

UNDAUNTED COURAGE

Meriwether Saltzman and Jeff CLARK Conquer the Cuyahoga River

Two courageous modern day explorers, driven by only their need for truth, undertook the daunting task of canoeing the treacherous Cuyahoga River on June 1, 2000. The following journal will document this trip for those afraid to undertake such a challenge, and yet wishing to know what hardships real adventurers face daily in their quest for new knowledge.

Day 1 - after checking the weather channel, we headed for the origin of the Cuyahoga River. Unlike Lewis and Clark, we took only enough food for one day, and few weapons. We were smart enough to take Gore-Tex clothing and stored our camera and cell phone in plastic bags. (If Lewis and Clark had done this they wouldn't have had as much trouble with mildew and would have had a better record of their trip...that one can only assume that they completed.) We put our 14-foot canoe into the water above Route 608, near East Claridon.

After going about 200 feet, the water became too shallow and we had to pull the canoe about 100 yards. We feared that we might have lots of problems like this since we were near the origin of the river, but we only had this problem one more time during the day. The biggest problem we encountered were logsjams along this very narrow portion of the river. Some sections of the river were only 10 feet wide and there was heavy growth along both sides of the river. All

told, we had to lift, push, pull and carry our canoe over 37 logs piles during this first day. We also had to make two portages of about 100 yards. The scenery surprised us...primarily wet lands, thick woods, and on occasion, huge fields of water spadderdock (a skunk cabbage look-alike with yellow flowers).

In one area this plant covered an area of over 500 acres, and in one section of the river covered the entire river for several hundred yards. For the first 5 hours, we never saw a person or a man-made object except for 3 bridges, and a church at the intersection of the river and Route 87. We saw four people fishing and two others kayaking, all within a mile of Route 422. It took us 5:5 hours to travel the 14 miles (as the crow flies...it is hard to measure the actual mileage since the river is so crooked) to Route 422, where we stopped for the day. Jeff and I had lots of fun, but had to work very hard. We hope that the coming days will be easier...with faster currents, and less paddling and portaging. Only 76 miles to go.

Day 2 - we started Day 2 under sunny skies and facing a stiff wind. In fact, the wind was so strong that if we stopped paddling, the canoe would start to drift upstream. This resulted in a day of continuous paddling, if we wanted to make any headway. Planning only to make 16 miles for the day, we stopped several times to fish and enjoy the scenery. Jeff caught one 15-inch bass, winning both the "first and biggest" wagers of the day. Since it was the only fish, he would have won all other wagers too. Jeff also "caught" his leg with a hook, and like the real Meriwether, had to cut it out

with his knife. It was amazing to see him hold the hook with a pair of pliers and use his knife to remove the hook. Ouch. He never complained about it, so I guess it didn't remain as painful as it first appeared to be. We did not have trouble with the river being clogsged with debris, and enjoyed a good day of paddling.

We saw six ospreys and a like number of blue heron. We also saw several beaver lodges and lots of damage to trees caused by beaver. It was a wonderful, peaceful day, for a father and son, who have both been living fast paced lives for a number of years. We talked about our lives...our dreams for our families...our plans for the future...the kinds of things that more fathers and sons should talk about, but rarely do. Maybe "canoe rides as therapy" will become the rage for the new millennium. We ended the day in the city of Mantua (Route 44, below Route 82), about 6 miles short of our goal. We had a wonderful day on the Cuyahoga River. Only 66 miles to go.

Day 3 - Jeff and I decided to take some guests on leg 3 of this adventure. Jeff invited his son, Dan, 17, and I invited my daughter Jill's oldest son Andrew, 15, to join us. My oldest son and my two oldest grandsons...what a nice combination for this short 6 mile leg. The River was barely moving and so we had to paddle most of the time. We saw no other humans during this leg, but again got to see many blue heron, carp jumping out of the water and the banks full of Indian Paint Brush, a red flower resembling Salvia. Andrew was very excited to be making this trip, but Dan wasn't too excited, having just returned form 7 days of canoeing in the

Boundary Waters with his parents. Dan knew how to paddle a canoe and Andrew didn't, resulting in a crooked route on a crooked river. It was funny to see, but frustrating to Dan, who needed to finish and go to football practice at Stow High School. We took time for a lunch on the bank, while we talked about colleges the boys would like to attend, Andrew's band and Dan's football team. We ended the day at Lake Rockwell, an Akron Reservoir that we are forbidden to canoe through. Only about 60 miles to go.

