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| Prologue |
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| This is a tale, 340 miles long, down the Missouri River. Meandering from Kansas City across the state of Missouri to St. Charles, less than 30 miles from the mouth of the mighty Mississippi River.  My brother flew in on Friday, 31 July.  That evening we gathered and sorted through all the supplies I had been stockpiling in the basement. Consisting of camping gear and items I had purchased off of Amazon from the recommendations of canoeing and river race forums.  Having accumulated most of the equipment over the past two years.  Saturday we went through our gear, then went to gather supplies and snacks that were missing or thought we might need. Sunday was spent setting up the railing on my girlfriend’s car to place the canoe on.  Why weren't we using my car?  I drive a two door Honda, and she is a very nice person.  On Monday we loaded everything up and packed ourselves in as I white knuckled the drive to Kansas City with a 17 foot giant aluminum battering ram of a canoe on top of a Kia Soul. We arrived at Kaw Point Park in Kansas, just across the river from Kansas City Missouri.  The ground was littered with hundreds of brightly colored canoes and kayaks, 95% were some kind of fiberglass, polymer, plastic, lightweight, recycled bullshit racing craft weighing as much as a small dog.  Along comes my brother and I hauling our 17 foot aluminum Grumman canoe made from what I am sure were discarded F-14 Tomcat and A-6 Intruder panels.  We placed it down with a thud and once the dust settled, started loading it up with our gear from my girlfriends tiny Kia Soul nestled in between massive campers and trucks.  Spectators and competitors watched us, probably wondering "what the hell are they doing with all that stuff?"  We had a nice dinner that evening and stopped by the park on the way back to the hotel.  After sitting in my garage for over a year we finally took the canoe out for the first time to see if she floated, she did! No time like 10hrs before an 85hr river race to see if your canoe actually floats.  If you were to say that we were half-assing this entire venture that would be giving us twice as much credit for how much we trained and how much we prepared for this 340 mile aquatic endeavor across Missouri.   Our training plan did not exist, our preparation amounted to the morning of, and our plan was to figure it out along the way.  I'm sure plenty of people have done a lot less with a lot more.  Day 1  The race started Tuesday morning, 4 August.  0700 was when singles started and 0800 was the starting time for tandems and everything else.  We arrived outside the park at 0645 and the line was backed up with cars out onto the main road.  People were hauling canoes, kayaks and wheeling gear towards the park close to a quarter of a mile away.  Apparently the parking lot was full up, probably had been since 0530.  We bluffed our way past the parking attendants into the park stating we were just "dropping off our gear."   Fortunately we found a parking spot and I once again wedged that Kia Soul between a giant RV and an even bigger truck among the hundreds of other RVs and trucks. We located our canoe and joined the conga line of hundreds of other people staging and loading their watercraft.  Most people had support crews with them carrying their canoe and their few supplies. The support crews would follow and resupply each canoe.  My brother and I opted out of that option because we aren't weak, just stupid. We packed all the gear we would ever need and then some... extra hundred pounds.  My brother and I would lug the canoe however far forward the line moved, then we would run back, grab some bags of gear, run back and get more of our gear and then make another trip or two to get our water (we had over 20 gallons of water, a 5 gal jug, 15 gal water buffalo, and a myriad of nagleens, water bottles, camel backs and gatorade), rinse wash repeat 20 or 30 times, 5 feet at a time.  We were in the water by 0745 and paddled out to the other side of the Kansas river and waited for the start.  At 0800 the horn sounded and the river erupted with frantic paddling and swarming of colorful watercraft.  We paddled off to meet the Missouri River 200 yards away. We managed to merge into the river without too much problem.  Then began the arduous chore of trying to steer/turn/control our extremely overloaded canoe through the myriad of other participants and the ensuing five bridges.  Once we were outside Kansas City we realized that if we aimed at something like another canoe or a log we were bound to miss it, but if we tried to correct and miss an item our canoe zeroed in and we'd hit whatever obstacle was in our way.  