

Kim A. Story

I went to Boy Scout summer camp a thousand years ago (mid-60s) and learned to paddle a canoe. For me it was the best part of camp. I "graduated" to Explorer scouting (Post 385 North Little Rock, AR) and in 1968 I heard about the White River Canoe Race for Explorer scouts. I knew I had to do it, but with only a week or so to go, I had no canoe and just one fellow Explorer willing to be on my team. My local District Executive helped me to recruit four other guys who I didn't know, secured us a loaner canoe, and he became our temporary post advisor. I wish I could remember his name; I'd like to thank him.

In the beginning, the race had once been from Cotter to Newport. In 1968 it was from Cotter to Batesville, and was later extended to the Bull Shoals Dam. Cruising class was still unknown at the time; almost everyone paddled aluminum canoes. Our team of six was inexperienced, though probably not much different than the rest of the teams. We learned right away that having only six on a team meant some had to race two legs a day - not good. I think it was a year of low water and the arrival of teams into Sylamore extended long after dark. Afterward, the organizers changed the race format to prevent that from happening again. Competitively speaking, our team was way down in the standings, but we all had a pretty good time. I was totally hooked on the White River Race. I knew I'd come back, better prepared, next year.

The next year I spotted an old canoe in a neighbor's back yard. I approached the man about it, and my plan to compete in the upcoming White River Race, and soon the canoe was in my yard. It was an old-fashioned heavy fiberglass canoe of the "Arkansas Traveller" brand, but we learned that it had sleeker lines than typical aluminum canoes, so it could be competitive. We painted it yellow and called it "The Banana". This time I recruited a team months in advance, including my brother and some friends, and we practiced. We still knew nothing about canoe racing as it was practiced in the Midwest, so we had no guidance about sophisticated gear or technique. We experimented with our gear and ended up with seats mounted above the gunwale, and very long paddles. I used a 72 incher (a foot and a half longer than considered "normal" these days!!) until it broke during the race. That rig would get laughed at on the river these days. That year a team came from Brownsille, Texas with a "Sawyer Super" racing canoe. Ultra long and narrow, we'd never seen anything like it. The moment I saw it, I knew we were outclassed. Brownsville won. I think my team was 2nd. Everything changed after that.

I went away to college in Chicago in 1970, but kept my membership current in explorer scouts, determined to return and compete again the following year. In behalf of my team I acquired what appeared to be a used racing canoe and racing paddles. Unfortunately, later that year the Sawyer Champion canoe was newly introduced, and it defined the USCA Cruising Class for several years to come. The White River Race introduced separate racing classes for Aluminum and Cruising Class.

About this time the nationwide magazine for scout leaders did a feature article on the White River Canoe Race. The race began to draw participants from other states, some quite far away. Our "new" canoe was fast, just not as fast as the newest model. We practiced long and hard and went to the race much better prepared than before. In 1971 the guys (and girls!!) from Las Cruces, New Mexico showed up for the race. In addition to having the newest, fastest boats, the guys were built like wrestlers (my team was skinny be comparison) and they clearly had practiced long and hard too. We were runners-up again. Losing to the Las Cruces team, however, raised our sites and our standards like nothing else could have.

Determined to compete again and finally win, before I aged out of Explorer Scouts, our team acquired a new Sawyer Champion canoe for 1972. We practiced longer and harder than ever. However, we were no longer

the only team in Arkansas with good equipment and support, and determined to win. Other posts had also acquired new boats and were preparing just as seriously. Despite all our team's progress over several years, the competition had expanded and sharpened such that our team might go faster than ever before and still finish lower in the standings than ever before. The local newspaper took notice and covered our campaign. We went to the race, battled fiercely, and finished 3rd.

I aged out of Explorers, but returned the following summer to support the team and help staff the event. Phil, my paddling partner through those years of runner-up status, eventually won the White River Race, with a better partner. He went on to race more seriously than ever in other arenas and later won many races on the way to winning the Texas State Championship.

I've remained connected with scouting, serving in various leadership positions throughout my adult life. I returned to the White River Race in 1990 for a veteran's reunion. Though I haven't continued racing, paddling has remained a part of my life. Over the years I've done more canoe-camping trips than I can count, in many states and Canada and Mexico. My current goal is to make a trip to the Yukon Territory in the far north of Canada. My experience in scouting as a youth shaped me in many ways, and it has enriched my life, both through my service as a leader and through my many cherished paddling experiences.