

river rat

John Ruskey
brings adventure
tourism to the
Mississippi

by Gary Bridgman

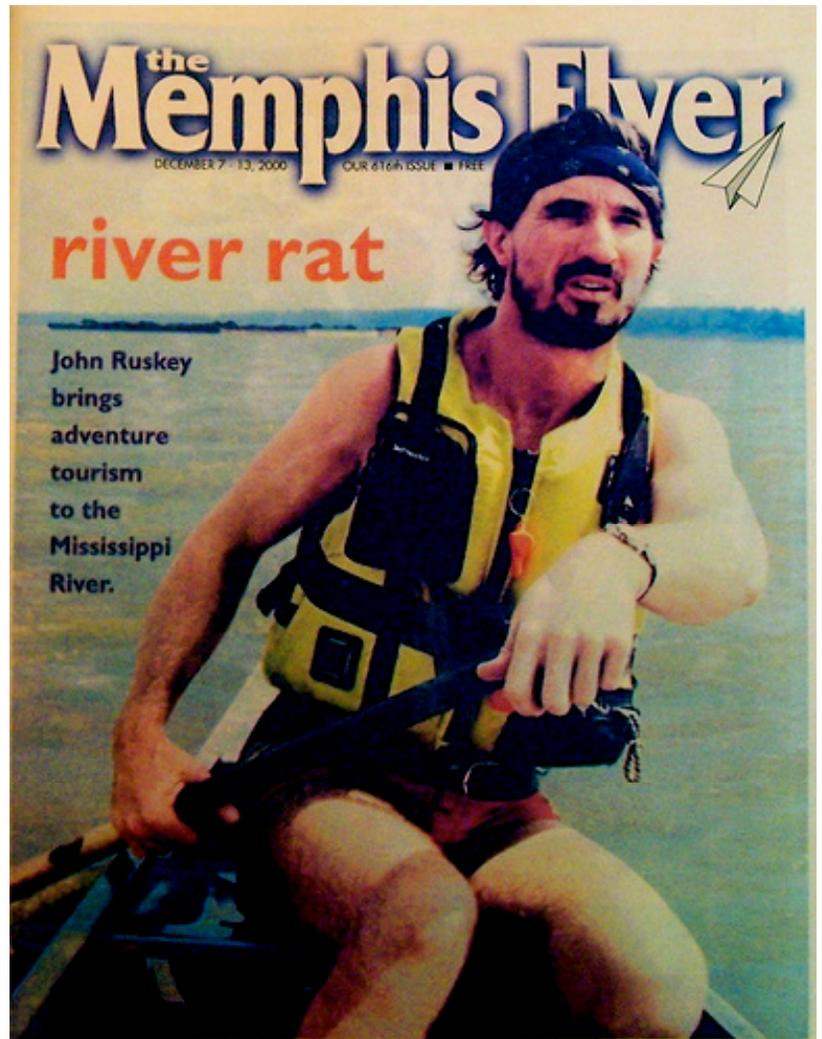
EVEN though I could
see the line of
immense standing
waves from a distance —
looking like the vertebrae of
some impossibly large skeleton
rising from the Mississippi

River's bed — I was still literally stunned when our aluminum canoe veered out of
the trough and up the face of the first wave.

One minute we were riding the Mississippi's smooth current past a tugboat laboring upstream
behind several acres of iron ore piled atop its barges. The next, we willingly point our canoe
across the tug's 5,600-horsepower wake into the frothy, 8-foot high, chocolate milk waves.

*Blue sky ...
muddy water ...
blue sky ...
muddy water ...*

Those are the only clear images I can take in as we smack into the troughs and careen over the
crests. I half expect to see Anthony Sherrod, the guide at the front of the canoe, stand up with a
harpoon, ready to gig a whale. Instead, the Clarksdale High School sophomore clamps his hands
to the gunwales and lets fly with an altogether appropriate roller-coaster scream.



I was distracted from this adrenaline circus by a conversation taking place several hundred yards behind us. John Ruskey, steering in the back of the canoe, had turned up the volume on the VHF walkie-talkie strapped to his life jacket in order to hear some chatter between the tug pilots we had just passed.

"Did you know the life expectancy of a tugboat pilot is about 55?" one captain says.

"Naw, I didn't," replies the other, in the kicked-bucket drawl common to the trade. The two sound oblivious to the plight of three men in a canoe, bobbing in their wake like cast-off bait.

"Yeah, the incidence of heart attacks is about 10 times the national average! Just take a look around ... you don't see anyone over 55 out here."

"Yeah, I need to do some exercise, too."

