

MOON-UNDER-WATER ADVENTURE

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This is a long story about our adventure kayaking down the Pine River. No, I am not going to tell you what this photo is about, at least not right away. No spoilers here. You will have to read about my birthday jaunt on the mighty Pine River. And it is quite the story, so here goes.

We were gathering all the family that could be got for my birthday celebration. We tend to do this in our home. Christmas and other holidays are fine, but nothing touches the birthday. It is always a cause to get together and have a celebration. This was my seventy-first.

My daughter May and her husband Seth (who are musicians) are in their summer season of playing music festivals, so the chance of seeing them was slim. As it turned out they had my birthday off and signaled that they wanted to celebrate with us. The same thing is true for my son Michael Andrew, who works at Elderly Instruments in Lansing, Michigan. Wednesday (yesterday) was his day off, and he and his partner Micah Ling headed north to Big Rapids, where we live. There would be six of us and we decided to canoe the Pine River.

We met up at the Blue Heron Café in Cadillac, Michigan for a bite to start things off. The menu there has whole and natural foods, about as close as we could get to 'wholesome' in Mid-

Michigan. And so we had a leisurely lunch and discussed how long we wanted to be out on the water. They offered two and four hour trips. We knew we wanted more than two hours on the Pine, but were not sure about the four-hour outing. We also wanted to stop midway to swim and carry on. No decision was made, and we were soon heading out of town and into the Manistee National Forest, almost a million acres of protected land. It was maybe a 25-mile trip and we took two cars.

Once into the forest and at the canoe livery, we continued to debate how long of a trip was just right, and finally decided on a two-hour ride with lots of stops along the way. We also switched from renting two-person canoes to individual kayaks. We would kayak down the Pine River. Kayaks are fast and highly maneuverable. Since some of us were not that experienced with kayaks, we chose a stretch of the Pine that had no rapid water, or so we thought at the time.

In hindsight, I had already ignored two important components, the first of which is the fact that there had been heavy, but isolated, rainstorms in the area over the last few days. This had raised the water level of the Pine and gave it a lot more speed than the normal relatively slow moving current we were used to.

The second component was that it was the day before New Moon, traditionally the darkest and most difficult day preceding the lunation. Oh, I thought about it of course, but I rationalized it by telling myself that the last of the Fourth Quarter Moon was a great time to make up for opportunities lost, and that 'family fun' on the river was something we should have been doing more of for a long time.

Be that as it may, all six of us were soon out on the river and darting around in our little kayaks. And the flow of the water was rather gentle. However, I did notice signs along the river bank that it had been much higher very recently because it was still soaked there. I wondered how much higher/faster the water was because of that recent rain. By this time we were midstream and far from the launch area.

And it was beautiful. The Pine River is not straight for more than a brief stretch, but ever winding, and tight turns at that. And the river has etched its way deep into the earth so there are frequent high banks, almost like mini-canyons, with endless large cedar trees, some of which hang over the water. Much of the river is shady, so it was not straight sun.

And when we would come to open, sunny areas with perhaps a little sand on one side, we would head for those, park the kayaks, and take a swim. The water was very cold. A few of us even swam (or walked the banks) upstream and rode down on the current, which was quite fast. We were surprised to find that the water depth there was something like seven-feet deep, which surprised me. I had always thought of the Pine River as shallow.

Then onward we would go, trying to stay together, sometimes traveling in pairs, but there were those among us who would shoot ahead and disappear around the endless bends in the flow. And there was no going back upstream, at least not far. The way I define a 'fast' current is if

when you try to paddle upstream, you practically go nowhere. The flow was too fast in many places as we were about to find out. I tried to keep everyone in sight, but that was easier said than done.

And because many parts of the Pine are shallow, there were countless rocks, trees, and branches that protrude from the water or are just barely submerged. You could spot them by the waves they caused near the surface. One needs to stay away from anything that disturbs the surface and steer around it. And they were everywhere.

At one of the swim stops, Seth Bernard found clay in the river and everyone except me decided to have a beauty or health-fest by covering their entire bodies with clay, especially their faces. The clay is supposed to draw out impurities in the skin, but I believe that is if you let it dry on you in a beauty parlor and that was not happening here. Pretty soon I was surrounded by clay-covered savages who were really just kids playing with mud. Some washed it off, but Seth and Michael Andrew kept their mud on and downstream we went.

The river seemed to be moving a little faster now. There were increasing stretches of not could be called white-water, but fast moving water with little highlights in it until all around me the water sparkled like snowflakes falling or a million lightning bugs. It was hypnotizing. And in the many bends and windings, more and more piles of wood, stumps, and debris that had collected was found. I had to be careful not to let the water force me into them. The river tends to run faster on the outside of curves and if you get caught there, you can be forced to move fast. I got caught in one of those.

