My Days Aboard *The Breaux*

Tuesday, June 30, 1964

Actually, I am writing this on Thursday, as I've been naturally preoccupied with orientation procedures aboard the raft, *The Breaux*. Attempting to catch Ron Wismar, Les Netland, and Norm Hellmers, I flew Delta Air Lines to Memphis (my very first flight), but I learned from dock workers that I was too late—the raft had been spotted earlier that day. After questioning several marine service companies along the river, I calculated that the boys had to be somewhere between Memphis and Helena, Arkansas. I took a Greyhound Bus to Helena and was given the royal treatment by Jim Walden, even though I never got to meet him in person. Mr. Walden owned a marine service shop on the banks of the Mississippi. He put me up for the night in one of his storage sheds on site, and in the mosquito-infested environment, I slept at peace with the world.

Wednesday, July 1, 1964

I woke up at 5:00 am and sat on the small porch of Mr. Walden's store, watching the riverbend where I expected to meet them. Surprisingly, the boys arrived exactly on time, as a "tiny, boxlike, raft" was seen by a river pilot around 7:30 am. One of Mr. Walden's crew handed me one of their lifejackets and took me in a runabout skiff to meet the boys in the middle of the river.

I asked them, "Permission to come aboard?" and after their initial shock following the reunion, we continued down the Father of Waters, the Mississippi River! The day was surprisingly uneventful, and I was amazed at how glassy, calm, and lazy the river was. There were many interesting and indeed spooky features of the river that I became acquainted with on my first day. Falling banks, tiny whirlpools, and the overall strength of the river increased my ever-growing respect for it. I was also introduced to night and day markers, nun buoys, cans, and other facts and features necessary to cruise safely down the river. So far, barges and tugs ("tows") have presented no problem; they go slowly enough to give us time to retreat closer to the banks, and their wakes, in general, have not been overpowering. After a supper of beef stew and fruit cocktail—I must adjust to lighter meals—we decided to stop for the night along a rather inviting sand bank.

Then came the most miserable eight hours of my life. The area was swarming with mosquitoes, and I devoted the entire night to self-protection. No sleep at all!

Thursday, July 2, 1964

Our day began at 3:30 am, and we were off again at 4:00 am. Breakfast was pancakes and milk, neither of which was too thrilling. Around 9:00 am, we docked in search of Henrico, Arkansas. Not being able to see past the cows and their endless pastures, we left in favor of the next town, Rosedale, Mississippi. Lunch quickly came, and we made short order of salmon sandwiches. We reached Rosedale around 2:30 pm, and after a long hike, we were picked up and driven into town by the sheriff of Rosedale. Our reception there was anything but exciting, but the cold atmosphere quickly vanished when the sheriff and the townsfolk realized our mission. It seems we were first mistaken for Civil Rights workers! We

purchased supplies at Safeway Supermarket, and I mailed a letter and a postcard home, and a card to Gene Smith. (Gene and I had been rooming together as summer workers at Concordia Teachers College.) We stopped at James' Sandwich Shop for a quick burger and met a few interesting people—must send them a card from New Orleans. We walked under black skies and boarded *The Breaux* around 5:30 pm. Lightning was close, but the river current took us right into good weather. Supper came, and we were nourished by sardine sandwiches and pineapple chunks.

Then, the fun began. A huge tow came by, kicking up 3 ft. waves and giving us a roller-coaster ride for about half an hour. We decided to moor for the night at an inviting cove about 570 miles from the "Head of Passes". We put up the mosquito netting and fought our enemies with our new supply of Black Flag, spraying it freely on our faces and bodies. My second night was pleasantly cool, and although I had to remain in one tight position—Les next to me, Ron above him in a hammock, and Norm above him in his hammock—I slept rather soundly.