John Ruskey, 37, has been giving tours on the Mississippi River for two years, operating Quapaw Canoe Company from his home in Clarksdale. His most popular guided expeditions cover the isolated stretches of the river between Mhoon Landing (remember Splash Casino?) and Rosedale, Mississippi.

The Mississippi Delta has always had its share of eccentrics, but you've got to hand it to a man who will show up on the Oxford Square on a Friday night wearing both a coonskin cap and a straight face. Canoe outfitters tend to be individualists, but most guides don't take you down major waterways in a homemade cypress canoe. He'll swim in any water not covered in ice, and he's less likely to wear shoes in the winter than even Prince Mongo. Unusual, sure, but he has a knack for sharing his adventurous life with others.

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While Ruskey's clients have come from Europe, Asia, and South America, his most pleasantly surprised paddlers are usually from the Mid-South. "They are amazed by the size of the sandbars — which are like ocean beaches — and the expanse of the wilderness," Ruskey says. "There are some beautiful places along the Mississippi to drag the canoe ashore and explore, or to work on an 'island tan.' "The largest contiguous expanse of bottomland hardwood forest in America is at Big Island," Ruskey continues, "opposite Rosedale at the mouth of the Arkansas River. I've made a lot of camps on the sand down there ... good hiking."

Good stories, too.

Everything between the Rockies and the Appalachians that isn't nailed down seems to work its way into the Mississippi River, and Ruskey himself is no exception. It wasn't the smell of camp coffee and bacon or the diesel-tinged adrenaline rush of barge-wake surfing that lured Ruskey to the Mississippi River from his native Denver. It was the quieter passages from a book written 125 years ago, like the one describing the river just before sunrise:

The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line — that was the woods on t'other side; you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness spreading around; then the river softened up away off, and warn't black any more, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along ever so far away — trading scows, and such things; and long black streaks—rafts; sometimes you could hear a sweep screaming; or jumbled up voices, it was so still, and sounds come so far

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn hooked him on the idea of floating the river when he was still in high school. "I didn't know anything about the Mississippi. All's I knew is that Huck and Jim floated it," he says. "They built a raft, and I wanted to build a raft, too. We decided we were not going to college."

Ruskey and his fellow college-evader, Sean Rowe, did build a raft, in Wisconsin in late 1982. They floated as far as the TVA power lines that cross the river south of Presidents Island. By then, it was February 1983 and the temperature was below freezing. Rowe and Ruskey were too engrossed in a game of chess to notice that they were about to collide with a concrete and steel tower.

"That was where the trip ended," says Ruskey. "It's a wonder we weren't run over by a tug or rendered hypothermic. We had to stay in the water several hours, mid-channel." The pair then hitchhiked to New Orleans and got jobs [as porters] on the *Mississippi Queen*. Ruskey went back West and settled down long enough to earn a bachelor's degree in philosophy and mathematics at St. John's College in Santa Fe. Rowe eventually became a reporter for the *Miami Herald*.

It would be another 10 years before Ruskey would come back to the area, in part to be near the Delta blues culture, which he helped to preserve as the curator of Clarksdale's Delta Blues Museum and as director of the Delta Blues Education Program. He began canoeing alone to release the pressures of his job at the museum, then he started to make his living taking other people along. By the time he finished handbuilding the *Ladybug*, his 26-foot cypress canoe, Ruskey had completed the transition from chronicling history to actually living in it.

Ask Ruskey's friend Estella Houston when he got interested in the river, and she'll tell you it started before he could read a book. "His mother told me that when John was about three, he would want to go play in the duck pond across the street. They had to keep him fenced in the backyard so he couldn't get in the pond," she recounts, "but they would often run water from a

hose through the grass for him to play in. He was content to be in the water. He didn't just start this water thing; it's been there all the time ... water and no shoes!"

The Mississippi River is a lot bigger "thing" than water from a hose, but those who would dismiss it as a big, dull barge canal, more trouble than it's worth for recreation, stand to lose that debate with Ruskey.

"In Western rivers you can't get away from outfitters, and the sandbars are all crowded with rafters and paddlers," Ruskey says. "The Mississippi is just the opposite: You don't meet anyone, even though it's the biggest river in North America.

