

Tennessee PEER sails with Tennessee Riverkeeper

October 13-17, 2003

Up the Cumberland River to Nashville

(photos by Mike Rogers, Nashville)



TN PEER Director Barry Sulkin (left) joins TN Riverkeeper Captain Leaf Myczack (right) as acting third mate and sole crew member for 5 days of his annual whole river survey - pictured above at Riverfront Park in Nashville across from the Titan's stadium on Oct. 17, 2003.

This leg of the trip was from near Barkley Dam in Kentucky, up the Cumberland River 162 miles to Nashville. The entire survey trip was from Sale Creek on the Chickamauga Lake above Chattanooga, down the Tennessee River to the Kentucky, over to the Cumberland River near the dam on Kentucky Lake, up the Cumberland to Nashville, then all the way back down the Cumberland to the Ohio River, and up the Tennessee to the point of origin. The entire trip lasted from mid September until late December. PEER was proud to be a part of the crew for a portion of the trip.

Additional photos from the trip and landing are posted below along with an article written for the Riverkeeper's newsletter.

Slow Boat to Nashville

by Barry Sulkin



Left: Leaf aboard the *Broadened Horizons* - the handcrafted boat he built to patrol the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers

I knew what I was getting into. Back in 1995 I had sailed up the Tennessee River with Leaf and Cielo from Sale Creek near Chattanooga, to Knoxville. I had wanted to go again but never made the time. This year I set aside a week in October and made plans to travel for five days with Leaf up the Cumberland River to Nashville. With Cielo now spending much of her time at the land base, I would be Leaf's sole crew - or as he called me, acting second mate. Quite an honor.

We met on Monday, October 13 - Columbus Day, coincidentally - at Grand Rivers, KY at a marina near Barkley Dam, the most downstream dam on the Cumberland, about 30 miles from where it flows into the Ohio River. We re-provisioned the boat and around mid-day headed for Nashville, about 160 river miles upstream. At about 5 miles per hour on a good day, it would take us 5 days - truly a slow boat to Nashville; perhaps the slowest boat out there, but the best way to get to know a river.

The lower portion of the river above the dam is deceptively big. It is quite wide, but most of the water is shallow with only the meandering original river channel deep enough for our 30 foot sailboat and most other large crafts. To stay out of trouble, we had to follow the chart and channel markers closely. We often saw shore birds way out across the water in what looked like the middle of the lake, standing knee deep. The extensive shallows in this reach are actually the flooded bottom land farms that were covered when the dam was built and this area converted from a river valley to a reservoir. The shallows are now also made up of massive amounts of sediment that flush out from upstream activities and settle out in this wider area, as is quickly apparent when you try to step out onto the bottom along the banks or in the coves.

Partly due to the shallow water, there are shore birds in this reach. Lots of birds. We saw flocks of perhaps hundreds of pelicans (yes, on the Cumberland), along with numerous ducks, geese, and herons. As we moved upstream into Tennessee, the river narrowed, and the birds almost disappeared. In some reaches the river has been turned into a huge ditch with miles of rip-rap rock covering both banks, and little sign of wildlife. The worst stretch being between Dover and Cumberland City where it looks like someone had an overactive rip-rap gland. As we traveled upstream we developed an informal measure of the river's health - the BHT ratio. That is the ratio of Blue Herons to Tires. It went from a very high number in the lower reaches to a small fraction as we moved upstream and junk tires along the banks far outnumbered the Blue Herons.

Right: Barry (left) and Leaf in full water-camo uniforms trying to look nautical



Getting to know the river this way you can see some of its remaining beauty such as the areas with limestone bluffs, along with some of its problems. And you start to understand why it has problems - some of which are being made worse by ongoing human activity, and some of which are just the nature of this modified beast. In order to generate electricity, allow navigation, and control flooding by dams, the river is now effectively kept all the time at a level that used to be considered flood stage; in many places putting water up against erodible materials that used to be far back from the river's edge.

Behind Barkley Dam the water is raised at summer pool for recreational use, and lowered at winter pool to make room for wet weather storage. Ironically this is the reverse of nature's cycle where rivers are usually lower and drier in the summer. This annual fluctuation creates a zone along the water's edge where nothing much can grow, leaving a muddy and eroding bank in many areas, apparently driving the mission of more rip-rap. To make matters worse, we saw too many farmers working the land right up to the edge of the river bank, furthering the problem.

In an attempt to get a couple more rows of corn, they were probably losing much more in acreage falling into the water - but hey, why should they care, it's probably just leased

land, and maybe even leased from the Corps of Engineers who controls the system. In far too many places there was at most a single row of trees along the river bank, not enough to hold back the soil and pollutants, so the process of erosion and more rip-rap is likely to continue eating up what's left of the river.



Left: Entertaining the ladies at port with tales of life at sea

Life aboard the Broadened Horizons vessel was peaceful but at times a bit rustic - all part of the experience. It got a bit nippy sleeping on deck under a tent fashioned from a tarp, and I never quite got used to the toilet facilities that consisted of a bucket or a quick dinghy trip to shore. But on the other hand, the Captain does have good taste.

The ship was fully equipped with most of life's real necessities - such as Grey Poupon Dijon for my mayo-free tuna salad. And when John McFadden called the boat phone to make plans to bring us dinner one night at the mouth of the Harpeth River, he asked if we needed any supplies. Leaf informed him that we were "all out of steak and both kinds of ice cream".

Along most of the way, there is still scant civilization along the river, which is generally a good thing. However as we approached the first real river city, Clarksville, I looked forward to a break - tying up at the city's river front dock and walking to a fine restaurant nearby. Boy was I off the mark. The dock wall was so high off the water that you'd have to climb our mainsail mast to get up there - no way for anything but a large tourist paddle-wheeler to dock. We tried going up into the mouth of the Red River, but got stuck in the floating sea of debris blocking the channel. We finally anchored up the river a bit by a muddy inlet where we had to dinghy over, climb up a bank of debris in the dark, and found ourselves in the back of a biker bar where we were soon confronted by the establishment's large and curious proprietor, who was quickly calmed by our explanation... and matching Riverkeeper hats (nothing like a uniform to gain respect). I think he figured we were part of some new homeland security detail.

Right: Docking at downtown Nashville on Oct. 17, 2003 as (very small) crowd of supporters rushes to greet us on a Friday afternoon

The final day of travel to Nashville - Friday, October 17 - was a bit rainy, but not too bad and brightened by some scenic bluffs and the sighting of an eagle soaring along the river. The feel of the Cumberland changed as we entered this urban reach and out ran a barge on the inside turn along the new Metro Center Greenway - the first boat we passed the whole trip that was moving in the same direction as us. On our left was the remains of the old lock and dam that few people know about, as downtown came into view. At about 4:30 PM we arrived at the city's Riverfront Park dock - where you could actually dock - courtesy of the Mayor's office and the Parks Department, and were greeted by a gathering of friends, supporters, and a reporter.



I will do this again. Sailing slowly along you get to understand a river in a way unlike all I learned in school. It's a learning through observation and feel that you don't get from books. I can see how Leaf's many years traveling the rivers this way has truly made him an expert and wiser than most in the ways of the river, and in many ways about life itself. One thing I'll do differently next time though. After two great trips traveling up the Tennessee and Cumberland, next time I'm going downstream.