Fortunately we were paddling a steam roller of a canoe, the National Lampoon Griswold station wagon of the Missouri River, which would obliterate any obstacle in its path.  We toiled away paddling for close to 50 miles and finally accepted the realization that we might have absolutely over packed by a couple hundred pounds or so. We pulled over to a sandbar and emptied the 15 gallons from the water bladder (we were expecting Missouri in August, 100F 100% humidity) into our nalgeens, camel backs, and another 5 gallon jug and dumped the rest.  The canoe handled ever so slightly better after that.  By this time it was close to 1600 and we had a little over 20 miles before the first checkpoint and if we didn't make it by 2000 we would be disqualified from the race.  As we pushed off the sandbar we saw the reaper boat.  The reaper boat was going at the speed of failure.   This speed was what was required to reach the first checkpoint by 2000, if the reaper beat you there, you were disqualified.  The reaper boat was also a safety boat in case of any mishaps or problems, and at that bow of the boat was a figure in a Grim Reaper costume pointing ahead as we struggled to get into the channel.  At this point we were shocked, we didn't think we were doing so bad, but the reaper boat thought differently with definite clarity.  Shattered were my dreams of a laid back Tom and Huck trip of introspection and fun.  We ramped up our efforts into overdrive and paddled and steered aiming for and missing every obstacle in our path.  We paddled with more passion, force and gusto than actual skill or efficiency.  We made it to the checkpoint at Waverly Missouri before 2000 with less than 15 minutes to spare, having done 74 miles since 0800.  We floated along glad we were still in the race and found another sandbar down the river to have dinner around 2100.  When we finally got out of the canoe I was soaked, freezing and shaking.  I dried off the best I could, exchanging my so called "dry-fit" pants for blue jeans.  We ate our MREs and organized the boat a bit better in the approaching darkness.  The plan that evening was for me to sit in the back with all the supplies I would need with the high powered flash/spot light and keep us in the channel as we floated down river while my brother would catch some rest, In 4 hours we'd switch.  Things went according to plan for two and a half hours until I hit a wing dike.  I had been staying in the middle of the channel and in the darkness didn't notice another outlet that was bracketed by 8 wing dikes extending into the middle of the river.  I managed to steer past the first 4, but hit the 5th at the tip. I yelled for my brother to wake up and brace as we hit the wing dike, getting stuck, and swinging us around facing upstream.  This was a little before midnight.  A minor note about our sleeping aspirations. We came to the conclusion that in order to lay down on the bottom of the canoe we would have to create a shelf to put our gear on.  This was accomplished by laying spare oars across the thwarts/braces and then stacking the gear on top and tying it down with bungie cords to the gunwales.  Wriggling to get under the gear was a hard chore in a stationary canoe, but damn near impossible in a moving one.  As soon as we hit the wing dike a safety boat passed by heading up the river.  They yelled over, asking if we were doing okay, I yelled back "yep, we just hit a wing dike, we're fine."  They started moving their spotlight towards us. I verbally and explicitly encouraged my brother to quickly get up out of the cocoon/coffin we had created so that they could see that we were both being safe and handling the problem and that not one of us was not buried under a hundred pounds of gear with no a way out, and then disqualify us for being stupid.  My brother, the squirrelly man he has always been, somehow emerged from the gear and took up a position on the bow of the canoe striking a pose of nonchalantness in the midst of the swirling chaos surrounding our craft.  Then the light flashed on the canoe with us giving thumbs up and the safety boat went on their way.  I asked my brother for help getting off the wing dike since we were facing backwards, he replied "with what?!? The fucking paddles are under the gear, I almost died! Being trapped under everything! And you hit a wing dike!"  I don't know why he was so upset?  I’ve tried to kill him hundreds of times during our childhood, throwing him down hills and gullies in a radio flyer wagon, falling out of trees, off cliffs... etc and it never worked, and it's not like the Missouri River could do any better, plus I could have almost possibly gotten wet and we lost our high powered spotlight, which was now at the bottom of the river never to be of help, a minor sacrifice to the river Poseidon of the Midwest.  