You see a lot of tugboats, but you don't see a lot of recreational boats." When he does meet fellow paddlers on the river, the encounters often become part of Ruskey's body of stories. "Mark Twain talked about the strange coincidences that occur on the Mississippi," he says, "and I've certainly had my share of them: odd chance meetings with kayakers and canoeists who are floating the length of the river or repeatedly running into the same floaters under unbelievable circumstances. One time a couple of guys in a tandem canoe doing the river screwed up and got caught in some snags in the chaotic mess of whirlpools at Modoc Crevasse. I was in my solo kayak and just happened to be at that same enormous bend on the same day, at that same time. I saw them get back into the current and get impaled on a snag — a dangerous position on any river, on the Mississippi even more deadly.

"I've been in wilderness areas in the Rocky Mountains that seem a lot more secure and predictable than the Mississippi River. Access is difficult on this river. If you happen to capsize or have an emergency situation where you have to walk out, it's a difficult prospect on the river. You're going to do a long hike and it may take days to reach civilization."

Ruskey compares his trips to mountain climbing. "The commitment you have to make to the environment you are entering and the logistics involved in getting on the river, even if it's just a day float, are similar to getting on a big mountain.

You are quite exposed, there is little opportunity for easy outs until you reach your destination, and it's just big in all proportions. You're not going to fall 10 feet on the big mountain; you're going to fall thousands of feet. On the river, if you drown, it's not going to be on a shallow bar but in hundreds of feet of water, and your body might not wash up for hundreds of miles downstream."

Despite the various river put-ins in close proximity to Memphis, Ruskey warns against assumptions that his trips are quick and easy.

"You might as well leave your watches at home. I warn all clients that while on the river there is no time but river time and that each float is different. It would be a difficult river to have a set itinerary on, and when we do, it's subject to river level and storms."

Some of Ruskey's trips even involve paddling the big canoe upstream for short stretches, which isn't always as hard as it sounds.

"Sometimes you can catch eddies and you don't have to do much work at all. A lot of places you have to do some real hard paddling; sometimes you have to pole off the bottom of the river. Sometimes the current is just too strong and you have to get out with a rope and walk up the bank and pull the canoe up through that section, and sometimes you have to portage."

Actually, muscling a canoe upstream can be educational. "You don't really get to know the river until you've spent some time paddling upstream," Ruskey explains. "That's when you understand how the currents work. You also get to know the bank. When you float with the river, you can be hundreds of yards away from the bank and you have no idea what's there, what the life is, what the birds are."

While John Ruskey travels the Mississippi River in the old way, he doesn't necessarily regret not being able to see what the river looked like in Mark Twain's time. Even today, the river is a magnificent force with or without the inconveniences brought on by the Industrial Revolution.

"The river just rules this landscape so completely," Ruskey said. "Back in the days before revetments, whole forests would be swallowed by the river in one gulp. Today, the Corps of Engineers can make it do this and  in little ways, but eventually the river is going to do what it wants to do and go where it wants to go."

"It's like trying to tame the wind."

A Floatable Feast

Quapaw Canoe Company proprietor John Ruskey puts almost as much emphasis on cooking as he does on navigation when exploring the lower Mississippi.

"As far as food goes, I don't like hungry paddlers. A hungry paddler is not a good paddler. An unhappy paddler is a dangerous thing to have on a windy day, and hunger is just one step away from mutiny."

Ruskey found a coconut in the river on one of his tours, and he cooked it with some chicken stew. On another occasion, he collaborated on a sandbar cookout with a German chef while a writer from the German equivalent of *Food & Wine* took notes and photographs.

"One of my favorite things to do is cook steaks over a willow fire," Ruskey says. "Willow smoke has a beautiful odor, no matter how you cut it. To make a grill, we cut the green branches and lay them crosshatch-style over coals. It makes a beautiful way to grill the steak with roast potatoes, corn, onions, and garlic. The onions, potatoes, and garlic you have to bury, though. You move the fire, bury them in the sand, then move the fire back over them."

Other common Quapaw menu items include rabbit gumbo, Spanish garlic chicken, shish kabob, and even fajitas.

Overnight trips call for a hearty breakfast of Ruskey's signature "raft potatoes," eggs, pancakes, bacon, sausage, coffee, and orange juice. "Whatever it is," Ruskey says, "we always make a lot of it."

Quapaw Raft Potatoes

corn oil

4 medium potatoes, roughly diced

half an onion, chopped

3 cloves of garlic, chopped

4 eggs

1/2 cup sliced pepper jack and/or cheddar cheese

- Coals of a campfire are preferred to cooking at home, but when cooking at home set the burner to a high heat. Cover bottom of skillet with 1/8-inch corn oil. Sauté potatoes with onions and garlic until potatoes are soft and onions and garlic are caramelized. Crack eggs over potatoes and mix thoroughly; stir occasionally till eggs are cooked. Add cheese to top of mixture, cover skillet and wait till cheese melts. The raft potatoes are ready to eat when cheese is melted. The preferred garnish is cayenne pepper or Frank's Original Red Hot Cayenne Pepper Sauce.

