

River Journeys Book Talk

By Elizabeth Barker

Harlan Hubbard and the River; a Visionary Life by Don Wallis (1989)

Harlan Hubbard's early years were spent in a small river town near Cincinnati. He went to art school in New York City for two years and then returned to his home area. When he was 43 years old he married Anna Eickenhout. The two of them built a shanty boat and spent five years floating down the Ohio and the Mississippi rivers and into the bayous beyond. They settled in Payne Hollow Kentucky along the river and pursued a life similar to the one they had lived on the shanty boat. They grew and foraged their food, played music, and read. Harlan wrote books about their life and travels and painted.

He was a legend in the nearby town where Don Wallis grew up and became a good and trusted friend when Wallis returned to the area years later. This book chronicles Hubbard's life, exploring his restless love of the river and his search for a compatible way of life. It is a wonderful, lyrically connected compilation of excerpts from Hubbard's journals and books - illustrated with his woodcuts. It's possible to outline events and encounters and extol the pleasures of its writing. It deserves to be read and really appreciated.

Near the end of 1946 Harlan and Anna started down the river in their 24' x 10' boat outfitted with space for their violin and cello in the cabin, and a john boat. The following spring they tie up at Payne Hollow and spend the summer tending a garden, fishing, foraging, and stocking up for winter's continuing voyage. The pattern continues for three years until they arrive in New Orleans. Somewhat reluctantly they buy a motorboat and head into the bayou country. A year or so later they sell the shanty boat and head west in a car. By 1952 they are back, building a house at Payne Hollow where they live for over 30 years. Anna dies in 1986 and Harlan less than two years later.

Don Wallis isn't the only person who heard of them. They have many visitors during those years but manage to maintain a simple life enriched by the river and the land and their interests; people and the arts. They had done this together, marrying Harlan's unease around people and city life with Anna's gracious culture. Their home at Payne Hollow was designed and built by Harlan. It had wood heat and no electricity but housed a piano and they played music together daily. They kept a biweekly laundry ritual of heating water and hand scrubbing. They read to each other - Thoreau and Nietzsche among others. After Anna died Harlan, who died two years later, tended more toward his early visions of an animal den of his own. His paintings had been mostly unseen except for the ones that hung above the shelves in the local grocery store. Now he began to donate them to a local college and a Cincinnati museum. He saw that Don Wallis would get many of his journals. His life had been free of the many obligations and constraints imposed by earning a living. In many respects it was like the river which so influenced him - restless and untamed but full of energy and eager for what each day could reveal.

Life on the Mississippi by Mark Twain (1874)

During the steamboat glory days the pilot was master of all, esteemed above the captain even, for it was the pilot alone who could guide the boats through the ever changing hazards of the river. It was the pilot who sacrificed his life saving the boat and all others. What higher glory could a boy imagine? And what image could he possibly have of what that entailed? The book begins with a description of his own training, humorously depicting the dawning comprehension that he has to learn 2400 miles of river, backwards and forwards in every time of day, season, or weather - daily modified by changes.

The river wasn't the only changing factor. The advantage of an apprentice for the pilot created an excess which threatened the pilots' status. An association was formed to support unemployed pilots, a seemingly unsustainable concern, but perhaps a model for start-ups today. By requiring co-pilots who would only work with member pilots and establishing a member only river conditions update it soon gained control.

Then the railroads came and the Civil War. Most steamboats were replaced by tug boats haul freight on long lines of barges. Pilot Sam Clemens became the journalist Mark Twain. He began that career by burlesquing a river conditions report which was signed anonymously by the familiar depth sounding. Twain makes a trip up and down the river in those waning days. It's an opportunity to report on the changes and to tell lots of tall tales. He hopes to gain insight as an unfamiliar traveler. This is soon foiled by a visit to the pilot house where the well aware pilot plays his own game with an outlandish description of his job, including the government boats that patrol for alligators.

He wanders his boyhood town of Hannibal MO, seeing it as remembered. He visits New Orleans. There are mule races (the most enjoyable) and cockfights and Mardi Gras. Above ground vaults lead into a tale of the lucrative funeral business as the survivors always want not to be outdone by others, with spending greater than what the government gives to education. He discourses on language, chivalry, and the constant presence of the wa' (war) . Lagniappe, a little extra, is common as a term and a practice. (This seems to be a Creole rendition of a Spanish word with a tilde.) Any mention of ladies becomes flowery. "He hadn't ought to have went" is a North South marriage. Uncle Remus and George Cabel (Old Creole Days) are lauded for their dialect and tales.

