabatchee were the keepers of the mysterious copper and brass plates used in sacred ceremonies. The Creeks said they had been in their possession as long as they could remember, but some accounts of the plates said they appeared to be of Spanish origin. Some have speculated they could have been acquired from Desoto's expedition though he is not known to have visited this site. No one has definitively proved where the ceremonial plates came from or whatever became of them. Benjamin Hawkins, appointed as Superintendent of Indian Affairs by George Washington and three subsequent presidents, tried to establish peaceful relations with the Creeks here and attempted to teach them modern agriculture. His work toward building a lasting peace and incorporating the Creeks into mainstream white society was set back when the famous Shawnee leader Tecumseh came here from Ohio in 1811 in an attempt to convince the Creeks to join all Indian nations in resisting white intrusion on their lands.

I enter a sharp bend and Uphapee Creek enters halfway through on the left. Several Creek Indian towns were located up this creek. There is a large gravel bar just below Uphapee Creek and there are a couple of artifact hunters combing through the gravel. Truckloads of Indian artifacts have been found on these and other nearby gravel beds and every flood reveals more, a testament to size of the native population in times long past.

The river travels southwest a couple of miles before running into high hills on river left. On top of a prominent point lies old Fort Decatur built by General Joseph Graham and his army of Carolinians in 1814. The earthworks and dry moat of the fort are still remarkably intact, but not many people know about it because it is so hard to access. The fort is now hidden by dense vegetation, but when built it had a commanding view of the river and the plain beyond. This fort was occupied for various reasons after the Creek Indian War ended. Davy Crockett came to this fort as part of an army under command of a Major Russell on its way north from the Chattahoochee River. Crockett said they were so near starvation that they were shooting the smallest birds for sustenance. They hoped to find food and provisions at Fort Decatur, but the small garrison there could only supply them with one meal. In 1815, President Madison appointed John Sevier as the Commissioner to ascertain the new boundaries of the Creek territory. John Sevier was a Revolutionary War hero and had served as the first governor of the State of Tennessee. While engaged in his boundary work at Fort Decatur, he died and was buried there. But thinking it was not appropriate for their first governor to be buried in Alabama,

the Tennessee legislature made arrangements to dig the poor fellow up and move him to Knoxville, Tennessee. In my exploration of the land around the fort, I have seen evidence of quite a few dug up graves, but don't know who else was interred here or if their removal was proper.

The river changes to a predominantly westerly course versus the south southwesterly course it has followed to this point. In a mile, I cross under SR 229 that leads into Tallassee from the south. The river has dropped over 980 feet in elevation from its beginning to this point, but will drop only another 40 feet from here to its merger with the Coosa. Without releases from the dam, the flow is barely perceptible and it will not be much different from lake paddling for the rest of the trip. That's OK. At least I'm not facing the disheartening head winds that taxed my physical strength and endurance several previous days.

About three miles below the bridge, Calebee Creek enters on the left. General Floyd and his army of Georgians and friendly Creeks attacked the Red Stick Creek village of Autosse here in November, 1813 killing many of the inhabitants and burning the town. He returned to Calebee Creek with his army in January 1814 and was surprised by a pre-dawn attack of 1,300 warriors. It was a near disaster for Floyd as many soldiers initially panicked. But the attack was ultimately repulsed with many of the Red Sticks killed including major chief High Head Jim. A number of the surviving Red Sticks joined the forces at Horseshoe Bend that would be attacked and destroyed by Andrew Jackson's forces two months later.

The temperature is about 90 degrees, it is near calm, and heat seems to be my biggest enemy today. This is an unusual heat wave for late April and I am not acclimatized to it. I had cool weather until yesterday and thoroughly enjoyed it. But I'm drinking lots of water and eating a little salt so I'll be OK, just sweaty and nasty.

There are several Indian mounds from the Mississippian era along this westerly stretch whose exact location I won't reveal in writing. But the pot hunters already know about them because they have been heavily dug and not professionally.

Eleven miles below the SR 229 bridge, Line Creek enters on the left and the heat has really sapped my energy. I'm confident I am far enough along to be assured of reaching Fort Toulouse tomorrow so I start looking for a place to camp. Camping spots are few and far between here because of steep muddy banks that make it difficult to get up the banks without becoming a muddy mess with no way of cleaning up afterward. Gravel and sand bars look inviting, but I had a close call camping on one long ago when the upstream dam started generating during the night and our canoes almost floated away.