Ruskey and his high school buddy, Sean Rowe, concocted this rib-sticking dish in 1982 while floating down the length of the Mississippi on a homemade log raft. The raft sank when they collided with a TVA tower south of Presidents Island, but the recipe has survived.—GB

Past-Perfect Storm

John Ruskey's account of some Delta sound and fury, signifying humility.

On the lower Mississippi I have come to understand the God of the Old Testament: vengeful, wrathful, and full of contradiction. William Faulkner bemoaned the cutting of the Delta forests because it was the wilderness that taught a man humility.

was especially humbled by the river once, having fun on the edge of a tornado on a solo float. It was the spring of '98, I think, or maybe '97, and I was returning downstream from a circumnavigation of Island 63 [near Clarksdale]. The willow forests were groaning under the weight of the wind and the leaves were showing their undersides. I was in the lee of Island 63 on the way upstream, so it was actually quite enjoyable — all of the wind and commotion, the leaves torn from the trees, the rush of the air through the willows and mad clattering of the cottonwoods. I was kayaking upstream under the shelter of the island, but all of that changed on the return trip.

Really, in hindsight, I should have returned downstream the way I'd come; in the back channel there was little flow. However, being a good river rat I wanted to let the main channel carry me downstream. It's something like the reward you get in the downhill after climbing the mountain. I cut through a pass at the top end of 63 that's only accessible during high water and entered the fray.

With the fury of a storm that was still in the making, the channel was a mess — all frothy and wind-whipped, foam being sprayed off of each wave and whisked in wind-beaten lines eastward. You could see sand storms upstream on the bar of Island 62, which indicated gale-force winds, and vision was down to a couple of miles. The chop was not normal — waves rolling in parallel lines from one direction — but chaotic, water beating and crashing from all directions, waves climaxing on waves, waves hitting the revetment and bouncing back to be superimposed upon by other waves, haystacks leaping upward.

Each stroke of the kayak blade was like paddling upstream in a Rocky Mountain rapid, each stroke necessary just to stay in the current and to stay upright. It's something like walking a tightrope, where your kayak blade becomes your balance pole.

Downstream a tugboat captain was having problems of his own. The onslaught of the storm front had forced his starboard edge onto the revetment and rocks above me along Island 63. Later I learned that they lost two barges.

Meanwhile, the sky to the west was darkening from grays and blues into a thick atmosphere that seemed to press down on my shoulders. At one point the clouds close to the horizon became consumed in a vertical blackness — you could see the forests of Island 62, but above that nothing but striated blackness. Then lightning flashes illuminated the blackness and my adrenaline started to rush when I saw the forest on the Mississippi side get bent over by an unseen hand. The wind intensified into a loud roar and the trees began thrashing back and forth like wheat in a Kansas field — and there I was midstream with no cover, so I beat tail for the shore, which was fortunately downwind.

But what to do once I got there? There was a lightness entering the sky — a greenish-blue light — and hail began to spatter the water. There were a few trees in the water at the shore, and big rolling waves were crashing through them. I managed to get out of the kayak without flipping, pulled it ashore, hail pelting my skin. I was afraid the wind would blow my kayak away it was roaring so loudly and hard, so I removed my knife belt and strapped the kayak with the belt to some low-lying osage orange in a low place on the bank. I crawled back down to the water's edge because I was afraid to stand with the wind roaring so hard. Then I immersed myself in the river like a scared possum.

Getting in the water solved the problem of the hail, even though I was riding the waves as they came crashing into shore — the river actually felt warm after the wind. One of the trees I was floating among pitched over. It wasn't a violent collapse. The sycamore trunk just ruptured, exposing the gleaming bony whiteness of the wood inside. It made no sound as it fell; I suppose because the wind was so loud.

So now a twisted mass of sycamore branches, twigs, and leaves was riding the rollers with me and I was wondering why I hadn't stayed at home. By and by, a lightness began to creep under the billowing clouds to the west, and then a calm fell.

Once again, I set off downstream along Island 63, feeling very scrubbed and much sobered. I'd always hoped some day to witness a tornado, but in the face of one I felt small. I certainly would never impose these kinds of weather conditions on fellow paddlers. In fact I have stayed at camp for several days with clients awaiting the passage of severe weather, but at the same time, powerful storms and their effect on the river are fascinating to watch.



Text and photography by Gary Bridgman

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