

Trip along Caney Fork reveals world from different point of view

From Center Hill Dam at Buffalo Valley to Carthage,

a small adventure

right in our own backyard

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To take a boat trip down the Caney Fork River is to leave this world behind. Almost immediately after



putting-in at a ramp below Center Hill Dam, with that monolithic slab of grim gray concrete hovering in the background, the greenness closes in behind us, the green of the water, the green of the trees standing in an unbroken leafy wall along the riverbanks. We are in a place separate and apart. Except for the overcast sky, it is a corridor downriver through a green world.

For the next 27 miles and the next four-and-a-half hours, we don't quite know where we are. It's not that we are lost, just traveling through

territory unfamiliar to all of us and having none of the markers that we would be encountering if we were, say, taking a highway between Buffalo Valley and Carthage.

No place signs or directional signs, no advertising signs, no stores, no mailboxes, no houses with driveways and front porches, no people along the way, no traffic ahead of us or behind us on the waters of the Caney Fork just us and our two boats.

It is a trip arranged by Tom Peek, who is resource manager at Center Hill Dam and Lake for the Army Corps of Engineers, and Ranger Stephen Beason, neither of whom has ever been the length of the river from Center Hill to near Carthage, where the smaller, more sinewy Caney Fork River flows into the bigger, beefier Cumberland River coming down from the northeast.

For all of us, it is a mini-adventure, reasonably comfortable and without hazard or the need for survival skills but for those of us who spend too much time sitting on our bottoms in air-conditioned offices, it is an adventure nonetheless.

10:30 a.m., Monday, June 8 Tom, Steve and others with the Corps of Engineers back the boat trailers down the steep concrete ramp between several fishermen who are tossing their lines into the river below the dam.

The waters are swift, the surface a rapidly shifting pattern of wrinkles and creases because the generators in the powerhouse are operating almost at full capacity, allowing the lake to plunge through the turbines with

great force and raising the depth of the river from something like a trickling 18 inches to more than 10 surging feet.

Soon after we swing out into the water and get underway, tooling along at about 10 mph, Tom spots a turkey vulture (buzzard) soaring overhead a reminder that on a recent morning he'd counted 140 of the critters preening on a grassy spot near the powerhouse. For a reason as yet undetermined, the big ugly birds are tearing up the powerhouse roof and otherwise creating a nuisance.

Steve, sliding along beside us in a run-about, dips his hand into the water and says it's cold. About 58-60 degrees, Tom estimates because it comes through the generators and down the river from about 50 feet below the surface of Center Hill Lake.

Tom happily announces to us that the second Bald Eagle ever known to have hatched on Center Hill Lake is now about 10-weeks old and soon will be leaving its nest. Its parents were an eagle pair that wintered on Davies Island.

One eagle had hatched out a year earlier but the baby was eaten by a predator, a Great Horned Owl. Tom is confident that this one will make it and make history.

We pass under the hulking, rusty-brown railroad bridge near the I-40 rest area at Buffalo Valley, then under the sweeping spans of the twin-lane interstate bridges balanced like long sleek wings atop round concrete pillars that tower above us. As we travel on down the Caney Fork, through its curves and turns, we will pass under I-40 four more times, the river threading itself back and forth under the highway like a needle-and-thread in and out of cloth.

11:30 a.m. The river has begun to change color, becoming more brownish as muddy streams carrying runoff from farms flows in and dilutes the pure dark green seen near the dam.

12 Noon We have been on the river an hour and a half; we have come 13 miles from Center Hill Dam, and have left the fifth and last of the I-40 bridges behind.

Along the way, we have been accompanied by one Great Blue Heron after another. They leave their perches and fly ahead of us, flapping their large wings slowly, their beaks jutting out in front like walking canes, their long skinny legs extended in back.

There was no way to count them it could have been the same three or four or so flying and stopping and flying and stopping again, disturbed possibly by the soft put-put-putting of the boat motors or by the very existence of boats and people in their domain.

For it is indeed the domain of shy Great Blues, of owls, of Kingfishers zipping along just above the water, their wings making blue flashes; of squirrels and of the small dark mink that Tom Peek spotted scrambling up the bank from the water.

In fact, from the time we leave the dam until we reach the boat ramp near Carthage, where a fisherman has just 'put' into the river, we see only two people, a lone man fishing from the water's edge and another mowing with a noisy red farm tractor in a field above the river.

The backside of many farms end at the water's edge, and unfenced cattle stand lazily about or lie in numerous clusters along our way, not even giving us a second glance as we cruise by. In fact, the presence of cattle would have been obvious had we not ever seen them, for several times we move in and out of the thick smell of cattle manure, lying in pockets above the river like invisible clouds.

We frequently played a guessing game trying to figure out exactly where we were and what we were seeing, particularly after we left the last of the I-40 bridges behind. We had a couple of pretty good maps and, by combining information from each of them, we could determine a few place names such as some of the creeks flowing into the river, the abandoned store at Lancaster, Betty's Island (one of a half dozen islands), Hell Bend and the beautiful Dripping Rock Bluff.

But we could only wonder about Smith Fork Creek, described on the map as "the world's longest creek"; about a place on the map called Sebowisha we saw nothing except a long-abandoned railroad trestle; about a place lettered in as Stonewall; about what appeared to be a limestone mine, and what we thought was a zinc mine about 19 miles downriver, probably close to Gordonsville; and about two or three old bridges that looked to be flimsy, rusted out, unused. What roads or railroads did they once carry? from where, and to where?

About 12:30 p.m. Tom and Steve pull the boats over to the bank and tie up for lunch. Mary Robbins has gone grocery shopping and we picnic on ham, chicken, turkey and cheese sandwiches, fruit, snack crackers and soft drinks.

2 p.m. We are about five miles from Carthage, the maps tell us. By this time, the rushing waters of the Caney Fork are 'way behind us and the river has become wider and flatter. Steve and Tom say we have entered the backwaters of Cordell Hull Lake, which is the Cumberland River backing up from Cordell Hull Dam.

The water is perfectly calm. "Snow" dropping from the tall cottonwood trees scattered along the banks floats in the air like down and lies in thin drifts on the river's glassy surface.

Just after we pass under the old, green-painted steel bridge where Highway 70 crosses the river, we see what we think must be former Sen. Albert Gore Sr.'s home at the crest of the bank, overlooking the water. But the map has "Sen. Gore's Residence" marked at a somewhat different location. That confuses us.

In a section of the river called Boulton Bend, Tom and Steve say that's where some Cookeville fishermen like to go for Big Stripers Larry Nunn, Jerry Abston, Charles Cobble.

2:55 p.m. The Caney Fork is behind us; it has poured its waters into the Cumberland River. Our boats have passed also onto the Cumberland, and that much wider river stretches far out on either side of us. In a moment we pull up to the ramp near the old water in-take for the Carthage city system, something that looks like a huge concrete box sitting at the edge of the river.

A couple of bright white Corps of Engineers vehicles, a pickup and a utility van, wait for us in a small park there, trailers to transport our boats attached to their rear bumpers, and we drive back to the Visitors' Center at Center Hill, an ordinary, unremarkable trip by highway.

Thinking back, it is as if we have traveled through a dream tunnel on a different side of the world.

I keep thinking about it.

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