

Kickapoo river flood 2018 -3

This is my story of the Kickapoo river trip Bruise Schneider and I canoed Aug 27th 2018

This 22-mile river trip turned out to be by far the most dangerous trip of my life.

August 27th

Monday 4:15 am

I set my alarm early so I could complete the final trip preparations and begin driving to the southwest corner of Wisconsin by five AM. Bruce and I planned a three-day, two-night canoe adventure on a twenty-two mile stretch of the Kickapoo River, considered to be one of the most scenic river ways in Wisconsin. The weather forecast predicted a beautiful day with a chance of possible thunderstorms in the evening.

I roped my eighteen-and-a-half-foot Old Town canoe to a small canoe trailer and for extra safety measures I strapped it down with ratchet straps. I tightly tied my favorite paddles as well as two emergency paddles in on both sides of the canoe under the back seat and had already packed seat cushions and life jackets in the car. I had remote camped and canoed for forty years and learned a long time ago to use caution while preparing for any trip.

I never packed a backpack over seventy-five pounds and fully packed mine with only the bare necessities. This included one pair of shorts, pants, a shirt, a flannel, under garments, a coat. I also brought along basic cleaning supplies for personal cleanliness and washing out meal dishes, an emergency medical kit, fishing supplies, prepared foods, a tent, a sleeping cot, a sleeping bag, a cooler with meat, eggs and hopefully extra room for the fish we caught.

We met in Ontario, WI at 8:30 AM and dropped off the canoe at a local Kickapoo riverside park. We then followed each other with our vehicles and drove down river to LaFarge, WI and dropped off my car and canoe trailer at a riverside park. We then drove Bruce's truck back to Ontario and parked his truck near our canoe. We then began our river trip downstream.

My spacious and comfortable canoe made of a double layer of polyurethane plastic suited this type of camping trip perfectly. The cooler was heavy with ice so we placed it toward the stern to allow the rear man better steering control. The backpacks occupied the center and the fishing poles were all set in order to quickly fish any spot we considered to have good potential.

On this beautiful, warm, sunny morning, the approximately twenty-foot-wide river moved a predictable three to four miles per hour. The clear water averaged two feet in depth and cut through countless limestone structures covered in ferns and moss. Trees seemed to impossibly grow from steep smooth walls of different sizes and shapes, proving mother nature always finds a way to create life anywhere.

Around noon we landed the canoe on a small sand bar so we could take a break and have a small lunch. Two kayakers, a father and son, passed us by and after we remained on the sand bar for another 30 minutes to ensure we gave them space to peacefully enjoy the river. Throughout the rest of the day we saw two other pairs of day kayakers as the Kickapoo provided many opportunities for shorter paddling adventures.

On the first day I intended to travel a six mile stretch down the river to bridge number five while taking it easy fishing and relaxing. We needed travel under a total of 20 bridges in order to reach Lafarge. As Bruce's first overnight river trip, I wanted to ensure he had a great experience. We intended to camp the first night near bridge number five, the first primitive campsite located in Wild Cat State Park, however, we reached the bridge early in the day with perfect weather and calm wind while having a great time so we decided to continue on another six miles to bridge area nine. At that rate we would complete our trip on the second day so we agreed, when we reached Lafarge, we would take my car and trailer down river twelve more miles to the village of Viola.

By 5:00 PM we reached the site located near bridge number nine. Clouds started to cover the sky so we focused on setting up camp. We wanted to ensure we didn't get caught in the rain unprepared. My phone had no cell reception since I entered the river basin. Fortunately, Bruce's cell phone had great internet reception so we checked the radar and we could see a storm coming our way, appearing to miss us to the north.

Elevated about 15 feet above the river, our sandy surfaced campsite required a very steep climb to access. The relatively small camping area measured only twenty feet in both directions, but worked just fine. We saw no trees on our side of the river for quite a distance. The grass had grown about four feet tall and consisted of thick field grass, burning nettle, and a small brush plant-very difficult to walk through. We tied the canoe to a tree about 5 inches in diameter so it would not float away for any reason. Then we brought our backpacks up to the campsite and left the cooler and life jackets in the canoe. I did take one of my canoe seats up to the camp site so I would not be sitting in sand all night while sitting around the fire.

