

40 Years ago... The 1968 White River Canoe Race

In the early months of 1968 the Lion's Club of Cabot decided that, in addition to their work with the sight impaired, they wanted to assist some of the local youth. They eventually approached me, the new football coach, about starting an Explorer Scout group. Their intentions were to buy a canoe and enter a team in the newly established White River Canoe Race. I had three young men in the Spring weight program who were strong, willing to take on a new adventure, and completely inexperienced. Soon the canoe was purchased and off we headed to the local pond to practice. We had no raging waterway, or even a useful placid stream, so we made do.

We began by making a series of mistakes. We would not realize this until much later. Anyhow, we were having a blast! We paddled for a while and then we went frog gigging. Lynda, my wife, stayed up late to cook the frog legs for us, another new experience for my young paddlers. Feeling as prepared as we could be with the limited time available we struck out for the Sylamore Springs start line.

The most glaring mistake became evident long before the end of the first day. By the first portage we were a distant last and fading with every stroke. It was not due to a lack of strength but a complete lack of experience. We had only one canoe and I wanted all three to have the race experience, but the physics were against us. We had to make a decision, who would have to sit out? One of my boys volunteered and off our lightened team went.

The overnight was in Batesville and the Chamber of Commerce sent a milk truck out and cooked as many burgers and hotdogs as my boys could eat. We had surged to the lead by the end of that day and the smiles on the faces of those boys was as big as the river and they gorged on the food and visited with other kids from all over the state as well as from Texas. We exited our tent the next day with new confidence.

When our two remaining paddlers reached Newport we had won the race by a surprising margin, but more importantly Roger Grimes, Phillip Tucker and Jackie Odom had a great story to tell about the 1968 White River Canoe Race.