Day 4 - the plan for today was to canoe to Monroe Falls, a trip of about 10 miles. We put our canoe in near the water processing plant, about 4 miles north of Kent and headed south. There were two fishermen at the bridge where we put the canoe in the water and they asked if we were going to fish. When we told them what we were doing they were very surprised. One, because they didn't know they were fishing in the Cuyahoga River (Wow!), and two, "We thought the Cuyahoga River was in Cleveland." After explaining the route of the river to them, they acted as if we were pulling their legs at first, and later seemed happy about their newfound knowledge!

Jeff and I are not just canoeing the river for our own pleasure, but try to educate the masses during our travels...several more enlightened people left in our wake! Before we arrived at Kent, we met a fisherman, the third person we met in the river on this trip. He was fishing from a rowboat. He had a small outboard motor attached to the boat and said that he often comes out from Kent to fish in this area. He was fishing behind the Oak Knolls Golf

course...and we could watch the golfers missing shots as we paddled by them...they were oblivious to our presence. When we got to downtown Kent, we had to take our canoe out of the water to portage around the Kent Dam (the second oldest arch dam in the United States). We pushed the canoe up the side of the river to the railroad tracks, walked down the tracks for several hundred yards (behind the Pufferbelly Restaurant and lowered the canoe down to the river. A lady standing on the bridge applauded our efforts; we took several pictures and headed on down the river.

The remainder of the trip to Monroe Falls was very pleasant and very pretty. We feared that a recent Kent storm, which knocked down lots of trees might pose a problem, but that was not the case and we only had to go over one large pile of trees. All in all, the Cuyahoga River has been very clean so far. We have found very little evidence of debris caused by humans, and the only clogsging of the river seems to be from fallen trees and tree limbs. We arrived at Monroe Falls just as a large rainstorm was passing overhead. We made it to our car, make that "hand made lean-to," before the rain hit. Forty miles completed, only 50 miles to go.

Day 5 - this is the part of the trip that we were most excited about (except the finishing part). Today, we would be going through Akron and several large dams, before heading into the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, where we would be paralleling the Erie Canal and its almost forty locks. The canal system died a sudden death in the great flood of 1913, when so many locks and canal banks were washed out. The railroads were gaining strength and there was no need to

replace the canals...a busy and important transportation industry one day and gone the next. We went through Cuyahoga Falls and saw many lovely homes in the River Estates area. We saw several hundred ducks and geese at the Water Works Park, many Blue Herons, two Red-tailed hawks and two Kingfisher birds diving for minnows. We quickly arrived at the falls by LaFevers Restaurant, because the current had become much more rapid in this area. We took our canoe out to the restaurant and walked through their parking lot and down Front Street, the main street of Cuyahoga Falls.

No one asked us where we were going with a huge backpack, paddles and a canoe. We marched, make that portaged, past the Sheraton Suites and several hundred more yards past the hotel, looking for a way to get back into the river. We asked several people and no one had the slightest idea how we could accomplish our goal. Finally, a machine shop operator said that we could go down a very steep path behind his shop where "crazy fishermen go to fish." We decided to try it, although the sign posted at the entrance said that the path was "Dangerous and Life Threatening." I guess these people didn't know they were dealing with Meriwether-type people!

Well, first, we lowered the canoe 14 feet while holding onto a tree, next one brave explorer would move on down the steep slope and hold onto the canoe, while the other one would go around the man and canoe and repeat the process. This was a 70-foot high, 60-degree mountain, make that hill, and we got to the bottom safe and sound in 25 minutes. Next, we

had to portage around the Gorge Falls; a 50-60 foot falls in the Gorge Park. We portaged the canoe a thousand yards and reentered the river in a rapids-area. As we started out into the rapids, Meriwether, leaned upstream, a real no-no, and over we went into the raging waters (Have you seen the movie PERFECT STORM, well then you know what I'm talking about.) Lewis told Meriwether that he had a serious look on his face during these moments, but I can assure you that he relished facing down death!

