

HALLOWEEN HORROR

OR THE HUMBLING OF "HURRICANE" HOWARD

By A. Howard Kirkland

"How far to the first big rapids?" I asked, trying not to let the fear I was feeling show in my voice. "Just around the bend. You can still see the bridge from there," Ron replied. "This is the one we call 'Bruce's Eye.' You can carry on the right.

At this point I was close to abandoning this foolish venture for the relative pleasure of a long uphill trek back to my truck. Ron's morbid recounting of the perils of the forthcoming rapids was doing nothing to quell the trembling, which, radiating from my stomach, now threatened to engulf my entire body. He continued to describe how, on previous expeditions, this rapids had completely destroyed Pete Shaw's kayak; how it had folded Roger Scott's boat nearly double with Roger inside; how it had sent Bruce Berman to the hospital for stitches to close a wound which only nearly missed his eyeball.

In my present state of mind, I took his implied suggestion to heart and paddled close to the right shore to make sure I didn't miss the portage point. My judgement was reaffirmed when I saw Harvey and Bob follow my lead.

At the top of this rapid, the full flow of the river was diverted to the left by a cobble-strewn ledge. It then plunged down and sharply left over a steep eight foot drop, in such a manner as to sweep the unlucky Paddler directly under a deeply undercut boulder just left of the drop. Even a successful run would require the paddler to lean hard right to miss striking his head upon this rock.

Ron, Dean and Rusty all chose to run the rapid, and with a brilliant display of skill and finesse managed to come through without mishap. Meanwhile, Bob, Harvey and I chose the safer, albeit inglorious, route across the cobble bar on the right.

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Perhaps it should be explained that I often find myself in situations that "sensible" people would avoid like the plague. The problem is that I am cursed with an over-developed ego; I constantly have to prove to myself that I am something other than a left-footed feeble incompetent nerd. The result is that I often tend to exhibit a degree of left-footed-feeble-nerdiness far beyond what I expect of myself in the depths of my deepest depression and self-loathing. As a consequence, I feel even more strongly compelled to achieve yet greater deeds of derring-do. And so the cycle repeats.

Thus it is not surprising that when I heard it said that the lower section of the Meadow River had never been paddled in an open canoe, I immediately decided that I wanted to be the first to do so. My resolve was further bolstered when I asked Bob Taylor and Ron Mullet, both of who had previously kayaked this stream, whether they thought I could expect any reasonable degree of success if I undertook the venture. They replied, "If anyone can, you can." Not exactly encouraging, but I chose to take their assessment at its most positive interpretation: "You Can." I also am an accomplished selective listener; i.e. I hear only what I want to hear.

The foregoing serves only to explain how I found myself, in the company of Ron Mullet, Bob Taylor

and Rusty Dunbar, all renowned kayakers; the inimitable Dean Tomko and his friend, Harvey Shapiro, decked canoists; sitting on the riprap strewn banks of the Meadow River, beneath the looming structure of the U.S. Route 19 bridge.

It was the morning of October 31st, the eve of All Saints' Day, Halloween. I had just finished reading for the hundredth time, Burrell and Davidson's Wild Water West Virginia description of this stream with the bucolic name, in order to prepare myself for what lay ahead; and in hopes of finding there some cause for feeling optimistic about our imminent journey. But it only served to turn the sausage I had eaten for breakfast into a hard, unyielding and totally indigestible lump in the center of my intestines. Upon previous readings, I had treated their dire pronouncements that "every rapids has a death trap" and that "undercut rocks abound" as deliberate overstatements designed to frighten away the turkeys bent on getting a cheap thrill. This morning such musings only tended to tighten the iron band of fear that was encircling my trembling gut. My sense of impending doom was only heightened when Rusty discovered he'd forgotten to bring along his spray skirt and had to return to Summersville Dam to find one. I was convinced that his forgetfulness was of a Freudian nature, though he denied this vehemently.

