A Journey Well Taken:
A Father and Son Experience

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I remember seeing a movie a few years back that starred Bill Murray. It was not really a comedy (although I can hardly imagine a movie with Bill Murray that wouldn’t be funny at least a couple times) but a more serious movie; some might even call it depressing. The movie? Lost in Translation. Anyway, I will never forget a line from that movie. Bill Murray was having a conversation with Scarlett Johansson, and he says something to the effect of, “Your children are the most intriguing people you will ever meet in your life.” This is a story about a journey taken with one of those people.

In April of this year I started reading a book about the Muskegon River written by Jeff Alexander. A co-worker had told me about the book and it sounded interesting. I have lived in Muskegon my whole life (except for a brief 5 year period in the early 80’s when the economy was so rotten that I think half the state left. Sound familiar?) and I thought it would be fun to read something about an area that I know and love. I was smitten by the book from the first page. At first the book takes you back to a time when the area was virgin and not spoiled by European settlers. What an unspoiled paradise Michigan once was. Trees to rival the redwoods of California and wildlife that was so abundant that one thought it could never be depleted. But as Jeff writes, it was depleted, wiped out and never again to be the same. But he also writes about how the river has refurbished itself. He writes of hope for the river, that things are getting better, and that the Muskegon River is one of the great rivers of the Midwest. But, at 52 years of age, I had never been on the river. The book so moved me that one day toward the end of April, I said to Kyle, my 14 year old son, “Let’s paddle down the Muskegon River.” “No way Dad. That’s like 50 miles long.” I said, “No, it’s more like 220 miles long. I think it would be fun to go down the entire length of a river. It would be quite an accomplishment and, maybe even an adventure.” We would start our journey on May 5th.

We had about a week to prepare for what I was determined to do. Luckily we already owned the kayaks but I really had no idea how to coordinate our trip. One thing I did know was that our journey would not entail camping- I hate camping. So, I figured we would do the river in day trips. Kyle was still in school so I thought we would go on Saturday’s. But how would we get my truck back after we did a section of the river? It was just Kyle and I. I then thought about using canoe liveries to help us out by spotting my truck so we could get it at the end of each day’s journey. I went on the internet and found the names of all the canoe liveries on the river. The furthest one up the river was White Birch Canoe and Camp Ground. I will never forget calling White Birch. It was the end of April, and I swear they were still in hibernation mode. A man answered the phone, and I, still excited about reading the book, blurted out “I just read a book about the Muskegon River and I want to paddle down the entire length of the river, can you help me out?” “I guess so.” “What do we do?” “Well I guess you probably want to start below M-55, it’s not very well maintained above that.” “But I want to do the entire length of the river; it starts in Houghton Lake, doesn’t it?” “Yeah but do you really want to start there? It can be pretty rough on the lake and the headwaters are pretty desolate.” “Oh yeah, I want to start right at the beginning.” “Ok, when are you planning on starting?” “How about this weekend? I will call you later in the week and confirm it.” When Kyle got home from school I told him the exciting news. He wasn’t very excited.
May 5th, 2007

I still don’t think he thought I was serious. He wanted some details. When would we start? This weekend. When do I have to get up? 5:30 am. How long of a drive? 2 ½ hours. Why? Because it is going to be fun! And so began his 2 ½ month trip of getting up early every Saturday to satisfy a whim that his dad had. Good kid.

I loaded the kayaks on the truck the night before because I knew we would be starting out early the next day. I did indeed wake Kyle at 5:30 am, we had a quick breakfast and off we went on something I wasn’t entirely sure of, or how we would do. Neither Kyle or I are experienced outdoorsman. The poor kid was born to a father who doesn’t like to hunt or fish, and as mentioned, hates camping and missing his morning shower. We didn’t have any maps. Just go with the current, right? Other than paddling around Mona Lake, we had not done much kayaking. Why were we doing this? Read Jeff’s book.

We drove north for 2 hours and we stopped in Lake City and had another breakfast. I guess we were feeling like hobbits that morning- they like breakfasts. I called Bob Holt, the owner of White Birch, and said we were about a half hour away. He told us where to meet him and then we would drive up to Houghton Lake. When we met Bob, Kyle and I were still not sure how far we would try and paddle that day. Bob suggested starting out slow and maybe just paddling from Houghton Lake to Reedsburg Dam. He thought it would take us 4 to 5 hours and that sounded about right to me. The area we would be paddling through is called Dead Stream Flooding, the name of the headwaters to the Muskegon River. It sounded kind of spooky to me, but we had to do it.

Bob put us in on Houghton Lake about 9:30 and our journey was under way.

Bob said, “Paddle over that way and you should see an opening to the river.” Kyle and I paddled, and we sure didn’t see an opening. I was starting to get nervous. Bob was now gone and we were on our own. After a few more nervous minutes, we saw an opening. That wasn’t it and after a few minutes more we saw another opening- that had to be it. It was.
It was a beautiful spring day with warm temperatures for early May. Kyle was leading the way, and I was so happy to be with him. At this point in time, it looked like a pretty conventional river. There were cottages and cabins along the way, and the river was winding along. “Not bad,” I thought. Once we got a little further along the landscape started to change. The river with banks and trees was giving way to the Dead Stream. It was pretty slow and I would have sworn we were in the Everglades, except the Everglades are green. Everything here was still winter brown.

The buds were barely on the trees, but there was something eerily beautiful about the Dead Stream. We kept seeing outlets and I kept wondering if we were going the right way. “Just stay on the main part of the river,” I told myself. I was kind of mad at myself. Why didn’t I bring a map? Why hadn’t I studied this area more? I figured we were on a river, how do you get lost? But we kept paddling through the “Everglades” enjoying the
scenery and wildlife, mostly ducks and birds and occasional beaver huts.

We were told bears frequented this area, but I didn’t really want to see one.