I managed to back paddle off the wing dike in reverse and turn us around and get us back into the channel avoiding the other wing dikes.  We found a big sandbar where the safety boats were staying.  We pulled in to recollect our wits, relieve ourselves, and for my brother to regain his composure.  They recommended we stay the night there. We figured that running into a wing dike with one of us buried in the bowels of the canoe was pretty stupid, it being late almost 0100, being tired, and fog starting to roll in. We came to the same conclusion that with all of these obstacles surmounted and surmounting against us... we should definitely keep going!  As we headed out, the fog got thicker and thicker.  We couldn't see the water ahead of us in case there were logs, wing dikes, or buoys; let alone the shore, and trees lining the river.  My brother, using his superior eagle scout skills of navigation and community service, figured out a way for us to keep a relatively straight course.  He would use the stars and constellations to find a rough bearing and we would stick to it. He figured that if we "keep that constellation (you know "that" one) on the right and those two weird stars on the left (not the three "normal" ones) and stay in the middle (of these two celestial displays) we should be safe, until we could make a bend in the river" or when we were lucky enough see a blinking cell phone tower to navigate by... just like Lewis and Clark did on their return trip in 1806. We arrived in Miami, Missouri close to 0300 Tuesday morning having traveled over 20 miles that night.  We arrived on the boat ramp in our Griswold station wagon canoe, sparks flying as the aluminum crashed against the concrete ramp.  We got out and helped the poor safety and dock personnel haul our aquatic monstrosity out of the way, fortunately not too far since it was so heavy, which would make it easier to get out on the river in the morning, just as we hadn't planned.  We reached the top of the ramp and were greeted by a site, reminiscent of a Civil War battlefield. Lifeless forms, people laying all over the ground, tents, piles of gear, and RVs, just like Civil War.  We found a spot amongst the bodies and shapes, unfolded our tissue thin aluminum foil Mylar blankets.  Laying one down on the ground and covering ourselves with the other and shivered for the next 2 and half hours with maybe 15 minutes of sleep.  That was the end of the first day.  Day 2  We were up by 0615, bleary eyed, dew covered, frozen, and exhausted.  No longer human, but lifeless automatons without a word of coordination we started getting our gear together amongst the hustle and bustle of the 40 something other canoes, kayaks and their accompanying teams.  Somebody had a tent selling sausages, pancakes and lukewarm coffee.  My brother bought us breakfast and that lukewarm coffee was some of the best I have ever had. By the time we had packed up and waited our turn we were out on the river a little after 7:30.  We paddled along with a couple other canoes and kayaks that quickly outpaced our aluminum monstrosity.  We did pass a bass boat with four men, one in a wheelchair; we would see them every morning.  Our goal that morning was Glasgow 48 miles away.  We went on our way down the river and a little before noon we reached the point where the Missouri River reaches its apex and starts finally heading south again, that was some minor inspiration.  Along the way a crop duster flying an air tractor 802 put on an airshow for us, flying low over the river doing patterns along the fields. Once over the river he'd do a sharp bank and head down another row of fields.  We were attacked by three carp.  One landed in my lap and then at my feet and started flopping around like crazy.  I grabbed him with a bandana and threw him out.  The other two landed on our gear and my brother whacked them away with his oar.  We made a quick stop at a sandbar and dumped some more water.  We reached Glasgow 2 hours ahead of the cutoff and planned to eat lunch, take a warm nap in the sun and let our stuff dry.  When we woke up after an hour of rest everybody was gone except for 3 busted kayaks, one had the crew valiantly applying flex seal to the bottom. We gathered our gear and piled back in the canoe and were on our way again.  We were soon interrupted by a safety boat saying that there was a barge heading downriver at a fast pace and that there were two other barges that we might encounter later.  We found an inlet and got the canoe next to some fallen trees to ride out the wake from the barge.  The tug went flying by at 12mph with no barges, and the wake wasn't too bad.  We let it die down and continued on our way.  A couple hours later another safety boat told us another barge was coming up the river and we should pull over to a sandbar.  