

A WHITE OAK RIVER PADDLING EXPERIENCE EMMETT'S LANE TO GIBSON BRIDGE ROAD

Paddlers: Richard Montgomery, Kelly Gray, Melvin Willenborg, Pat Willenborg, Doug Willenborg, Ruth Willenborg, Deborah Willenborg
Date 2-26-2000, By Doug and Ruth Willenborg

Our trip down the White Oak River got off to a near perfect start. The weather was in the 60's and there was not a cloud in the sky. We made it to the Maysville Mansion 10 seconds after 9:00 AM and everyone was ready for a nice easy day of canoeing. It really looked like it was going to be the perfect day for canoeing. No wind, lots of sunshine, no snakes, and our tax dollars had been hard at work cleaning all the trees out of the river.

Since we had an extra canoe, the great debate of the morning was which canoe we should we leave behind. Should we take the unstable and light white water boat or the big, stable, and heavy Discovery 174. After a quick vote, the Discovery 174 won by a wide margin so we went over to the bridge behind Milton's house and started unloading. While we were unloading the a guy in a pickup with a dog in the back stopped and told us that he had been down the river all the way to Gibsons bridge, but that there was a few beaver dams that we might have to deal with. We didn't think that a few beaver dams would be an issue so we unloaded and headed on down the river (brief delay while Deborah has to run back and get sun block).

Our official start time on the river is still in question, but my guess is that it was around 10:00 before we actually started paddling. If so, then around 10:06 we ran into a tree that came down in one of the hurricanes and blocked the river. We looked at the sides of the river and the river banks were really evil. Mud, thick brush, logs, and lots of down trees so we decided to jump out on the log and pull our canoes over the tree. It took about 20 minutes to help everyone get over the log, but on log was not going to ruin our perfect canoe day.

So somewhere around 10:30 we got every one back on the river and in a few minutes we ran into a section where 2 tree blocked the river, If we could over 1 tree, then we should be able to handle 2so once again we all jumped out and pulled canoes over the trees. At this point we started a tittle concerned that the entire section of the White Oak river might be full of down trees, but Kelley mentioned that she heard that the river became easier the further you went down the river. This made us feel better and besides if that guy in the pickup could make it down the river than people with Gray blood and barbecue in their veins could beat the White Oak river. So for the next hour or so we continue pulling canoes over trees. For some trees we discovered that if you lean all the way back you could go under the tree.

After about an hour and a half we came to an impressive collection of trees blocking the river. Melvin was the first to arrive on the scene and had already figure out a process for getting through the trees. We couldn't go over, under, or around, so we would pick up the boats one a time and stuff them through a small hole in the brush. Everyone would then have to climb down the canoe while it was at a 45 degree angle and fight their way through the brush to the other side. This seemed a little nuts, but we only had one other option. Paddle up stream and carry all the canoes back over all of those trees. Given the choice between nuts and down right crazy, we took the nutty option and climbed down the canoes.

After that the river did seem to clear up a little. We still had to fight our way over a few beaver dams (3 by Melvin's count), and a few more down trees, but we were making some progress. We were also getting a lot faster at pulling our boats over and under trees. Our minds started to focus on lunch when we came up to a killer set of trees. It was almost like a bulldozer pile of trees and we couldn't even figure out how we were going to get around this collection of trees so we sent our mountain goat (Kelly) on a scouting mission.

The recommendation came back that we could get over this next set of trees if we lifted the canoes 8-10 feet in the air and pulled them over one set of logs and under another set of logs. So for the next hour (Pat actually timed us on this event) we pulled people, paddles, and canoes over the big pile of trees.

Unfortunately we had about a 10 foot section of river between trees that you had to canoe between before you finally got to the other side of the pile. Due to poor planning on our part, the green Viper just happened to be the boat that everyone had to use to get to the last log. The Viper is really a dunking booth so we were really careful and held the boat while for each person who had to float to the last log. The bad news for Pat was that he was the last person left on the pile and didn't have anyone to help stabilize the boat. For a second it looked like Pat was going to make it, but the Viper had other plans and we soon had our first swimmer of the day. We managed to pull Pat out of the river, but his hat is still on it's journey to the Gibson bridge.

After that experience we had a brief lunch stop on the river. We also did a time check and everyone was a little concerned about spending the night on the river. It had just taken us an hour to go 30 feet and we had 7.4 miles to travel before night fall. We had 3 flash lights and enough food for to last us overnight so we decided to continue paddling down river.

After lunch we paddled another 3 or 4 trees when we came to the "mother of all pile of trees". In order to get our boats past this mess we were going to need a chain saw and some dynamite. This time we were going to have to go around the trees, but the banks were just as bad if not worse. So this time Kelly was sent not only on a path scouting mission, but she was also trying to climb the trees to see if she could figure out how far down the river we had traveled. Perhaps the Gibson bridge was just over the pile of trees, or perhaps it was another 6 miles down the river. We had no clue and Kelly's scouting report didn't help the situation so Pat did a quick calculation and figured that if we turned around would could make it back before it got real dark. Before we could even take an official vote, Deborah and Ruth had already turned their boats around and were heading "up river" (I guess this is why all the Grays always say "Up River" and not "Down River" because no one in their right mind would try to go "Down" the White Oak River).

This time it only took us 1/2 hour to get over the big pile of trees so we were optimistic that we could make it back by dark. The bad news was that some logs were more difficult to deal with going up stream. In addition people were getting tired and that darn Discovery 174 was getting very heavy. We were rushing so much that we started losing track of who was in which boat and everyone ended up switching boats, partners, and paddles. After a while we didn't even know who should be in the front or back of the boat so you just jumped in the first seat that was available after you made your journey over the trees.

The good news on the way back was that everyone kept having fun (I guess you could call it that) or at least kept their sense of humor. The bad news is that everyone was tired and hurrying and it didn't take long before people started falling off logs. First Kelly, then Doug, Richard, and then Doug again.

Pat dug out a flashlight and it helped a little making it over the last few logs before we finally made it back to the bridge behind Milton's house. Putting the canoes up in the dark was not exactly fun, but at least we weren't pulling canoes over trees anymore.

Many thanks to Milton and Kelly for driving to Jacksonville and getting us Pizza afterwards. Donald and Milton also let us use their houses for shower after the trip. It felt wonderful after being on the river all day.