

SUMMER ON THE 'SIPPI

There is probably not one among us who, at one time or another, wouldn't have realized his supreme ambition by climbing aboard a raft with Mark Twain's Huck Finn, and drifting down toward Dixie on the broad bosom of the Old 'Sippi.

A primary urge for all men is to travel, to see distant places, to follow running water. As a lad I never leaned over a bridge railing without watching the small flotsam on the water borne on beyond my sight by the gurgling current. My fellow voyageurs and I set adrift crude wooden boats with our imaginations for passengers. The lure of the river pulled on our boyish imaginations just as the current water tugged our weighted linen lines as we sat bankfishing, barefooted beside our willow poles. Sometimes we watched travelers pass in assorted craft, and we wondered among ourselves if they would go down as far as the Mississippi herself, or even to Kentucky.

The Mississippi of the twanging banjo and the ornately filigreed river packet dissolved into the Mexican Gulf many, many years ago. But the Old River herself is there as ever; lazily indifferent to time and people, full of big catfish, and with her miles more isolated than ever on her lower reaches.

Over 2375 miles of water highway, stretching from Lake Itasca to New Orleans and below, she is the jugular of a continent, the great vacation waterway of America, offering all extremes of climate, and biology from trout and pine trees to alligator gars and cypress swamps. You'll find no other vacation highway furnishes a travel mile at such low cost as a Mississippi float-mile; nor does any other travelway transverse such a picturesque and changing country, affording its vagabonds a cross-cut of America's hinterland, undecorated by billboards or barbecues, and free of traffic lights and noisy crowds.

We summered on the 'Sippi, the mate and I.

"It'll be too hot in Dixie in the summer." well-meaning friends warned. But it wasn't.

"It'll get monotonous and you'll grow sick of her weary miles," others told us. But it didn't, and we didn't.

Summer on the river is cool and the most pleasant time to make the trip-if you're not in an open boat and directly exposed to the southern sun. Over the levee the sun may bake and the languid air may stifle, but on the river the atmosphere is ever water-cooled, and the river seems to breathe a freshness into the always present breeze.

Whether you will tire of the river depends on your outfit. Many people start the 'Sippi, but few finish. This is largely due to the use of ill-adapted craft, a common occurrence as boats best suited for her upper reaches make a headache out of traveling her southern miles. We saw boats on the shores of all the states we passed, boats sold or abandoned by water-weary travelers. Fortunately the mate and I fell into a good consul, constructing a well-suited craft, and like true river rats grew to love the old river more and more with the passing of each day and mile in our comfortable, yet in inexpensive outfit.

Canoes were the mistake of many. Canoeing the Father of Waters may seem romantic to the Modern Hiawatha, but the only practical men who ever canoed the river below its less navigable upper reaches were the early traders who had no other choice of craft. From Itasca to Minneapolis canoes are dandy, but from here on they're like touring the Lincoln Highway on a bicycle.

I'm not saying canoes can't go all the way to New Orleans. If you're a sturdy grin-and-bear-it and get a great kick out of extreme self denial, when you arrive back home your sun-tanned dermis will sheath a lot of muscle. A friend of mine paddled as far as St.Louis, discovered upon his homecoming that his neck and

shoulders had expanded beyond the compass of his extant shirts. The sequel to this happy canoe story is the drowning of part of a canoe crew we overtook between St. Louis and New Orleans.

For the idyllic river life of loaf-and-live-it, take a boat you can live on. Not necessarily a houseboat with a twelve-foot beam-remember you have to travel, too. Choose a compromise between livability and travelability. Our craft was not too large; it measured sixteen feet long and beamed sixty-four inches-just wide enough for maximum comfort. Doing it over, I'd select a five-foot beam and a twenty or twenty-foot overall. Added length gives a large increase in living space without materially increasing the water resistance.

John-boat style is as good as any: punt bow, fairly sharp flare in the side boards, with a high rake to the bow bottom and a reasonable rake on the stern bottom. These boats are stable, room-conserving, run effortlessly at low speeds, and are easy to build at a minimum cost. Don't take an expensive boat down-river expecting to sell it at a small loss; natives along the lower river are used to picking up boats for a song and you will recoup little of the original cost of your craft.

By all means have a screened cabin. Roof it with only a canvas tarp if you wish, tack screening around the roof supports and fix canvas flaps to roll down over the screen in case of wind or rain. Many mosquitoes breed in the bottomlands, and camping unprotected on the damp shore is a torture. Much of the time there is a light breeze on the river and you can sleep very comfortably anchored out away from shore in an open boat. But if the breeze fails, the insects will find you anywhere, and when rain comes all will be cold and sodden on an open craft. With an easily and cheaply constructed cabin as outlined, you will be immune from the insects and the elements, can read or play cards late into the night under a gasoline lantern light, and can travel in sun or rain with equal facility. Ten feet is the absolute minimum for comfortable cabin length.

Perhaps you will want a dinghy or small skiff for fishing trips, exploring the lure of small side channels or bayous. The best solution is a light plywood carried on the cabin roof. We pushed an ordinary skiff ahead of our cabin boat by means of a bow bridle, but in rough water this is an inconvenience as well as a threat to unsafe running.

For power you can either install a cheap inboard or old auto engine, or use outboard motors as we did. To rely exclusively on drifting with the current is patience taxing, dangerous, and impracticable owing to headwinds or still water behind dams. The sinuous curves and prevailing headwinds (summer winds usually from the south) make sailing craft ill-adapted for river use. For a temporary outfit, outboards are easier to install, take up less room, and can be easily crafted for shipment home-thus preventing a loss on a second hand sale. If you have a dinghy, you can change the motor from one boat to the other in a couple of minutes while with an inboard this is impossible. With a 2 and an 8 HP motor, we had both light and heavy power, and a spare engine just in case one became temperamental.