After about 2 ½ hours of paddling, not really sure we were going the right way, we finally started to see some opening of the stream and I knew we were heading the right way. Because we were paddling to a dam, at some point in time we were going to be in a reservoir area, or as they are called on the Muskegon, ponds. We were now in the open waters of the area called Dead Stream Flooding and Kyle’s comment was “Dad, this area is really creeping me out,” as it was me too. We were paddling over old trees, stumps and from what Jeff writes, an old logging town.

I did not want to fall into these waters. They were definitely “Creatures from the Black Lagoon” waters. But we could see the end of the pond and we were almost done with our first day’s journey. Interestingly, as we approached the dam, I expected to see some
ropes or signs warning us of the dam and the dangers ahead. But no signs were posted.

I guess the DNR or whoever, thought any moron must know to pull off before going over the dam. Kyle and I knew. So after 3 hours of paddling, we had completed our first day on the Muskegon River. Bob was off a little bit on his time but Kyle and I also paddled hard. I was proud of Kyle. He didn’t complain about the work (that was not always going to be the case) and he did a great job. We had lunch at the picnic area near the dam. After lunch we walked over to the dam and looked down the river. It looked awesome.
It was flowing fast and I said to Kyle, “Next week we start on the real part of the river.” I was excited. Kyle just sighed.

May 12th, 2007

Once again, during the week I called Bob from White Birch and said Kyle and I would be driving up again this weekend to continue our trip down the river. When I had first met Bob the previous week, I had given him a copy of Jeff’s book. I asked him if he had started it. “I’ve read a few pages but I’m really busy right now getting the camp sites ready for Memorial Weekend.” I asked him if he wanted to meet Kyle and I for breakfast this Saturday and he said, “Sure, I would like that.”

Bob Holt is a great guy. He looks the part of a camp site operator: full beard, big (not quite grizzly size, more black bearish), and very quiet.

We had a nice breakfast, in spite of a cranky waitress, and set off to start where we had left off the previous week. Once again Bob suggested not doing a part of the river
because of all the tree fall and congestion we could encounter. “Ken, why don’t you skip
the part from Reedsburg Dam to M-55. That is really snarly and I’m afraid you and Kyle
are going to get really frustrated.” It was probably good advice. In fact when Jeff was
doing research for his book, I think he skipped that part of the river. “No Bob. I’m not
going to miss an inch of this river.” So Bob drove us up to Reedsburg and put us in the
river.

Kyle and I decided that we would go from Reedsburg Dam to Bob’s campsites near
Cadillac Road Bridge. I had bought a guide book on canoeing Michigan Rivers, and this
was a stretch the authors thought would take about 8 hours. Bob concurred. Kyle was
not very happy about 8 hours in a kayak, but I said, “If we don’t do some distance we
will never complete our journey. I don’t want this to take all summer.” I am famous for
underestimating how long it will take to do something and I drive my family crazy. My
original estimation on how long our trip down the river would take was about 8 days. It
took longer- no surprise there.

Before we started paddling I noticed a lot of foam and bubbles in the river.

I asked Bob if that was the result of pollution in the river. “No that is from all the tannins
in the water from dead trees and leaves.” That made me feel better. Off we set and it felt
good to be actually on a river after the previous week’s Everglades experience. The
scenery was typical of what you would expect- trees everywhere. Because we were
going down the river in the spring, the water was high and overflowing most of the
banks.
Actually, this was a good thing. Because Kyle and I started early in the year, the high river was to our advantage. We encountered a ton of fallen trees and were able to paddle around them.

In fact you could not go any distance at all with clear stretches of the river. But once again the natural beauty around us was stunning. The leaves on the trees were still not out but the underbrush was greening up, the buds were coming out on the trees, and we were paddling along quite a bit of river grass.
Our worries about the tangled mess of trees that we would encounter and have to portage around were unfounded. The river was high and in spite of all the tree fall we were able to paddle around everything.

But we did encounter one problem- the bugs were terrible. We stopped to have lunch and we had to be constantly moving because the bugs were driving us crazy. So instead of a nice leisurely lunch, we had to gulp down our food and get back on the river. All in all though, it was a fairly uneventful day. We paddled into the dock area of White Birch and Bob’s wife Pat said, “We weren’t expecting you for another 3 hours.” We had paddled a stretch that was supposed to take us 8 hours and we had done it in just under 5 hours, but that was plenty for Kyle. He was tired and he wasn’t sure if he was enjoying this. I asked where Bob was. “He’s taking a nap,” Pat told us. I was disappointed. I wanted to talk to him about our day. Oh well, I would see him the following week.

May 26th, 2007

Actually, Kyle and I had to take a week off because Kyle had to be around the following Saturday for a school event. However the following week I called Bob and said we would be coming on Saturday. “How about going to breakfast again Bob?” “It’s Memorial weekend, Ken, I’d better stick around the campgrounds.” I certainly understood his responsibility but there was still one detail that Bob and I had not cleared up yet. I had now been bugging Bob for three weeks, calling him all the time, picking his brain and leaning heavily on him for my lack of experience. I was about to use him for the third time on our journey down the river and I still had not paid him a penny. “Bob, how much do I owe you?” “Nothing Ken, you bought me the book about the river and you took me out for breakfast. I’m just glad to help you and your son out.” What a good guy. But I was not about to take advantage of his kindness. Kyle and I were taking off from his place. We were leaving the truck at White Birch, and he was going to drop it off
at our destination downstream. I left an envelope on the front seat of my truck with Bob’s name on it.

I told Bob we were going to paddle from his place down to Leota. The guide book said it could take up to 12 hours but I thought we could do it in half that time. By this time I was feeling pretty confident about our kayaking prowess. Bob thought we were biting off a big stretch. I thought that we would have no problem. Bob was right, I was wrong. Almost from the outset we encountered more down trees than we had been used to.

