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Canoe passes Buffalo, Lake Mary, Angola prison

LAST IN A SERIES of articles on a Mississippi River canoe trip from Natchez to St. Francisville, La.

We launched early into cool, fragrant morning air and slid around the back side of Shreve Island, where I have run trotlines with friends. We canoed past a channel to the hydroelectric plant in Louisiana, staying well away from the strong current pouring into it.

More channels led west to the Red and Atchafalaya rivers. Control structures divert one-third of the Mississippi down the Atchafalaya, said our guide, John Ruskey of Quapaw Canoe Co.

During the flood of 2011, I got to travel the Mississippi River here by boat with game wardens and fly over it in a private plane.

Now we crossed the river and coasted through flooded forest at the mouth of Buffalo River, a popular local fishing spot. The bluffs of Fort Adams rose directly beyond it.

We passed the mouth of Clark Creek, which flows from rugged Clark Creek State Park, known for its waterfalls. Farther on, we landed and hiked up knife-edged ridges with steep ravines and dramatic river overlooks.

The bluffs contained different plant species than those found at the lower riverside, such as mullein, pawpaw, oak, hickory and a toothache tree, also known as Hercules club, whose wedge-shaped knobs contain pain-deadening qualities.

We stopped on an island for lunch, then continued around a vast peninsula on the east side where the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola is located. We had left the state of Mississippi and now had Louisiana on both sides. From the river there was little to indicate a prison, which was set well beyond the tree line.

Legend has it that the penitentiary was built here because the river is too treacherous for escapees to swim, but Ruskey said it's no more dangerous here than anywhere else, and in fact is probably less so, since the river is 1½ mile wide and makes a long, sweeping bend. But on land the prison is backed by the rugged Tunica Hills, which form a natural barrier.

Slow as the river seemed, we had been making 10 mph in the channel, 6 mph on average. Compare that with streams like the Bogue Chitto, where 2 mph is a typical canoeing pace.

In a patch of slow water, Ruskey and Christopher "Wolfie" Staudinger jumped out of the boat for a swim. The water temperature was in the upper 50s, but these guys were used to it. When they climbed out, we shared chocolate bars all around.

Below the prison, the final line of Tunica Hills stretched to the river's edge. We stopped for a look-see.

I scampered up the steep, crumbling bank to the top 150 feet up. Here I found cedar, redbud and may apple. I followed the bluff line, pausing for spectacular views over the river.

A gorge full of water lay directly behind me. Ruskey and I followed an ancient, deep roadbed down and circled back to the river around a point from the cove where the canoe harbored. Two towboats pushed noisily against the current a short distance away.

Ruskey scampered along the steep side of the dirt bluff. I was hesitant to take such a precarious route. Two men watched from a barge, and we exchanged waves.

Perhaps afraid to chicken out in front of an audience, I followed Ruskey's lead along the side of the dirt bluff in my clumsy rubber boots. I'll bet the men in the boat fig-



LEATHER BRITCHES

ERNEST HERNDON

ured I was a reckless youngster, as opposed to someone well past the half-century mark.

I survived the scramble and rejoined the boat. The towboats plowed past, churning the cove into a jumble, but the waves had

no effect on our sturdy 30-foot wooden vessel as we rode back into the current.

We paddled up a flooded ravine, which normally would have been dry. Before the trip I had asked Ruskey if the high water would affect us, and his cheerful response was typical: "This means we'll be exploring more back channels, more oxbow lakes normally disconnected, etc. We'll be able to make good distance with less paddling! I'm happy about it. You know part of the reason we're doing this is to locate good campsites. Now we'll know exactly which bars are out at flood stage."

Back on the river, the Tunica Hills ended, replaced by a long line of willows. We saw an occasional camp and passed a couple of bayous on the east bank. Beside one stood a rustic church and what looked like a plantation house. A towboat captain had told us on the radio that this was called Little Hollywood, a set built for a movie and abandoned after the filming was over.

We didn't stop to explore. Ruskey evidently prefers natural wonders to man-made ones.

Black clouds rolled out of the north. Thunder rumbled over the east bank. A cool wind blew from our left while sunshine warmed us from the right.

Ruskey predicted the rain would miss us, and he was right.

We landed in a grove of willow trees after a 45-mile day. In no time a fire was crackling and we had the gear unloaded. The sun going down directly across from us turned the river to molten silver. The air was cool, with few mosquitoes.

We were camped on a narrow sandy shelf backed by swamp. I played music on my banjo-mandolin, and John did a turn on the guitar. Then we ate steak and sweet potatoes followed by campfire and ginger tea.

After the long day I was tired and sore, and slept hard. On Saturday we had a mere 20 miles down to St. Francisville, where I was getting out, while the others continued to Baton Rouge.

We passed Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge to our left. I visited there in 2002 to see the national champion baldcypress tree. Otherwise the river was wide and slow, the only noise the quiet splash of our paddles.

Soon Ruskey pointed out the towers of the nuclear power plant and the new bridge at St. Francisville. As we coasted toward the old ferry landing, I could see my familiar white pickup truck where Angelyn was waiting. "Paddles up!" Ruskey said. "Hoo-WOOO!"

Our shout of greeting echoed off the river bank.

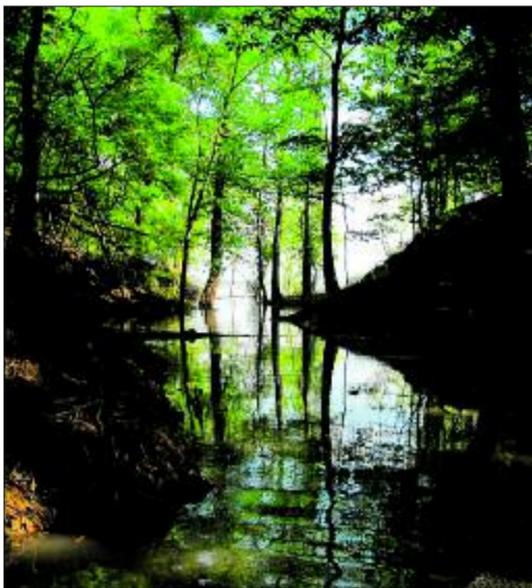
"One more time," Ruskey said. "Hoo-WOOO!"

The River Gators had arrived.



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Above is a toothache tree, also known as Hercules club. At right, Chris 'Wolfie' Staudinger takes a swim in the Mississippi River off a canoe. Also shown are Mark 'River' Peoples, front, and Brax Barden, right. Below is a secluded gorge in the rugged Tunica Hills, which run from Fort Adams south to Tunica, La., below the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. For more information on Mississippi River canoe trips, see www.island63.com.



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