

FROM MAZO TO THE MISSISSIPPI



The saga of this journey started out on Father's Day 2004, when my husband and I attended an outdoor church service, at the invitation of Timm Zumm, at Larry Neumaier's beautiful yard on the banks of the Wisconsin River near Mazomanie. I had met Larry and Timm while serving on the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Board. They had discovered a bald eagle nest in the Mazomanie area in 2003 and produced a small publication, complete with Timm's photos and Larry's journal, of their experience watching the eagles build the nest and raise 2 youngsters. Timm has a great pontoon boat, the SS Mazo II, that he and Larry used to visit the nest frequently throughout the summer of 2003.

Also present at the church service that day was Jim Dickey, another river supporter that I had met while serving on the Riverway Board. He mentioned to me that he, Timm, and Larry were planning a trip for later that week – Timm wanted to see if he could make it all the way down the Wisconsin River to the Mississippi on his pontoon boat! The water was unusually high for this late in the season so it seemed like the ideal time for such an adventure. When I heard this, a light immediately went on in my brain that said "OPPORTUNITY"! Since becoming a Riverway Board member I had wanted to canoe the whole length of the river, preferably in one trip, to see it in its full beauty, observing how it changed throughout its length. We had a canoe to make the trip, but the water had

been too high and too cold to even consider it so far. Before I thought much about it, I said I'd like to go, too, if they "needed" more passengers. I had taken 2 weeks off from work and it seemed like the ideal way to spend some of my vacation. Later, I was afraid I might be interfering with a trip the 3 of them had planned, but I was kindly assured that I was very welcome to accompany them and be another "deck hand". We would be four 50+ kids on the river together!

The weather was very unpredictable in the early summer of 2004, with incredible amounts of rain. On Father's Day, the flow at the Prairie du Sac dam was about 18000 cfs. Timm had visually calculated that it needed to be nearer 17000 cfs in order to make the trip possible because of some of the low railroad bridges downriver. We decided that Thursday, June 24 would be the day for our adventure, since none of us had to work that day. Rain was possible, according to the forecast, but we agreed to start out no matter what, assuming the weather would improve if it was bad to start with.

We met near the Mazo boat landing at 6:30 a.m. to begin our voyage. The water flow at the dam was 16080 cfs – just right! We had been instructed to "travel light" but it still appeared we might be going for a week rather than a day!



We were all dressed warmly, and prepared for anything – at least so we thought! And yes, it was sprinkling a little bit as we loaded, and it was only 54 degrees and a bit breezy, but we were confident the weather would improve. And as Timm said, "We can always call it a day at Spring Green if we need to –my wife can come get us."

We shoved off at 7:30 a.m. with the GPS unit saying we had 67.5 miles to our destination. Larry was in the far front of the boat, watching for obstacles in the river. Jim and I were in the center of the boat with Timm at the wheel. We spent quite a bit of time adjusting the position of the canoe we were pulling with us (to hold the extra gasoline and for use in case the engine failed).



We soon passed under this year's eagle nest near Mazomanie and though the parents were not to be seen, all 3 eaglets were there - huge and sitting around the edge of the nest, flapping their wings as if they were about to fledge any minute!



We stopped nearby so Timm could put the brand new, shiny prop on the motor. The old one still worked but had been abused on a few trips upriver when the prop had been “customized” by going through some small willow trees!

After the prop replacement, it started raining harder – we had the top up on the boat but water periodically dumped on one passenger or another (usually Timm, who was nearby

at the wheel) through an area where the zipper on the canvas top was broken. As we again started motoring down river, Jim kept us laughing by standing at the back of the boat, pretending to be our tour guide, saying, "I'll be collecting your tickets now," and to Timm, "Young man, are you sure this is the trip you signed up for?"

We continued in the rain – it would let up for a while, and just as we thought there might be a chance for clearing, it would start pouring. We tried to maintain our good humor but we were all really cold and becoming wetter by the minute. Larry was the most unlucky of all, having climbed out to push when we got stuck, but he acted as if it were a hot springs spa instead of the cold river!

We cleared the railroad bridge near Spring Green with only about 8" to spare, but we had left the top up, which added several feet to the height of the boat. Timm said he thought we should dock at the Highway 14 boat landing at Spring Green and decide whether we should continue or not. I was disappointed because I had so badly wanted to go the whole distance – yet, at the same time, I wasn't sure we could make it all the way as cold as we were. At best, it would be a miserable trip! We pulled in, got off the boat, and Timm said, "I don't know about anyone else, but I'M COLD!" There was no disagreement in the ranks, as I believe all of our teeth were chattering or close to it.