Fortunately we found a sandbar that turned out to be half mud/half sand.  I went off to stretch my legs and wait out the barge.  When that tug passed it was pushing 6 massive barges at 3-4mph. The wake from those barges was massive, might as well have been at the ocean.  We waited ten minutes for the wakes to die down then pushed off.  Out of nowhere an echo wake came and swamped our canoe as we got into the channel, and pooling all the water in the rear around my brothers feet.  For the next ten minutes we fought the echo wakes as we were bounced around doing our best to crash through the waves.  The sun set and the moon finally rose over the trees close to 2200 making navigating easier.  Around a bend we saw a canoe and a giant spot light dancing along the trees.  We cautiously neared the spectacle; we were trying to figure out what the hell was going on.  Then we saw it was a tug with four barges.  A safety boat came by and told us to stop, by that point we were already paddling for the left side of the river and another fallen tree.  For close to 30min we waited for the barge to make a move, but it just sat there.  Finally the safety boat came by again and told us to start moving, but to stay to the left side of the river.  As we started paddling the barge would occasionally shine its high powered spotlight on us wrecking our night vision.  We finally passed the barge and paddled through Boonville, our first glimpse at somewhat modern civilization.  From the river we could see the Isle of Capri Casino and Hotel, oh how tempted we both were to stop, go in and rest on warm dry sheets, neither of us said a word about it.  We had just passed the halfway point, 170 miles down in two days.  As the hour grew later, our lack of sleep, paddling all day, and sitting in the sun started to have an effect on us.  My brother and I were starting to hallucinate pretty bad at this point.  Around midnight we started asking each other if they were seeing things in the trees. Like making shapes out of clouds, except the trees in the dark started turning into elephants, dinosaurs, buildings, Godzilla, and giraffes in all sorts of poses threatening, erotic, or otherwise. Worse were the audible hallucinations, one of us would start talking loud and/or yelling at the trees because we would hear things. I kept hearing someone yelling “hey!” occasionally, or “what are you doing?” My brother would hear something similar at a different time. It’s a little disconcerting when you are making weird shapes out of the tree line as it swirls into the river like some arboreal lava lamp, while you are pretending to try and keep your sanity as your cohort starts loudly yelling at the opposite bank “what do you mean what are you doing!” We passed under the highway 70 bridge outside Columbia Missouri close to 0100.  We both thought it would be a fantastic idea to find a sandbar.  That way we could have a fire, be warm, and not sleep on the cold dew covered ground.  At some point we saw a couple shooting stars and that slightly increased our coherence and spirits.  We continued our journey down river investigating potential sand bar prospects, but in the dark it's hard to see and they all turned out to be mud banks.  After spending an hour investigating an island my brother had enough and declared that we'd head for Coopers Landing which had always been a tentative objective that evening.  We rounded a few more bends and finally saw the lights and blinking strobe of the boat ramp ahead.  We headed in, but encountered some crazy eddies, or mixing of fast and slow water.  We were so delirious and exhausted we didn't know what it was, but in our crazed state we didn't want to find out.   We maneuvered and spun around for an extra 500 yards for good measure and finally reached the ramp, once again careening onto the ramp sparks flying into the night.  We were greeted by a hobbit looking man (it might have been a hallucination) and he greeted us with soft whispered words "welcome this night, may peace be with you" again I was hallucinating pretty bad, it was a little after 0300.  If the last campsite was a Civil War battle ground this site was Woodstock.  There were a couple of tents, but the majority of shapes were other people passed out all over the place on the ground.  There was a small stage with a light show on it and some psychedelic music was softly playing, the few people who were standing swaying along to the music, people were talking in low voices.  We found a grass strip between a road and a parking lot and once again unfolded our aluminum foil blankets, we had created a type of primitive A frame lean-to out of our paddles, bungee cord and Mylar blankets and tried to pass out, instead we shivered and froze again.  