With storage space for two gallons of gas and five or more gallons of drinking water, you won't have to worry about running out of gas, either. You can pick up gas, water, and other supplies at any of the river towns. Most stores and service stations will make free delivery of any purchases right to the riverbank. Small boating has become popular in most of the river cities, many of which have comfortable accommodations for river travelers at the local boat club, the number of which are increasing rapidly. At smaller towns you will find houseboat colonies and fish wharves where you can dock and buy petrol.

A few of the more essential items needed for greatest enjoyment are: gasoline stove for cooking on board, gasoline lantern, fishing equipment for casting and line-setting, at least two mud anchors, air mattresses for sleeping, a .22 rifle for turtle

shooting and plinking, minnow seine and bucket, sack or livebox for caught fish, boat pole with hook, grapnel hook, plenty of 3/8" and 1/2" rope, strong flash or spotlight, and navigation charts.

If you use an outboard, rig up a rope steering wheel as used with the ordinary inboard. A couple of folding canvas chairs make life very luxuriant. Plus of course, the required life preservers, fire extinguishers, lights, and other equipment which you would ordinarily take on a camping trip, blankets, utensils, and such.

The fishing is good. However, don't fish in the swift current. The backwaters of the upper river furnish excellent black bass either on fly or casting rod, also some nice walleyes and northerns. Below the Missouri where the river gets the exact color of coffee and cream, few fish live in the river proper except catfish and gars. The channel or fork-tail cat is one of the best eating fishes you can find anywhere. He is easily caught in eddies and still pools by nightfishing with minnows or doughbait containing cheese. We would throw a set line off the stern of the boat each night and unhook fresh fish at breakfast time. Black bass, white bass, crappies, and other good game and pan fish are abundant in many of the ox-bows, as the old river channels are called. These become isolated from the main river, the water becomes free of sediment, and as most of these waters are impossible to reach by auto, fishing is excellent and very private.

Navigation is mostly a matter of common sense. Have your boat (necessary for all boats power-driven in navigable waters) registered at the nearest U.S. Customs district office, for which purpose they'll send you the proper blanks, and give you the registration number you'll need to get passage through the various locks around the Upper River dams. The U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation, puts out a copy of pilot rules which you should read before embarking. You will also be advised of the necessary lights and scanty, but essential other equipment required on all boats.

River charts are necessary for intelligent traveling. Do not try to navigate the river from a road map. Precise charts are available at low cost, showing all milages, jetties, islands, channels, and so forth. Without these charts you would be confused as to your exact location most of the time, would be apt to get lost in blind sloughs, pass by important tributaries you might care to visit, never know for sure where the next town would be, and you'd pass by many towns not visible from the river but shown on the road map to be right on the bank. Many sizable towns formerly on the river are now three or four miles distant though almost impenetrable swamp growth and sloughs, a fact which may prove embarrassing if you planned to acquire water or petrol there.

A very suitable set of Upper River charts are available from the Division Engineer, Upper Mississippi River Valley Division, Room 831, U.S. Court House, St. Louis, Missouri for \$1.00 per copy per bound book of lithographed navigation charts. Send a money order made payable to "Treasurer of the United States" and specify that you want "Designation 1 a." For lower river charts covering the distance from Cairo, Ill., to the Gulf of Mexico, the order must go to the Mississippi River Commission, P.O. Box 80, Vicksburg, Miss., with a money order for 75 cents payable to that office, specifying "Designation 12th." Both these offices are very prompt and courteous, and on request will furnish you with a list of other bulletins describing the river in greater detail should you have a bigger boat curiosity than the average navigator.

Don'ts are few and simple. Don't drink water without boiling it, don't eat raw vegetables purchased from uncertain sources, don't try to hang your "rights" when doing so may cause trouble with a fleet of barges who are unable to maneuver as easily as you, don't ask too many questions of the rivermen, don't try to navigate in bad storms, don't anchor where big boats may run you down at night, and don't try

to assume a southern drawl for the benefit of the natives, who are sure not to appreciate it.

People along the river are sometimes hostile to inquisitive strangers, but infallibly give aid or necessary information to a courteous traveler in need of it. By the simple process of giving as much information as you ask, you can find out worlds of local lore.

Although summer and early fall are the best times to travel the river, voyageurs make the trip at any and all seasons. In later fall, winter, and early spring, they are apt to encounter nasty southwinds whipping waves against them all the way. These seasons have many overcast days, cold damp wind and raw unfriendly weather; while in contrast, the 'Sippi sailor of summer can live eternally in a pair of shorts and sandals, never have trouble sleeping or keeping cool enough for comfort. The summer nights on the river are positively the most delightful I have ever spent anywhere.

Summer is also the safest time to navigate on the river. From December until June the river is usually at bankful stage, swollen with winter rains and snow meltwater that falls on lands as far distant from each other as Pennsylvania and Montana. The current boils along at from 4 to 9 ½ m.p.h. at these times, carrying immense trees and other monstrous chunks of drift, forming huge eddies and cross currents, causing large geyser-like "boils" and waves which make navigation dangerous as well as unpleasant for the inexperienced navigator. High water and rapid fluctuations are not conducive to good fishing conditions, although of course the waterfowl hunter would prefer some of the otherwise unpleasant aspects of a late-fall, early-winter trip.

So, for the combined lives of Twain, Finn, and Riley, where you pull the anchor when you get the wanderlust, carry the wanted and toss the unwanted overboard, lean over the rail to wash and simply lie down to sleep, forget your neighbors chickens and the choking confines of the civilized, catch fresh fish from your backdoor, live for a penny an hour (excluding traveling expense and depreciation)-for these delectable portions of life, sample the shiftless vagrancy of a supper on the 'Sippi!