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Written by Christie Matherne Hall

A Trip Down the Mississip'

Mapping the Lower Mississippi with River Gator and the Quapaw Canoe Company



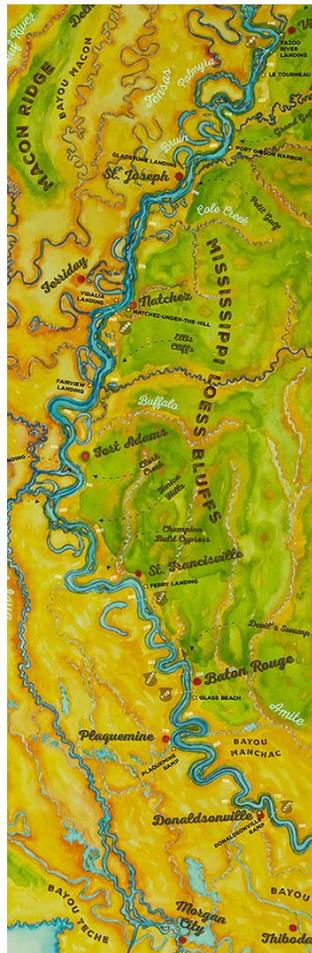
John Ruskey, founder and owner of Quapaw Canoe Company, has led the creation of a detailed river log that maps the Mississippi River's features from its confluence with the Missouri River to its mouth.

Photo by Josh Hall.

Once upon a time, the great majority of folks considered a canoe trip down the river's business end, properly known as the Lower Mississippi River (from the Ohio River to the Gulf), to be an idiot's last decision. That time is ... mostly still here, to be honest; but for those who dream of making the trek, the idea has gotten a lot closer to home—and a lot less dangerous.

Enter the Quapaw Canoe Company. Founded in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1998, Quapaw specializes in all-inclusive canoe tours down the Lower Mississippi River. Last April, the company officially expanded south into Natchez, and founder John Ruskey welcomed

Natchez river guide Adam Elliott into the partnership with a ribbon-cutting ceremony and a night of adult beverages at the iconic Under-The-Hill Saloon. At 10 am the next day—about eight hours after their celebration ended—my husband and I joined them for a two-day segment of the ongoing River Gator Lower Mississippi exploration mission. The heavily sponsored expedition will provide the meat for a forthcoming “paddler’s map” of this portion of the Mississippi River. It is Quapaw’s most ambitious project to date—largely because the river has never been mapped for paddlers before.



Leaving Natchez

Mark Twain, arguably the first great American storyteller, was obsessed with the great river. His first influential work of literature—appropriately named *Life on the Mississippi*—was written in such detail, it’s *still* the closest anyone has ever gotten to creating a paddler’s guide.

That’s the tail-end of the answer that our assigned Quapaw river guide, Adam Elliott, gave when I asked him why six other souls were loading their gear on the Natchez boat launch. The beginning of his answer was news to me: “We’re making a paddler’s guide to the Lower Mississippi.”

“Now?” I asked, standing on the steep incline of the boat launch. “Like, right now?”

“Yup,” he beamed. “Here’s a gift.” He handed me a rolled-up bundle of posters, which turned out to be five glossy prints of a hand-drawn map of the Lower Mississippi. “We’re about half-done, I’d say.”

In about an hour’s time, we—my husband and I, along with five Quapaw river guides and two other adventure writers—were packed like luxury sardines in two beautiful, spacious canoes with all of our gear, slinking beneath the massive Natchez-Vidalia suspension bridge.

I guess their collective experience was reassuring, because against all odds, I wasn't the least bit anxious.

Exploring over lunch

One of the greatest things about steering a canoe down a river as big as the Mississippi is something that only evacuated barge crews and recreational boaters get to fully appreciate: The massive, jungle-esque river islands, which periodically appear and disappear as the water level changes.

Some of the islands we passed were entirely submerged, leaving only clusters of telltale treetops as evidence of once-solid campgrounds. The taller landmasses held their heads above the high water as we floated by, offering us glimpses of vast fields full of bright yellow rocket flowers, some as tall as eighth-graders. As we made landfall on one such island for lunch that day, I found it hard to believe that Adam had called it a "sandbar," mostly because I'd never seen a sandbar with a full-fledged forest growing on it.

I'd almost forgotten that lunch was the point of the stop, just when Elliott—with the help of fellow Quapaws, Braxton Barden, Chris "Wolfie" Staudinger, Mark "River" Peoples, and Quapaw founder John Ruskey—pulled an actual *table* from the depths of the bigger canoe, and set it up on a flat spot near the edge of the sandy bank. It was as big as any college dorm dinner table, and I have yet to understand how they managed to fit it in the boat along with six people.

In a few minutes, they laid out a spread worthy of an art gallery opening: hummus, three different kinds of cured meats, apple slices, cheese chunks, and thick slices of bread. Rather than disposable dinnerware, our guides had brought along real silverware and reusable metal plates, and they washed dishes after every meal. Real men, they are.