Friday, July 3, 1964

We awoke at 4:00 am and set off under cloudy skies. The Rosedale supplies will hopefully get us to Baton Rouge, and our only stop before there will be Vicksburg, for gas and water. We decided to ration our bread and crackers supply, and I worked out a menu that should stretch our pantry supply until Baton Rouge. Here's hoping!

I had my first "Watch" today, and despite a conglomeration of tugs and dredges, all remained okay. I'm still amazed at the immenseness of the river, especially in contrast to our 10' x 15' vessel. It's about noon now, the sun is beating down, and all other crew members are scattered around in varied prone positions. We're approaching another tow now, and after this I'll settle down for a few minutes of sleep.

The biggest problems so far are morale and time. There's just too much of the latter, and it's difficult to keep the former high all the time. Everyone is preoccupied with thoughts of July 12 or July 13, our ETA for New Orleans.

Lunch comes and goes, a non-too-large bowl of tomato soup and about 15-20 shoestring potatoes. The sun is unusually hot, and everyone is glad for the beautiful day. The "Social Hour" is very good; we played "Lost and Found" and "Problem-Solution". Everyone has a good time. Evening approaches, and at around 5:00 pm, a boat, the *Pat II,* comes by with offers of ice water. We naturally accept, and we are also gifted with a few newspapers and magazines. Dinner of macaroni and mixed vegetables is filling, and we dock at a point 48 miles further downriver than the night before. We decide to shoot for 50 miles a day to reach Norco, Louisiana, and Jane Erickson next Saturday night, eight days away. The night is pleasant and crowded, but not too many mosquitoes.

Saturday, July 4, 1964

The day began rather eerily; heavy fog made the river look ominous to me. We crossed under the Greenville Bridge to the toots of a truck driver who had noticed us. A tugboat captain suggested that we should wait for the fog to lift, but we continued on, staying close to the shore. Coffee helped awaken us,

and Ron led an interesting discussion on the Book of Esther. Fog lifted at about 9:00 am, and we celebrated with Cheerios for breakfast. I'm impressed by the natural beauty of today's shores—many pastures, cows, and beautiful turns on the river. A tug passes from Lake Providence, Louisiana, and I get excited by the fact that we are about two hours from Louisiana's border with Arkansas.

Ron and I put up a sign showing our New Orleans destination. We're eager to arrive in Vicksburg tomorrow. We have dreams of procuring handouts from holiday boaters. Here's hoping! Right now, Les is browsing through those gifted magazines, Norm is top deck reading, and Ron is doing a watercolor tugboat scene. I'm really glad for this opportunity to think out any and all subjects, and I decide to lie down on top of the cabin for some sun and for general meditation. Lunch of egg sandwiches fills us, and we enter Louisiana around 2:00 pm!

Evening comes; we play "Hearts" and "Old Maid", and the sun continues to beat down. We devour our supper of pork and beans, and we realize we'll likely make 50 miles today. Night falls, and with it a little excitement. Dodging three tows, we almost run head-on into a sandbar 10 ft. high, probably the result of recent dredging along the shores. The night is warm, and we decide to leave extra early tomorrow. No mosquitoes!

Sunday, July 5, 1964

We left at 3:00 am under a bright crescent moon. A passing tow befriended us by lighting the shoreline for us for some time. I record a beautiful sunrise at 8:30 am, and sweat is already beginning to pour on us. Breakfast is pancakes, and they taste surprisingly good. (maybe because of the cane syrup).

It's now 10:30 am and I'm up for watch from 11:00 am-12:00 noon. Right now, we're cramped inside our "palace", trying to avoid the sun and trying to ignore the odors that only days without a bath can produce. Phew! We only have about 20 minutes to Vicksburg, where we'll remain for the night. Maybe we can go ashore and buy a good supper! We're all looking forward to calling home and perhaps getting the opportunity for a bath.

