

On a slow boat to the Big Easy

By **BETSY BLOOM**
Of the Tribune staff

By any measure, Ron Haines is on a long journey. It officially started at Minnesota's Lake Itasca on July 27, when he launched his 17-foot canoe at the source of the Mississippi River.

But it could be said it began in the 1970s, when he settled in Davenport, Iowa, and got the canoe "to poke around places on the river."

Later this month, man and canoe will come full circle on the Mississippi, when Haines stops in the Quad Cities for the first time since he moved to Florida more than two decades ago.

■ At 59, Ron Haines figured it was now or never if he wanted to paddle his canoe the length of the Mississippi River.

His journey won't end, however, until he reaches New Orleans, where the river spills into the Gulf of Mexico.

That will be sometime in November, he figured just before leaving La Crosse on Wednesday morning. When you're the only power behind the paddle, progress can depend on which way the wind is blowing.

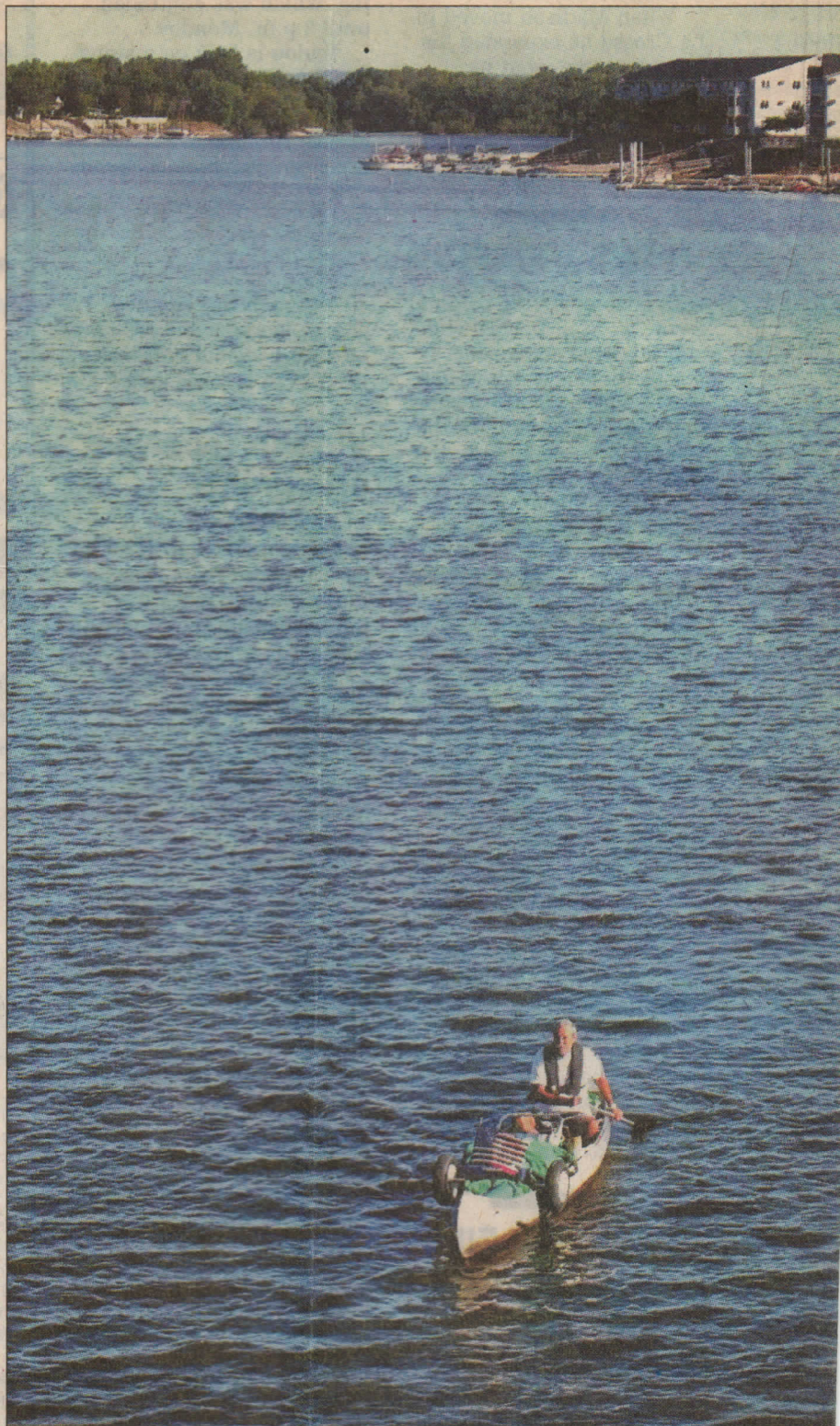
A wind at his back can mean a 20- to 30-mile day. But faced with a headwind north of St. Cloud, Minn., he struggled to cover 10 miles.

He had planned on being in Davenport by Sept. 1. "I'm so much slower than I thought," Haines admitted.

Though a longtime Sierra Club member — he wore a Sierra shirt Wednesday and had spent two nights in La Crosse with local club contacts — Haines isn't making the journey to point up a cause or condition on the river.

At 59 and between jobs after 19 years of working with the tabloids — yes, the weekly newspapers at the check-out stand — he figured it was now or never.

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Dick Riniker

Ron Haines paddles down the Black River to the Mississippi River to continue his journey to New Orleans after staying a couple days in La Crosse.

■ Paddler

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"I'm not getting any younger," he said.

His wife, Sue, an instructor for Montessori teachers, remained in Lantana, Fla. She might join him in New Orleans, he said, depending on when he gets there.

Going solo, he said, encourages him to meet new people along the way. "If you're leery of strangers," Haines said, "you might as well stay in your house."

Early on, near Bemidji, Minn., he took a wrong turn and ended up lost in a wild rice marsh for half a day. He asked two guys for directions, and instead got a lift — with canoe — back to the river.

"Which was a nice gesture, 'cause I was really stranded," Haines said. "I

find that people are very helpful."

But most of the trip has been relaxed and uncomplicated, a chance to cross middle America one river town at a time. He takes breaks during the day to pick up groceries or check e-mail if he can find a local library with a computer.

"Just meeting people," he said, "and learning about the area."

Most nights are spent camping on islands. "Being away from urban noise, urban lights, is amazing," Haines said.

He's been pleased with what he's seen on the river so far — lots of bald eagles, rare when he was last in the Midwest, deer and otter.

"They have this snorting sound they make when they don't like your presence," Haines said, chuckling. "It's pretty. I've kind of thrived on the wildlife."