By 7:00 pm we had our tents up, sleeping cots blown up and sleeping bags in place. Next, we retrieved enough wood from the riverside to build a cook fire. After a long day and we were ready for a good meal. We had pork steaks prepared in the cooler and ready for the fire. Unfortunately, a light rain started to come down and reduced our great meal to cheese, sausage, and crackers. Bruce had a larger tent than I so we used his to sit in to wait out the rain. We didn't let the weather get us down and proceeded to play cards, making the best of the first night of a great river trip.

By 8:30 PM we continued to monitor the radar weather map watching as the storm significantly grew to 300 miles long and 50 miles wide. This storm appeared about three quarters past us. Most all of the storm on the weather map in the red category, the tail end of the storm, was dropping down into our path. Having experienced bad weather on river trips many times in the past, I did not worry. Getting caught in the rain while camping exists as just a natural element to contend with. We did not consider it a big deal at all.

Throughout the years of camping I slowly invested in very rugged camping equipment. The most important items a person needs are a canoe, backpack and a tent. Mine had all proven themselves time and time again. Bruce, on the other hand, purchased a new unproven tent at a discounted price. Considered a three-man tent, it fortunately held both of us earlier in the night as we tried to wait out the storm. Under normal circumstances his tent would have performed just fine, but it could not hold out the amount of rainfall that was about to begin.

9:00 pm The light rain suddenly turned in to a torrential downpour. The rain smashed down on Bruce's tent with such pressure we could hardly hear each other talk. The rain continued to come down at an amazing rate, never letting up.

10:30 The rain continued to pour down as hard as ever as I become increasingly concerned about my canoe. I put on a rain suit and stepped out into the rain. My flashlight proved nearly useless as I could only see about fifteen to twenty feet in front of me. I could mostly only see the heavy rain's reflection. I walked over to the river and looked down into the sand bar where I tied my canoe, only to find it GONE. The sand bar, the tree, and the canoe, all gone. I was completely shocked. I wanted to jump down to where the sand bar was to check if I could possibly see better down there, and hopefully find my canoe, but did not think I would be able to climb back up the now saturated bank and decided against it. Definitely the right thing to do.

Bruce received his first flood warning on his cell phone stating flooding in our area. We completely understood flooding was likely but never imagined it would ever reach up this high above the river. At that time, the river had risen at least twenty-four inches. We only had one concern at this point- finding our canoe. If we could not locate it, we planned to find the best way to walk out of the woods to the nearest road and hitch hike a ride to my car. Bruce attempted to access MapQuest on his phone to help direct us out of the woods. Do to poor satellite signal he was unable to access the app.

11:00 pm The rain persisted as hard and fast as ever. In frustration I went to my tent to hope fully get some sleep and get up early to look for my lost canoe. At least I could rest in my completely dry tent.

12:00pm Bruce woke me up telling me the river had risen to his tent, and we needed to move out. I couldn't really believe what I was hearing him say. There was no way the river could climb up to the top of the 15 ft bank. I slept on a cot about three to four inches high off the ground. When I slipped out of my sleeping bag and pushed down on the tent floor, the floor sank about three inches. Obviously, a lot of water had surrounded my tent, but I remained completely dry. The stakes in the ground held the tent in place as the water went up, when I opened the door to get out of my tent the water came rushing in. I climbed out and shined my flashlight down at my feet only to see my legs ankle deep in river water. I shined toward the river to see the crest of the river level to the water at my feet. The river rose over the fifteen-foot bank and the current moved extremely fast. I could see trees and large branches floating by. We agreed, we needed to pack up our gear and not to waste any time. I positioned my backpacks in the thick grass to help hold it up to help prevent the pack from falling into the water.

12:15 PM The river rose up to our knees, I had my cot and sleeping bag rolled up and most of my gear, and still attempted to pack my tent. The tent had swollen with water, forcing me to abandon it. I closed up my backpack, any items not in it at this point stayed behind.

