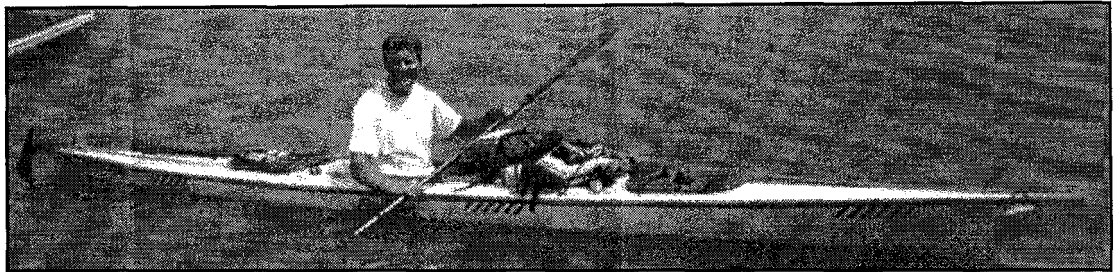


Mississippi River trip not like Huck said

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Tom Kinsella on his 2552 mile river trip during the summer of 2000

After paddling an 18 1/2 foot sea kayak 2,552 miles in 48 days, Tom Kinsella seemed surprised when asked if he could stand up.

"Of course," he said, his tanned face lit with a broad smile. "It's like anything else, your muscles get used to the activity. I never really was sore."

Apparently, Kinsella isn't your ordinary river rat, because this wasn't your ordinary river trip. His jaunt was an eight-week trip down the length of the Mississippi River, starting June 3 at Minnesota's Lake Itasca and ending July 22 at Venice, La., just before the river dips into the Gulf of Mexico.

Kinsella is a language arts teacher at Englewood's Flood Middle School. His parents, Joe and Norma Kinsella, live in Grand Junction, and only shake their heads at their son's enormous adventure.

"He always talks about doing these type of things," said Norma, amazed at her son's determination. "He's wanted to do this for years, but I can't believe he would actually do something like this."

Said Papa Joe more succinctly: "I think he's crazy."

Not crazy, exactly, but certainly driven. Most people envision Huck Finn or Tom Sawyer casually floating a river that drains all or part of 31 states and two Canadian provinces.

The reality, said Tom Kinsella, is much different.

"You couldn't do (the whole river) by just floating," said Kinsella, who averaged 53 miles every day. "The river has only a 2 miles per hour current and the headwind often is strong enough to blow you upstream."

"This was not a leisure trip. I paddled 10 hours a day for 48 days, and lost 23 pounds."

The quite-trim Kinsella got hooked on

paddling early, while working summers for the Denver recreation department. He and his wife, Donna, made a pact to paddle in every state, and now they have only Hawaii to go.

The Mississippi trip started out as a couples endeavor, but Donna's work (she, too teaches middle school) stopped her from going. Undaunted, Tom went alone, albeit with some help.

"School got out in June and the next day Donna dropped me off at Lake Itasca State Park in Minnesota," Tom said.

From the marshlands of Lake Itasca (where a sign reminds travelers, "2,552 miles to the Gulf") to the big river, Kinsella paddled through 11 consecutive days of rain.

He carried all his food, carefully wrapped in 46 individual packages.

"I had everything with me I needed," said Kinsella. "Dinners required five to 10 minutes of boiling water. Breakfasts consisted of granola and breakfast bars."

He passed through 29 locks controlling river traffic, at times waiting up to three hours to get through. The wait allowed him opportunities to talk to other river trippers, including a family on a raft of inner tubes and planks.

"The trip was made by the people you meet along the river," Kinsella said. "These really are river people, those who live along the river and those who work on the river."

He said fewer than 10 people a year attempt the entire Mississippi, although many people do shorter sections of the river.

"In Iowa, I met a 62-year-old father and his 27-year-old son who started the first of May in canoes. My sea kayak was about three times faster than a canoe, and I think those two still are on the river," Kinsella said. "Other boaters I met

skipped major parts or got out early."

He camped on river islands, surviving intense heat, alligators, packs of wild dogs, and severe dehydration.

"I pulled into a station in Missouri to get some water and saw the heat index was 110. The station master recommended I not go back out," recalled Kinsella, who at the time was drinking 2 1/2 gallons of water per day. "I started drinking four gallons a day."

One concession was a cell phone to call his wife.

"As I got further down into Louisiana, I was calling her three times a week to let her know where I was," said Kinsella. Green and red mileage markers allowed him to be pretty specific about his travel.

"I called her about five days before I got out, and she took two days to drive down and pick me up," said Kinsella. He left the river at Venice, where the road ends at the Gulf of Mexico.

"So few people attempt the Mississippi it remains an adventure," said Kinsella.

"You have to be prepared for it," he cautioned "This was not a Huck Finn or Tom Sawyer type of thing."

He said his best memories are the people and the wildlife.

"I have never been on a river trip where I saw that much wildlife," said Kinsella, recounting bald eagles, otters, ospreys, turtles and numerous deer. "I also saw three water moccasins, but they don't bother you. You just know they are there and go on."

Back home in Colorado, Kinsella prepares for school with a terrific "What I did on my summer vacation" story.

"It's one of those things you do in your life that you carry forever," he said. "You can't put a price on a trip like this."