After getting the canoe and our possessions back together and emptying the water out of the canoe, we continued our voyage. The rapids lasted for some time and I learned a new and important lesson...a canoe with water in it, even several gallons, makes it very unwieldy and difficult to steer or manage. The concept is called "free surface" and is like carrying an ice cube tray without the dividers in place. For all of you non-canoe experts, keep your canoe dry...or you'll be very sorry. On down through the "Valley," past the water treatment plant for Akron, past Blossom Music Center and to Peninsula. As we pulled our canoe out of the water for the day at SR 303, Mr. Fisher, the owner of Fishers' Restaurant, in Peninsula, greeted us.

We talked to him for 30 minutes about him growing up in this small Western Reserve town that had been the western boundary of the United States in the early 1800s, how he had canoed so much of this river, and how his Mom had told him about the flood of 1913. We talked about the canals and how Peninsula had had dozens of bars in the late 1800s. This was a wonderful conclusion to a wonderful day. We

learned more about the river from first hand experience and Mr. Fisher taught us more about Peninsula and the river and the canals. There is so much to learn and so many great teachers if we only take the time to absorb these lessons waiting to be taught. We covered 20 miles and two major portages today in 7 hours...only 30 more miles to go.... And after the grueling conclusion the, our celebration and press conference in the Cleveland Flats.

Day 6 - Today was the longest day of our trip. Two hours to get our cars loaded and positioned before we started, seven hours on the river and two hours to reload, collect our cars and return home. We added a new passenger today...Jeff's dog, Bramble, a twelve year old English Setter. She was a good passenger, and loved jumping in and out of the boat to point out birds. At first, she moved around the boat too frantically, and nearly tipped us over in some rapids, but Jeff soon taught her to sit in the middle of the boat and we had no more problems. We put the boat in the river at Lock 29 in Peninsula and headed north.

We no sooner got started than we had to portage around the temporary dam put across the river for the construction of the new bridge for the Ohio turnpike. The workers seemed happy to see us, especially Bramble, and offered to take some pictures. One worker's home was located near East Claridon, where we started our adventure, and told his fellow workers how far we had traveled...they were impressed! He said he hoped to take the same trip with his son one day. We continued to be impressed with the cleanliness of the river. There were piles of logs, but very little human made

debris. We saw five deer today, including a nice buck whose antlers were still in velvet. One doe on the bank of the river let us approach to within ten yards before fleeing. The river depth was a surprise to both of us. We thought it would be deeper. On the first six days of the trip, we would estimate the river depth to be 1-3 feet in most places, with occasional areas where the depth reached eight feet. In this area we could see that the high water marks were six to eight feet above current levels of four feet.

During the day, we observed the Cuyahoga Valley Train passing us in both directions on the west bank of the river. No one on the train seemed to notice that we were canoeing in the river. We had to carry our canoe and gear over several areas where the water was too low and sandbars had formed, but these areas were only about twenty-five yards long. The biggest portage of the day was around the Brecksville Dam. We had to carry our canoe and supplies about five hundred yards down the river after getting out of the river and up to a path paralleling the river. Near the dam, we saw a man and three boys fishing from the bank and one man fishing while standing in the river.

The man in the river was only the sixth person we had seen in the river since the beginning of our trip...a big surprise to us because we thought that more folks would be using the river at this time of the year. The river has been clear for most of the trip, but became muddy after Tinkers Creek joined the Cuyahoga. We concluded our day at Rockside Road...near the northern part of the Cuyahoga Valley Recreational Area. During the day we never saw a home or

building and the only manmade objects we saw were bridges, a train and cars. This will change as we do our last leg through the Flats area of Cleveland. The weather was great and Jeff and I had had another great day on the Cuyahoga. We were both very tired when we finished unloading the cars, but shared a feeling of accomplishment for the fifteen miles we had completed during the day. We agreed that it had been an especially tiring day when we had to wake up Bramble to get her out of the back of my car when we got home. Only twelve more miles to go!