I decided to try walking away from the river to find higher ground, but the water just got deeper the further I walked. The rain made it impossible to see where I was going. I was forced to return to our flooded campsite.

12:30 The water was now up to our waist and just kept rising and we knew there was no easy way out of this situation.

12:45 Bruce suggested calling 911. am I could not believe I was actually considering it. Never in my life did I ever think I would need professional assistance to escape the woods. I didn't want to call for help.

I was standing in place with water up to my chest, rain coming down so hard my flash light was almost useless. Our position was not looking good and we had no idea where to go. I could not think of anything to help our situation.

1:06 We called 9:11 At this point, it was obvious we had found ourselves in a real life and death situation. As Bruce used his phone, I was watching the continuous rain drench his hands. I wondered how long the phone could handle the water splashing down upon it as I realized the importance of that phone call, and the importance of protecting that phone.

Bruce reached the 911 control center where they located Bruce's phone and sent help our way.

The river was now all around us, the current was pushing at our backs forcing us to brace ourselves. debris was continually floating into us, we kept pushing it all away. The rain continued to down pour as hard as it did four hours prior. I realized once the water rose to a certain point we would lose our foot hold and be swept away with the current. We were now considering the real fact that rescue may not arrive us fast enough.

It seemed we had more good questions than good answers. If we left the camp site, our rescuers could possibly lose contact with us and we would again find ourselves on our own. Our life jackets disappeared downriver with my canoe and cooler so no matter what we decided to do, it was not going to be easy. We could see no trees to simply climb and wait this out.

The first option was to again attempt to walk away from the river and find high land. I lost my compass in all the confusion. The flooded grounds were very deep at this point, developing very a strong current of their own. The water was now considerably higher than it was the first time I attempted this. Also due to the high water and the inability to see we risked eventually walking back into the river around a bend.

The second option was swim with the current down river.

If we choice or were force to swim this would mean abandoning our backpacks and in the black of night backpedal downstream, with our feet forward until we blindly found a tree or something we could hold onto.

We would have to decide to ether backpedal feet first down the main part of the river or try to back pedal over the flooded grass and brush.

The river was now intensely rushing with the trees and debris all around. It was very obvious to swim the main part of the river was impossible.

The other choice was to try to backpedal over the flooded grass and brush that ran beside the now flooded river. If we did choose to swim over the flooded grass, we would likely get entangled. Ether way we knew if we decided to try to swim out, we would be separated, there would be no way we could keep in touch.

Eventually the rescue team arrived at our area. First the team shined a flood light in the air from their location. We could see the light off in the distance They called Bruce's phone, as he removed it from his pocket, but his wet his fingers wouldn't unlock the phone. He missed the call, but then somehow managed to dry his hands and call them back. First, they wanted us to walk to the light, but that was impossible. Walking to the light would require us to cross the river.

4

Once the rescue team realized they were on the wrong side river they repositioned their trucks to our side of the river. At this time the team decided to walk to us. In time we started seeing flashlights periodically disappearing and reappearing.

We could only stand in place while the river rushed around us and wait. This went on for quite some time, Bruce flashed them with our flash light allowing them to get a fixed location on us. Eventually, the rescuers stopped about sixty yards away and tried to call out to us, but the hard rain made it impossible to hear them.

In the nearly neck deep water and unwavering rain, Bruce states to me "they are not coming any closer. They are waiting for us to go to them and I'm going now". So, he started toward them and I followed. Walking to them proved extremely difficult, but we did have their lights to lead us. We worked our way through the tall grass and it was exhausting. Logs bumped us and branches lodged between our legs in the now nearly neck deep water and we finally reached a point that forced us to swim in order to reach them. Once we reached the rescue team, they hauled us out of the rushing water and took our backpacks as we could barely move our bodies.

The rescue team led us through more long grass and flooded water until we eventually reached a corn field. We followed them through three corn fields to finally come to a road with an emergency fire truck and an ambulance waiting for us. The EMT's checked us over and quickly released us.