We stayed on that island for what felt like several hours, but no one seemed worried about time on that glorious afternoon—the sun was keeping track of that stuff for us. If it hadn't been for Ernest Herndon (one of the writers who came with us) pulling out his notebook to

scribble down some wisdom or another, I might have forgotten about my own lonely notebook sitting at the bottom of the dry-bag.

“Good idea,” I said aloud as I rifled through my things, searching for a lost favorite pen. Herndon was too far in the zone to reply with anything more than a lifted eyebrow of acknowledgment, and perhaps the better part of an old soul’s smile.

It wasn’t long before everyone, including my husband, wandered away from the riverbank; lured into the island forest by a thick, thorny carpet of future blackberries. They found shells of baby turtles that hadn’t made it to the water; sunbaked wishbones and rib shanks of some unidentified bony fish; and warm patches of smooth sand that begged Ruskey for a catnap, to which he granted one.

I sat on the bank with my notebook and tried to summon some literary motivation, but my word-well had run dry. All I found was all that was there: a strange island to explore with seven strangers, a crisp day, and a blue, cloudless sky.



With our tent pitched and the sun sinking towards the other side of the island, I cracked open an ice-cold India pale ale and started getting chatty with the others. I wanted to know more about these “river rats,” as they called themselves. Who are they, and of all the places in the world, how did they find each other on the Mississippi River?

Quapaw’s founder and executive river rat, John Ruskey, is a silver-haired river spirit; a man whose only goal appears to be sharing the Mississippi River’s savage beauty with all who seek it. Ruskey hails from Colorado, but a quest to find the Delta blues landed him in Mississippi. He spent six years curating the famous Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, where he met swaths of European tourists looking for the same thing. He began to notice that many of them were also looking for a close encounter with the fourth-largest river in the world, and at the time, all he could tell them is how hard it was to

find a non-industrial boat launch. He'd have a lot more to say about that now.

Mark "River" Peoples had one of the most unlikely stories. Prior to becoming a Quapaw river guide, Peoples was a defensive back for the New York Giants. He grew up hunting and fishing near the big river in St. Louis, Missouri; and when he was sick of football, he went back to his watery roots, finding Quapaw and earning a nickname in the process. In addition to being a river guide, Peoples writes for the *Lower Mississippi Dispatch*, interns at 1 Mississippi (a national organization dedicated to protecting the Mississippi), and serves on the board of the Lower Mississippi River Foundation. He also keeps up a lovely river blog that can be found at BigMuddyIsland.org.

Adam Elliott is a Natchez native and a man quite attached to the great river. As far as river guide qualifications go, Elliott is something of a black belt—in 2007, he paddled the entire length of the Mississippi, top to bottom—and that's probably why Ruskey asked him to operate the very new Natchez outpost of Quapaw Canoe Company. He added that he also enjoys romancing his wife, Allyson, with an occasional *Little Mermaid*-style boat ride.

New Orleans native Chris "Wolfie" Staudinger joined up with Ruskey's Quapaws not too long ago as a guide and canoe-builder; but for our current purposes, I'll call him the resident river chef—the guy knows his way around a pile of campfire coals and a Dutch oven. After his time at Boston College (where he completed a thesis entitled "Mudded: The People and Foundations of Southeast Louisiana"), Staudinger fled the north for some hands-on research with the Quapaws. He's also a writer for *The NOLA Defender* and reigns as editor for BigMuddyIsland.org.

Braxton Barden is Quapaw's former sailor and resident hardass. After paddling through his childhood in the Piedmont region of Georgia, Barden spent twenty years hitting the high seas with the U.S. Navy. Between then and now, he's been everywhere water can take him—from the Arabian Gulf to the mangrove swamps of Singapore—and has hiked Mount Fuji and Asahidake in Hokkaido, Japan. He's taught Navy men how to operate on the high seas; and now, among other river-related ventures, he shows the ropes to youth who enroll in the Mighty Quapaws program.

By the time our six-pack was empty, my husband and I had made seven new friends against the backdrop of a sunset so striking, I'll

never have words for it. After the story trading was over, we made our way back to our tent for the night, and just as I was fading into dreamland, I heard a wild hog snort from behind the tent. It was almost comforting.

River Rhythms

Rivers are heavy-handed instruments of change, especially those the size of our Great One. Their constant redistribution of water is a quintessential force of nature—they create and destroy things that humans consider permanent—and because of this movement, little else is allowed to remain constant in its wake.

On the other hand, people who choose to build lives of adventure on a river as big as the Mississippi are, no doubt, a special breed of human being. They seek the unpredictable—the unknown that most folks spend their whole lives avoiding—and when they find it, they roll around in it like dogs in clover. But humans thrive in patterns, and where there are none—no rhythms, no constants, no predictable elements to be found—we tend to create them.