We were getting around them but they were really frustrating us, Kyle in particular.

And it kept getting worse. On four occasions we had to portage around trees and it was not easy. What made it worse was that most of the time when we got out we were in the
middle of poison ivy patches. I told Kyle not to touch anything but it is almost impossible to do that. I don’t know how, but neither of us ever succumbed to poison ivy.

After about five hours of paddling, we were both getting tired. We encountered our last portage around that time. We got out of the kayaks and tried to go around the tree on land; however, there was nowhere to go. We were basically trapped, around more poison ivy, and I didn’t know what to do. Kyle was ready to kill me. He was in a foul mood, and I don’t think he liked me very much. “What do we do now Dad?!” “Let’s go back and see if we can find away around the tree or somehow go under it.” After a great deal of struggle, twisting of our torsos, and a little bit of yelling and screaming we made it through what would be our most difficult passage on the river. But it wasn’t over. Leota, our destination, was just not showing up. We were both dirty, we were tired, the bugs continued to be terrible and we had had to rush down our lunch again. Kyle was getting madder with each stroke of the paddle. “Dad, you can’t seriously think this is fun!” I had to admit, it wasn’t. As I was about to have a full scale mutiny on my hands, I was glad that I only had a crew of one. I knew I had to stay positive and told Kyle that he was not helping the situation by complaining.

Finally after almost 7 hours of paddling we could hear cars and we knew that Leota Bridge was just ahead. We had made really good time but we were both dead tired. To add a little icing on the cake, as we were loading the kayaks on the truck, the bugs continued to swamp around us, driving us more insane. We started driving off and Kyle made it very clear to me that this was the last time on the river. I couldn’t blame him. I felt like quitting too. I called Bob from my cell phone and said we had a tough day. “When we send people down that stretch of the river we usually recommend that they do it in two days.” We did it in one but I thought, at what cost?

June 2nd, 2007

Kyle knew I would be going back on the river the following week. I didn’t mention k-a-y-a-k to him for most of the week. I had another concern. Bob told me that Leota was the furthest down the river that he could help us out. I asked him who he would recommend to help us on the next stretch of the river. He mentioned that Sandy Duggan was a member of the same canoe association and that she seemed very nice. But before I called Sandy, I decided to call The Old Log Resort that Jeff had mentioned in his book. I thought Old Log might be able to help with multiple legs of the trip, as Bob had. When I got in contact with Old Log, Jeanette Knoph, co-owner of the resort with her husband Mark, said that they did not go up as far as Leota. My best bet would be to use Duggan’s next. However in talking to her I mentioned what a tough trip that Kyle and I had on the river the previous week. I still had not learned my lesson. I was thinking of going from Leota to M-61, another long and grueling day. I told her about how Kyle hated long days on the river and she immediately went to his defense, even though he was a total stranger to her. Good for Jeanette. She suggested going from Leota to Church Bridge, also called Pine Road. That would be a shorter trip and we shouldn’t encounter many down trees since Duggan’s maintained that stretch of the river. Something I did not know was that the canoe liveries maintain the parts of the river that they service. It makes sense. They have to keep their customers happy and portaging around trees all the time is not fun, just ask Kyle. The canoe liveries always bring their customers upstream and generally get
them out at their site. The stretch Kyle and I had so much trouble with was below White Birch and too far above Duggan’s, kind of a no-man’s land that obviously, was not well maintained. Jeanette said she and Mark could help us from Church Bridge. It sounded like good advice, the shorter trip, and I decided to take it. I called Duggan’s and arranged to meet them the following Saturday. I told Kyle the plans for the upcoming weekend. He was not overly enthusiastic, but he liked the idea of the shorter trip and he agreed to go.

We pulled into Duggan’s parking lot just before they opened. Originally I was going to go from Leota to their site at M-61 but, as mentioned, Jeanette talked me out of that. I had talked to Sandy Duggan during the week about getting out above their site at Church Bridge. That was a bit of a problem for them because it would entail them taking my truck up to Leota, plus arrange for someone to pick up their employee at Church Bridge, where they would be leaving my truck. Sandy’s husband, when we met him in the parking lot, said, “It is going to cost you more than what Sandy quoted you over the phone.” Ok, I didn’t really have much of a choice. “And you still are going to have close to an 8 hour day on the river.” I didn’t look at Kyle because I knew he was giving me a look to kill. We headed for the truck and I took Kyle aside. “Hey look, don’t worry about what he said. We have been doing the river in half the time we are supposed to. Don’t forget, we are in kayaks. Their times are based on canoes.” I don’t think he had much faith in what I was saying.

A very nice retired gentleman drove us up to our previous destination from hell. The bugs were still pretty bad at Leota and we hurried at getting into the kayaks. I was happy to be back on the river. Kyle was so-so.

The one thing I had hoped to see going down the river was a bald eagle. So far we had seen an abundance of turtles, deer, many different kinds of ducks, turkeys, herons, geese, hawks but no eagles (and no fish). We were about an hour into the journey when suddenly I saw one.

“Kyle an eagle! Did you see it? Oh my gosh! This is great!” “Calm down Dad, it’s just an eagle.” I was still gushing, “Wow! That was really something.” You know what amazed me the most about seeing that eagle? How bright it was. You would think that brown and white would not be bright but those colors were so vivid on that bird; it must have been a very healthy eagle. I had only seen eagles in the zoo or stuffed in museums,
never in the wild. And the best part? That eagle became our friend. We saw it three more times that day and it made some of the frustrations we had experienced previously on the river well worth it. Also, Jeanette was right. The river was well maintained. We did not have any problems with fallen trees and after 4 hours we came upon Church Bridge. We had had a great day. The weather was perfect, the scenery was beautiful and we saw an eagle. We also made very good time. I was thinking to myself, “This is alright and I think Kyle is buying into this trip.” However, World War III was just six days away.

