

Deck Talk II: News Of The River

Canoeist makes Quad-City pit stop

By Barb Arland-Fye
ON THE RIVER

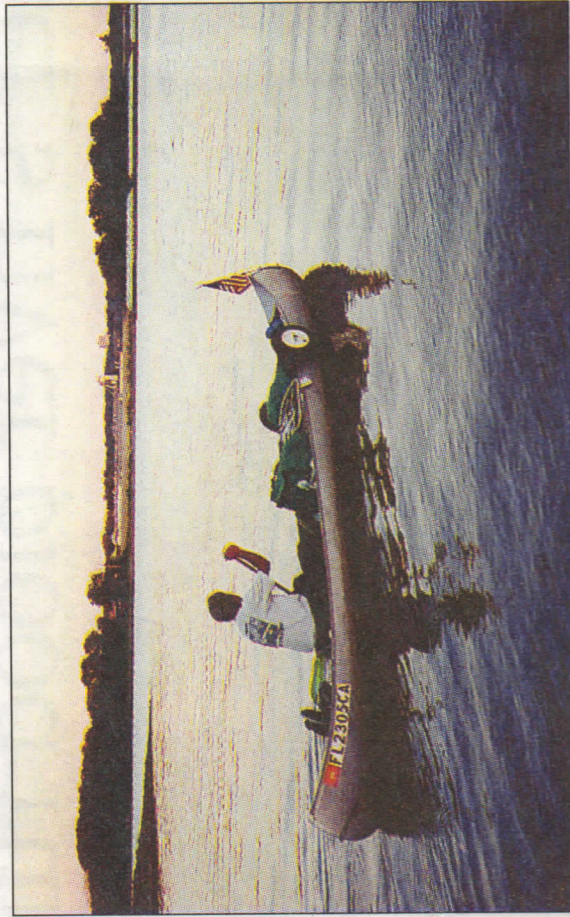
Ron Haines and the Mississippi River are getting intimately acquainted. For the past few months, Haines, a longtime journalist between jobs, has been paddling his 29-year-old canoe down the moody waters of the Mississippi.

His ambitious, 2,350-mile journey will take him from the river's beginning at Lake Itasca, Minn., to its end in the Gulf of Mexico.

Six weeks into the adventure, he pulled up his 17-foot aluminum boat on Davenport's Credit Island.

The lanky, tanned 59-year-old fortifies himself with a few beers at the Credit Island Golf Course clubhouse and shares with listeners the tale of an odyssey whose seeds were planted long ago in Davenport.

It was 1974. Haines, then working at the Quad-City Times, had just bought a canoe because he wanted to explore the river. At some point when the canoe was still new, he crossed the Mississippi between Iowa and Illinois. "I got in the middle and felt the current. I thought, 'Wow, what would it be like to flow with the current?'"



Photos by Marcia Chambers Regrut/ FOR ON THE RIVER

Ron Haines, a former Quad-Citizen, is making a 2,500-mile canoe trip from the Mississippi River's beginnings in Lake Itasca, Minn., to its end in the Gulf of Mexico. Haines made a pit stop in the Quad-Cities last month.

ness of strangers.

Etched in his brain is this phrase:

"This is what I've chosen to do, and I'm going to have a great time doing it." That mind-set keeps him going through merci-

and silently glides away, in harmony with the current.

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Haines' trip, which began July 27, included a stop at Credit Island Park, Davenport.

Tucking that thought into the back of his mind, he continued on with his job, got married, moved away and went to work for the National Enquirer. Later, while working as photo editor for the Globe, he scored a coup by acquiring exclusive photos from the honeymoon of the late John F. Kennedy Jr.

Based in Florida, Haines came to a professional crossroads earlier this year when he had to choose between moving or staying put and finding employment elsewhere. He decided to stay put. The idea of canoeing down the Mississippi resurfaced.

"I ended up with enough of a package from my employer that I could pay the bills for months, and I had these acres of free time," he recalls.

Haines contacted acquaintances in the Sierra Club — of which he is a member — did research on the Internet, read and consulted with his wife, Sue. He then mentally prepared himself for a three-month trip that he knew could be daunting as well as challenging.

On July 27, he launched his canoe into what begins as modest stream, more than 200 miles north of Minneapolis. His gear included a three-person tent, sleeping bag and sleeping pad, portable rocking chair, canned food, pots and pans, one-burner stove, and books, including a copy of Mark Twain's "Life on the Mississippi."

Early on, the Mississippi tested Haines' resolve, teasing him as he paddled his way through a maze of rice marshes and channels in northern Minnesota. He got lost twice and benefited from the kind-

less head winds, confusing forks in the river and muscle-numbing fatigue. The river rewards perseverance with a decent current, no head wind, and a rhythm of movement and sound that synchronizes man and nature.

Listening to the river, Haines hears its two separate identities: rural and urban. The river of nature is a symphony of otter, deer and other animals; the river of noise is a combination of industrial sounds and trains. Traveling alone, he sets his own pace — about 15 to 20 miles per day — and savors life in the many river towns along the way. He accepts that his trip will take longer than anticipated.

At the end of a day, he sets up his rocking chair on shore — close to a stump or some other makeshift footrest — and watches the river go by. During a deluge in mid-September, Haines holed up for a few nights in Sabula.

He pulled into the marina, where operators told him about a bed and breakfast in town and offered to keep an eye on his boat. The people running the bed and breakfast took him wherever he needed to go: to the grocery store, the library to check his e-mail and the marina to check on his boat. Downstream in Camanche, Iowa, the residents have been just as neighborly.

"I've had people go out of their way to help me, or offer to help me," Haines marvels. "I'm meeting people. I'm exploring river towns. I'm taking my canoe to places I've never been."

He gets back into his canoe, dips his paddle into the river's silk-like surface

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