It was on the outside of a bend and it was a sharp spike of a tree-stump or log just below the surface of the water, but protruding straight up. I was suddenly slammed into it by the current and, although I knew enough not to lean away from it (toward the center of the river), the fast-moving water welled up, creating a surge of water that quickly turned my kayak upside down, plunging me down into the water and under it. There was no struggle. It happened in an instant. I should have avoided getting that close to the river's edge.

Before I knew it, I plunged under, and it was deep water. And it was shockingly cold. Bam! I could not find the bottom with my feet and I was under the boat. I came up gasping and clinging to some part of the kayak. It all was moving downstream, but still my feet could find nothing to leverage with. And then I finally could feel some large branches at the bottom and tried to stand on them, but found no purchase. I was swept forward.

By this time the shock of the cold water and the surprise of the event had me a little worried. However, my feet finally reached a place where they touched the streambed and I was moving slower. Still hanging on to the kayak and paddle (and somehow my hat), I struggled to move toward the opposite side of the river where there was a bank without branches and obstructions.

When I finally reached shore, the kayak was full of water and very heavy to move around, much less empty. But somehow I managed turn it over on the shore, allowing some water to flow out.

Then turning it again and again, I managed to get the water out of it.

By this time my wife was near. She said I looked like I was at death's door, pale, cold, wet, and visibly shaken. My heart was pounding and I could not catch my breath. It was like that.

I eventually calmed down, re-entered the stream of the river, and we continued on. By this time I had recovered and in hindsight the experience was actually refreshing, but not something I wanted to do again soon. And on we went. But the adventure was not yet over.

Seth Bernard and my son Michael Andrew went on ahead and were soon out of sight. I went around bend after bend but no longer saw them. I was third and the ladies were behind me. I tried to keep them in sight, but the guys were long gone. Of course, this is just what I did not want to have happen, getting separated.

The river was also beginning to have more and more stretches that were faster moving, little rapids, and plenty of obstacles to steer around with little time to think. Anyway, after what seemed like too long, I came around a bend and saw Seth and Michael Andrew out of their boats and in the shade of some trees. They looked strange with their clay-covered faces and bodies.

I pulled up across from them, while the girls came round the bend, and soon we were more or less together. Michael Andrew was having a little problem getting into his kayak from the shore, since there was not much of a shore, but just deep water. Some of us moved on downstream. And this is where it gets a little scary.

Micah, my son's partner went on ahead. She was soon out of sight. I guess some of the flies were bugging her. Seth and I followed, and we supposed everyone was fine. The river had more and more stretches of faster water. My daughter May was right behind me, but after a while she too disappeared. No one was coming round the bends behind us. Hmmm. I pulled over, flagged Seth, and we both hovered in the water, waiting for someone to show. Then we pulled to the sides, out of the current. Still no one.

This was not a good sign. Seth and I began to work back upstream, but the current was swift. Seth seemed frozen forever in one spot, trying to paddle upstream beyond the small rapids. He finally made it, and beached his boat, jumped out, and was working his way through the brush to where the others must be.

I could not overcome the rapids, so I crossed the river and tried to beach my boat. However, there was not much of a beach and a single misstep on my part sent me back into the river, upside down again, and in deep water. It was Déjà vu all over again, as they say, the cold, the shock, the struggle, etc. I did manage to get out of the water, beach my boat, and start to head up through the underbrush where some thorn bushes torn my hands. Pretty soon I was bleeding, and so on. I was worried about those still upstream.

This blog is getting overlong, so I will try to shorten-up what happened. Michael Andrew had overturned his kayak while trying to get back into it on the edge of deep water. Then he got bumped by another kayak and the water still in his boat surged and over he went. I don't know the whole story, but it involved one or two immersions, and all that goes with that. My daughter May had beached her boat and worked back upstream along the shore to help him. Anyway, finally everything was OK, and we were all back on the river. Seth got back to his boat, and I to mine.

By this time we all were tired. The water was getting faster and the endpoint of the trip seemed reluctant to appear, although I imagined it around every next bend. I believe all of our arms ached by this point. What was supposed to be a two-hour cruise ended up being something like a three and one-half hour adventure.

We did reach an end to it; everyone and all the equipment was intact. We changed what clothes we could, put on dry things, and went out to a long and lovely dinner at "Lakeside Charlie's" in Cadillac, and had a dining room all to ourselves. There was much eating, some drinking, lots of talking, and much sharing and toasting. It was a celebration indeed with my family. None of us will forget it our day on the Pine River.

As for me, I would not do it again too soon, certainly not on the dark of the Moon, and not with a swollen river at hand. Capiche?