

April 3, 1994----

NEW ORLEANS--- "We don't do nothin' nice and easy," sang Ike and Tina Turner two decades ago in "Proud Mary."

That makes a buoyantly bittersweet refrain for bare-budget travel - those frugal odysseys from which the inevitable adversity can be applied to future adventures. After spending 12 days pontooning down the Illinois and Mississippi rivers a year ago, not far ahead of the great floods of 1993, I will never again complain about such land-based hazards as bad bed springs and bathtub rings in cheap motels.

Rainy days and Mondays?

That's something else - and it's kind of what this story is about. I was one of six big sweaty men who chose to travel from Chicago to last April's New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival by pontoon. And not just any pontoon. This was the Sun Tracker Party Hut.

The Party Hut is owned by the FitzGerald family, who also run the popular FitzGerald's music room in Berwyn. Twenty-eight feet long and 8 feet wide, the Party Hut is the Jugo of pleasure craft. It can manage 18 m.p.h. under the best of conditions. Even before reaching the treacherous Mississippi, we removed the porta-john, the sofas and a spare engine in order to lighten the load.

So there wasn't much else to do on the hut but party.

Crew members Bill FitzGerald and Tom Cimms had navigated the Party Hut to New Orleans once before. Chris FitzGerald, Kevin Hoy, Steve Piper and I were rookies. Some of us hadn't met until we began planning the trip in January of 1993.

Steve was a stock trader. Tom was a roofer. Chris had just moved back to the United States after living several years in Australia. Kevin was not only a computer operator for a transportation firm, but also an accomplished cameraman. He documented our trip on six videocassette tapes. It was a bit like traveling with Maury "A Current Affair" Povich.

By journey's end, we were brought together as friends - and united in a respect for nature and the forces that surround it. I once drove Route 66 from Chicago to Los Angeles. The charms of that American ribbon were in the pre-interstate innocence of man's imprint. This trip was different. The heartland's riverways are defined by beauty, dignity and an infectious spirit of self-reliance. There are no fast lanes.

What follows is a rapid-fire journal of our river adventures and misadventures. Most of the days include land highlights - in case you want to follow along by car for the 25th annual New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival (April 22-May 1).

DAY 1: We launched the Party Hut out of Burnham Harbor at noon on a sunny mid-April Saturday. The first Chicago lock, three miles from the lake, is

327 miles from where the Illinois River flows into the Mississippi River at Grafton.

No problem.

By 10 p.m., we had made it to Seneca, a whopping 75 miles from Chicago. Problem.

"Everything possible went wrong on the first day," lamented Capt. Bill. We encountered big swells in Lake Michigan. The front end of the pontoon went under when we were passed by a bigger boat on the Illinois River. Just before docking, we ran into dense brush while trying to switch gas tanks in the dark.

During a late dinner at Springbrook Marina in Seneca, crew member Tom reassured everyone that we were a mere cab ride from home in case anybody wanted to bail out.

LAND HIGHLIGHTS: Beautiful blue heron flying riverside along the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal around Willow Springs. And a poignant view of the Chicago Sun-Times building from the underappreciated Chicago River.

DAY 2: First-day tribulations inspired these alter egos for the Party Hut: Apocalypse Now. Hit or Miss. Ship of Fools. All were amusing at the time.

We left Seneca at 7:45 a.m. and arrived in Peoria by dusk. The fury of 1993's high rivers were already apparent. Driving into strong wind and waves around Peoria Heights, we saw backyards completely under water. Basketball nets were only 2 feet over river level. Conditions slowed the Party Hut to an 11 m.p.h. I already was worried whether I'd hit New Orleans in time for the following week's Jimmy Buffett concert at Margaritaville Cafe.

LAND HIGHLIGHT: Par-A-Dice riverboat casino in Peoria.

DAY 3: The sky was crying. A hard 7:15 a.m. rain was accented by a 46-degree temperature. Things would only get worse, as they did around 3 p.m. when we stopped for gas in Beardstown, west of Springfield. The Beardstown Marina was surrounded by 6 feet of water.

Vietnam veteran Dave Logsdon, who runs the marina, is the kind of guy who lives on the edge - as we quickly discovered. Dave dangled a lighted cigarette from his mouth while filling up our built-in 18-gallon gas tank and assorted portable tanks. He also mentioned tornado warnings. We took Dave's advice and stayed the night, drinking beer with good ol' boys (whom Dave transported back and forth to his marina in a motorboat), playing pool and exploring the area.

Meeting Dave marked the first of many encounters with the warmth of river people. He let us use his truck. He let us sleep on the floor of his Dry Dock marina bar. Brenda, a kind-hearted resident who worked at the local glove factory, took us shopping for supplies. "I sew up the fingers," she said with a proud smile, "and no one does it better."