Day 3  Once again we woke up around 0600 freezing and covered in dew.  We were out on the river a little before 0730 and were greeted by our four friends in their bass boat, and headed for Jefferson City 26 miles away.  We fought a terrible head wind all the way, and arrived at Jefferson City a little after 1200.  We passed under the Jefferson City bridge and took turns eating our lunch of MREs.  We kept paddling on our way trying to decide how far we would be able to go that evening.  The headwind still hadn't let up and was making our miserable lives even more miserable.  Once we finally rounded the bend and we couldn't see Jefferson City anymore I was attacked by another carp. This sucker must have been over 10 pounds and created all sorts of chaos in my little portion of the canoe. Flopping and thrashing about.  Once he exhausted himself I was able to grab hold of him and using both hands threw him back into the river hopefully worse for wear since all my stuff was now covered in the fish slime, fish blood, scales, and not the best of smells.  The scenery slowly changed from flat banks and trees to bluffs of limestone and dolomite (according to my mining engineer brother, he hasn't steered me wrong on rocks or canoes so far) with some pretty nice mansions perched on top of the bluffs.  Three UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters from the Army Guard flew by a couple feet off the water, which was a sight to see. I turned around to watch them and saw my brother, he was passed out hard, dead to the world. Not even the sound of three helicopters could wake him.  He woke up some 45 minutes later. I noticed because at that point we started to actually move forward, compared to whatever the hell I was doing. Between 2145 and 2200 we passed through Hermann the second to last checkpoint and just kept on trucking. The hallucinations were starting to set in again, but we welcomed them at this point, the audible hallucinations weren’t a factor thankfully.  Eventually it occurred to us the moon should have risen by now, the past two nights the sun had set at 2100, moon rose at 2130 and was above the trees by 2200.  On this night we couldn't see the moon, it was close to midnight, and in our halucinary stupor we finally realized that it was overcast.  We pulled over to some fallen trees to wait for the sky to clear since we couldn't see anything and the river was filled with a lot more buoys now, we didn't want to hit one at night even with our battering ram aluminum canoe.  I tried to get some rest but couldn't find it.  We spotted three lights in the river, three kayakers trying to make some progress at night, we headed for them and tried our best to follow their movements although we were probably two miles behind them and getting further behind every minute.  A couple of times we lost sight of them around a bend, fortunately we would find them again.  Occasionally one of us would say "stop" and we would stop paddling, and listen for buoys or wing dikes paddles at the ready.  If one of us heard or "sensed" something we would start yelling "Paddle LEFT/RIGHT" and head in that direction to avoid the sound of whatever was causing the water to crash or swirl against whatever it was, real or imagined.  Two days prior, or at this point two lifetimes ago we were given safety cards with all the river/boat stops on them.  We figured the other would probably keep it on them and we each quickly threw them into the midst of our gear to be lost.  At this point in the night it would have been awesome to have that little card because we didn't know when or where or if there was a boat ramp stop before the town of Washington Missouri some 40 miles away.  Fortunately a little after 0200 we saw the flashing strobe of a boat ramp in the distance.  This was the small Pleasantville type town of New Haven.  We barreled into the boat ramp, yes, sparks flying of course.  We pulled the canoe in, grabbed our sleeping gear that included some real wool blankets we had packed and forgot about. Then we scouted out a sleeping spot.  This was the best park/boat ramp yet! Well-manicured with plush grass and even a real brick and mortar bathroom with running faucet water.   At this point we were pros at sleeping on the ground.  I laid out a Mylar blanket, a dry blanket, folded it over; another Mylar blanket layered my wet clothes on top and covered those with a towel, took a Motrin, crawled into my fabric concoction and passed right out for a good solid 3 hours of none shivering sleep.  Day 4  We slept fantastically, or maybe our standards and expectations had been lowered too far at that point anything would have impressed us.  We were up by 0610 out on the river by 0637 with our bass boat friends behind us in the distance.  