As Vicksburg came into view, we decided to enter the Yazoo River to get closer to downtown. Just as we were approaching a potential dock, we noticed three people onshore, waving frantically. Unbelievably, it was the Hellmers! They had driven up just to say hello and to wish us good luck. We received permission to tie up alongside *The Sprague,* an old steamship with the world's largest pilot's wheel—13 feet across! The Hellmers drive us to a gas station, and we fill up, hoping to stretch our fuel to Baton Rouge. After a generous gift of $10 for supper, the Hellmers bade us farewell.

We walked around town awhile, saw the Old Courthouse Museum, and ate a tremendous meal at the Hotel Vicksburg. Feeling quite content and overstuffed, we decided to try to get a bath or shower somewhere. We went to the YMCA and were allowed to take showers at 40 cents apiece. It was beyond a doubt the best 40 cents I've spent so far. It took us a couple of hours to clean up, but none of us seemed to care about the time.

We then went looking for something to do, and after realizing that the city is fairly dead on a Sunday, we decided to try purchasing some powdered milk, as our supply was running low. We found a small grocery, and we splurged by buying a half-gallon of fresh milk. Ron and I called home. My folks weren't in, so I called my sister Bonnie to give her our status. It was good to hear her voice and my brother-in-law Jerry's as well.

We returned to *The Breaux* around 10:00 pm, drank our treasure of fresh milk, and retired for the night. Our night turned out miserably because we hadn't prepared ourselves against mosquitoes. We tried sleeping on the open deck, but it was such a hot and humid night that I just couldn't get to sleep. Several times, I got up and walked around the barge to which we were tied, but daylight was long in coming. Today was the hottest one yet!

Monday, July 6, 1964

We began our day at 2:30 am, as we must meet our quota of 50-55 miles per day in order to arrive next Sunday, July 12th. Ron, Norm, and I cautiously floated down the Yazoo River while Les remained fast asleep. Then, a little excitement ensued. As we reentered the Mississippi River, we noticed an oncoming tow. We lit our Coleman lantern, safe in the knowledge that he'd see us and easily pass by. I looked through our binoculars and I noticed what seemed to be two shore lights; however, they were moving, and they were moving directly toward us! We quickly used our tiny 25 hp. outboard motor to get closer to the shoreline. We finally realize that it was a lone barge being pushed by a tug at a rather fast clip. One thing we all agree upon—night floating is anything but dull. We must continue to leave so early, however, because we were 7 miles short of our 50-mile goal yesterday. Going to Vicksburg was a day trip of 43 miles, so we must make it up before Baton Rouge on Thursday night. Good luck with that! Breakfast was the familiar bowl of Cheerios, and we consoled ourselves with the fact that last night's supper was a spoiling experience. We hate to look at this week's menu.

Right now, Ron's reading a *Times-Picayune* newspaper we purchased in Vicksburg, Norm is writing in his journal, and Les is answering the call of nature. We're floating around a rather sharp bend, and Ron and I were fortunate to catch a falling bank. Quite a show! I'm still impressed by the beautiful, tranquil shores. Pastures and dense forests remain repetitive, but never monotonous.

Lunch consisted of vegetable soup and peanut butter crackers. The heat today is unbearable. We're all hoping for a shower. Les leads the Devotion, and we discuss Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians.

Just as I finished cooking supper, our prayers were answered. It clouded up, and a wonderful light rain cooled us off. Having to make 52 miles, we decide to float an extra hour or so. We are lucky in that no tows approach us, but as we are ready to moor for the night, we have difficulty in finding a place to dock. We can't find any revetments, and dangerously high banks are on either side of the Mississippi. Finally, we make our way to a sandbar, but only after having to change a sparkplug on the way over! The sandbar is far offshore, so no mosquitoes visit us. We all agree that it's a great place to spend the night.

Tuesday, July 7, 1964

It was such a good place that we overslept! Norm woke us up at 4:30 am, and we discovered that we were stuck solidly to our little sandbar. We had just one solution—get out and shove! We donned our life preservers and stepped into the cold muck. It wasn't stuck more than a foot deep, but our work was cut out for us. After much grunting and moaning, we were free! Because of this, our floating didn't begin until 4:30 am. We must run late tonight in order to get our quota of 50 miles.