Tuesday 2:30 AM After five and a half hours, the pounding rain finally calmed to a light rain. The rescue team alerted us now that we were safe, our vehicles were most likely not. They stated the village of Ontario and the village of LaFarge were both in danger of possible flooding and we parked both of our vehicles near the river. The rescue team drove us to LaFarge to my car to find it safe and sound. We shook every member of the rescue team's hands for all they had done. Considering what we had been through and the time of night, they tried to convince us to spend the night in LaFarge. We politely declined and just wanted to get to Bruce's truck to continue on our way home. Ontario was 25 minutes away, we hurried to get there.

3:00 AM We just started to cross over the bridge entering Ontario, WI when we saw a truck in the middle of the bridge and a man waving his arms trying to stop us. We stopped about ten yards from his truck. A sheep farmer stood with a soaked sheep that strayed from his flock. I got out of the car to see what the farmer wanted, he told me the bridge was starting to flood over and we needed to get out of there. The farmer told us Ontario was completely underwater, he stated "Ontario is up to their eye balls in water". I looked at him like he was crazy. I just couldn't believe what was happening. He got upset with me and shined his flashlight behind him on to the bridge. I saw water flowing over the bridge toward me at a very fast rate. The farmer snapped at me and stated "it's not just the Kickapoo river flooding over, the entire Kickapoo valley is flooding over". He only could find one of his fifty sheep. Bruce and the sheep farmer assisted me by unhooking the trailer so I could turn around. We then quickly reattached the trailer, the farmer gave directions for the next best road to get out of the valley. We wished him luck with his sheep and we were off.

Starting from LaFarge, going to Ontario was north, and now we knew that was impassable. Following the farmers directions, we took a small road west. This road had heavy damages from the flood and it appeared the flood would intensify before this ended. As we drove past the local farms, we could see from their yard lights, the damage done on every farm. Water raged through their farm yards water

rushing around the buildings, taking rocks, farm equipment, anything not tied down, and leaving them scattered in the roads and ditches. Water rushed through the drainage ditches hitting the driveway culverts, back splashing four or five feet in the air. We continued on past many more farms seeing the same destruction. After going about 20 miles we came to a bridge, which flooded also, forcing us to turn around and go back to the highway that joined LaFarge and Ontario. We then google mapped a road that takes us out of the valley driving east, hoping with a little luck, the route would get us safely out of the valley. We saw the same farm damage as before- trees down, and debris everywhere. Unfortunately, the first bridge we had to cross was also flooded and impassable.

So once again, we went back to the main road and went south, we drove back to LaFarge and took a road going south and finally got ahead of the oncoming flood.

Tuesday 7:30 AM We arrived at Bruce's house. We have been soaked to the skin since midnight, after a shower I found his couch and took a well needed rest.

Summary

Later that day we learned the flood exceeded all records in Ontario WI, the flood totaled 22 feet high above flood stage. Every home or business suffered severe damages or suffered complete destruction. Bruce's truck parked in the flooded village fell victim to the flood. Amazingly no one was injured. I never found out what happened to the farmers lost 49 sheep.

The severity of the storm took everyone by surprise. The Lafarge Rescue team didn't realize in just a few hours after helping us the village of Lafarge was going to be 11 over food stage. If we would have accepted the first responder's kind offer to stay at the bread and breakfast in LaFarge my car would have also been caught in the flood.

I do believe Bruce's leaking tent had a lot to do with us getting out alive. He was fully aware when the flood water hit his tent. In this rare incident my tent was actually too water proof, I likely would have continued sleeping for several more minutes (or until my tent walls crushed in). At that time every second counted, the flood water rose at an incredible rate. We needed all the time we had to save ourselves. There was a point I actually believed I was going to drown. It is a very sad empty feeling. This was a truly life changing experience.

911 – I am so thankful to the Lafarge rescue team for saving our lives. They were totally prepared for a water rescue such as the one we needed. Their response time and professionalism were over whelming. There is no question in my mind Lafarge rescue saved our lives. I have never truly been in a life and death situation before. I will never forget that night or any of the people who helped save us.

Thank You Lafarge Rescue Team