

The Drifters - Mellow on the Missouri, September 4, 2011



How do you put together a canoe brigade of 20? With friends from New York to Hollywood, Washington DC to Washington State, Massachusetts to Pittsburgh to Vancouver, Calgary, Saskatoon and Toronto? Start with the core '06 brigade of seven who paddled the **White Cliffs of Montana's Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument** which Lewis and Clark described as the most beautiful section on their exploration to the Pacific. Tell them, "We vowed to return. Now's the time."



Tell them that we're only travelling 47 miles in eight days through the prime slice, remind them that the current is so strong they don't even have to paddle, and that there's no portages. Har har har. I know what a lazy bunch of bastards my friends are. And tell them that we'll be doing more hiking into the stunning sandstone formations and canyons than paddling.



And let word of mouth sweep out from there. It was by far the largest brigade I've led, and filled up (overfilled actually) so fast I didn't dare broadcast it to our 296-strong Voyageur List (sorry) or I would have been swamped even more (as it was I unfortunately had to turn people down). Neal and Pittsburgh Patty of Pennsylvania had to cancel at the last moment (lowering it to 18) - but Neal generously offered to pick up the dinner tab for our last night blow out in Fort Benton. More on *that* later.



And a lazy drift it was - so languid that our outfitters announced that we hold the record for taking the longest to explore this short section. None of us could imagine doing it properly faster. We camped three nights right here in what has to be one of the most remarkable vistas on the planet. (This is a Gene "The Incredible Hulk" Hattori panorama but I don't always give photo credit, many members chipped in pics for this blah blah.)



The view upstream to the right. (The flat, dark green bank on this side was the site of Lewis and Clark's campsite May 31, 1805.)



To the left.



The back yard. (Note Ostrich Legs and Tiny Tush standing atop dark volcanic intrusion into white sandstone when this area was still under thousands of feet of overlay.) .



And our three day Eagle Creek campsite in the centre of this magnificent panorama.
Meadowlarks were everywhere - and the first leopard frogs I've seen in decades.
We're a hundred yards down from the Lewis and Clark site.



This was their actual site, at the mouth of Eagle Creek.





It was another exhausting Jason Schoonover canoe trip....



Everyday we went out to play. We did a forward ferry across the fast flow to explore this box canyon which tweaked our curiosity in '06. It's the one to the left of The Dragon Lady in the lead picture.



Ostrich Legs and Tiny Tush, often in the lead, were alone scrambling up the 60 degree slope to the top.



They saw neat stuff. Nature at her most whimsical.





We spent a second fascinating day exploring slot canyons. Good Yoko drawn to the dark at the end of the tunnel. She was never seen



again.

The cougars couldn't keep their hands off us men and jumped at any excuse to cop a cheap feel, like Snorkel Master and Diane, fondling The Incredible Huulk's butt.



Talking about tushes, this is why Tiny Tush is called Tiny Tush. She even brought a child's folding lawn chair to tuck her tiny tush into.



This is Muskeg Lars Bjorck who lives in the Hollywood Hills and on his third canoe adventure with us. His *Havoc* with Anne Hathaway is excellent. He came with this pretty young thing, Listel a.k.a. "Nature Girl", whom he claims is his "daughter." Ooooookay. Fine. Nudge, nudge, wink, wink. We all know what lechers these producer types are....



Gene "The Incredible Huulk" Hattori and his kid sister Su, my Dragon Lady. I'm not sure which is which, Asians all look alike, but I think that's Gene on the left because I know he wears glasses and a white hat. He shot the class picture following and if it looks pretty good it should: he's been chosen to photograph Queen Elizabeth and the Royal Family four times over the decades and shot and published the official Rideau Hall photographic tome, of the Governor-General's mansion in Ottawa.





The food was the usual slop, starting with champagne, wine and tenderloins. Moose stew another night was the big hit. Capt. Hook made a record five trips to the trough! For once we filled him up!



Major Cougar Diane and Snorkel Master drove out from the Wet Coast together, practising a hilarious song and dance routine which they performed while we celebrated being back on the water with champagne. Diane hasn't been on a paddle with us since the first Bangkok Brigade of '02, though Snorkel Master is a regular.



It went down well. So did the champagne.



A taskmaster, I demanded that paddlers launch at the crack of 10:00am...when we launched at all.

