

1400 MILES ATOP 14 BARRELS
by Ronald Evan Wismar

“You’re crazy!” That’s what my college comrades shouted when I informed them that I was going home this summer by raft. I attend college in a Chicago suburb, and my home is in New Orleans, approximately 1400 miles south of Chicago (by river).

No one believed my cousin and me until we carried an antiquated 25- horsepower Johnson motor up the dormitory steps stealthily past the housemother’s door. It didn’t look like much, but we treated it like a family pet, for this was the start toward the fulfillment of a longtime dream.

My cousin Norm and I had for many years considered making a trip down the Mississippi River, and the time seemed ripe for our plans to solidify. We invited several people to join us, all of whom backed out for various reasons. Finally, we found a friend from Ohio who had some extra spending money; he consented to join us. His name was Les and we felt he would make a worthy contribution to the group – particularly money-wise.

When school let out we moved to a friend’s house where we began construction of the craft which was to be our home for thirty-three days. At night we studied river charts and signals and tested each other on what we had learned. After constructing the frame from second-hand 2x6 lumber, we were ready to move our equipment to the launching site.

Barrels, bolts, lumber, canvas – we brought them all to the Sag Channel, a ship canal connecting Lake Michigan with the Des Plaines River. We built the raft atop fourteen steel drums. It was 9x15 feet with a small frame cabin on top. Two walls of the cabin were made of canvas so that breezes could fly clear through, and later, to our dismay, water also.

After three days of intensive work – for food we ate sunflower seeds and peanuts – we were ready to collapse. But finally our task was over and Noah himself couldn’t have felt more proud. It was so heavy that we had to move it three inches at a time to the channel bank. Then we slid it down on boards and to our delight (and my surprise) it floated! Having sunk most of our money into equipment, we were now left with \$20 to make the long, winding drift to New Orleans.

We shoved off the next morning, our heads filled with exciting river adventures. The motor purred beautifully for fifty feet. Then it conked out and we had to start paddling. The bargemen must have considered us a sorry sight. All of them wanted to know our destination, and when we shouted “New Orleans!” you could see a twinkle in their eyes – as though they yearned to be aboard. Norm said we should answer “New Or-leens” so that the Yankees would understand us. But when I did they responded with “How’s that?” Then I said “New Awlins” and they knew right away. Perhaps they were on a towboat from the South.

We estimated our rate of speed at two miles an hour. We could have *walked* home faster. One of our crew jumped onto the bank and pulled us with a rope. We were making better time then, but his legs soon tired and we again manned our oars. The next day the wind blew us backwards. It was at this time we decided something had to be done about the motor. We stopped at Joliet, Illinois, and received a \$20 repair bill. With our motor working we could now move on, but we were flat broke and had one tank of gas left. I reached into my pocket and to my delight there were four crispy one-dollar bills nestled there. Now we could at least get to the next town. The four dollars had been left over from a “Donate-a-Barrel” campaign we had sponsored at the college.

Our gas enabled us to reach the Illinois River as far as the hamlet of Morris, Illinois. We were hoping to get help here from some kind river adventurer. We received financial help from several citizens of Morris, but the conservation officer who inspected us threatened to make us stay there because we lacked a fire extinguisher. Now I knew I had to call home for help. Here it was, the second day of the journey, thirty miles from Chicago, and we were calling home for money.

My brothers roared when they heard how little we had traveled. But my folks wired some assistance and we were merrily on our way again. They didn't think we would make it; I must admit, I had a few doubts myself. I bet I could tell anyone where the nearest gas station and Western Union office is in any town along the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers!

The country along the Illinois River is beautiful. There are many exciting islands and the water is good for swimming and water skiing. The barge traffic was quite heavy, but once we were out of the ship channel and in the river, there was plenty of room for our "floating dump," as one little Illinois girl referred to the raft.

The nights were icy even though it was June, so we didn't mind the close quarters of the cabin. One slept on the floor and two in hammocks stretched diagonally one above the other. If one of us moved, we all moved. We docked up at night at the side of the river.

We enjoyed using the locks (mainly because they're free). However, our first experience at locking through was somewhat harrowing. Our motor wasn't working yet, so we had to paddle toward the gates. As we did, the current pulled us around the concrete base of the lock toward the dam. It was a grim struggle; finally we managed to pull ourselves around, and we were ready to take our place next to the haughty barges.

Down and down we went – a forty foot drop to the next water level. The rest of the locks we enjoyed thoroughly, and we were quite proud on one occasion when we were the only craft in the entire lock. It had to be emptied and filled with all that water, just for us! At every lock we saw billowy islands of soapsuds created by detergents thrown into the river. They created an arctic scene, and with the cold weather, we seemed to be wending our way through glacial lands.

Gas and food were far more expensive than we had anticipated. We knew that at Peoria we would have to dismantle the raft and bus home unless something next to a miracle happened. As we were floating into Peoria with heavy hearts, we heard a noise above us. The water began to spray into the air! A helicopter was sputtering above us and inside was a little man waving frantically. We obliged and waved back – he was taking our picture. We pulled over to the side and the helicopter landed. Now would be a good time to hint for help. But he asked us our names and a few other silly questions and before we could say "Help!" he was off again in his metallic bird and we were left standing with our mouths open.

