

Finding his fortune one paddle at a time

Fortune is a damn strange thing. Some men find theirs when they are up, others when they're down.

His arms and face, what you can see above a salt-and-pepper beard that's heavy on the salt, have turned that ruddy hue somewhere between red and brown. He admits the going's been harder than he anticipated and at the end of most days he has a hard time lifting his arms over his head.

Still, at 59 and suddenly without employment, former Davenport Ron Haines can't think of anything he'd rather be doing than canoeing down the Mississippi River.

"I always said I'd do this if I won the lottery or suddenly had the time to do it," he says, stretching out in a lawn chair at Illiniwek

Campground outside of Hampton. "The paper I worked for decided to move the business, and I didn't want to move with them, so my job ended. I got a nice severance package and suddenly had some free time and decided to do it."

He set off July 27 from Minnesota's Lake Itasca, the headwaters of the Mississippi River, in his 17-foot, nearly 30-year-old Gruman canoe. He plans to paddle until he reaches the end of the river in New Orleans.

Mr. Haines lives in Lantana, Fla., and worked as a photo editor for the weekly news tabloid "The Star."



Compass Points Chronicles

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Ron Haines, of Lantana, Fla., started his trip down the Mississippi River at Minnesota's Lake Itasca on July 27, when he launched his 17-foot canoe en route to New Orleans.

unpleasant, so I checked into a bed and breakfast for a couple days," he says. "I initially thought I could do it in about three months, but now more realistically, I think it's going to be more like 3 1/2 or four months.

"I've covered over 800 miles in six weeks, and the river is 2,500 miles long, so that's about a third in six weeks," he says. "Besides, I don't want to make this into a grueling thing."

While the scenery is beautiful, the people he's met along the way have made the biggest impression.

"I don't know if I'll be going back to that profession," Mr. Haines says. "To do it at the level I was doing it would mean a move to Chicago or New York and I don't want to do that. Part of this trip is to take some time and think. I still haven't really decided what I want to be when I grow up."

Mr. Haines was raised in Kankakee and went to the University of Illinois. After college, he went to Ethiopia with the Peace Corps.

"That was great," he says. Most of his possessions are held in a couple of dry sacks, stowed in the canoe. "The Peace Corps gives you an airplane ticket when you are done. I cashed mine in and hitchhiked back to the States, through all those places you can't go to anymore, Afghanistan, Iraq. I flew to India and walked back through Europe. When I got back, there weren't many journalism jobs."

He ended up working for the Daily Democrat, the newspaper that is now the Quad-City Times, in the 1970s.

"That's when I got the canoe," he says. "I loved getting into the canoe and going someplace I haven't been before. So this has been perfect. This stretch of river especially, I love these little river towns. I pull in, walk to a cafe or diner and have breakfast or lunch. Look around, get back in the canoe and hit another town for supper."

He's been camping on islands and at campgrounds when he can find them, but hasn't roughed it the entire way.

"In upper Minnesota, I ran into some bad weather, had a headwind and it was wet and miserable and had really turned

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Ron Haines,
canoeing Mississippi River

"Just in Camanche (Iowa) this lady watched me pull up to the dock at a marina in my canoe," he says. "I tied up and walked into town, found a tavern and decided on having a beer. She figured out what I was doing, came up to me and asked if I needed anything, a lift to the store, whatever. In Minnesota, I passed a guy fishing, said hello and talked while I passed by. Two or three hours later I come up on the same guy. There were some rapids ahead, he remembered, and jumped in his truck and was on the bank, waving at me, asking if I had scouted them out and if I would want a ride around them."

As for what's next, Mr. Haines isn't sure. He has a good camera with him, and has been taking notes and pictures as he's gone along.

"I've thought about a book, but I don't know," he says. "You have to find the right genre. I don't think anybody wants a cookbook detailing a Mississippi River canoe trip."

You never know, there might be a market for a book on how to find a fortune.

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