Being too lazy to paddle, we linked up and drifted, cracking jokes until our faces were sore from laughing. The brigade quickly developed that fabulous "collective high" that makes canoing in brigades such a great, unique, major fun experience. That's really why I do them, as I don't charge. We share costs.



The Missouri flowed at 3 mph. When we paddled, we doubled that, so we were usually two hours between campsites.



The scenery is fantastic and causes your imagination to run rife, like these medieval battlements.



Hole-in-the-wall is a highlight, a 600 foot climb. And our second major destination.
Birdman shot.



The first day we joined up with a Scout troop and struck off for the butte on the right which we ascended then hiked along the top to the cliffs at left which overlooks the separate mesa which holds Hole-in-the-wall.



Jump! Jump!





The next day we climbed to Hole-in-the-wall.



Made it!



Uh, Heil to you too Muskeg Lars, though we Dutch dike-pluggers, even 12th generation jobs like me, are sensitive to anything Kraut. In any case, I thought you were a Peruvian wetback?



If Chicken Legs is standing wonky, it's because he's terrified, phobic to heights. In '06 he didn't make the climb but braved it this time, thus earning an advance in his river name to Brave Chicken, at least in the short term. Good Yoko is obviously proud of him. I'm impressed too.



Descending, I started to lead along another path - which I did for 25 feet until I heard a ZIIIT! ahead. That's what a rattlesnake sounds like, not the ominous rattle-rattle invented for 1950s cowboy movies. Quite high pitched and fast, almost electric, definitely designed to attract attention! I stopped in my tracks - I had been waving my walking stick ahead for just this reason (snakes) - and glanced down. At the base of a sage brush was a hole and streaking out of it away from me was a rattler. We judiciously chose to take our *original* route down.



It wasn't our only run-in with snakes. This is the third bull snake I saw and Tipper, who has a phobia (we really needed a shrink along for all the whackos....) to serpents, had a run-in with another rattler near our Hole-in-the-wall campsite. And there were more sightings. Actually, I'm grateful to rattlers for sounding a warning. Better than being struck by surprise by one as with a coral or aggressive fer-de-lance. Apparently the only thing that's been chomped along here in 15 years is a dog. Local rattlers are actually pretty non-aggressive (but still dangerous!) and want to get away from us as much as we from them.



Babe magnet Capt. Norm Baker, a.k.a. Capt Hook (for his prowess snagging North America while fishing) in a sandwich with Lorrie "Tiny Tush" Hansen (L) and Bev "The Flasher" Pavelich, both of whom were also on the '06 trip. Capt. Norm was Thor Heyerdahl's best friend, first mate, celestial navigator and radioman on the reed boat floats *Ra*, *Ra-II* and *Tigris*. A living treasure of adventure and exploration, he flew his Cessna 172 from Massachusetts for his fourth canoe trip with us. He was disappointed there were no Class 3 rapids this time. The guy is fearless, loves danger. On his honeymoon he climbed the Matterhorn.



Capt. Hook is also one of the world's *great* raconteurs and that evening mesmerized our Scouting neighbours, as well as us, with a riveting 45-minute retelling of the dramatic two Atlantic voyages with Heyerdahl in '69 and '70. The part about the circling sharks as *Ra* sank was most gripping. The next morning we learned the boys were so stoked they could hardly sleep.



One of the Scouts was a remarkable young woman named Caitlin Cattabiano (in black), who impressed us all with her gazelle grace, ease and speed on the formations. A speed climber who has always dreamed of being an explorer and who is considering expedition medicine (Ken Kamler note: we told her about you and your being the first doc to administer to Beck Weathers on Everest after the '96 disaster), we've offered to sponsor her as a student member into The Explorers Club with Capt. Norm and Lynn Danaher endorsing. Actually, their Akayla (Scouting leader) Curt McIntyre has a compelling aeronautical and certainly adventurous background. You see, this was also an Explorers Club trip and that's the Explorers Club flag. L-R: Explorers Capt. Norm Baker, Rob Tymstra, Caitlin, Hairy Smelly Old Guy, Lynn Danaher, BJ Mikkelsen (and *blllllt* to you too) & James Anthony.



The Explorers Club member not present was our deceased friend Jim Chester who generously unlocked the secrets of the Missouri River in '06 for the seven of us making the return trip. I'm holding his picture in the earlier class photo. This expedition was dedicated to Jim, one of the world's top cavers and a dear and much respected friend of all of us.



