

GANGING AGLEY

I recently devoted an entire summer to a trip I had been planning and dreaming about for years. The idea was to canoe the entire length of the Mississippi River from its mouth all the way to its source in the rice lakes of northern Minnesota. No one before me had exactly pinpointed the very spot where the Mighty Mississippi actually begins: it was just “up yonder,” above Lake Itaska someplace. I was determined to stand on the very spot. Like Stanley finding the source of the Nile. I’d be famous.

I equipped a sixteen-foot cedar canoe with what was essentially a backpacking outfit. If necessary, I could cook and sleep right in the canoe. Carefully stowed in the bow was a bottle of champagne to toast my arrival at the exact, ultimate source of the Mississippi River.

I began my odyssey (That’s Greek for “odd journey”) at New Orleans where river meets ocean and huge tankers and container ships come and go. What followed were long days and weeks paddling and nights tied up to the bank or camping in one of the many riverside parks. Through Natchez, Vicksburg and Memphis of Civil War fame. Past Cairo (pronounced “Karo” by its citizens) where the Ohio River comes in. Through Sain’ Louie and Eas’ Sain’ Louie, past the mouth of the wide Missouri and still farther north, always north.

The Mississippi is much narrower up there than back at the mouth but still wide enough to dwarf my life peanut shell of a canoe. No more big ships. River traffic now was mostly barges pushed or pulled by powerful tow boats. I paddled through the miles of heavy industry that are Rock Island, Davenport, and Clinton, continually dodging barges and boats.

Through Minneapolis-St. Paul and on to St. Cloud (is there really a saint named “Cloud”?) and Grand Rapids. The Mississippi is even narrower here and begins to meander. By the time I get to Lake Itaska it’s a pleasant, leisurely little stream barely thirty feet wide, totally unlike the miles of boats and barges and ships behind me.

Beyond Itaska the once Mighty Mississippi is only a creek, five feet wide and a couple feet deep meandering through a vast marshland of reeds. Every few hundred yards it widens into a small shallow lake of wild rice. As I make my way ever farther upstream the Mississippi continues to narrow and the rice lakes become progressively smaller

ponds. As I enter the last of these ponds I think, "At last! This is the true source of the Mississippi River." But no: there is a shallow creek flowing into it barely wide and deep enough for my canoe. The low banks are so close on either side there's no room for my paddle. I pull the canoe along by grasping reeds and grass on the low banks. I'm almost there. I know I'm almost there!

My canoe wedges tight and will go no farther. The source must be very close! Unpacking my champagne from the bow, I sprint ahead on foot. The stream narrows to the width of my hand. Then, at long last, there it is: bubbling up through a small round hole the size of my fist is the ultimate source of the great, the mighty Mississippi River!

Sitting next to the spring which has been my goal for so many weeks, I push the champagne bottle down into the hole. It fits like a cork in a bottle. I leave it there to chill while I lie back, savoring the moment, one with the great explorers of history. I'm tired from my long quest, the sun is warm, the ground soft. I close my eyes.

WHUP! WHUP! WHUP! A National Guard helicopter is hovering directly overhead. Beside it is another, even larger helicopter: all black, no markings, absolutely silent! Armed men in body armor are rappelling down from the National Guard craft. A voice on a loudspeaker orders, "Remove the bottle from the hole and step away!" I snatch the champagne from the hole and scramble away. "Down on your knees! Hands behind your head!" An angry guy with a lot of military insignia demands my ID and orders me to explain myself.

Flustered, I babble something about my quest for the source of the Mississippi and chilling my champagne. After a few more questions he gives me a disgusted look and speaks into a microphone on his shoulder, "Stand down! Repeat: Stand down! Its just some ***** cooling a bottle of booze." To me he says, "Do you realize you've stopped the entire Mississippi River? It's just one long empty ditch with barges and boats and ships lying in the mud! Pick up your stuff and get out of here. Don't even think about coming back, ever! I'll take the booze: it's, ugh, evidence"

I scurried back down the stream which was now running again since I removed the champagne bottle. Glancing back as I ran, I saw the National Guard chopper WHUP-WHUP-WHUPing away at tree top level. The silent black helicopter simply disappeared, leaving a faint puff of blue vapor.

So ended my long-planned quest for the ultimate source of the Mighty Mississippi River. Robert Burns once wrote, "The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley." So true. My well-laid scheme for reaching the Mississippi's ultimate source certainly ended by ganging a-gley.