

The Trip

I had a partner, but on the night of the departure, June 14th, he decided not to go, so I started out alone. I merely paddled across the lake here at Madison, and slept in Tenny Park. The next morning I left at four o'clock in a slight drizzle, most discouraging as it was, and paddled through Lake Monona and into Lake Waubesa, where a wind storm drove me ashore for the night. The next morning, after fishing for some supplies, I set out, but on account of a high wind and my own utter inexperience in handling a canoe, I did not get out of the lake until late in the afternoon. About four o'clock, I pitched camp on the Yahara River, the outlet of the four lakes. I stayed there a few days to take an inventory of things as they stood. Following is the inventory:

My health was exceedingly poor as a result of too much study and also because I was slowly recovering from an attack of infantile paralysis, which had left me weak and lame. My purpose in taking the trip was that of regaining my health, and so I intended to remain on it all summer.

I had two weeks of supplies of food, beans and rice, and four dollars in cash; this was to last me all summer.

I had some German books, a Psychology, a History, all of which I intended to study all along the way.

I had no destination, for I felt that if I set one, I would work unnecessarily hard to get there. All I planned to do was to keep paddling along until I was far enough away so that it would take the rest of the summer to get back. I did not need to get back until about Sept. 20th, for I am a student at the University of Wisconsin, and the term did not open until then.

From the lakes, I went down the Yahara River which empties them to the Rock River which it joins and on down that river. A little below the city of Janesville, I stopped on the river-bank to repair a hole in my canoe, the result of shooting some rapids, and there I found a farmer for whom I worked for a few days, earning thereby a few supplies. From there I moved on to Beloit where a boy named Harry Ford helped me to portage the dam, I stopped at the post-office for some mail, for I forwarded possible addresses to my friends, and then paddled on. I slept in a paper mill at Rockton that night, and there I got a few fish which served me for a few meals. Some miles below Rockton, I camped beneath some big trees for several days, for I had no tent. I spent the time studying my books. Several days later I was cooking a meal of beans in my tin pail on the river bank a

few miles above Rockford, when I met a farmer who wanted a boy to help during the haying season by milking cows etc. I took the job, staying a week, and when I went through Rockford, as a result of my work I was able to purchase a pup-tent. A few miles below Rockford I became acquainted with a couple of bachelors living on an island. They became interested in me and wanted me to stay with them for a few days, which I did. My next stop was at Sterling Illinois, where I camped on a high bank for several days. There I met a couple picnicking parties, who upon seeing my tent and canoe, became interested in me and my trip, and had me join them in their lunches while I told them about my trip. So I began to take the role of an entertainer for a meal now and then.

On July 11th, I decided to set out for the Mississippi, and a few days later found me there. That river far exceeded even my greatest expectations as to size. I felt utterly lost on it. At the point where I entered it, a few miles below Rock Island, it is considerably over a mile wide and it bore me along at a rate greater than I could paddle. I slept that night in Missouri, and the next few days I kept busy moving down the river. As the river is infested with thieves and hoboies, I usually set up camp after dark for I had no fire-arms, and therefore did not care to set up camp when it could be seen by anyone. However I always

tried to set up camp in such a place that if anything should happen to me, I would surely be found by some passer-by before very long. I never set up my tent unless it looked like rain. I slept anywhere, on the ground, in my canoe, on sand-bars, in old deserted, flood-ruined shacks. Once I found an old cot born down the river during flood time and deposited on an island which after some careful patching with string promised to hold together for the night. I carefully braced it up, spread out my two blankets on it, and the next morning I awakened feeling that I had slept like a king. How I hated to leave that cot behind me!

At Keokuk, Iowa, the Mississippi is dammed. I spent a night on the locks after making friends with the lockmen. In the operation of the locks a foot-bridge is raised and lowered and this acts as a trap for fish. As the locks were operated several times while I was there I soon had all the fish that I wanted. To go through the power-house I joined a crowd of sight-seers who had come up on a steamer. In this crowd were two roughly dressed boys whom I judged to be taking a trip like myself. It so proved, and after getting acquainted, they asked me if I knew how to cook. They told me that they did not know how and that they did not like to live on canned goods. They offered to board me if I would go along with them and do their cooking for them.

Beyond fish, I had a few supplies, but I did not need that urge to accept their offer, for travelling alone is exceedingly lonely. We set out the next day, and continued together for about two hundred fifty miles. We camped by day along the way and did our travelling by night.