Timm lives near Spring Green so he called his wife in hopes she could pick us up. I think we were all dreaming of being warm and dry within a few minutes. Unfortunately, she had gone to Richland Center shopping, so we decided to continue on down the river to Bob's Riverside and meet her there. We took this turn of events in stride, laughing as we got back on the boat. Timm experienced a bit of "geographic amnesia" at this point, thinking Bob's was above the Highway 23 bridge rather than below it. We turned around and went back up river and then, not finding it, came back down. I was sitting near Timm trying to figure out where Bob's really was by imagining driving through Spring Green. I thought it must be below the bridge but decided Timm knew the area better than I, so I didn't say anything. Fortunately Jim spoke up and asked Tim exactly what we were doing....When Timm said he was looking for Bob's, Jim said he was pretty sure it was below the bridge, not above it. After a moment of embarrassment, Timm said he must be right and we continued on down to Bob's. We pulled in amongst the trees (the water was still quite high) and hurried up the slope to warmth. It was about 10:30 a.m. but it felt like we had been on the river much longer. We had seen a deer, the 3 eaglets, but no other boats – who else would be crazy enough to be out there? I think we were all hoping to get something warm to drink, but Bob's only offered the choice of beer or soda...Since we were taking up space, sucking up the warmth and dripping on the floor, we smiled at the irony of having cold drinks and ordered soda.

Within a short while Timm's wife, Heather, arrived to transport us home. She had been grocery shopping with their 2 small boys and the van was pretty full before the 4 of us piled in. At least it was nice and warm, which felt wonderful since the outside temperature had now dropped to 49 degrees. Jim and I occupied ourselves for a while playing with one of the boy's musical toys. We left the boat and most of our food and supplies at Bob's. While waiting for Heather we had decided that we would start out from Bob's on the following day (since we could all miss work for one more day) and it was predicted to be good weather. After being delivered to our vehicles, we agreed to meet at Timm's house near Spring Green at 8 the next morning to try once more to get to the Mississippi.

I went home and took a very long, hot shower. Later that afternoon, my husband and I drove to Madison to go to a movie. By then the sun was out, but it was still quite cool and very windy. I found myself thinking how the people that had been in the city all day had no idea that 25 miles away on the river, it had been a very different world. I thought of Larry Collin's sermon on Father's Day about the unforgiving and unrelenting river. I had never been on the river very much in unpleasant weather conditions – only a brief thunderstorm one day while on a canoe trip. I actually felt fortunate to have experienced this “other side” of the river, though I was glad to have only spent a short time there. It also made me appreciate all the hours that Mark Cupp, the Riverway Board, and FLOW spend on days that aren't so perfect in order to keep the river so wonderful for its users.

The next morning I had mixed feelings... it was just 41 degrees at 5 a.m. with a predicted high of 68 degrees. I still felt cold from the day before but I was really excited to make the trip. I was also looking forward to eating the brownies that I knew were in the cooler on board the SS Mazo II! The water flow at Prairie du Sac was 16500 cfs – up a little after the rain.

We were almost ready to board the boat at Bob's when Timm got a call from his wife - the keys to the truck and trailer parked at Bridgeport were still hanging on the hook at home. This little episode became the subject of many conversations during the course of the day such as, “Hey, Timm! How would you feel if you just now realized you didn't have the keys to the truck?” We decided if Heather had to come to Bridgeport to get us, she might very well not have been so good humored about it as she was when she retrieved us from Spring Green! After a brief delay going back for the keys, we pushed off at 8:48 am with 50 miles to go.



It was sunny, if still cool, and it portended to be a very different kind of day than the day before...

We tried to maintain a speed as close to 15 mph as possible throughout the trip so that we would arrive at a reasonable time. We found that on this second day, with the sun out and little wind, that 15 mph felt like 5 had the day before in the rain.

We spotted 2 bald eagles soon after leaving Bob's Riverside. We moved right along and were soon at the Lone Rock railroad bridge, where we had to take the top down to pass under it. Jim reached up from his seat in the front and came pretty close to touching the trestle. Tim had a copy of the SCR Bald Eagle Nest Survey for 2003 and both Timm and Jim had GPS units along, so we could determine the exact location of the nests that were near the river. The most upstream nest on the river was the one Timm and Larry had discovered near Mazomanie. The next nest down the river was in Richland County not far below the Lone Rock trestle. Jim located the spot with his GPS unit and then Larry spotted the actual nest.



We were excited to see that this nest, like the Mazo nest, appeared to have 3 eaglets. They were a bit larger than the Mazo birds and the nest certainly was. What a construction project – well built and huge – very roomy for the big family!



For the rest of the trip, Jim and Larry occupied the 2 front seats. Every once in a while Jim would study the nest sheet closely, consulting his GPS. Then he'd point to the right or left to let us know where the nest was. Then Larry would get his binoculars out to scan for eagles. Within a minute or less, he would point or shout "Eagle!" over the noise of the motor. This happened again and again for the whole trip. Every time there was a record of an active nest, we saw eagles flying - both adults and juveniles. We lost count after a while but the total was at least 35. What a thrill! I canoed the river quite a bit as a

child 35-40 years ago but never saw even one! While enjoying the view, I was reminded of trips my family used to take, canoeing on the river. We had 2 canoes for my Mom and Dad, my sister and our dog. We weren't allowed to swim in the water (the best part I believe now) but we enjoyed picnics on the banks and wading along the sand bars. I felt very close to both of my parents during this part of the trip, even though they have been gone a long time. I know they would have loved to be with us!