While we were awaiting his return, some of the others began the traditional pre-trip rehash of the "Death on the River" scenario. Then the normally imperturbable Dean Tomko began expressing doubts as to his being able to "handle this river." The 400-yard-long, arduous, slippery climb up the 60 degree slope back to where the vehicles were parked was beginning to look infinitely more welcoming than did this stream running beneath our feet and disappearing into - what? Catastrophe? Tragedy? Death? Nothing seemed too far-fetched at that moment. Conversation was becoming more morbid by the second. Unable to bear the strain, I said, "Let's talk about something else. Let's talk about sex!"

A few short, nervous ha-has, and then an uncomfortable silence met this sally. For Harvey Shapiro to fail to rise to the bait at the mention of "sex" indicated that he, too, had reached his emotional nadir.

Our meditations were interrupted by the returning Rusty, and, having exhausted our supply of excuses, we put into the water and paddled slowly downstream to meet our destinies.

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Perhaps I should pause momentarily to inject some objective data into this narrative to help you, my patient reader, to bring my hysterical ravings into proper perspective.

The Meadow River, during the final five miles of its descent into the Gauley, has an average gradient of 94 feet per mile, with some stretches exceeding 150 feet per mile. It is characterized by steep ledges, one after another, with no pools and only tiny micro-eddies and violent hydraulics in between. Huge boulders choke the chutes and block treacherous rapids from view of the paddler. The scenery, whenever the paddler can force his attention away from the rapids, is stunning. The Meadow Gorge winds through steep, rugged laurel-and-evergreen coated hills, often overshadowed by megalithic sandstone bluffs. The only evidence of civilization was the polyethylene and styrofoam flotsam washed into the eddies by recent rains and an occasional glimpse through the forest of the railroad above the left shoreline. This morning, the Corps of Engineers at Summersville Dam had reported the Meadow's flow at 980 cubic feet per second; having dropped from 6,000 C.F.S. three days previously. This level proved to be slightly more than what we considered

to be the minimum for canoeing. It is my belief that this level is also only slightly less than maximum (for open canoes, at any rate).

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Even with the first, and by Ron's account one of the worst, rapids behind me, my fear had not even begun to abate; portaging does little to inspire confidence in oneself.

The next rapids (Class 6) begins with a long tortuous Class 3-4 rock garden-ledge type rapid which carries the paddler to a small eddy immediately above a very steep and powerful drop into a complex jumble of boulders. Ron had warned us that we must stop in this eddy to scout before running the drop.

When Dean heard this, he asked, "What happens if you miss the eddy? Sometimes Harvey don't catch eddies too good."

"You GOTTA catch this one," was Ron's instant reply, which triggered a fresh set of spasms in my stomach.

So Dean and Rusty ran the two-hundred-yard entrance rapids, successfully caught the eddy, and got out to look, just in time to see Harvey paddle frantically toward them, hit the eddy at too great an angle, spin around, and drop over the ledge backwards.

This rapids is characterized by a nearly vertical drop over an eight foot ledge, with a narrow chute at its left end just to the right of its juncture with a towering boulder, which is undercut at its bottom. In the middle of this chute, about two feet below the crest, a sharp-cornered boulder splits the chute like a cleaver, diverting the flow to the right into a pile of boulders, which would probably trap the unwary paddler in a vertical position; and to the left and under the undercut boulder, with only a tiny margin for error. The rapids continue immediately over a series of smaller drops before slowing down.

So having missed the eddy, Harvey found himself dropping backwards over the ledge, totally out of control. Suddenly, in the middle of the drop, he turned completely upside-down, with only the bottom of his boat partially visible in the churning, foaming waters.

It is not too clear what happened then; we only know that Harvey managed narrowly to miss the cleaver, and wash down the "clean" chute. Somewhere in the midst of the chaos, he managed to separate himself from his boat and his paddle.

When Dean first realized Harvey wasn't going to make the eddy, he quickly jumped into his boat and went to Harvey's rescue, which he accomplished only a short way downstream. After a quick survey, it was determined that Harvey had suffered a painful (but not severe) bruise on his thigh and had lost his paddle. Luckily, he had a spare.

Bob and Ron had followed Harvey, but had successfully caught the eddy and had gotten out to scout, when I came paddling down, only to find that the eddy was already full of boats. I tried to squeeze in below the boats, but only found myself on the verge of duplicating Harvey's debacle; my stern was slowly being drawn toward the edge of the drop, despite my frantic efforts to paddle back up into the eddy.

