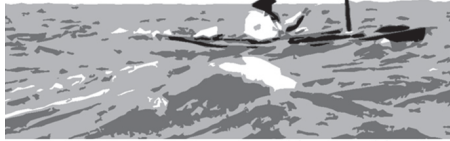


John Guider's Gifts and Gumption

Cartop Cruising



with Hugh Horton

"I had to laugh at the irony of the 'sage advice.'" It was August 2010 and John called from Sarasota. "They all told me, 'Don't go this late in the year!'—but if it weren't summer, I might have been as cold as the night on Lake Itasca."

He'd left Cedar Key rowing his CLC Skerry at 3 a.m., pulling on her repaired gear all day, and had been too beat to get in the lee of a spoil island off Crystal River. He anchored.

"First my anchor dragged." He chided himself, "as you'd warned." The breeze had been light easterly, but veered to heavy southerly after dark, and the only thing keeping his tent from blowing away was him in it. He saw his Skerry heading for the rocks, then "bucking wildly" in the surf. He stuffed his tent in a low spot and splashed into the mid-80-degree Gulf water, then held her off against wind and waves for eight hours, mulling ironies and talking to her like a pet.

"My feet and ankles were banged up and I thought of your suggestion about white fishing boots." The wind eased at dawn and he continued south, mostly rowing, making Sarasota in a week. "Bob's fix of my oarlock blocks saved me."

We'd met two weeks earlier in Cedar Key at Bob and Jeri Treat's. The day before, Thursday, July 15, he'd rowed into Cedar Key in the afternoon and rented a room. At dawn he'd left Horseshoe Beach and pulled twenty miles against southerly zephyrs into a steaming sunny day, mid 90s, dewpoint not much less.

John said he was a photographer, and in Phase 2 of a "Great Loop" around the eastern part of the continent in his Skerry. He'd built the one-off, twelve and a half foot waterline Expedition version, although he'd never before built even a model boat or bird house. Phase 1 had



been Nashville to New Orleans in 2009, his second journey down the Mississippi. His first trip, in 2003, was paddling his canoe from Nashville, and in 2005 and 2006 he paddled the upper River.

Near sunset of August 4, 2005, about twenty miles downstream from Lake Itasca—the headwaters, and the sign saying the Gulf of Mexico is 2348 river miles away—he'd stood up to look for a channel through a cattail maze, and toppled in.

"I even managed to turn the boat over." His canoe was lightly loaded, so not much was lost, but little was left. He'd worn his PFD.

He couldn't right his canoe. He pictured his five grandkids, but a friend's remark stuck, "John, you are not going to die." He said it over and over until he thought of folding cattails at the waterline, bending them into a "table" which supported the boat and drained it, and helped his re-entry. He found his paddle.

He figured he'd be okay if he could keep paddling until 4 a.m. and not slip into a cozy snooze, so he paddled back and forth in his half-mile-long cattail cage until four. He put his paddle down and sat back, then scrunched down to wait for dawn. A mistake. He shivered away the next hours of 37 degree night in wet shorts and T-shirt, his body stiffening miserably so he couldn't paddle. The only warmth he found was from pressing a halogen flashlight into his palm—while above was the starriest night he has known.

John's not a polished seaman or sailor, nor a student of single blade techniques, but there's not a molecule of dilettante in him, either. He's a learner, a journeyer, getting ever further into the journey of life through art and by conveyances which are art for many of us. Although he has a destination, it's incidental, the end of a journey where the new one begins.

"Everything you told me came true." I'd noticed his two little Danforth-type anchors and knew a time might come when they'd not hold. "The final irony," he said, "was in the morning when I landed. I stuck my foot over and there was a sting ray, as you'd said to watch for."

John gives to us all, by his example of staunch determination—gumption—and glass-half-full equanimity, far more than the Treats or I gave him with a meal, repairs or local knowledge.

Following his long canoe trip, he wrote in his superbly illustrated book, *The River Inside*, "What can make an effort remarkable is not...the accomplishment, but...the consequences of one's actions, intended or not."

All the people he met were compelling. "Each life is so well worth living and is equally profound. There are no failures in the world I witnessed." •SCA•

www.theriverinside.com is his website.

We've arranged with John to sell some of his museum quality hardbound The River Inside. Call for details. —Eds