I'm not *exactly* sure how those thoughts relate to Chris Staudinger's sage-smudging of my husband and I before we set off the next morning, nor am I sure how those thoughts sing to the rhythm that Mark Peoples tapped out on his travel-sized drumhead during our "purification" ceremony—but for some reason, I don't consider it a stretch to suggest that one force of nature might have some influence over the tempo of another.

In fact, I experienced it first-hand during our paddle to the pickup point. Due to an unchangeable previous obligation, my husband and I had to be back in Natchez for 3 pm, so with Elliott as our guide, we said our goodbyes to the bigger canoe and cruised on in another direction. We still had a long way to go when my arms began to ache, and for a moment, I was seriously concerned that my biceps wouldn't hold out for another hour.

We'd been paddling alongside Elliott since the beginning of the trip, and I'd noticed that he loved to talk—and did talk—about anything and everything, from backyard chickens to maintaining a happy

marriage. By the end of the first day, I'd predicted that we'd know his favorite brand of socks by the time we got back to Natchez. What I didn't predict is that his conversational skills would get me through that last grueling stretch of Old River.

That's exactly what happened: When we were talking, we all paddled to the same rhythm without much thought. When the conversation waned, I could hear my forearms crying in protest; but their demands would melt away the moment he chose our next topic, and another ache-free hour would pass without my knowledge.

At some point during our two days of paddling, I had thought about the great, living energy that the Quapaw explorers brought to this muddy river. I didn't catch the other half of it until we were pulling Elliott's canoe out of the water (he said we'd paddled about sixteen miles altogether), but I still think I deserve the badge for figuring out what the river gives the Quapaws in return: the opportunity to forget about their aching biceps, their hungry bellies, and their human selves. Not forever, but just long enough to become part of it for awhile—long enough for such a fleeting reward to be just that: *Enough*.

Navigating the Log

The River Gator website (rivergator.org) is as detailed a river log as one will ever find for the Mississippi River. Various listing interesting natural features, comfortable camping sites, and lessons in river ecology and even water use, the guide is a mile-by-mile how-to for getting safely down the U.S.'s second-longest—but most storied—river in a human-powered vessel: kayaks, paddleboards, canoes, etc.

The log was spearheaded by John Ruskey, owner of Quapaw Canoe Company, which has three locations along the Mississippi: a home base in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and two outposts in Helena, Arkansas, and Natchez, Mississippi. The mapping began four years ago, with stretches from St. Louis to Caruthersville, Caruthersville to Memphis, Memphis to Helena, Helena to Greenville, Greenville to Vicksburg, and Vicksburg to Baton Rouge (the section detailed in Christie Matherne Hall's story) already completed. The remaining trips—from Baton Rouge to Venice and Venice to the Gulf of Mexico—will take place in March and April of this year.

An additional route off the Mississippi, along the Atchafalaya River, will also be mapped. “We’re actually gonna promote the Atchafalaya as the best route for long-distance paddlers coming down the Mississippi ... who are really looking to paddle all the way to the Gulf of Mexico and experience the wild beauty of the Lower Mississippi,” said Ruskey. “The Atchafalaya route avoids the heavy industry and very dangerous stretch of river below Baton Rouge.” Technically, Mississippi River water flows in the Atchafalaya, and paddlers need only jump from the Mississippi to the Atchafalaya through a lock and dam across from the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.

Ruskey said that by the end of the year, the entire river log, from its confluence with the Missouri River to its mouth, will be live at rivergator.org, though the website has already received a lot of attention. Visits to the site already number in the 500,000s, Ruskey said, documenting that several hundred thousand people are at least dreaming of one day navigating the Mississippi.

To help those adventurers along, Quapaw Canoe offers guided expeditions down the river. For those who’d like to join them on all or a portion of the remaining mapping trips this March and April, see details below. —*Nalini Raghavan*

March 16—27, 2015:

Atchafalaya River Expedition

From Three Rivers WMA to the Gulf of Mexico

159 miles of wild exploration through the two-million-acre “River of Trees” via Simmesport, Krotz Springs, Flat Lake, and Morgan City with side trips down mysterious side channels and bayous.

April 15—30, 2015:

Rivergator Expedition

Baton Rouge to the Gulf of Mexico

225 miles downstream, down the biggest inland harbor in the world, including Plaquemine, Morganza Floodway, Donaldsonville, Bonnet Carre Spillway, New Orleans, Algiers, Belle Chasse, Venice, Pilot-Town, Mile Zero, Head of Passes, and Birdsfoot Delta. Last camp will be a sandy beach on the Gulf of Mexico!

October/November 2015:

Rivergator Completion Celebration Expedition

St. Louis to the Gulf of Mexico

1180 miles on the Middle and Lower Mississippi River! Start: Missouri
River Confluence. End: salty waters of the Gulf.