We reached Washington close to 1000 and had another 20ish miles to the final checkpoint at Klondike before the finish at St. Charles.  We were making good time, having thrown away our shoes, Mylar blankets, the map, and any other water logged, rotting, broken superfluous crap.  At Klondike park the final checkpoint, we filled up our Nalgene’s and camelbacks again and dumped the rest of the water and threw away one of the chairs and anything else we didn't think we'd need.  At this point we had 27 miles to go.  As we paddled on our way, my brother asked "have you been paddling like that the entire time?"  I said "yes?"  Turns out I had been paddling with the wrong form the entire time, nothing like getting it right when there are only 20 miles left (I had been sticking the paddle far out into the current instead of along the side of the canoe).  After a couple of hours and bends in the river we came upon the highway 64 bridge.  At this point it was 6 miles to the next bridge, we were on the final stretch!  Those 6 miles after the bridge dragged on a bit, the veterans of the race call it the "bridge of false hope" but I kept up hope, having now learned how to properly paddle.  A couple more bends in the river later and I saw some electric towers for telephone lines in the distance, part of the Page Extension Highway 364 bridge, one more bridge to go.  As we rounded the bend we spotted the final bridge, highway 70, and saw the finish line.  We were on the right side of the river in the channel across from the finish line on the left side of the river.  We pointed the aluminum falcon towards one last boat ramp and paddled with all our might as the current dragged us further and further downstream.  With encouragement, yelling, whistles from shore and some guy screaming at us "COME ON HEAVY METAL!!!"  We crashed into the boat ramp sparks visible.  We tumbled out onto dry land.  We stood on the boat ramp trying to get our gear together, but were ushered out of the way.  We were told there were another 40 boats out there and another 20 were right behind us.  Here we were thinking we were close to last place.  We stood by and watched as 8 safety personnel grabbed our canoe and struggled to carry it out of the way, something my brother and I and some poor boat attendant had done on our own the past three nights.  It was a bit after 1430 and we had completed the race in a little over 78hrs.  We had stopped less than 10hrs and slept less than 5.  Epilogue  We sat by our canoe amongst the hundreds of other canoes in a scene reminiscent of how this whole thing began.  A giant aluminum canoe in a sea of brightly colored aqua craft.  We were called over by some of the event coordinators to get our picture taken.  The photographer gasped at our attire and asked if I had worn blue jeans the entire time, I had.  I had changed out of my soaked dry fit pants into jeans the first night when we stopped and never took them off. She remarked that in her 15 years she had never seen somebody wear jeans during this event.  We returned to our canoe another event coordinator stopped by and chatted with us, he was impressed that we made it in our aluminum canoe. Apparently aluminum canoes as any sort of competitive watercraft went out of fashion in the late 80s and hardly anyone ever uses them in the Missouri River race anymore, but he was glad to see ours.  My girlfriend and one of her friends had driven down to pick us up.  When they saw us and got close they immediately took a couple steps back, we were pretty haggard looking and smelled god awful I’m sure. We left the canoe in the park overnight, I was hoping someone would run off with it.  We checked into the hotel and I took one of the top ten hot showers of my life and surprisingly was not tired.  We went out and had a fantastic dinner of burgers and beer and a nice soak in the hotel Jacuzzi.  I woke up the next morning at 0600, probably out of habit.  I drove by the park where we left the canoe overnight, and much to my disappointment no one had run off with it.  When everyone was up, we loaded up the Kia Soul and threw the canoe back on top and headed home.  Along the way we passed a number of other vehicles with canoes on them.  While I might have been apprehensive about the accommodations for our 17ft canoe on top of a 5ft long car, seeing the setups of the cars we passed eased my mind.  We were passing SUVs, vans and sedans with kayaks or canoes on them tied down on the front and back with only pool noodles on top of the car to protect the roof while the kayak was twisting every which one on top of the car in the slipstream of the highway, while our was ratcheted down 8 ways to Sunday.  We arrived back home by the evening, unloaded the gear and my brother flew back the next day.  Would I ever do this race again?  HELL NO! But probably next year. |