He claims that cut-offs between river meanders have so shortened the trip that St. Louis and New Orleans will soon be neighbors. There are other tales of exciting steamboat races, boiler explosions (one killed his brother), gamblers, and drummers. Mrs. Trollope's unfavorable view of her journey is contrasted with his own of the elegant shoreline homes and luxuries of steamboat travel. Cotton seed oil, sugar, and fuel for the boats were produced near and transported on the river. Much of this river life has also been curtailed. Twain's style may be somewhat old-fashioned and his tales, like Shakespeare quotations, clichés; but the rambling, humorous, and informative story is still worth reading.

Life on the Ohio by James Coomer (1997)

Here is a more contemporary tale told by a harbor master and tug boat captain. Coomer's earliest years were spent on an excursion steamboat, his father the captain. He enlisted in the Navy when he was 16 and served on a diesel powered amphibious lander. Earlier friendships led to a Cincinnati deckhand job and the realization of harbor master possibilities. A few years later he becomes a tug boat captain towing barges on the river and ends his career working at a New Orleans harbor. The story of his experiences and the workings of river traffic are well told and quite interesting.

The chapters were written over a period of time and exhibit an interesting variation in tone. He doesn't duplicate Twain's tall tales but uses a fair bit of exaggeration to fashion incidents into appealing good stories, sometimes trying too hard. I preferred the less adorned accounts. The people he meets, the work he does, and the business of river traffic don't need embellishments. The complexities of barge shifting and attachment, the need for night vision, and communication requirements are all factors in the work environment drama. Coomer, unlike some old-timers, appreciated radar but it tricked him into an encounter with a ghost ship which almost caused a disaster and turned a spooky river story into a different way of being tricked.

In 1967 he takes time out to motor down the river from Pittsburgh to New Orleans, picking up his 12 year old son along the way. The 2000 mile trip takes him 31 days which is quite a contrast to the Hubbard's' three years. The New Orleans view inspires him to work there later with the tugboat he and his son spend a year building. As a tugboat captain on the river he worked one month on and the next off. His comments on his own family life adaptations are concise and helpful. The emphasis is always on the river.

River of Darkness: Francisco Orellana's Legendary Voyage Of Death and Discovery Down the Amazon by Buddy Levy (2011)

This obviously isn't a descriptive, leaning towards the humorous, river tale. In 1541 having trekked east over the Andes from Peru Gonzalo Pizarro and Orellana were essentially stranded. Their search for El Dorado had not been successful and supplies and men were greatly reduced. In hopes of finding food ahead they build a boat. This is a tedious venture which includes building a forge and producing charcoal in order to make nails from the horseshoes they salvaged from butchered horses. Orellana and 57 men take to the river leaving the rest with Pizarro to wait their return.

After a few days it seems apparent that the strong current would make returning upstream on the river almost impossible and the distance on land an equal obstacle. None of the men are willing to make the attempt. Orellana decides his only recourse is to continue downstream, realizing that this will be termed rebellion. They are on a tributary of the Amazon and are 4500 miles from the ocean. They come to a friendly inhabited area. For two months they build their strength and another, larger, boat.

Orellana, unlike Pizarro, tried to establish good relations with the natives. He had excellent language

skills and compiled a dictionary. He tried to avoid using force. This served him well in the beginning but warnings of more hostile tribes proved true. Later encounters involved continuous days of fighting and rowing with little time for rest or replenishing supplies. He resorted to raids on villages as often as not. Both boats suffer damages and need repairs. A recently deceased 650 pound tapir found in the river saves them from starvation. Sheer survival is the most essential concern as they are swept continually downstream.

This does not prevent Orellana from hearing rumors and getting glimpses of the wonders beyond the river banks. Elegant pottery, gold of course, women warriors, white men are all enticing and foster hopes of wealth and fame. With friendly tribes he performs the appropriate ceremonies of claiming the area for Spain and Christ. He also records official reports that justify his actions.

The Amazon delta and the open sea are eventually reached and provide their own challenges. Back in Spain Orellana eventually gains permission but not funding for his longed for return expedition which proves disastrous - and deathly. Brief accounts of the Aguirre and Walter Raleigh Amazon trips are appended.

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack River and The Allegash and East Branch by Henry David Thoreau.

The first essay about a canoe trip Thoreau and his brother took after his college graduation would have been written about 1837, and the second in 1857 is about a canoe trip he and Edward Hoar took. They are very different, as he must have been between ages 20 and 40. Both appear in a Modern Library edition of Thoreau's collected writings. The jacket notes that Thoreau was known as a poet and naturalist. This is quite evident in the earlier work which has very little to say about the actual trip. It abounds with poetry and I assume the majority is Thoreau's. A few poems pieces are attributed, some appear related to authors in the text and some give the impression that they need not be cited because any literate person would know their source. The poetry is included within a variety of topics discussed such as poetry, the difficulties of sustaining a traveling life, friendship, etc.