Our next plan of action was to notify a radio station. We checked each station until we determined which was the big teenage dial spot. Having found it, we called and told them our story. Soon a mobile unit came to the river to interview us. They broadcast our sad story every hour on the hour. A girl from our college happened to be listening and she invited us to stay at their home. They and their friends gave us gas, food, and money, and welded steel cones to our front barrels to cut down resistance from the water. Again merry sailors were we.

River folk are like one big happy family; they can't help each other enough. We found that we were quickly adopted into this family. We had invitations to eat dinner, to use summer cottages, and to spend the night aboard luxurious yachts; tugboats brought us water and gas, boaters gave us food and drinks. Our own food usually left much to be desired. We used a Coleman stove, but we seldom had money to buy anything worth cooking.

We were again short on cash, and we knew that if the current of the Mississippi didn't carry us, we could never complete the trip, for we had 1100 miles to go (we traveled only 300 miles in the Illinois River). We could never afford 1100 miles of gas.

I can't describe the thrill I felt upon reaching the junction of the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. High, jagged bluffs loomed up on the Missouri side. The river resembled a huge misty lake and it was difficult to determine which way to go. Luckily, we chose the right direction, and we were now floating upon our country's largest drainage system. But to our dismay, we still had to use the motor; the current did not take us.

We gloomily passed through the Alton locks and soon came to the junction of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. The Missouri had been flooding, and we could see a little "waterfall" where it was flowing into the "Father of Waters." As soon as we passed this spot, we were swept into a rapid current. It was an odd sensation at first, and when at last we realized what was happening, we shouted for joy – the current would take us home!

Traveling on the Mississippi was a completely different experience from our adventures on the Illinois. Without the motor grinding away, we could hear the sounds of nature. It was a slow, lazy life now, and we no longer had to worry about money for gas. It was like moving from New York City to Samoa. I grew to respect the river fast. In a matter of seconds it could change from a glassy bayou to a treacherous gulf. The waves bolting across the bleached sandbars reminded me of the Gulf of Mexico during a hurricane, and the beautiful sunsets glistening on the sand made me think of the desert and a spectacular scene I remembered from "Lawrence of Arabia." In the evening I'd sit on the roof of the cabin and listen to the swirling jetties and whirlpools and wonder about life and God and creation.

For many evenings, the moon and the sun appeared simultaneously at opposite ends of the river. I felt that something – I wasn't sure what – was about to happen. Sure enough, there was an eclipse of the moon. I could really enjoy it, sitting on the inky water, under a sky encrusted with stars. We held devotions at night, when everything was silent and beautiful.

The actions of Old Man River never ceased to amaze me. I grew to love him as a father and to fear him as a father. I was always amazed to see the swift current push buoys upside down. Watching banks and trees crash into the muddy water, and seeing the sand pile up endlessly as the ornery old river tries to defy the efforts of man and change his course, instilled within me a deep appreciation of its might. Our charts indicated numerous old river beds. State boundaries have changed many times, and levees which once held back raging floods are now located several miles away, standing as monuments to the past glory which once ran by.

At Helena, Arkansas, a buddy from college surprised us by arriving in the middle of the river in a johnboat. Mike gave us quite a surprise. We were now four and had less room to move about; but his company and money compensated for any hardships.

Soon we were falling behind schedule. We all had to be in New Orleans for various commitments, so we decided to travel at night. I dreaded these nocturnal escapades more than anything else. The towboats and barges, like ominous warships, glided silently by with but a few tiny lights adorning them. Often they crept upon us unawares. We had no lights except for our lantern, so many times they did not see us. One night a barge was just about on top of us. Its steel jaws opened wide, ready to swallow us. I pulled the rope on the motor at least five times before getting results, and we slowly crawled to safety.

Another night one of the back barrels popped out and our stern was submerged in water. We used the motor and a flashlight to retrieve the barrel. Then we hobbled to a sandbar and went to sleep, hoping the raft wouldn't crack to pieces by its own weight on the sand as the wakes

from passing tows rolled in. When we awoke the next morning, everything was intact. The only unpleasant experience occurred when a wave of water rushed through the cabin, drenching our blankets. We fixed the barrel and were again heading south.

Many of our land stops were more dangerous than our marine experiences. In one Mississippi town, we were pegged as missing civil rights workers. We received cold stares until the townspeople discovered who we were. Then they welcomed us with open arms and couldn't do enough for us. After this case of mistaken identity, however, we made a rebel flag and tacked it to the side of the raft. It became our passport through the Magnolia State.

Once we reached Baton Rouge, we began to see ocean liners. Their wakes were huge, but they came slowly and we rode them like a cork. The ships seemed out of context on the river. The palatial, graceful towboats appeared more at home. Many of them look like showboats, and with a little imagination, you can hear the shrill tones of a calliope, and perhaps see a little colored boy jumping up and down atop the levee and shouting: "Showboat's a'comin!"

Big plans were being made by our family and friends for our arrival in New Orleans. We were getting excited as we passed under the Huey P. Long Bridge, and as we neared the New Orleans River Bridge, we could see crowds and crowds of people through our binoculars.

As we drifted toward the Canal Street landing, the *S. S. President*, an excursion boat, passed us. Next to her we felt quite small, yet we felt quite big too. Our tiny raft had brought us 1400 miles down one of the mightiest rivers of the world. With the cabin creaking, our left front end sinking, and two barrels ready to fly out from under us, we smiled broadly as the crowd sang out the old familiar round, "Row, Row, Row Your Boat."