

Mississippi River 2015 Thru-paddlers



By John F. Sullivan

The paddling season started early this year, with the departure of the Rediscover North America Expedition at the Gulf of Mexico on January 2 (see *Big River*, May-June 2015). Six paddlers launched their three canoes into the Gulf of Mexico, then proceeded up the Atchafalaya River to the Mississippi. There they turned their canoes into the swift cold waters of the Mississippi and paddled all the way to the mouth of the Minnesota River at St. Paul. Fortunately the river was unusually low last spring, but cold weather, snow and ice slowed their progress at times. The expedition crossed Minnesota via the Minnesota and Red rivers and then followed a maze of big lakes and rivers in Canada to reach the Arctic Ocean September 2, after paddling 5,230 miles.

Another ambitious paddler, Steve



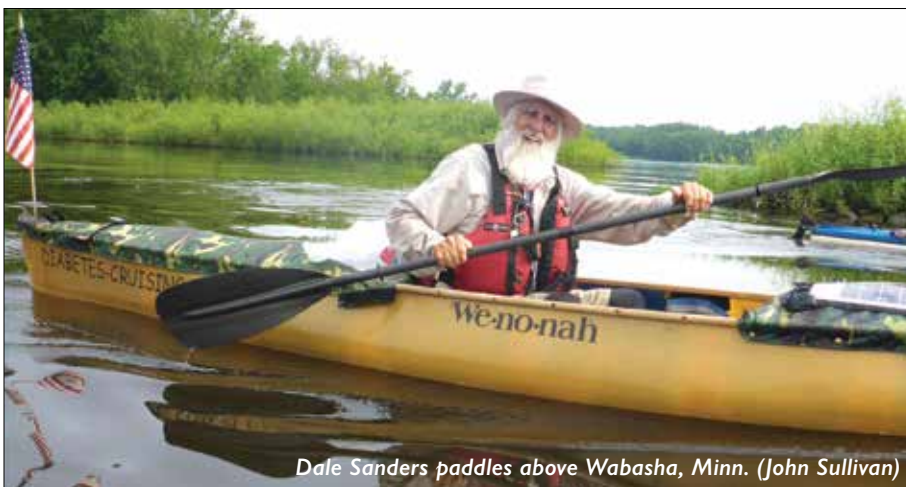
Top: Richard Sojourner approaches Lock & Dam 5. (John Sullivan)

Above: Alyssum Pohl and Leanne Davis pass St. Louis. (Leanne Davis)

Posselt, attempted a similar trip from the Gulf on March 3 and struggled with high water until reaching Memphis on April 11. There Steve quit the river and continued his adventure on bicycle — peddling into New York City on June 21.

In 2015, at least 51 thru-paddlers started at the source of the Mississippi River, Lake Itasca, from just after ice-out in mid-May through early September. One notable paddler, Dale Sanders, who had just turned 80, started with three friends and a film crew on May 15. They battled snow storms and cold windy weather early in their trip near Bemidji, Minn. Dale's paddling partners had a hard time keeping up with him as he pursued his goal of reaching the Gulf in 80 days! Dale paddled into the Gulf on August 15 with at least three of the original team members — Richard Sojourner, Austin Graham and Brad Tallent — raising more than \$23,000 for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation.

Both Dale and Richard completed their trips in 80 days of paddling. However, Richard took a break in late July at Vicksburg, Miss., due to heat



Dale Sanders paddles above Wabasha, Minn. (John Sullivan)



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Above: David, Reggie and Amanda Mosse paddle past La Crosse, Wis. (John Sullivan)

Below: "The Big Finish" (Leanne Davis)

exhaustion, as heat indices approached 115 degrees. He returned to the river in October and completed the segment from Vicksburg to Venice, La., paddling with Julie Haskel and Jake Travakoli as well as Scott Hite, a Missouri-Mississippi thru-paddler.

In 2014, Ellen McDonah was believed to be the first woman to solo paddle the Mississippi River from source to sea. This year four female paddlers, Annie Balthazar, Leanne Davis and Alyssum Pohl in kayaks and Nicole Brennan in a homemade wooden canoe, paddled the river. Annie reached the Gulf on October 31. Leanne and Alyssum finished together on November 4. Nicole reached the Gulf on November 19.

About 10 Mississippi River thru-paddlers were still making their way downriver in late November. One paddler, Mike Hatfield, left La Crosse, Wis., just a few days before the season's first winter's storm dumped loads of snow along parts of the Upper Mississippi River a week before Thanksgiving.

Dave Roberts faced a serious challenge during his solo trip when he stopped at Brainerd, Minn., in mid-June to wash clothes, get on the internet at the local library then grab a bite to eat at a restaurant. When he returned to the landing, his canoe and all his gear were gone. However, with assistance from a network of friends, Dave managed to get back on the river four days later at Bohemian Flats, in Minneapolis. Dave finished his trip at Venice, La., about two months later. Unfortunately, none of his stolen gear was recovered.



The Lower Mississippi played a near deadly "trick" on Caleb Reynolds and Joshua Witham on Halloween near Hickman, Ky. They were crossing the wide channel to avoid barges and got caught in strong cross-winds. Their canoe quickly filled with water while some of their gear floated away or sank. Towboat workers rescued them. They were treated at the Union City, Tenn., emergency room, only an hour away from the their parents' homes in Jackson, Tenn. They spent 10 days recuperating at their parents' homes and replacing missing gear, then returned to the river to continue their adventure, with greater caution.

Several recent veterans paddled the river this year, searching for peace and tranquility, which the river is so willing to offer. They included previously

(Thru-paddlers continues on page 31)

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A map of the Mississippi River basin showing major cities from Minneapolis to Venice, La. Two covers of Big River Magazine are shown: one featuring a duck and another featuring a river scene. The word "THANKS!" is written in the sand at the bottom of the graphic.

(Thru-paddlers continued from page 20)

mentioned paddlers Leanne Davis and Annie Balthazar, as well as Shawn Murphy, who finished his trip on the Atchafalaya at Morgan City, La., on October 30. Veterans Mark Fox and Bart Lindberg are still paddling. Casey Barfels, another veteran, departed from Lake Itasca with his son Carson. They completed their trip on July 22 at Appleton, Wis., after leaving the Mis-

issippi and paddling up the Wisconsin River and descending the Fox.

I sometimes ask the thru-paddlers why they chose to paddle the Mississippi. Their responses are often similar. Jake Travakoli summarized it nicely, “The Mississippi River represented a chance to challenge myself and take on an iconic American adventure. The river splits our country down the middle. As a child it was the first river I

learned how to spell. I wanted to take on a lengthy expedition and the Mississippi was able to do all of these things for me.” 🌊

John F. Sullivan lives in La Crosse, Wis., and has paddled the length of the Mississippi and many other rivers. His last story for Big River was “Wild Rice Resurgence on the Mississippi River,” May-June 2015.