We arrived at the Gotham boat landing at about 10:30 a.m. – 10 miles in a little less than 2 hours. We needed to make better time than this if we were to average 15 mph! We tended to do pretty well until we spotted an eagle and then we stopped and enjoyed the experience or continued on without watching the river close enough and would get stuck (which sometimes took a while to remedy). We made good time after getting stuck just above Gotham and made it to the Orion boat landing in only 20 minutes and then to Muscoda in another 15. The water just above Muscoda was 15-19 feet deep in places, with no sandbars in sight. The Avoca Prairie had been particularly beautiful and was made even more so by 2 cranes flying nearby. We had only 33 more miles!



We stopped for lunch at the one and only real sandbar of the whole trip, about 3 miles below Muscoda. I had volunteered to bring lunch for everyone, so about 15 minutes before we stopped we got out the little charcoal grill and cooked brats and burgers. Larry brought some wonderful strawberries, and of course there were the brownies I had longed for earlier!

We started the journey once again at 12:45. We got to the Blue River bridge at 1 pm. We continued at a good pace, continuing to see many eagles along the way.

The bridge we were most concerned with was the railroad trestle at Gillis Island near Woodman. We had been told that it was the lowest one on the river.



There were several channels here; we chose the right side of the river. We put the top all the way down, sat down in the bottom of the boat, and the light on the back cleared by only 6"! Once we passed through we noticed a woman sitting at the base of one of the supports, quietly fishing. I'm sure she didn't expect something like our vessel to pop into view. Of course we proceeded to get stuck at this point – but a little repositioning of weight on the boat (“Jim, move to the front, please...”) and we were underway again.



We realized that we hadn't been in the main channel so we went back up river to the trestle in the main channel to see what that looked like. Larry pointed out that we had been fortunate after all, because it appeared there was even less room to get under on this side.

We would see the railroad again near Bridgeport where it was built up on a dike along the north side of the river. It was very picturesque, with small bridges over little creeks that flowed into the river. As we neared Bridgeport, the bluffs of Wyalusing State Park, as well as those of the far side of the Mississippi, came into view. They were SO high!



We decided that we had time to continue on past Bridgeport (where the truck and trailer were) to the Mississippi River. I was glad we were able to do so because seeing Wyalusing State Park from the river was a special experience for me.



We were able to look up from the water and see people at Point Look Out, far above us. My father had earned money for college by working as a park ranger here. He had a telescope mounted on the outlook walls and charged a fee for its use. The last time I was at the overlook, parts of the mount site were still there. It was surprising and also special to remember things I hadn't thought of in such a long time.



We continued past the park out onto the main channel of the Mississippi River! We (at least I) felt like intrepid explorers! We had survived and experienced both sides of the river – rain, cold, wind, and low bridges, as well as blue skies, sun, eagles, cranes, and herons. I thought of Ken Burn's Lewis and Clark documentary I had seen on PBS and their response of "Oh, the Joy!" on finally reaching the Pacific Ocean. I knew our trip was not even remotely comparable, but I still felt a little of what they must have when we came around the last bend and saw the Mississippi. And there was even an eagle there to greet us! We went about ½ mile down the river before turning back upstream. (Timm asked if we wanted to go to Minneapolis or New Orleans next; Larry said south – it would be warmer!)



We arrived at the Bridgeport landing at around 5:30 pm. The boat was loaded on the trailer (expertly, I might add) with only a small mishap involving Larry and a mud puddle.... I was incredibly impressed with Timm's piloting skill and Larry's good surveillance eye – they could talk, look for eagles, and avoid shallow water all at the same time.

We were tired campers on the way home but we enjoyed learning more about each other and the type of work each does to earn a living. We all seemed to agree that we worked to be able to have days like this one!



Timm commented that the trip had been something like a Native American vision quest with eagles as our guides all the way down the river! And so it did seem, with another eagle around almost every bend.

We had seen about 15 motor boats and 2 jet skis but no canoes, as the water was still too high – the river looking most of the time like an overfilled bathtub. It had in many ways seemed like a very different river than what I had experienced in the past. My goal of seeing how the river changed over the 92 miles wasn't met because the water was so high it all looked about the same. It would turn out that I would have a chance to do that yet, by canoe, later in the summer. However, I did get a good appreciation on this trip of just how much river there is, how much wonderful habitat there is for all the creatures living here, and realized yet again what a great treasure it is! So much has gone into its preservation and I'm so lucky to be able to benefit from all of that earlier work. I also had a wonderful 2 days and made good memories having fun with 3 great kids I met at the river!



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