June 8th, 2007

What is it about boys and trips taken with their father’s? While I don’t remember a whole lot about Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, a book I read a few years back, I do remember that the author took his son with him on a motorcycle trip out West. The son was not really happy about being with his dad on the trip and years later I would share the same experience.

After still being scarred from the long trip on the river a couple weeks back, I decided shorter trips would be far better and would help to keep Kyle interested in my goal of paddling down the entire length of the Muskegon River. With Jeanette Knoph’s suggestion, I decided that Kyle’s and my next trip down the river would include a night’s stay at the Old Log, thereby enabling two shorter day trips on the river. We would leave on Friday, stay over night and make a fun event of it, except Kyle wanted nothing to do with it. He had just gotten out of school for the summer the day before and he should have been in high spirits. He wasn’t. I’ve experienced mood swings in girls (I also have two teenage daughters) but I thought boys were supposed to be this happy-go-lucky lot. Not Kyle, at least not on this day. He was cranky, surly, and being a general pain in the “you know what.” We were getting a late start, leaving right after lunch and as we were getting ready to go he said something to the effect of, “I’m not going” or maybe it was “I don’t want to go,” and he wasn’t very nice about it. I blew up. “Ok, stay home! Stay and watch TV or sit in front of the computer for the next two days! I thought we were going to have some fun. It’s a beautiful day. We will be staying over night; we’ll a nice dinner tonight, and get a little further down the river.” But he wasn’t sharing my enthusiasm. “Fine,” I said. “If you are going to be this way, I’ll go alone and probably have a better time!” I walked out of the house, got into the truck and as I was getting ready to back up and leave, I saw him walking out. I stopped the truck. He opened the door and got in. “Let’s go,” he said glumly. We didn’t say much to each other for a while, other than a few grunts here and there. Finally I started to talk. “You know Kyle, I’m not forcing you to go with me. I just thought this would be such a wonderful experience, and to be truthful, something many boys would give their eye teeth to do with their fathers. I wish I could have done something like this with my dad.” He just listened and didn’t say much. Pretty soon both of us calmed down, and you know what? We had a terrific couple of days. The whole battle must have been some sort of cleansing for both of us. He let me know that he wasn’t really wild about kayaking down the river, and I let him know that it was really important to me that he was with me on this hair-brained and fanatical goal of mine. I must have hit a nerve with him because from then on he was great, and we never had another cross word the remainder of our journey down the river.
We arrived at Old Log about 2 p.m. on another beautiful day. Jeannette suggested going back to Church Bridge and paddling down to their place at M-115 and the next day going from their place to Evart. Both trips about the same length, about six hours each. I just looked over at Kyle and smiled, “We will do better than that.”

We started paddling about 2:30 and I was hoping that I was right about the length of time it would take us. If Jeanette was right, we wouldn’t get back to Old Log until 8:30 p.m. and we would both be really tired and hungry. But off we set and the river was just perfect. This stretch of the river was wide; trees were not a problem at all.
However it was as windy as could be.

With the river being wide, I was surprised that our progress wasn’t slowed by the wind but we had a good current and I could tell we were making good time. We saw another bald eagle and perhaps the most disturbing sight we would see on the river. Jeanette had told us we would see an abandoned boat along our route today. She had called the DNR, but with budget woes and being short staffed there was not much they could do. When we came upon the boat I couldn’t believe it. It was a fiberglass fishing boat, probably close to 20 feet long, laying along the bank half submerged.

Why would anyone just leave something like that? To me, it was another example of the ultimate in man’s selfishness.

We pulled up to Old Log’s bank about 5:45. Another look of disbelief from a person who said it would take us much longer than it did, “Do you know what time it is?” Jeanette showed us to our cabin, we cleaned up and decided to drive up to Cadillac for
dinner. We had a nice meal at Maggie’s, had some ice cream at the local DQ, and headed back to Old Log. We were both tired and after reading for a little while I shut the lights off and we went to bed. What had started off so poorly, ended nicely and I went to sleep happy. And relieved.

June 9th, 2007

After breakfast Kyle and I followed Jeanette down to Evart (claim to fame? Home of Ice Mountain bottled water) which is where we were going to paddle to that day. After getting back to Old Log we thanked Mark and Jeanette for their kindness and hospitality and set off about 9:30 am. The wind had died down from the day before and this was another stretch of the river that had delightful paddling. We saw more wildlife- another bald eagle, more herons, more turtles and something I will never forget. As we were paddling along I saw on the bank what looked like a fawn. I called to Kyle, “Hey come on over here. There’s a little fawn over here.” I kept paddling closer until I was so close to the fawn that I could have literally grabbed him, or her, and put it in the kayak. Of course I didn’t but I thought, “If this little deer has such little fear, I am afraid it is not long for this world.”
One comment that I kept making to Kyle was how uninhabited the river was with people. Oh, we would see people at their cabins and we would see cars and trucks going over the bridges, but we were almost halfway down the river now and we had not seen a soul. I kind of liked that. I was on a journey with my son and with my son it had been. We were almost to Evart when I saw some fisherman in a bass boat heading toward us- the river was fairly wide and deep here. I yelled to Kyle, “The first people we have seen on the river.” They were putting out a wide wake and I shouted to Kyle to go perpendicular to the waves. Jeff Alexander points out in his book that if people would keep their wakes down it would help control erosion on the banks. Our seclusion and serenity had been spoiled but we had a good day and about 1:00 p.m. we saw our truck at the park at Evart and paddled to shore. “Half way,” I said to Kyle as we loaded up the kayaks. I needed to make some phone calls to find out who would help us the following week.