That Montana night sky - with no light pollution - is something else. We were near the end of the Persedes meteor shower and we saw herds of them - including the hugely bright and fast space lab on three separate nights punching holes in the Big Dipper, spilling the vivid Milky Way across the sky. "Just think," commented a Scout, "there's people in it." Birdman shot.



Dark Butte (or Dark Butt as we called it, the dark bump on left of horizon) earned another two-day stay. It was a steamboat landmark. Our camp is in the cottonwoods.



Back of us was another paddlewheel era landmark called, appropriately, Steamboat Rock. It could also be a garden slug crawling up the hill. At the lower level is Cathedral Rock to which The Dragon Lady, Good Yoko and Brave Chicken climbed.





Note the group still below us - and it's still a good way down from there to river level.
We scrambled higher, some to the top, like Capt. Hook.



It's great having a partner who loves canoeing, the outdoors and exploring wild places and tribal cultures around the world as much as I do. We've been happily unmarried over 23 years. If she looks especially happy right now it's because my hand is on her ass. That's where Huulk told me to put it, so he could get this reaction.



Can you believe this ol' broad o' mine turns 60 Sept. 6? She still has the waist of a 15-year-old! This is the contest picture: What is she singing? Winner receives a spot on the Red Deer River, Alberta, expedition next summer - the valley of the highest concentration of dino bones on the planet, according to our friends Phil Currie and Eva Koppelhus.



That's Birdman, an ornithologist, of the tricorn hat pouring absinthe over a sugar cube held on a sieve-like replica of Toulouse-Lautrec's absinthe spoon. He counted 61 species. Two weeks after our trip he was off on an Explorers Club flag expedition to James Bay on Hudson Bay, seeking evidence that Henry Hudson survived for a year or two after being set adrift. There's a strong oral tradition among natives along the Bay that he did and was assisted by them but was massacred at a portage while trying to make his way overland to Quebec.



Gaudi and Disney had to have gotten together to create the fantastic landscape.



Who got together to create this fantastic eccentric with such a great sense of humor, I don't know. To his friends in Manhattan he's BJ but on the river he's known by the unabbreviated pronunciation.



Kids again, laughing, splashing and playing.



If they only knew the "dehydrated smoked ham bits" in their five-variety-wild-mushroom stew was really chopped rattlesnake heads....
That's Don "Chuckles" Yoshida next to Huulk. He's a hulluva photographer too, but then all these Japanese are born with a camera, which probably accounts for the squint that evolved, from the pain passing those Hasselblads at birth. Their canoe was known as the Imperial Japanese Navy.



Dark Butt was another great campsite.



This was the scene at Slaughter River a.k.a. Arrow Creek Aug. 5, 1833 painted by Karl Bodmer while on Prince Maximilian's trip up river. Fortunately the injuns were friendly Gros Ventre and not Blackfoot, though it was still a tense situation for the palefaces.



The scene today as The Dragon Lady and I pass. Karl certainly took license, even adding a mountain range in the background, but it's recognizable. Mind you, he had other things on his mind - like keeping hair on his head - than memorizing the scene for a painting....



Our Slaughter River campsite was just a hundred yards downstream and on a higher shelf than the site of Lewis and Clark's two stays of May 29, 1805 and July 29, 1806. It was rare for them to reuse a campsite. The "slaughter", incidentally, referred to a herd of rotting buffalo, not palefaces or redskins.



We pulled out at Judith Landing and the A eh brigade organized a (cold) beer run into a nearby town. Man, did it taste good. We had a lotta gear. 8 blue barrels of grub alone.



Our outfitters arrived with two vans and canoe trailers. On the drive back to whoop it up in Fort Benton, our cougars broke out into *Home on the Range* every time they spotted an antelope, even a dead coyote on the road.



We passed Decision Point Lookout where Lewis and Clark were stymied for ten days trying to establish which branch was the Missouri. Clark continued upriver while Lewis explored what became known as the Marias River, killing two Blackfoot savages who tried to steal their guns, sparking decades of violence between that tribe and the Yanks. Huulk's shot is taken from the hilltop where the explorers puzzled over the two rivers. (The Marias is on the left, the Missouri the right.)



Back in Fort Benton, one of the wildest of wild west towns, navigation headwaters for steamboats, the founding settlement of Montana - and the 1882 Grand Union Hotel for our last night's whoop up.