At that moment, I would have gladly given up canoeing forever just to be walking back to my truck. This thought was instantly replaced by a feeling which I can only compare to what the children of Israel probably felt as the waters of the Red Sea parted before them; when, like the hand of God, Ron grabbed my bow painter and pulled me back into the eddy. Somehow, I got my quaking limbs to support me, and climbed out onto the shore. Only my pride (read ego) prevented me from striking out for the railroad track and thence home.

Upon scouting the rapid from atop the undercut boulder, I decided that carrying around the first

ledge, while being un-heroic, was far more desirable than the consequences of making an error while negotiating the drop. Apparently Bob and Rusty concurred in my assessment, for they, too, chose to carry, even though Ron and Dean had made successful runs. After re-entering the river below the undercut boulder, I managed to plunge and plough my way through the rest of the ledges and holes.

Maneuvering was becoming increasingly difficult; I was taking on gallons of water at every drop and as a consequence of the ever-growing knot of fear inside me, was becoming weak and very shaky. I cannot fully recall how the others were doing, because my every thought, all of my senses, were turned inward and toward the river immediately in front of me. I was only peripherally aware that there were others on the river besides myself; the only part they played in my scheme of things was whether I could rely on them to be on hand when (not if) I needed to be rescued.

My memory of my physical surroundings from here on is quite sketchy and out-of-sequence. Boulders, ledges, holes, hydraulics, slide rapids, undercuts, they came so rapidly that my mind was unable to record them; I was receiving images, reacting to them, and rejecting them to make way for the next. This was pure "reaction paddling." The thinking part of me was totally engrossed with one thought: "What the hell am I doing here?"

One more boulder garden and one more carry-around, and then another boulder garden. Not one mile into our trip, and we found ourselves confronted with a series of Class 4 and 5 rapids, culminating in a Class 6 horror which some paddler, probably in his cups, had christened "Home of Sweet Jesus." Here, the river widened and swirled around house-sized megaliths and plunged over countless ledges and spewed through narrow, funnel-like openings over a seven or eight foot ledge. Needless to say, no one chose to run this one, although several of the braver souls had run the rapids immediately above. Harvey and I took our boats out above the first of these rapids on the right bank and made our way to a path which parallels the river and pushed, pulled, and carried our boats about one-fourth mile to a point just below "Sweet Jesus." The path we were following appeared to be the remains of a late nineteenth century narrow-gauge railroad; the tracks and all but the rotting remnants of a few crossties were gone as were several sections of grade, which had succumbed to landslides. These slides, along with the closely spaced pines growing along the path made portaging quite difficult. Never before had I undertaken such a carry so willingly, even gladly. Up to this point, no one had encountered serious difficulty. Harvey had taken a spill and collected some bruises, and was experiencing pain in his thigh and one of his knees, which suffers from torn cartilage (an old wound). This made it difficult for him to climb with his boat on his shoulder.

We re-grouped immediately downstream of "Sweet Jesus" and paddled another Class 4-5 series of ledges to a point just above a complex rapid known as "Gateway." Ron instructed me to follow him, turned, and disappeared over a ten-foot ledge. So I followed and landed upright, but with a canoe full of water only feet away from another drop. Somehow, I managed to bulldoze my way into a relatively quiet eddy (Class 3), climb out onto the rock and dump the water out of my canoe. By this time, Ron and all the others had vanished, leaving me in the middle of this boiling, plunging nightmare with no idea which way was out. Here again, I swallowed my pride and chose to portage the remainder of this rapid.

Below this rapid, the river took a turn to the left and immediately to the right again while dividing itself between several small boulders and dropping over a two foot ledge into a moderate hydraulic. I failed to miss the rock above the drop, went in sideways, catching my bow on a boulder at the edge of the left shore, and banging my stern on a mid-stream rock. The boat tipped downstream and almost capsized, being saved from doing so by my reflexive low brace and the current forcing the boat over the rock and into the hydraulic below. Somehow, I managed to remain upright and to paddle into an eddy on the left shore, where once again, I dumped gallons and gallons of water from my canoe.