A breakfast of blackberries and cornflakes followed, and I slept before and after my 8:00-9:00 watch. It looks like another hot one so far; we're all irritable and miserable from the heat. Around noon, we pass through the Southern town of Natchez, Mississippi, a scenic area with many stately homes situated on high bluffs. Lunch follows: chicken vegetable soup. (Ron and I, way ahead of our ration schedule, even eat a few slices of bread!) I turn on the radio and we listen to a few innings of the All-Star Baseball Game. The National League wins, 7-5. Wait until next year!

Just a few minutes ago, we had some minor motor trouble. We were floating through an area that had many tiny whirlpools and back currents. Norm decided to start the outboard motor to get us out into the center, where the main current was. Then we heard a loud noise, and we discovered that our shear pin had broken. Norm and Les quickly replaced it as I continued my 4:00-5:00 watch. Norm led the Devotion today, and we discussed Joel and Obadiah, although due to our limited knowledge of the Books' settings, we offered more speculation than fact.

Norm is on Watch now, Ron is lying down, and Les is on the roof. We're all pretty well bored right now, and I think I'll go read some more of *Kon-Tiki.* Supper comes, and we enjoy beef stew, potatoes, and lima beans. We're quite full! Ron plays his ukulele while Norm does the dishes. We're all happy to see the sun go down. We decide to run a little late. Norm and Les will run until 11:00 pm, and Ron and I will get up and shove off at 2:30 am.

<u>Wednesday, July 8, 1964</u>

What a morning this has been! Norm and Les ran until 1:00 am, only gaining 3 miles. Dead Man's Pass (Yikes!) was overflowing with traffic, and yet another problem—a flock of huge birds—and they ran aground on a sandbar. Ron woke me up at 2:20 am, and by 2:30 we were off again.

It was then, floating in Widow Graham's Bend, that we had our first really close call. A tow was seen approaching us. Ron and I fumbled with the Coleman lantern, but the matches were damp and our efforts futile. Meanwhile, the barges began to bear down upon us. We ran to the back, and Ron tried to start the tiny outboard motor. Five desperate pulls, yet it would not start. Ron panicked as we frantically waved our flashlight in the tow's direction, but it was obvious that the pilot did not see us.

I held the motor steady and Ron pulled again—and it started! At this point, the lead barges were no more than 50 yards away! We gave the motor full power, realizing that our lives depended upon our old Johnson 25. The barges came so close to hitting us that the raft tilted down slightly for just a few seconds, influenced by the powerful undertow caused by the massive tow. A few items slipped into the Mississippi, including our portable toilet (a galvanized bucket). Luckily, we reached safety by the near shore. What an experience!

Our troubles, however, were not over. At least eight more tows passed us, and none of them were comfortably away from us. Ron and I kept watch until 6:00 am, giving the boys an extra hour. I fixed hot cocoa for everyone. We all laughed hysterically over the night's events, but we are determined not to risk driving at night ever again.

I went to sleep at 6:30 am, and at 8:00 am I got up and fixed pancakes. We passed a dangerous River Control Structure for the Red River. Right now, my 9:00-10:00 watch is winding up. I think I'll join Ron topside for a little sun. Baton Rouge is about 80 miles away, but after last night, it seems like an even greater distance.

Supper of stew, potatoes, and pudding is prepared by the Master Chef (me), and we're all disappointed that it will be very hard to make 50 miles today. We figure we'll have to run until around 9:30 pm. We tried, but what a day this continued to be! At around 8:30 pm, as we passed the Brunette Point Light (mile 283), we lost our rear right barrel. The corner of the raft was underwater, and we could hardly see anything as night was upon us. Somehow, Les and Ron were able to retrieve the barrel, and *The Breaux* limped across to the farther shore and a welcome sandbar. We tied up for the night. Just as we settled down for sleep, a tow's wake swept through the floor of the raft, and Ron and I got soaked.