Day 7 - WE DID IT! WE CANOED THE CUYAHOGA RIVER! What a great feeling of accomplishment to be the first human beings to ever canoe the Cuyahoga River...or at least the only ones we know about (Not researching the above statement makes our accomplishment seem ever so more formidable...OK, maybe Native Americans and some other intrepid souls have done this....let's not quibble!) Today, it took four and half hours of hard paddling against a strong wind to reach Lake Erie. We started at Lock 39 (Rockside Road) and headed for downtown Cleveland. We left the Cuyahoga Valley National Park and at this point the scenery changed dramatically.

Instead of trees and fields lining the river, we were surrounded by heavy industry (machinery companies, cement plants, stone crushing businesses and large buildings with steam spouting from them, without any hint of what was happening inside.) If it weren't so noisy, the trees lining the river might have hidden what was going on further away. As we passed under the Route 480 Bridge, we took a

depth measurement and found the river to be eighteen inches deep at that point...it looks like a deep river from the bridge, but looks can be deceiving! The trip became more and more interesting as we entered the downtown area. As we passed LTV Steel, we were amazed by all of the activity. There were dozens of trucks moving what appeared to be stone (or some compound used in the manufacture of steel), large front loaders moving coal, very large Hulett cranes, on tracks, lifting SUV sized loads of iron ore pellets and dumping them in bins, which I assumed were directing the pellets to the blast furnaces we saw belching fire and smoke.

The air seemed to be clean, but the ever-present noise made this part of our trip less fun. As we neared downtown, we paddled past Jim's Steakhouse, Jacobs Field, the Ritz-Carlton, Sherman Williams Paints and many other Cleveland landmarks. We stopped at a ship (unloading its cargo of cement) which was tied up on the west bank of the river, and talked to two sailors scraping and painting the waterline of the ship. They had had too much to drink the night before and were "hiding" beneath the bow and not doing any work. They said that this was their 55th trip this summer and that they had not been home since May.

They planned to "work" until December when the lake "closes" for the winter. A few minutes later, we encountered a tugboat pulling a large dredging barge and although we were fifty yards away, the captain motioned for us to get out of the way and didn't even smile when we cheerfully waved at him. He probably didn't know I was a retired Navy Captain! A motor boat with a retired couple seemed very

interested about what we were doing in a canoe in this part of the river and moved along beside us for a mile or so, asking questions about our trip. Frankly, they were about the only people we met on the trip who were very interested in what we were doing, except Mr. Fisher. After at first falsely assuming they were from Channel 3 News, we finally concluded they were just two very nice folks from Kirkland, Ohio.

After seven days (forty hours of paddling and forty more hours of taking the canoe to and from the river), eight portages, 45 lifts, pulls and tugs over and around sandbars and log jams, we put some Lake Erie water under our canoe. During the trip we saw a total of fourteen people in the water fishing, boating or “working;” and about ten others fishing from the river bank. It was a great trip and one I would recommend to others who have the time and want to do some canoeing with a friend or loved one.

As I was leaving home the last morning, Ruth’s cousin, Jo, who had spent the weekend with us and was, heading back to New York City where she lives, asked me what I had learned on this trip. I had actually been thinking about that the last few days. I guess I was reminded of: what a wonderful life I have been blessed with; how I have always tried to finish everything I started (My Dad always said, “Do what you say you’re gonna to do.”); how much Ruth is always there to help me carry out any idea, no matter how crazy it might be; and, how blessed I am to have son like Jeff. As we finished, Jeff said, “Let’s do this again next summer.” I don’t think I want to do the same trip again, but

maybe something new. As we pulled the canoe up and over the ten foot retaining wall on the river behind TGIFridays to finish the trip and celebrate with Ruth and Sally, a lady stood nearby and watched us complete this difficult task. I said to the lady, "My son and I just canoed the entire Cuyahoga River from start to finish...over one hundred and twenty miles." She said, "Oh," and walked away. We didn't impress her, but Jeff and I each had a feeling of satisfaction that we had done what we said we were going to do. We had conquered the Cuyahoga!

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