June 16th, 2007

Jeanette suggested that I call Hersey Canoe Livery to help us out for the following Saturday. I had not heard of them. I was going to call Sawmill Canoe Livery in Big Rapids, but that was still a ways down the river. With Hersey being just below Evart, it made sense to call them. I talked to a fellow named Donn Trites who was the owner of Hersey Canoe Livery. He was also the owner of Sawmill. Great, we could use Donn’s liveries to get us quite a ways down the river. Donn and I talked about our plans for the upcoming weekend, and while he thought my idea of going from Evart down to Paris was a bit ambitious, (8-10 hours he guessed) he agreed to pick us up at the Paris Campgrounds the following Saturday and drop us off to resume our journey from Evart.

Even though we were getting quite a long way down the river, Kyle and I were still getting up early so we could get early starts on the river. I was amazed how long the Muskegon River was. If anyone has ever done much canoeing or kayaking on a river,
they know that you may travel by land 1 mile but on a river it will translate into 5 miles. This was especially true of the Muskegon River. While the river flows in a generally southwest direction, the Muskegon is an old river and it is the windiest son of a gun. At times Kyle and I would actually be paddling north; you don’t make much progress going that direction. For the most part the Muskegon River is a relatively calm river, fairly slow currents but all the same, powerful because of the volume of water.

Kyle and I got started from Evart and while Kyle was fidgeting a little about Donn’s prediction of a long day on the river, I was optimistic that we would continue to do the river in half the time we were always being told. To Kyle’s and my surprise we encountered many small rapids on our way down to Paris.

This was something we had not experienced and it was a nice change. We continued to see quite a bit of wild life and I even had a deer almost jump over my kayak when I startled it by paddling next to an island it was hanging out on.

Another bit of wild life that Kyle and I encountered was a surprise that came to both the see-er and see-ee: Kyle and I had a Woodstock moment. Kyle is fascinated by my past-he seems to like everything about the late 60’s and early 70’s, particularly the music (he loves The Beatles), and the cars (he wants a VW bus). I will always remember seeing the movie Woodstock and listening to the album. While I loved seeing the bands and listening to the music, I still remember the most controversial part of both the movie and the album- the nudity displayed by the hippies in the water. As Kyle and I came stealthily around a bend in the river, there they were a man and a woman- “naked as a J-bird” as Ray Stevens says in the old song. It was almost a time warp, beads on the woman and both with shoulder length hair. While my comment at the dinner table that evening, about seeing some of the best scenery on the river that day, was not appreciated, Kyle was excited for another reason- “Hippies Dad.”
After 4 ½ hours we came upon the Paris campsite and we were glad to see it. We were both tired and ready to stop. We no longer took breaks along the river after having had so many problems with bugs from our earlier experiences. As long as we didn’t stop, and stayed in the middle of the river, bugs were not a problem at all. We each had a fanny pack and we would snack along the way when we would get hungry, but paddling without breaks gets tiring.

**June 23rd, 2007**

Sawmill Canoe Livery serviced the river from Paris to Big Rapids so Donn (who lives in Hersey) said to call them for our next leg of the trip. He gave me the name of Bill Curtis and I talked to Bill during the week. We agreed to meet at Rogers Dam which is where Kyle and I wanted to paddle down to. This was going to be the first of three dams that Kyle and I would encounter over the next couple of weeks.

Again, a common refrain from our hosts, Bill, who has an uncanny resemblance to Buffalo Bill, thought we were biting off too much of the river. But there was not a good place to break it up into a shorter section. Besides, the worst part of the trip was looming ahead of us the following week- the backwaters of Hardy and Croton Dams. We bade farewell to Bill when he dropped us off in Paris. He already had agreed to help us the following week, and we started down what was our 8th day on the river. I was excited about this stretch of the river. I told Kyle we were going to be going through actual rapids in Big Rapids. I was just hoping that we could handle them.

The river was still fairly fast and ripplely.

![River scene with two kayakers](image)

We saw quite a few logs along the river banks before we got to Big Rapids. They must have been remnants from later logging because they were rather small, not the big logs that Jeff describes in his book. It was still neat to see evidence of the rivers heritage, even if it was a tainted heritage.
And then we came upon the rapids. I yelled to Kyle, “Keep your kayak pointed down the river.”
Here I was, giving him advice and I had never been in rapids on a kayak myself. But it seemed to make sense and we both were having a ball when we heard someone shout our names from the banks. It was Bill and his son, who saw us coming from their vantage point where Sawmill Canoe Livery is located. We gave them a hoot and holler and continued to enjoy what was too short of an exhilarating ride. We both got a little wet and it was fun to have a real life wild river ride, instead of the make believe one’s at Disney World.
The river below the rapids continued to be fairly swift but I knew that couldn’t last too much longer because we would be getting into the backwaters of Rogers Dam.

The areas behind dams are actually like lakes even though they are called ponds. Bill said we might see some of the biggest carp we have ever seen- up to 4’ in length. We didn’t see any giant carp but the paddling was slow without any current, and after 4 hours we came upon Rogers Dam and headed for home.

However, I didn’t like what was coming up the following week- over 20 miles of paddling in nothing but lakes. We had been warned about power boats and rough waters if there was a lot of wind. I decided that we would go on a Friday instead of the weekend to avoid the majority of power boats, but I couldn’t control the weather. I was hoping for the best.
June 29th, 2007

I started priming Kyle for the following week’s trip almost from the moment we had finished at Rogers Dam. “It could take us 8 hours and it is going to be like paddling on Mona Lake. I don’t know exactly how long it is from Rogers Dam to Croton Dam but it is basically one long lake with another dam in the middle. It is going to be exhausting.” He took the news rather stoically and I was happy about that. However, even I was not looking forward to this part of the trip.

