

David S. Story

Thirty years ago the White River Canoe Race was the highlight of my life. At the time, all of my best friends were members of a canoeing Explorer Post in Las Cruces, New Mexico. We raced anywhere there was water, but primarily in New Mexico and Texas. Several members of our Post did well in the National Championships each year, and two teams actually made it to the Olympic trials. But the race we looked forward to the most was the "Explorer Scout National Championships". I think the race was much the same as it is today; 120 miles from Bull Shoals to Batesville, spanning three days and approximately seven heats or race segments.

We had great rivalries in those days. The Las Cruces gang was inevitably dueling it out with a rival Explorer Post from Little Rock for top honors in the Boys and Girls Aluminum and "Cruiser" classes. There were also teams from Russellville AR, Laredo TX, Bogalusa LA, and Saint Joseph MO. One year some scouts showed up from Pennsylvania with a "high kneeling" style of paddling that most old hands were inclined to ridicule; that is until the high kneelers threatened to win their division. I think there were between 50 and 75 teams in the banner years, and that was without any of the "old-timers" that attend today.

We used to make the trip last a whole week. One long day of driving to get there, two days to practice, three race days, and another long drive home. I think Las Cruces was represented from somewhere around 1972 through about 1976. A few of the friendships I made back then have lasted through the decades, and the memories are sure to last a lifetime. I can vividly remember the year the Louisiana crowd hosted a "snake fry" the night before the race. Seems they collected a few water moccasins in their escapades back home, and they wanted to share the vittles with the rest of the country. There was also "The Spring" below Bull shoals that served as a favorite swimming hole, the "Rope Swing" down at Cotter after the first leg of the race, and the lake at Norfolk. I also remember the time a wayward bystander (unaffiliated with the race) fell into one of the locks above Batesville on the last day. A cry went out for help when he disappeared under water, and about three minutes later one of the scouts pulled him up and started mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I'm told we saved a man's life that day.

The White River is unquestionably my favorite stretch of water in the entire country. It's not at all hard to imagine several feet of fog shrouding the surface of that crystal clear river from view, and hearing the cadence of invisible racers calling hup or switch to stay in sync through the mist. Those were heady days for a bunch of strong-willed teenagers from the desert, and they played a major role in shaping a number of lives. I was fortunate to attend the race two years ago as an "old-timer", and I got to share a number of my fondest childhood memories with my wife and son, as well as renew old acquaintances from many years past. The White is as beautiful as ever, and I truly hope that eager young scouts will continue to find the same mixture of natural beauty, self-fulfillment, and camaraderie that made the race so special to a number of us a generation ago.