One afternoon at about six o'clock I said, "I'm getting tired of staying here, let's move out". We had been camping two days and a night there. They agreed and we had supper, packed up and by eight o'clock we were on the way down the river. At about eleven o'clock the sky became overcast and a rain threatened. One of the fellows asked me what we should do. I answered, "Cover up your wettables and keep moving". In fact there was nothing else to do for to find a camping place on the marshy, brushy shore is hard work in the day time. However, the storm passed over us after giving us a disagreeable scare for being on the Mississippi during a storm is not fun. I was alone in my canoe and carrying a part of their baggage, for I was used to paddling and they were fresh from the city. They took turns paddling and sleeping while I had to keep at the job steadily. That night at about half-past one we rounded a turn in the river and saw the lights of the town Hannibal some miles ahead of us. A few minutes later I heard something drop in the canoe behind me, and looked around. The boy whose turn it was to paddle had

fallen asleep at the job. I shoved over, rescued his paddle, arranged him comfortably, tied the canoe to mine and toed it along. The town was about two miles ahead of me and I reached it a little after two. The railroads runs alongside of the river, and since towns and the river are greatly infested with hoboos and tramps, especially where there are railroads, so I did not dare to go to sleep, for I knew that if I were to go to sleep, the three of us would probably sleep until late in the day, or else until some gang of hoboos discovered us, and decided that our canoes were just the things of which they stood most in need. So I took it upon myself to sit on guard till daybreak, when it would be possible to find a temporary camping place. So after arranging a comfortable seat, and it so happened that there was located on the bank just where I had drawn up a very powerful railroad light, one of the yard lights, and by means of that light I studied German until daybreak getting two lessons. Then I awakened the boys, we paddled over to an island, had breakfast, hid our canoes in some brush, laid down, threw a blanket over our faces to protect us from the flies, and went to sleep, slept till noon, then after some swimming, and general enjoyment of life we moved on till we found a good camping place. We wore nothing but swimming trunks, ate all we wished,

slept as much as we liked, swam a great deal, were in short, young savages enjoying life to the fullest extent.

Thus we went on till we reached Grafton, Illinois, where I left them to start my homeward journey by way of the Illinois River which joins the Mississippi at that point. That was the 27th of July, and I had five hundred miles to go before I reached home. Let me state here that I measured the distance according to the information given to me by the river men and not by distances according to the map. There is a great deal of difference between river distances and map distances. For example, towns only ten miles apart by road are thirty miles apart by river, due to its twists and bends.

I paddled up the Illinois both by day and by night, stopping to sleep whenever I felt tired. The river has a current of about three miles an hour, so the most that I could make against it was about two miles an hour. As a rule I averaged about twenty miles a day. About fifty miles up the river I camped opposite the village Pearl. It so happened that there is a fish market on the bank where I set up camp. Immediately behind the market is a picnic ground with tables and fire-places, which the fish dealer had set up to encourage people to come and have fish-fries. I set up my tent alongside of one of

the tables, had supper, and then proceeded to entertain the crowd that had gathered to see the queer looking colored man that had set up camp near the fish-market. I was considered a colored man because, as a result of wearing nothing but bathing trunks and since my skin tans very easily and very darkly, I had assumed a hue such that everybody took me for a colored man of some kind, and I was never taken for a white man. Usually when I camped in the neighborhood of people I slipped on a pair of over-alls but even they left sufficient of my skin uncovered to give the impression that I belonged to a dark race. Also my hair is black, my eyes are dark, and these coupled with my dark brown skin were enough to convince anybody that I must be a colored man. In fact, before I could ever get anybody to accept my statement that I was a white man, I had to offer them proof, which I did by pulling up my trunks and showing the little white skin I did possess. Then in high astonishment they would exclaim, "Why, you ARE white after all. Why I would never have believed it".

The fish-dealer there wished to make a trip, and after some conversation with me decided to give me the job of taking care of the market during his absence. I needed the job badly. I stayed there a week, buying, dressing, and selling fish. During that time, picnicking parties came every day to buy fish and to

eat them there on the grounds. They came there for every meal of the day, sometimes a half dozen parties being there at one time. Usually when they drove up, I was sitting at one of the tables beside my tent, studying for the work of the market did not keep me at all busy. It happened that there were no Germans in that neighborhood, so the German print of the text books of German I was studying was an unknown curiosity. Also, my brown skin aroused their curiosity mightily. When I went down into the market to await on their needs I would always lay my book down on a certain crack so that when I came back I would know whether or not it had been examined. Invariably it was in a different position when I came back. Those who went down into the market with me would to their great surprise find that I could talk pure English, and often for the fun of it I would carry on quite an extensive conversation with them to show them how well I could talk English. All this served to set their curiosity on fire. Then I would go back to my studies, and they would join the rest of the party. After a whispered conversation among themselves in which I suspect they were acquainting each other with their respective discoveries, namely my knowledge of English and the peculiarity of the book I was reading, the women would start to get the meal, and the men would come over to talk to me. They would start by asking questions,--"Is that your