Bill Curtis picked us up at Croton Dam around 8:30 a.m. I gave him a copy of Jeff’s book and asked him to pass it around the canoe livery when he finished. “You’re really taking on a big chunk of the river today, Ken. I don’t see how you can do it in fewer than 12 hours,” Bill warned. This was one time I thought a person from one of the canoe liveries could be right. Luckily for us it was a very calm day and when we started out, the water was like glass.
We were gliding along quite nicely, and paddling under the US-131 Bridge was very rewarding. We had been going over that bridge for weeks. It would now be behind us.

It wasn’t long before we were in the backwaters of Hardy Dam, Hardy Pond to be precise. This is the largest of the ponds on the Muskegon River and it resembled the reservoirs of out west. House boats were a common site and the captains were very friendly, honking and waving to us.
They didn’t throw off much of a wake, which was good because we were now on big water. The wind was still barely existent and that was working a great deal in our favor. I could see how the boat traffic could be very heavy on weekends, and I was happy we were doing this on a Friday. “Heave ho,” I yelled to Kyle as we paddled along.

Once again we were making good time but it took us about 4 hours to get to Hardy Dam. It was a big time portage to get around this dam and we had to cross a pretty busy road to
get around the dam. Hardy Dam is a huge earth dam that holds back a tremendous amount of water.

Say what you want to about the dams but they are engineering marvels, and to think, all three dams on the Muskegon River- Rogers, Hardy, and Croton were built in the early 1900’s.

The water below Hardy Dam was very fast but that didn’t last long. While the pond area behind Hardy Dam was a very impressive lake, the beginning of Croton Pond was not nearly as inviting. It was more like a pond and not nearly as good for boats.
That was ok with me since I did not want to encounter them with our kayaks, but we did have a funny experience on Croton Pond. There were an inordinate amount of swans that we were seeing when we actually started paddling on the open waters of Croton Pond. In fact, we encountered one of the biggest swans I had ever seen.
Let’s call it Alfred and it wasn’t long before Alfred was pursuing Kyle.

I have read about how aggressive swans can be and Kyle started screaming to me “Dad! This swan is going to kill me!” “Just keep paddling away Kyle, and if he gets too close scare him away with your paddle.” I started to paddle back to help Kyle because I actually thought Alfred could get the best of Kyle. Luckily the swan gave up his pursuit. Maybe Alfred was really Alfrieda and she thought Kyle was kind of cute. Who knows? I’m just glad we didn’t have a fight on our hands.

After 6 ½ hours of paddling we saw Croton Dam ahead. This was our second longest day on the river and Kyle never complained once. “You know Kyle, you are a darn good kayaker.” We had seen a country store near Croton Dam, and when we got into the truck, I said to Kyle, “We deserve an ice cream cone.” We each got an ice cream cone and it was the best butter pecan ice cream cone I ever had in my life.

**July 7th, 2007**

I was now feeling like a horse getting close to water. We had now been two months on the river on a weekly basis. Surprisingly, it wasn’t feeling like a task, but something I looked forward to every week, even though, to paraphrase George Bush, it was “hard work.” Kyle never again was surly; he had been a good companion ever since our blow up. But I was getting anxious to complete our trip down the river. My original estimate of 8 days was quickly expanding. We had now been 9 days on the river with almost 50 more miles to Muskegon Lake. Prudence said to break the trip from Croton Dam to Muskegon Lake into three trips. I decided on two.

During the week I received a phone call from a person by the name of John Noling. “Hi Ken, my name is John Noling. I talked to your brother and he told me you kayaked down the Muskegon River.” I said, “We have a couple more times on the river John before we are done.” John replied, “A couple friends and I are planning a trip down the river and
we would like to meet you for breakfast and get some advice from you.” I thought to myself, “Geez, Kyle and I are the biggest rookies in the world and now people want to talk to us as if we know something.” I gave a nervous laugh and said, “I’d be glad to meet you for breakfast.”

When I met John we were joined by his friends John Mixer and Mark Meengs. They were all nice guys, and I was a little self conscious meeting with them. John had his book of maps and it looked like he was really organized. Smart guys like John plan things out, dumb guys like me just go for it. “How did you go about organizing your trip Ken?” John asked. I was honest with him. “My son and I got into our kayaks and started paddling.” But I did express my enthusiasm for the trip and told them of our experiences and about all the great people who had helped out Kyle and I. As I write this, John and his companions are paddling down the Muskegon River.

I always intended that kayaking down the Muskegon River would be a journey for a father and a son; however, I really wanted my brother George to join us on a leg of the trip and I thought what better than the stretch below Croton Dam. George is an expert fly fisherman who ties his own flies, and from Croton Dam to Newaygo is a world class trout stream. “I’ll join you, Ken, but I’m bringing my fly rod.” I wanted to make time, not fish; however, George was just antagonizing me. I have always driven him crazy with my over abundance of energy, never relaxing, and just being a pain in his neck. (My friends say I am hyper-active. I tell them they just can’t keep up with me.) But, hey, it’s George’s fault. When he was 11 years old he jumped into a lake and saved me from drowning; I was 5½ years old.

Because we were getting close to home, we didn’t need help from canoe liveries any longer, especially with George joining us. We each had a vehicle and George left his Jeep at Bridgeton, our destination that day, and we drove my truck up to Croton along with the kayaks. Before setting out we had breakfast at a place John Noling had told me about called Hit the Road Joe Café.

What an excellent little restaurant. While at breakfast I told George that this was a lot of river we were going to cover today. But George is a Spartan and I figured it wouldn’t bother him.
The minute we got into the river I immediately noticed the change in the river. It was very clear and we could see lots of fisherman on the river.

I thought to myself, “Seeing these fishermen must be really tearing George up. I know he would rather being doing that.” Also, fishermen hate the interruption of kayakers and canoeists.

Up to this point on the river, from the very start of the river from Houghton Lake to this point, not only had we not seen many people, we hadn’t seen many fish. That all changed today. We saw all kinds of fish, and the scenery was beautiful.