In a little over a mile I spot a gravelly bank that I can scale. I haul my gear out and walk to a fair camping spot about 150 yards away. I immediately erect my tent so it can dry from last night's heavy dew and go back to drag the canoe higher up the bank in case the river should rise. I then take a long swim, going under many times to cool off and wash away the sweat and sunscreen. I walk back to camp naked having washed my shirt and shorts. I step carefully to avoid getting my river shoes muddy. I hang my clothes on a makeshift clothesline and dry myself with the pitiful excuse for a towel I brought. I get out my little alcohol stove, burn my lunch trash, pack

tomorrow's lunch in the thwart bag, and start setting up camp. The gnats and mosquitoes are already fighting each other for every square inch of exposed skin and it is not yet dusk. The air is still sweltering hot when my supper is cooked, so I set it aside to cool and seek refuge in the tent to catch up on my journal. I've not had a serious bug problem before today, but they are a real nuisance here. I hear an owl hoot and then the frog chorus starts. They are in abundance also and I hope they have a big appetite for the biting bugs. I'm also looking forward to them singing me to sleep.

April 26, 2009 – Day Eleven

Hi 85, sunny

Sunday Afternoon – Mile 258 – River's end at Fort Toulouse

It was a hell raising Saturday night for the coyotes. They were really yipping it up as I was trying to get to sleep. They didn't bother me at all though and I was impressed with the variety of calls and howls and the range of their voices.

As I cook my breakfast, the mosquitoes are already out in force and I hurry to break camp and seek solace on the river. I only have about 24 miles to go, a mere cakewalk with no portages and an actual tailwind for the first time. As usual, in the first mile or two I spot what look like perfect camping spots if I had just gone a little further yesterday afternoon. But you just never know. In a few miles, Chubbehatchee Creek enters on the right and the Indian village Hoithlewalli was here.

In four more miles, I come to a sharp bend in the river that has an exceptionally rich history. The Emerald Mountain toll bridge now crosses at the apex of this bend, but inside the bend was the village of Sawanogi which in Muskogee means Shawnee town. A party of Canadian Shawnee moved to this site around 1740 and was given this land by the Creeks. They were still here when William Bartram traveled through in 1776. Indian Agent Benjamin Hawkins also mentions the Shawnee town and stated they retained their native tongue and manners. John Hague, a white boy who was captured by the Uchee Creek, was said to have been raised here and became an infamous Red Stick warrior known to the whites as Savannah Jack. Inside this same bend are the Kolumi Indian mounds from the Mississippian period. However, archaeological digs have shown the occupation of this site extended much earlier from at least 300 A.D. Evidence of Indian occupation can still be seen as you drive through the area today in the form of the Tallapoosa Casino operated by the Poarch Band of Creek Indians. The early but short-lived white pioneer settlement of Augusta sprang up near here around 1819.

About five miles further I come to the water intake for the City of Montgomery that gets 60 percent of its water from the river. A few more miles and I cross under the US Hwy 231 bridge between Montgomery and Wetumpka. Not far beyond, I lunch on an enormous sand bar.

Early afternoon, I pass the Fort Toulouse boat ramp on river right where Amy is to meet me at 3:00 p.m. But I have another mile to go to get to the true end of the Tallapoosa. Desoto is believed to have visited this area in his famous 1540 expedition. The French established Fort Toulouse here in 1717 as a trading post where Indians could exchange pelts and furs for guns

and household items. The French lost possession of the fort to the British with the treaty of 1763 that ended the French and Indian war. But the British never operated the fort. William Bartram visited the ruins of the fort in 1776 and reported that it was one of the best sites for a city in the world being located on a level plain between two major rivers. After defeating the Creeks in 1814, Andrew Jackson established a fort here which he named Fort Jackson. He never missed an opportunity for self promotion. It was here that William Weatherford, known as Red Eagle, made his famous surrender to Jackson and where Andrew Jackson forced the Creeks, including those loyal to the American cause, to cede 23 million acres of land that made up one fifth of modern day Georgia and three-fifths of Alabama.

I finally run out of riverbank on my right and pull ashore on the last little spit of land dividing the Tallapoosa and Coosa rivers. I watch the two rivers merge to form the Alabama River that will carry their blended waters to the Gulf of Mexico. I'm surprised to feel a stirring inside and a strong desire to get back in my canoe and ride the Alabama down to the salt. But my tired body says "not yet." I walk back a few yards to rest in the scant shade of a small sycamore tree, the last one on the Tallapoosa River. I contemplate my close association with this river, now my intimate companion. I have lived most of my 61 years in its watershed and many of my happiest times have been spent swimming, fishing, boating, and just watching the river and its reservoirs. I have traveled every inch of its course from its birth to the point where it donates its waters and gives up its identity to form a larger river. And I claim to be the first person to have made this journey. For eleven days I have been buoyed by this river, bathed in it, and drunk from its waters. All the liquid in my body is Tallapoosa and my spirit feels renewed knowing it flows through my veins.

After my meditation, I get in my tiny red boat and paddle the one-mile back to the boat ramp. This time into the wind--against the current. It shouldn't end any other way.