tent? Is that your boat? Are you reading that book? (with considerable hesitation) Is-er--ah--is--- ah--er--that is--- what---er-ah--are you--- ah---ah---er what nationality are you?" I would laugh and answer, "Oh, I'm a white man". They would look at me with doubt written all over their faces. Then I would joke a little about my color and finally offer to prove that I was a white man. They would continue to look skeptical, and look at the book as if to say that white men did not read such peculiar print. At last I would pull up my trunks and show them skin as white as theirs, and after they had felt of it to see that I was not playing a trick on them, they would admit my claim to the white race and tell me that I had a marvelous coat of tan. Then they would tell the women folks about it, and follow that by taking my picture, getting my autograph, and address, and in general regarded me as a wonderful example of what the sun can do if it is given a fair chance. But best of all, from my point of view was that invariably they would insist upon my joining them at lunch so that I could tell them about my adventures. I lived a whole week in that way, and had to turn down many invitations.

When I again started up the river, I had plenty of supplies for a while as a result of my weeks work. Some eighty miles up the river, while waiting to be let through some locks, a

steamboat came along and when they came into the locks, I asked them for a lift up to the next town where I had mail awaiting me. They volunteered to give me a hundred mile lift up the river, and since paddling was so hard I promptly accepted. They took me to Peoria. The steamer did not travel by night, and the first night when we tied up, the engineer said that we were in the frog country of Illinois. So that night, the captain's two sons, the engineer, and myself went out in my canoe with a frog spear, a flash-light whereby to dazzle them till they could be speared, and a sack to hold them. We went up a drainage canal, and at twelve we came back with one hundred ten big bull frogs, some big enough to weigh two pounds or more. That was the biggest catch ever heard of, the next largest being forty three in one night. However, the reason why we were so successful was that with a canoe instead of the ordinary rowboat used down there, we were able to get in otherwise inaccessible places. Our catch was worth \$25.00, and the whole personnel of the boat had all the frogs they could eat the next day. Frogs are a very great delicacy, a single taste of frog costing fifty cents in a restaurant.

At Peoria, just as the steamboat pulled in, a canal boat also came in. The captains of the two were acquainted, and through this acquaintanceship, the captain of the canal boat

offered me a lift through the Hennepin Canal, which connects the Illinois River with the Rock River, and past whose locks I would have considerable difficulty in getting. This lift also amounted to one hundred miles, so in all I was given a two hundred mile lift. When I left the canal boat I was within a few miles of the Rock and felt as if I were at home again. Once on the Rock I took my time, camping in my former camping places, visiting the friends I had made on the way down, often not being recognized by them on account of the coat of tan I had acquired.

Then one morning I set out again, leaving at six in the morning. At ten that night I had reached Oregon, Ill., fifty-two miles away from my starting point. Moreover, I had portaged a dam on the way, a feat utterly impossible on the way down, and what is even more, the last fifteen miles of that fifty odd was against a current so swift that in order to make progress, I had to keep my attention fixed on the shore so that I could tell if I were making progress or not, and in case I were not, that I might increase my normal rate of paddling until I did make headway against the current. The next day I moved on again after visiting a friend in Oregon. I stopped again at the island where my bachelor friends lived, staying there for a few days, then went on again. Soon I had arrived at the farmer's place where I had worked for the first time on the way down. He was building a

sorghum mill, and using second-hand bricks. He offered me the job of cleaning them, and although I had plenty of cash and supplies for my needs, I took it. A few days later, I set out for Madison, making forty miles the first day and portaging two dams alone on the way. The next afternoon, I arrived on Lake Monona. As I paddled along the outlet connecting Lake Monona and Lake Mendota, I heard people say, "Oh look, there goes a real Indian in a canoe." Once in Mendota, I took off my bathing suit, washed my birthday suit, shaved, redressed, shoved my fingers through my hair, and paddled up to the boat house, disembarked, put up my canoe,-- the end of a twelve hundred mile trip. One thousand miles paddled, two hundred ridden, I started with \$4.00, I came back with \$8.00; I started a sick man, and came back with only a slight but permanent limp and with great rolling muscles as a result of the paddling I had done. I started a white man and came back a colored man; and of the books I had taken, I had studied 700 pages of History, 470 of Psychology, and had read one and two thirds German books. Moreover I had kept a daily diary, had written a lot of letters, and had talked to hundreds of people, and better yet, I had accomplished all that I had set out to do. So on August 27th, I declared at an end the trip begun on June 14th.

----- Milton H. Erickson