By this time, my feeling of terror had become almost absolute. I was hyperventilating uncontrollably and had to make a deliberate effort to calm my pounding heart and quaking limbs. Never before had I known such fear and apprehension.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine myself lying upon the sun warmed beach of a tropical isle with gently undulating waves lapping at my outstretched feet; but my fear invaded my fantasy and turned the gentle wavelets into a roaring tidal wave. So I swallowed by heart and my breakfast sausage for the umpteenth time, got back into my boat and paddled on.

During the time I was portaging "Gateway" rapids, Rusty, Dean and Harvey decided to paddle ahead on the premise that two small parties would progress more rapidly than one large group. Harvey was experiencing considerable pain in his "trick" knee, and needed to get off the river as quickly as possible. This left Ron and Bob to nursemaid me. And nursemaid me they did. They were patient and considerate, and offered encouragement, and above all, were always there to help when I went swimming, as I did several times. For this, I am deeply indebted to both of them.

My difficulty was compounded by my lack of sufficient strength to maintain control of my canoe, which was often at the brink of disaster, and saved, not by my ability to avoid hazards, but by my fortunate recoveries. And so I continued on downstream.

The next rapids came in quick succession: "Big Down-and-Out," a steep Class 5 ledge, "Taylor's Hole," where as the tale has it, Bob Taylor, during his first trip down this stream, took a nasty swim as his only alternative to spending the rest of the day in the hole. Next came "Little Down-and-Out," another Class 5 ledge. Then came "Island Falls," marked by the 500 yard long island for which the rapid is named, which diverts about two thirds of the flow into the left channel, while the remainder runs down the right. It begins as a Class 4 complex boulder field/ledge-drop rapid terminating at an eight-foot sheer drop with only one clear landing spot below; that landing being beneath a projecting boulder at the crest of the ledge which had only a thin padding of water. I had managed to make my way to the left shore at the top of the ledge, where I beached my canoe and got out to look.

Having thus far managed to survive more or less intact, and having Ron's assurance that the worst rapids were behind me, I was slowly regaining my confidence and along with it my all-pervading ego. Thus it was that I decided to attempt this difficult drop. I got into my

canoe, paddled out of the eddy, took a deep breath, and, lining up on the projecting boulder, launched myself into space.

At this instant, I discovered that I was too far to the right and too slow. The protruding boulder caused me to tip to the right, and I landed with my gunwales perpendicular to the water's surface. I immediately capsized, and washed downstream, all the while vigorously attempting to right myself by applying a knuckle-and-paddle brace to the river's bottom. All that was accomplished was the leaving of the skin of several knuckles on a boulder or two. As I disentangled myself from my thigh straps and surfaced, I looked about for someone to rescue me before I was swept into the next precipitous drop. And there, on a boulder above me on the left shore, was Ron with - was it a rope? No such luck. It was a camera. While I was struggling to save my canoe, and myself, here was my guide, the man into whose hands I had placed my very life, recording my shame and humiliation for the entire world to see! Fortunately, the water here was moving slowly and I had ample time to swim to shore with my canoe in tow, whereupon I emptied it again and made ready to continue.

The next rapid, according to Ron, is know, as "Sliding Board," an eight foot, 75 degree sloping rock with a moderate (Class 5) hydraulic at its bottom, followed by more Class 4 boulder-ledge rapids. As I prepared to scout, Ron yelled, "Don't look! Just follow me." To be totally honest, I must admit that following Ron is probably the only reason that I had managed to come out of many of these rapids alive; but any comfort I could take from this was offset by the realization that following Ron was what had got me into them in the first place. Ron later admitted that the reason he advised me not to scout was that he didn't want me to get "freaked out" any worse than I was already.

So I followed, and managed to negotiate the slide and its hydraulic, taking on only a moderate amount of water. The following rapids were as difficult as those preceding, and I continued hitting rocks, missing chutes, running rapids backwards and somehow accomplishing to swim three more times. Oddly enough, I turned over in the less consequential rapids (Class 4) while remaining upright in the rest (those I didn't or couldn't portage). I bring this to your attention, patient reader, only to salve my wounded pride, which had had to suffer indignity heaped upon embarrassment upon humiliation.

