Trip Narrative for the Collierville-Arlington Road to Houston Levee Section

By Ray Graham

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Today was my first exploratory trip as an intern. I wanted to put together a team of experienced paddlers, but this time it would just be Dale and me. We paddled from the Collierville Arlington (Col Arl) Bridge to the Houston Levee Bridge. Our purpose was to determine the usability of this section for large group trips. The put-in at Col/Arl Bridge had a well-maintained gravel drive that led to an ample parking lot next to a sand bar which provided easy access to the river. The skies were partly cloudy with temps in the 90s accompanied by a light breeze. The river level at the LaGrange gauge was 5.7 feet, and the water clarity was about two feet. I could see the bottom in some places, and the color was similar to green tea. This is a typical color in the summer months when there has been little rainfall and most of the water issues from underground springs upstream.

Almost immediately we began to have problems with downed trees. For the first mile, we had to weave through the branches and trunks of fallen hardwoods. This lasted for the first mile. We found that we could maneuver around most of the trees, but we had to portage over obstructions at least twice. Dale estimated that it would take a chainsaw crew three days to remove the blockages. However, if the river level was closer to 7 feet, we could have floated over most of the downed trees. I could hear the distinct song of a cardinal as we maneuvered through one of the tangles of fallen trees.

After the first mile, the river widened and fallen trees had been pushed to the outer curve of the river bank by last month's flood. The downside to the wider river channel was that we would be in full sun for the entire float. The other major obstacle on this section were the weirs, artificial rectangular formations of industrial gray rip-rap stones that are designed to prevent the destructive form of erosion known as head cutting. They stretched from the top of one river bank through the river channel and up to the top of the other river bank. Water splashed over the jagged rocks between the two banks. There were three to five weirs on this section of the river. I thought I had counted three, but Dale said there were five. On Google Earth, I counted what appeared to be four. Some of them must have been too small for me to notice. We considered portaging, but the steep climb over the rip-rap would have difficult. One can easily fall and injure oneself walking over rip-rap. The combination of the inclined river bank and carrying the boats would have made a portage even more dangerous. Dale and I decided that it would be easier to run the weirs in our boats.

The first weir looked like many of the small rapids on some of the Ozark rivers that I enjoyed canoeing when I was younger. There were rocks jutting through the surface of the water, but it was easy to navigate. The second was loud but not particularly difficult to cross. The third was much closer to the surface than the others. I was in my sit on top kayak and the bottom has a false keel that scraped the jagged rocks. Later inspection of my boat revealed long scrapes on its hull along with thin, curled ribbons of plastic. One pass over the weirs didn't do much damage but I could see how repeated trips on this section could cause sever damage to boats. I got stuck a couple of times and had to push myself forward to get off the rocks. I stopped at the bottom of one of the weirs to take video of Dale making his run while standing up in his canoe.

This section of the Wolf was not dredged in the early 1960s like the lower portion of the river. As a result, the river does not take a straight path but follows a serpentine course. The current on the inside of the curve is slower and more likely to drop particles of sand than the outside current. As a result, the inside of almost every curve contains a sand bar. They vary in size with some consisting of multiple terraced levels. There are also oxbow lakes and tributaries entering the river. At the end of one of the sand bars there is even a large bay of still water. It looks like a nice fishing hole. Some of the sandbars are fairly large, over a hundred yards long. We stopped on a couple of them. My favorite is one I call Piney Point so named for the pine trees on the opposite bank. The sand bars we stopped on were covered with animal tracks. We tried to identify the many tracks, but many were faint and difficult to make out. However, we found turtle tracks that lead to a possible nesting site. We also found deer, beaver and a cat-like print, possibly a fox or bobcat. There were also smaller prints that may have been mice or ground squirrels.

The faster water of the outer curves in the river channel cut into the bank creating a twenty foot high bluff of crumbling clay. Some of the pieces of clay were boulder sized rocks, but a cross section cut revealed them to be solid gray clay. Dale also pointed out some dark red and black gravel sized rocks that he said were from an ancient lava bed.

We didn't see much wildlife on this section, but I did notice a two and half foot long gar being closely followed by two smaller gar. I assumed they were mating. Dale stopped to take pictures of a small flock of turkey vultures, and we also spotted a belted kingfisher and a great blue heron.

Dale pointed out several examples of wood from the buried forest. Pieces of this wood are black in color and appeared to be flaking apart. We found specimens jutting from the banks about eight feet below the top of the bank. Other pieces of the ancient wood were scattered along the sandbars. Some pieces were in the form of large intact logs while others had been broken into shards. The buried forest dates from 12,000 years ago and like the name suggests was covered with sediment and preserved although not

petrified. Buried forests such as this one are rare, and I am aware of their presence only on this section of the river. Dale told me that the only other example of a buried forest was in Michigan. Dale also explained that a scholar from the University of Kentucky had written a research paper on the Wolf River buried forest, but I was unable to find the research on-line. Still the presence of these ancient logs adds to the mystique of the river. As we rounded the end of one of the last sand bars, I could hear the rushing water from the waste water treatment plant in Collierville being pumped into the river. There was a faint smell associated with the effluent. It disheartening to see the Wolf River treated like a sewer.

We took-out on the right hand bank just above the Houston Levee Bridge. The take-out was difficult since there was only a steep bank covered in gray rip rap. The parking area was packed dirt that would turn to thick mud under any substantial rain, and the driveway to the road was heavily rutted. This area would be impossible for most vehicles to use if it had rained. The drive and parking area on the other side of the river is in slightly better shape with more gravel that dirt, but the entrance to the river was just as treacherous with a steep slope covered in rip rap. The last flood made the take-out more treacherous than it had been last year by removing the small sandbar on the south side of the river.

In conclusion, due to the difficult take-out, the weirs, and the downed trees, this section should only be floated by experienced paddlers and then only if the river level is above 7 feet - unless of course, they don't mind damaging their boats. Novice paddlers should avoid this section.

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