And below Newaygo, about the halfway point from Croton to Bridgeton, we saw all kinds of people. From Newaygo to Bridgeton is tuber haven. Some of the tubes were almost comical. I saw a couple tubes that must have held 20 or more people. They were no problem to us though. We spent a total of six hours on the river that day, never
stopping and we were all glad to see the bridge at Bridgeton. It was so crowded we could hardly pull the kayaks up on shore.

Also George was really hurting. All the paddling had put a lot of stress on his left shoulder. And to make matters worse, it was now about 2:30 p.m. and he had a 4:00 p.m. tee time that he was worried that he would not make. “Maybe the sore shoulder will slow down your backswing and you will have a good game,” I said. He was not real happy with me. We had just paddled 27 miles down the river, we were fighting a mass of humanity and George was in hurry- and hurting. “Do you want to leave Kyle here to guard the kayaks while we go back to get your truck?” George asked. I was thinking about the ice cream cone from the previous week. “No we’ll just leave them here. With all these people, who is going to know whose kayaks these are? Besides, I want to get Kyle (and myself) an ice cream cone.”

When we got to the truck, I gave George some ibuprofen, he left for home, and Kyle and I went to go get our ice cream cones. The kayaks were still there when we went to pick them up at Bridgeton, and poor George, somehow, made his tee time. We were one week away from completing our journey.

July 14th, 2007

“Hey Dad, would you help Kyle and I this weekend? I want you to leave my truck at George’s office (George is an attorney at Parmenter O’Toole and their office is located on Muskegon Lake, conveniently located close to where Kyle and I planned on ending our trip down the Muskegon River) but first you have to drop us off at Bridgeton. And there is a cafe in Croton where we can have breakfast.” That was the clincher because there is nothing that my dad likes more than a good restaurant.

I woke up early on Saturday with much anticipation- and dread. The first thing I did that morning was to go on the computer to check the weather. A green mass covered most of Western Michigan and was quite a ways out on Lake Michigan. “Nuts,” I said to myself. “Wouldn’t you know it, we have had 10 incredibly beautiful days on the river and our last day is going to be spoiled by rain.” I guess our luck could not last forever and I was happy that we had been so fortunate with the weather up until now. I considered postponing our final day on the river, but that lasted about 5 seconds. “We are going,” I said to myself.

I woke Kyle up and told him about our bad luck with the weather. It didn’t faze him a bit. He was happy this was going to be our last day on the river. Deep down I also think he was proud of what he was about to accomplish.

I guess my dad knows me really well because when we pulled into his driveway at 6:30 am, he and his friend Heide were ready to follow us to George’s office where he would leave his car; bad weather wouldn’t have stopped him either.

We drove back up to Croton in a steady rain and even though Hit the Road Joe’s was out of our way, I wanted my dad to experience this unique restaurant. We had a nice breakfast and then drove down to Bridgeton.
What a difference. The week before it was bedlam at this bridge: you could hardly find an empty spot along the river banks to pull up your kayak, cars were parked in the parking lot like sardines and now it was completely deserted. Luckily for us the rain had momentarily stopped. Kyle and I got into the kayaks and as we started to paddle away I could see a look of sadness and apprehension on my dad’s face. I knew he felt bad that Kyle and I were going to have rotten weather on our last day. “Thanks a lot Dad,” I shouted as we were heading away from him, “we’ll be fine.”

“Kyle, you’d better put your poncho on. I think it is going to really start raining.” I pulled up next to him to help him out and sure enough, it started to rain, thunder, and lightning. I was staying close to the banks to avoid being a target and Kyle was more in the middle of the river. “Kyle, get over by me! It’s too dangerous to be in the middle of the river.” Once again I was giving Kyle advice that I had no expertise with but, again, it seemed to make sense. The ponchos were working but they were blowing around, letting water into the kayaks.

It wasn’t long before Kyle shouted over to me “Hey Dad, I’ve made a tent.” Sure enough, he had put the front of his poncho under the rubber straps that were on the top of his kayak. I mimicked him and now we were staying as dry as can be. The rain was no longer a problem, even though at times it was coming down in sheets. We were actually having fun paddling in it.
The thunder and lightning had also stopped, reducing my nervousness.

After about an hour or so the rains also stopped, the wind picked up and it looked like we were going to have a nice day after all. My concern now was that we go the direction I wanted to go. While the Muskegon River does not end in a delta like the Mississippi, it does have quite a few offshoots and I wanted to make sure we didn’t get off on any tangents to make the trip any longer than it had to be. In his book, Jeff Alexander talks about how the lower Muskegon River is silting up very badly and how the river is changing significantly. The biggest culprit in this is US-31 because it was built on fill, with few openings, and it is actually acting like a dam, preventing the silt from making its way to Muskegon Lake. The Muskegon River is essentially turning into a creek, and, a tributary, Cedar Creek, is turning into a river. Kyle and I chose to stay south on what was labeled on a map “Muskegon River.” After all, that is what we set out to do, go down the Muskegon River, not Cedar Creek.

With it no longer raining we were making good progress and we were both happy about almost being to the end of our journey. The scenery was beautiful, and we could see evidence of pilings driven into the river banks well over a hundred years ago that must have been used to help facilitate the flow of logs down the river.
We were really enjoying ourselves and were soon in the marsh areas before US-31 that had a very unique appearance, and the electrical towers from the BC Cobb power plant added to the uniqueness.

We could hear the roar of the cars from the expressway and knew we were getting close to the end. Kyle was ahead of me and suddenly a huge deer ran in front of him, splashing through the water, startling the heck out of him. “You see that Dad?” He got a kick out of being so close to a deer.
Just after we paddled under the US-31 Bridge my cell phone rang and it was George, “Ken, where you guys at?” “We just went under the US-31 Bridge.” “You still have about 2-3 hours to go.” “Yeah, right.” “Well I’m here at the office. I’ll keep a look out for you.” I said I would call him when we entered Muskegon Lake and he said that wouldn’t be necessary, he would see us.