Let me enter here with an important part of the day that I forgot. In the afternoon, we became parched from lack of water, so we made an unscheduled stop in Tunica, Louisiana (near Angola Penitentiary). We walked across an old barge and into town. We found an inviting air-conditioned store, and we quickly guzzled down two soft drinks each. We secured our water from the owner's well. (Her pump was being fixed, and we arrived just as repairs were ending.) We began the long walk back, and we were given a ride in a '56 Ford by a couple of young guys and their two little sisters. One of the girls looked like my sister Lisa. They were kind and friendly country folks, and we were grateful for the ride. We pushed off an hour later.

<u>Thursday, July 9, 1964</u>

Our morning began at 4:30 am, and we had our work cut out for us. Norm and Ron quickly tied the barrel to the raft, and we shoved off at around 6:00 am. We decided that in order to make Baton Rouge today, we'd have to use the outboard motor most of the way. We stopped at Morganza, Louisiana, and hiked into town to Savoy's Grocery and Gas Station. We bought gas and a half-dozen of eggs. We got back around 9:00, and I prepared a breakfast of scrambled eggs and grits.

Since then, the outboard motor has been running constantly, and we're only 10 miles from our State Capitol! But the trip today has been anything but uneventful! Around 12 o'clock, as we went around Bayou Sara's Bend, we were caught in some violent squalls. The sky became black, and the winds were gusty, and for about two hours we rode 3-4' waves, many of which found their way into our cabin. All of us were tense. We put on our life preservers, and nobody said anything. We were all concerned about the barrel that we had just tied on earlier. If it came loose, we would be in serious trouble. It would be impossible to retrieve it, and we would have our hands full making our way to shore.

But God was with us, and now the skies are blue and everything seems okay. We're low on gas, so we'll stop right before Baton Rouge. We'll stay overnight and get a good meal. Then—it's the Crescent City, next stop!

We get gas just below the Baton Rouge Bridge. Then, we drove over to Red's Boat Store, where we docked for the night. The store was right next to the Capitol Building, so we gave Les a general tour of Baton Rouge. It was all we could do to find a place to eat! The town is really "dead" on weeknights. We finally ate at a Walgreens grill, and then we called home. Plans are for arrival in New Orleans at 3:00 pm on Sunday.

We walked around town a bit and stopped in at the Tip-Top Tavern, where we quenched our thirst with a couple of drafts. The bartender was a Cajun from Lafayette, and he was really funny. We returned to *The Breaux* around 12:30 am, looking forward to tomorrow and our first ocean-going vessels. All of us have apprehensions.

Friday, July 10, 1964

We got up at 4:00 am and retied the problem barrel. We shoved off at around 4:50 am, after surviving a restless, mosquito-visited night. The city's port looked quite impressive as we puttered below many docked vessels. At around 8:00 am, we passed our first ocean liner. Its wake wasn't too bad! Hopefully, these nice conditions will continue the rest of the way. The waves were about 3' wide, and we glided over them without any trouble. We were like a cork, bobbing up and down. Truth is, the waves kicked up by the tugboats and their barges were choppier and rougher on us.

It's now 10:00 am, and in about two hours we'll stop in White Castle for gas and supplies. We hope to cover about 60 miles today and moor somewhere outside of Donaldsonville.

The walk to White Castle was an interesting experience. Ron, Les, and I got a ride with four Negroes who offered us a ride in the back of their pickup. They drove around 80 mph—at least it felt that way to me. They ran out of gas about five blocks outside of town, so we all walked the rest of the way. We bought gas and groceries, and Ron made a couple of long-distance calls at a drugstore. After gassing up, we got a ride back to the ferry landing where we docked, again with the help of a Negro man (who also sped!). We shoved off, and I fixed a lunch of peanut butter sandwiches. We realized we had forgotten to buy outboard motor oil (We are running the motor all day now), so Norm and I walked into Carville to buy some. We hitchhiked there and back, and even though it was two miles each way, we were back in less than 30 minutes. Carville is the city where the only Federal Leper Colony in the United States is located.