LAND HIGHLIGHTS: The Main Street tavern, 119 W. Main, Beardstown. Don't miss

Monday Night Steak Night featuring a 16-ounce ribeye steak, baked potato and salad - all for \$6. Trivia freaks should know that Beardstown got its name for being on the Lincoln Trail.

DAY 4: Like the river water between my soggy toes, the historical significance of the trip began to seep in. Our VHS radio reported that the Illinois River was at one of its highest levels ever.

Capt. Bill was concerned about the weight of the pontoon, which is why we left our toilet, sofas, slats, tools, extra motor and a battery at the Beardstown Marina. We kept Kevin, though.

It rained all day, which meant six guys had to huddle within the pontoon's vinyl enclosure curtains. One guy drove, another guy sat at the front of the pontoon to spot for hidden reefs, sandbars and sawyers (submerged trees that bob up). Chris hustled the rest of us into numerous games of Monopoly.

Around 5 o'clock, the Party Hut neared the Mississippi. We saw Our Lady of the Rivers Shrine, built in gratitude by river people who survived the disastrous flood of 1951. The Madonna is 50 feet high on a 17-foot pedestal, but only her head and neck stood above water. We turned off the motor and quietly coasted into the panoramic gate of the Mississippi.

LAND HIGHLIGHTS: The St. Louis Cardinals, walking distance from the Mississippi River. The Cardinals open their home season April 11 against the Los Angeles Dodgers.

DAY 5: On the river, days become rhetoric. This was one of them.

The previous night, we'd been unable to find a place to dock on the flooded St. Louis waterfront. So Capt. Bill deftly navigated the Party Hut practically to the foot of the Gateway Arch, where we tied up for the night. We thought it would make for a wacky photo opportunity, which didn't amuse the police officers who woke us at 6 a.m. to chase us off the property. The temperature was 35 degrees. Capt. Bill was sick. I began to write off the Jimmy Buffett concert.

Then the day evolved into one of our best runs. The sun broke through and temperatures warmed to the mid-50s. The crew began to dry out. We stopped for gas at Hoppie's Marina in Kimmswick, Mo. Long-time owner Charles F. "Hoppie" Hopkins told us that the Mississippi was already at its highest level since the 1973 floods.

"Hug the shore," Hoppie said. "Be careful of the waves and bumps from barges heading north. You probably shouldn't be on the river."

The Lower Mississippi south of St. Louis can be dangerous, not having the slackwater pools provided by locks and dams along the Illinois or Upper Mississippi. There is little pleasure boating, and therefore few marinas.

Were we crazy?

LAND HIGHLIGHTS: One of the most beautiful towns along the Mississippi is Ste. Genevieve, Mo., first permanent settlement west of the Mississippi.

Founded in 1735, the community has preserved many buildings from the French colonial period.

DAY 6: The trip was beginning to take its physical toll. All crew members had various bouts of the sways. When we were on land fetching gas or getting food, we felt like we were moving back and forth. Capt. Bill lost his voice. Chris couldn't find anyone to play Monopoly.

Pressing on, we left Cape Girardeau, Mo., under a clear blue sky. A 10-mile south wind didn't slow us through the loopy curves of the New Madrid Fault, and we reached the Missouri-Arkansas-Tennessee triangle by 8 p.m. We'd covered 160 river miles in 12 hours, winding up at Caruthersville. Mo.

Before downing the glorious Cajun sausage cooked up by Tom and Kevin, we explored Caruthersville nightlife, which basically consists of Billy's Riverside Tavern. It is owned by a one-armed bartender named Billy.

Tom and Kevin made friends with the regulars, many of whom did not have many teeth. After Billy's closed, the regulars took Tom and Kevin to another bar, Woody's. I did not go to Woody's, but Kevin's

video shows that when patrons are done with a can of beer, they toss it under the pool table. Hundreds of cans spill out from under the table. Even my beloved Weeds Tavern in Chicago isn't that uncouth.

LAND HIGHLIGHTS: None. Whatsoever.

DAYS 7 & 8: About 5 a.m., the Party Hut had a rude awakening. Woody and his pal Red were outside the pontoon drunk and drawling, "Ya know, your trip to New Ahleans ain't gonna' be all nice," and, "Let me in!" They seemed amused with the city slickers.

The homeboys pointed the headlights of their funky white Cadillac onto the pontoon. One of them removed a big long bag. He wobbled in the offshore weeds. This was it. We were going to get shot. My smiling face would be forever mounted in some Caruthersville den.

Then the bag man removed a golf iron and started slicing golf balls in the river. Whenever he hit the boat, he'd laugh and slap himself on the leg, screaming, "Ah hit the boat, ah hit the boat!"

This was Outweird Bound.

As the day unfurled, the good news was that we had our first 70- degree weather. The bad news was that we faced south winds gusting near 20 m.p.h. as we crawled into Memphis. Small-craft advisories were in effect for the entire weekend. For the second time, we were stranded.