He notes that it is difficult to keep a journal of such a trip because any interesting experience takes precedence over the recording. The Scotch-Irish brought potatoes to New England. He quotes an Indian sachem as finding it easy to accept Christianity and the custom of not working on Sunday because he never worked. A comment on the Yankee race having arrived to improve the area prompted me to wonder about the origin of the term Yankee. According to the OED it originated in the late 17th century and is derived from the Dutch diminutive of Jahn.

The second piece is definitely a journal of the trip. The two men take a boat to Bangor and hire a Penobscot Indian, Polis, as their guide. They botanize along the way with ample descriptions of the flora and bird life. Their supplies include pork and coffee vs. the cocoa and milk of the earlier trip. Sugar and bread are essentials both times though the Indian is the main culprit now. The tent is little

more than a cotton sheet but aside from their India rubber jackets they are little deterred by wet weather and working their way over soggy portages. Polis fashions a shingle attachment which enables him to easily support the 80 pound canoe overhead if it also must be carried overland. Thoreau is interested in the Indian language and those names are recorded along with the Latin ones. Traversing the lakes in the small canoe is a tricky venture and often discussed. Thoreau regales the simple pleasures of outdoor life. Polis gets the moose he wanted and they have a "succulent" breakfast of the tongue and lips which have cooked overnight. I found the naturalist more interesting than the poet.

The Water Road: a Narrowboat Odyssey through England by Paul Gogarty (2003)

This is the best armchair traveler. Gogarty is a British journalist who justified spending 4 months traveling 900 miles of England's canal network by writing this delightful book. There is a great deal about the canals, the surrounding area, and the boat people; and a reasonable amount about the actual navigation. An oft repeated, but variable process is going through the locks which involves a key and paddles and windlasses but remains rather mysterious and formidable to me. He is joined at times during the trip by his 12 year old son, his wife, and his father. He lives on the boat but frequently dines on shore and walks or bicycles through the countryside.

Gogarty is particularly interested in the history of the canals and many of those jaunts are to museums and graveyards or for interviews. Railroads and trucking led to disuse and deterioration of the network of canals and rivers. Recreational and historical efforts to revive and rebuild much of the canal system were ongoing when the book was written almost 20 years ago and, no doubt, have continued.

The system that connected and made England's rivers navigable was an essential factor of the industrial revolution as it insured a reliable and economical means of transporting materials. James Brindley was the main architect and engineer. He was an "uneducated" man, at one point carving a model from a chunk of cheese. His accomplishments included the 11 year long construction of a 2,900 yard long tunnel and several aqueducts. Unmotorized boats were propelled through the tunnels by leggers, men who lay on the either side of the boat and walked their feet along the tunnel wall. There is also a lift and a now disused incline rail mechanism.

During WWII much of this Inland Waterway was manned by a female crew known as Idle Women. One of the interviews is with one of those women. She recalls another one who left observatory work for the job and followed up as a motorcycle queen and quiz show winner. The canal people are generally friendly and quite hospitable. Gogarty's overnights are frequently livened by invitations to meals or pub quiz nights. The same is not consistently true for all of the shore side residents. Some have posh mansions. Some areas are preceded with warnings of theft, racial strife, and stone throwing youth.

Other points of interest included an inland salt works where brine was pumped from a well and caused a river subsidence and a textile manufacturer's model village for workers. The waterside industries are mostly historical remnants today. Railroads and trucking led to disuse and deterioration of the canal

system even earlier. Active, ongoing recreational and historical efforts have revived and rebuilt much of the canal-river network. The book's description of a leisurely trip shared with interesting company and lovely countryside, is a testament to the value of the restoration.

The Floating House by Scott Russell Sanders.

The author is much better known for his more philosophical nature writings, but this is not his only children's book. A pioneering family, moving from their home in Pennsylvania to the Ohio frontier, loads their belongings onto a flatboat and journeys down the Ohio River. Their new home is built from the dismantled boat. It's a well illustrated, lovely book.

Three Men in a Boat by Jerome K. Jerome (1880)

Three college students, to say nothing of the dog, take a break from their studies with a boat trip on the Thames. Mostly they have misadventures including a detailed description of their bludgeoning efforts to open a tin can. It's classic British humor and its remembrance (not quite when it was originally published) was the inspiration for a topic well distanced from humankind's trashing the planet. Others must have similar wishes as the book was a reissue (complete with copyright admonitions) and easy to find.