We pass Donaldsonville and tie up early at an inviting sandbar, five miles below Donaldsonville and 60 miles below Baton Rouge. We made our day's quota! We were moored in the shadow of a Delta Line ship, the *Del Alba.* Ron led a candlelight devotion, and we discussed Genesis 1. We turned in around 9:30 pm, looking forward to our final whole day tomorrow.

Friday, July 11

Our morning begins at 4:30 am, and we're off again at 5:00 am. We try to get gas around Belmont, LA, but after tramping through 6' weeds, we are cut off by a swamp. Our second try is St. James, LA. We asked a couple of men who were shrimping how to get into town, and they drove us in! They owned a sugar cane plantation, and after free sandwiches purchased by Mr. Guy, the President of the Police Jury, we were given a tour of the farmers' cooperative sugar plant. We met a lot of incredibly nice people and were even allowed to call home free through their direct distance dialing service. We lost a few hours, but we gained an extensive knowledge of the sugar-making process. They gave us jars of raw sugar and stalks of sugar cane as souvenirs. I myself hated to leave.

After fixing some loose barrels, we shoved off. After a couple of miles, we stopped to see the Oak Alley Plantation facing the Mississippi River. It was closed, but we enjoyed a picturesque view of it when we walked to the top of the levee.

Right now, we're passing the Lutcher Ferry. It doesn't look as though we'll make Harahan tonight, but we shouldn't miss by too much. I have to fix scrambled eggs for today's lunch. It's beginning to drizzle; hope it blows over.

The drizzle ends, and just as we were going around a bend, a Coast Guard Cutter approaches. We thought they wanted to inspect us, but they zoomed by and we didn't know what to think. Then, as the riverbend approaches, we see what appears to be a floating barn! Upon closer examination, we realize that it's a NASA ship hauling a Saturn Booster up to Huntsville, Alabama, for a static firing.

We tie up at a sandbar about 25 miles from New Orleans, Waggaman Bend. We couldn't reach Kenner because of our lengthy stop in St. James, but we shouldn't have any trouble arriving on time tomorrow. Ron and Norm went looking for gas and to call home, while Les and I stayed with the raft. I cooked some pudding, and they returned a couple of hours later, unsuccessful in finding a gas station.

<u>Sunday, July 12, 1964</u>

We get up at 8:00, and after getting gas, we shove off at 9:00, ready for the big day. We make great time. A stiff wind and huge waves are going our way, and we make 11 miles in one hour— unbelievable! We decide we're ahead of schedule, so we stop by the shipyards at Avondale Bend. Ron and Norm go off for gas after wading in knee-high slush. (It should make a funny movie.) I set the "table" (top of the cabin), and since this is our last meal on *The Breaux*, I had printed place cards. We have spaghetti and meatballs, and we shove off at 12:45 pm.

One of my biggest thrills is passing under the Huey P. Long Bridge, the world's largest free bridge. This marks the beginning of familiar landmarks. We pass by Ochsner Foundation Hospital, and then we see the new Mississippi River Bridge looming ahead of us.

We're glad that we are arriving on a Sunday because ocean traffic is few and far between us. As we go under the Bridge, we peer over at our landing place, Eads Plaza, and we notice a mob of people! *The President* steams past us, and all of their passengers are on the side facing us, trying to get a closer look.

We finally tie up, and we're bombarded with confetti and kisses. All of my relatives are there to greet me! The four of us will always remember our wonderful reception, with so many friends and relatives.

After an hour of happy conversations with family, friends, and TV reporters, we leave for Chalmette. We tie up *The Breaux* by the Chalmette Slip and head home, eager to be with loved ones, but reluctant to leave our new friend, the Mighty Mississippi.

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