The Party Hut was stuck at Mud Island Park, which is decent cab fare from plenty of things to do in one of America's most soulful cities. The crew was able to split up and get out of each other's hair. Some guys found a golf course, I went to Shangri-La Records to buy a rare Aquanettas LP. Capt. Bill spent the afternoon shopping for an improved propeller for the pontoon.

LAND HIGHLIGHTS: The National Civil Rights Museum, in the former Memphis motel where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, is an important interactive experience. There is a Mississippi River Museum at Mud Island. And don't forget ribs at the Rendezvous in Memphis.

DAY 9: We began with a brutal 5 a.m. wakeup to make up for lost time. Party monsters Tom and Kevin had rolled in at 4 o'clock after spending Saturday night at 616, Memphis' only alternative dance club.

Our departure was delayed for two hours by heavy lightning, but we were in the middle of Delta country by 11 a.m. We stopped to wander around Helena, Ark., hometown of blues legend Sonny Boy Williamson and the Band's Levon Helm. The spirit of the blues overpowered the tattered riverfront juke joints.

LAND HIGHLIGHTS: Well worth a look is Delta Cultural Center, 95 Missouri St., right off the river in downtown Helena. Across the street is Bubba Sullivan's This Little Pig Antique and Blues Corner record store.

DAY 10: When the going get tough, six big sweaty men get going. We camped in Greenville, Miss., after covering 205 river miles, the biggest one-day chunk on the trip. We celebrated with a 20-pound turkey barbecue on the Weber grill that was bungee-strapped on the Party Hut's outdoor bow.

We spent the afternoon touring Civil War-era sites in Vicksburg, Miss. I wandered into the Museum of Coca-Cola History and Memorabilia at Biedenharn Candy Company in downtown Vicksburg, where Coca-Cola was first bottled in 1894.

By 7:30 p.m., we were in Natchez, Miss. With daytime temperatures in the mid-70s, the river had finally settled down. Flooding had subsided. Kevin had accumulated 16 hours of video.

LAND HIGHLIGHTS: Natchez's Under the Hill, the oldest settlement on the Mississippi. The well-to-do lived in the fancy Creole-style mansions atop the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi. Low lifes such as riverboat gamblers and ladies of the night hung out at Under the Hill. We stayed at Under the Hill. Our host was Big Andre Farish, proprietor of the Under the Hill Bar, who let us use a room in the adjacent Mark Twain Guest House.

DAY 11: Natchez is Mississippi River mile marker 364, the distance to where the river enters the Gulf of Mexico. At marker 304, the Mississippi and Red Rivers meet the Atchafalaya, a swampy basin that cuts through Louisiana south to Morgan City, 85 miles from New Orleans. The Atchafalaya is known for its catfish, crawfish, cottonmouth moccasins and alligators that reach 14 feet in length.

We left the Mississippi to explore the murky Atchafalaya, which was framed by canopied cypress and willow trees - and a remote serenity. We were a long way from New England, but Walden came alive. Henry David Thoreau is quoted in the 1989 coffee-table book *Cajun Families of the Atchafalaya*: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

Such esprit manifested itself on the homestretch of our voyage. The last night featured a big camp-out on a sandy bank, with six tired guys sitting around a fire eating surf and turf - spaghetti and catfish.

LAND HIGHLIGHTS: What land?

THE FINAL DAY: We attended to our mosquito bites and left the Atachafalaya to enter Bayous Shaffer and Chene, which brought us into the Intercoastal Waterway and New Orleans. The Jimmy Buffett concert was tonight.

The biggest scare of the journey came around 8 p.m. on Lake Pontchartrain, just two miles from our final destination at the New Orleans Municipal Yacht Harbor. The crew had begun packing up gear. Capt. Bill was at the wheel. The swells suddenly picked up.

"When you're riding perpendicular with waves and the wind behind you, it feels like you're surfing," he said. "They carry you along. When you're against the waves, there's a constant pounding."

So the front end of the Party Hut, rather than riding over the crest of the swell, was catching water. Lots of water.

The boat tried to stop. The Weber grill snapped off and flew into the lake. Gear flew off the front deck. The soggy crew scrambled to the back of the pontoon to help the boat pop out of the water.

Tom yelled, "Don't slow down!" If we had lost power, we would have flipped over. Capt. Bill gunned it until we reached the harbor safely. I missed the Buffett show, but we were in one piece.

I lit a cigar in tribute to the fantastic voyage. We had cruised through lightning, thunder, the warmth of the sun and the chill of spring frost. We'd seen a beautiful double rainbow after the funnel clouds passed through Beardstown. We'd fed seagulls with tortillas, and they'd loyally escorted us down the Intercoastal Waterway. For 12 days, we'd had a helluva time on the Illinois and Mississippi, and the river spirits had touched our souls.

POSTSCRIPT: Six big sweaty men reunited the next day on the grounds of the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. Guess what?

It rained.