After going under the bridge at US-31 the river narrowed significantly but there was still plenty of water to paddle. We could hear cars all around us and we could see highway and road signs letting us know about where we were.

It was fun seeing this area that I had been driving through all my life, from the vantage point of the river. We kept winding our way back and forth and I was beginning to wonder if George was right (even though he had been kidding), that we still had quite a bit of time left. But soon Kyle and I spotted the bridge of the bike path that we had traveled over many times and the BC Cobb plant was looming large in front of us.
In fact, we had been seeing the smoke stack of the Cobb plant for awhile now.

The wind was heavy as we paddled past the Cobb plant and we could see the opening to Muskegon Lake. Kyle gave a shout of joy and I took his picture as he held his paddle over his head in triumph.
We were almost done.

I had decided that when we had completed our journey I would call Bob Holt from White Birch and let him know that we were done. I hadn’t talked to Bob since the last time he had helped us. I called to Kyle when he was almost in Muskegon Lake, “Pull over, I’m going to call Bob.” With this being a Saturday I thought my chances of getting Bob were slim because I was sure he would be attending to campers and canoers. Bob’s wife Pat answered the phone. “Hi Pat. This is Ken Johnson. We are about to enter Muskegon Lake. We are finally done and I wanted you and Bob to be the first to know.” “That’s great, Ken, but Bob isn’t here. He got a call from some people who broke down on the highway coming up to our campgrounds. He’s gone off to help them.” That was the Bob Holt that I had come to know.

The wind was as heavy as I had almost ever seen and it was blowing right at us.

I own a sailboat and this was wind I would not go out in. We had to paddle hard just to get into Muskegon Lake. I yelled to Kyle, “Be careful!” We had paddled 220 miles
without ever coming close to tipping over. Would the wind and waves capsize us on Muskegon Lake? I later found out that there had been small craft advisories on Muskegon Lake and that a bass tournament had been canceled because of the weather. We were in small crafts, we had to paddle perpendicular to the wind and parallel to the waves in order to get over to George’s office. Kyle must have been concerned too because he shouted over to me to put my life jacket on. Like a fool, I didn’t. Kyle did great. He paddled through that wind and waves like nothing. He really was good.

I would joke with him that I thought he could become a professional kayaker. After a somewhat harrowing and wind blown passage we made it to the shore of Parmenter O’Toole.
I handed George my camera to commemorate the end of our journey. He helped us get the kayaks up on dry land. We were done. After 11 days, 220 miles, a total of about 52 hours, and 2 ½ months time, we had completed our journey. There was one more thing. I ran over to the truck, and came running back with a bag in my hand. Inside were two bottles of champagne. “We have to have a champagne toast in celebration, Kyle.” He gave an embarrassed smile. I gave him his bottle and I popped mine open. The cork went flying. Kyle’s cork weakly fell off the top and George and I both laughed. We clanged our bottles together, and yes, Kyle did indeed take a swig.

It felt good to complete something that Kyle and I had set out to do. If you asked Kyle if he enjoyed the journey, in all honesty, he would probably say no. Did I enjoy the trip? Absolutely. Did Kyle get anything out of going down the river? I think so. I think a lot of life lessons were learned- setting a goal and completing a task, being unselfish and doing something for someone else- even when it is something you do not want to do, life not necessarily being easy, and I’m sure other lessons. Sometimes it will be years before you realize the benefit of something accomplished- or endured. I hope Kyle someday has fond memories of our trip. It was also wonderful to spend that collective time together- teenagers aren’t that bad after all.
Kyle and I have always had a nice relationship. He was a good son before we set out on the trip and he will continue to be a good son after the trip. But something in him has changed, he has matured. He has more respect for me now, and I think he truly likes doing things with me. While he may not be a big fan of kayaking, he likes to go on long bike rides. We will go on a 50 mile bike ride and he never complains. Kyle would like to ride his bicycle from Chicago to Muskegon like his grandfather did 66 years ago (when he also was 14 years old- and all by himself), but seven hours on the river, portaging around a bunch of trees brings out the worst in him.

All in all, the journey down the river was a trip well taken and something I will never forget. What was the worst thing that happened on the river? We never really ran into any danger. One of us once got Montezuma’s revenge, and if you don’t think that is a problem in bug infested, poison ivy laden river banks, than I don’t know what a problem is. After that incident, Imodium was always included in our “fanny” packs.

It has now been a couple weeks since we completed our journey. I have to admit that I miss the Saturday trips. I think kayaking down a river is a great way to see the countryside and to explore the natural wonders of Michigan. I would now like to do some of the tributaries of the Muskegon River. How about it Kyle?
Ken & Kyle’s Kayak Trip

1 – 5/5/07 Houghton Lake to Reedsburg Dam – 3 hours
2 – 5/12/07 Reedsburg Dam to Cadillac Road Bridge – 5 hours
3 – 5/26/07 Cadillac Road to Leota Bridge – 7 hours
4 – 6/2/07 Leota Bridge to Church Bridge/Pine Road – 4 hours
5 – 6/8/07 Pine Road to M-115 – 3 ½ hours
6 – 6/9/07 M-115 to Evart – 3 ½ hours
7 – 6/16/07 Evart to Paris – 4 ½ hours
8 – 6/23/07 Paris to Rogers Dam – 4 hours
9 – 6/29/07 Rogers Dam to Croton Dam – 6 hours
10 – 7/7/07 Croton Dam to Bridgeton – 6 hours
11 – 7/14/07 Bridgeton to Muskegon Lake – 5 hours

Total – 51 ½ hours