As if it hadn't done enough to overwhelm all but the most hardy and determined paddlers, the river turned mean again, and flowed through a most intimidating piece of mayhem known as

“Double Undercut.” Bob Taylor, on a previous trip, and probably in a funeral mood equal to mine, had dubbed this one “Casket Spray” for a coffin-shaped boulder above the right shore, which was adorned by a fully flowering Rhododendron “wreath.”

Here, the river turns abruptly right, drops over a concave four-foot ledge, forms a large hydraulic, plunges between a tombstone boulder on the left and the right hand arm of the ledge, and then over a three-foot ledge with another swamping hydraulic. If the paddler is still in control of his boat at this point, he has a chance of survival if he can negotiate a quick left turn and a narrow channel between two radically undercut boulders which almost touch each other about five feet above the surface. It was without a moment’s hesitation that we all chose to portage this one. We were to find later that Dean Tomko, who was now ahead of our group, had made a daring run through here. It seems that he capsized in the first hydraulic, but managed to “Eskimo roll” back up in time to meet the next one, and ran the remainder without mishap.

Somewhere near the middle of the fourth mile, Ron paddled up beside me and said, “You’re through the worst of it now, it’s all Class 3 and 4 from now on.” I never thought I would greet such a statement as “it’s all Class 3 and 4” with such relief. Nonetheless, two of my most spectacular upsets occurred in this final mile and a half. I would relate these episodes, but the memory has blurred, owing to the intensity of the day’s experiences. Perhaps I practice selective memory, as well as selective listening.

At long last we came in sight of the Gauley River and the beginning of the rapid known as “Lost Paddle.” Here was the site of the eastern landing of the eighteenth century Carnifex Ferry of civil war fame. Here also is the U.S.G.S. Mount Lookout Gauge, which was reading 5.10 feet as we floated by. Rusty, Dean and Harvey were already there. Harvey’s knee was very painful, and he chose to carry out here, rather than paddle the remaining ten miles of the Gauley to Peters Creek the next day. The rest of us hid our boats and gear in the bushes and took turns carrying Harvey’s boat up the long steep hiking trail to Carnifex Ferry State Park, where our shuttle was waiting.

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I am now sitting at my dining room table, wearing bedroom slippers and bathrobe.

Even in these comfortable surroundings, and even though several months have passed since the events I have related above, I have only to close my eyes to recall the terrible feeling of near total helplessness in the face of disaster that had been my constant companion throughout

this expedition.

Upon reflection, I have been forced to acknowledge (ego notwithstanding) that even were I twice the paddler I sometimes-fancy myself to be, I had no business attempting such an undertaking; especially in an open canoe. That I survived, I credit only to luck and the help of my friends. Had I but known what lay in store at the beginning, I probably would have abandoned the idea. But I am one who seems to learn only from experience.

Maybe I’ll do better next time.

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Author’s note

In the spring of 1994, I undertook my second trip down the Lower Meadow. By this time, several open boaters, all of whom possessed paddling skills far exceeding mine, had paddled this stream.

On this trip I was accompanied by no less than three other open boaters: Tim Ed Spangler, John Wingfield, and John Dierdorf. Doug Cox paddled his kayak.

The river was flowing at a rate of 550 C.F.S. (almost half the flow from my previous trip), which proved to be a very comfortable and manageable level, Dean Tomko’s opinions notwithstanding.

I was paddling a thirteen-foot canoe, as compared to the sixteen-footer I had paddled the last time. And although almost none of the rapids matched my memories thereof, I was feeling much more confident than on the previous expedition. And even though I still managed to take several swims, I found myself actually enjoying myself. Absent the life-threatening undercuts and strainers, this river is actually a great “play” river. Many surfing ledges and play spots await those bold enough to meet the challenge.

This trip never achieved the gut-wrenching intensity which characterized the previous one. No one had any serious problems, and everyone had a wonderful time.

I have no desire to ever do it again.

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This article has been edited and revised by the author to correct spelling and grammar errors, which were overlooked in the original.

Thank God for Microsoft Word.