It had recently undergone a four-year, multi-million dollar restoration and it was fabulous. We had a corner suite facing down river. One could imagine paddlewheelers beating upstream and moored below our windows.



Everyone swaggered through the swinging doors into the saloon, natch. Hoisting the glass at right is Martin "Ostrich Legs" Stockwell who, along with his wife Tiny Tush, handled medical matters for the brigade (none), both being MDs. In purple is James "Tipper" Anthony. A veteraniar, he handled medical matters for my cousin "Lube" Al, who's more animal than man.



Here's why it was necessary. Al, on the far (far) right, is barking mad. Sadly, eccentricity is not an uncommon Schoonover affliction. Vet and patient were rarely apart, having buddied up on the Churchill River last summer.



Our wind up banquet was held in the Lewis and Clark Room and the food, fare and fun were fantastic.



Neal, back in Pittsburgh (well, Butler, PA), was duly honored for generously picking up the \$1341.07 tab. The girls in front are especially eager to show their appreciative.



And then things got blurry.... Tiny Tush, then Muskeg Lars, pounded the lobby piano and rowdies danced before spilling out the door yelping and yahooping to hit the saloons along Front Street until the cows crowed. The next day we learned we were the talk of the town, population 1200.

And the song stuck in my craw all week? Debbie Reynold's *Tammy* from 1957 because of the magnificent cottonwoods. Their fluttering leaves sound like light rain, which has fooled more than a few campers at night in their tents.

Thanks to Meredith and Michael Gregston of Adventure Bound Outfitters for another excellent job organizing canoes, shuttles and giving advice:
abc@adventureboundcanoe.com 1-877-538-4890.

And thanks to the Drifters for the most mellow canoe trip of my life!:

Capt. "Hook" Norm Baker (Explorers Club) - Windsor, Massachusetts
James "Tipper" Anthony (Explorers Club) - Toontown
Rob "Birdman" Tymstra (Explorers Club) - Sarnia, Ont.

BJ "Blow Job" Mikkelsen (Explorers Club) – New York
Lynn "Snorkel Master" Danaher (Explorers Club) – Friday Harbor, Washington
Bev "The Flasher" Pavelich – Toontown
"Muskeg" Lars Bjorck – Hollywood
Listel "Nature girl" Bjorck – Portland
Garth "Chicken Legs aka Brave Chicken" Ramsay – Toontown
Kumiko "Good Yoko" Yokoyama - Toontown
Martin "Ostrich Legs" Stockwell -Toontown
Lorrie "Tiny Tush" Hansen – Toontown
"Lube Al" Schoonover - Calgary
Diane "The Cougar" Fay - Vancouver
Don "Chuckles" Yoshida –Washington, DC (Imperial Japanese Navy)
"The Incredible Huulk" Gene Hattori – Brooklin, Ontario (Imperial Japanese Navy)
(Neal and "Pittsburgh" Patty Christensen – Butler, PA)
Cheers - Captain Magnus Twat* (Explorers Club) and The Dragon Lady

*Magnus Twat was born about 1751 and joined the Hudson Bay Company in 1771 as a "labourer" and was subsequently a "carpenter and canoe builder" before advancing to "factor." From journal entries, he was highly respected for his multiple skills and work ethic. From 1791 to 1795 he was almost continuously in charge at Cumberland House, the first settlement in what became Saskatchewan, and only seventy air miles from the small town of Carrot River where I was brought up. In 1798 he was in charge at Carlton House on the Saskatchewan River, and later established a house at Setting river. From 1799 to 1801 he was back at Cumberland House. It was while canoeing up the Carrot River that he suffered what appears to have been a stroke and died, on October 23, 1801, and was buried on site. He left his mother not only an annuity of £10, but a trust to build and maintain a school, along with money for the poor, in his home parish of Orphir, Orkney. To honor this outstanding but unheralded member of the Canadian fur trade with whom I share the Carrot River, I have adopted his name as my river name. He left at least two sons. His descendents changed his name, adding a 't'. His distant cousin, Kim Twatt of the Orkneys, paid an emotional visit in 2001 to her equally distant Cree relatives at the Sturgeon Lake Reservation which she recounted in her booklet, *Full Circle*: http://www.orcadian.co.uk/acatalog/Orcadian_Bookshop_Full_Circle_327.html