

A Day on the Cooper River in a Kayak!

By Russ Case

Russ Case is a retired mechanical engineer living in Charlotte with his wife, Bonnie. They are enthusiastic supporters of the Society and are frequently seen at the Annual Meetings and home tours.

There was nothing, except maybe a horse race, that Charleston physician and rice planter John Beufain Irving (1800-1881) enjoyed more than taking in the fresh air and scenic vistas while sailing up the Cooper River aboard a steamboat. Writing in *A Day on the Cooper River*, published in 1842, he declared that there was “no more agreeable mode of passing a day.” While a quick crossing of a Lake Moultrie cove, a four-mile paddle down the Tail Race Canal, and a guided tour of Wadboo Creek and its adjacent ricefields doesn’t technically qualify as a day on the Cooper River, I hope that the spirit of Dr. Irving will forgive me if I borrow the title of his book for this article.

It was what Berkeley County boosters might call a “chamber of commerce” day. White, cotton-candy clouds floated in a Carolina blue sky, and the morning sun made the day sparkle. The weather forecast was ideal: a high temperature of just over 70 degrees and no chance of rain. What a glorious day for the South Carolina Historical Society’s first ever kayak tour! When I arrived at the designated meeting spot at the Old Santee Canal Park in Moncks

Corner, there were already several small groups of people gathered, comparing notes on what gear and what amount of sun protection to take along on the journey. It wasn’t long before our head guide, Louis Nexsen of Blackwater Adventures, appeared with his kayaks in tow to organize us for the day’s adventures.

The first stop on the tour was the Jefferies Hydroelectric Power Plant and the 1.2-mile-long Pinopolis Dam that holds back the vast waters of Lake Moultrie. Constructed as part of the Santee-Cooper rural electrification project in the late 1930s, the facility generated its first electricity on February 17, 1942. After a quick tour of the hydroelectric plant, we climbed the stairs to the top of the dam where we could look across the shimmering waters of the lake and then seventy-five feet down into the

lock where a solitary boat was waiting its turn to be let loose into the Tail Race Canal. That would be us in just a little while.

Leaving the dam and power plant, we headed back up the road to the Short Stay Naval Recreation Site on Lake Moultrie. This is where Louis was waiting to give us our orientation: “Paddle on both sides of the kayak ... wear a flotation jacket ... don’t take anything that can’t get wet ... don’t rock the boat ... look out for wasps and water moccasins in the overhanging bushes along the canal ... and don’t aggravate the alligators.” Then he pointed to the kayakers, scattered on the lawn like a pod of beached whales, and told us to pick one out and stand by it

until he and the other guides could get us launched. How to choose? I finally picked a red one with a sleek racing profile. Who was I kidding? Finally, it was my turn; we carried the kayak down to the water, and I was instructed to stand facing away



Kayaking 101: Louis Nexsen of Blackwater Adventures (left center, in hat) instructs the group of paddlers on kayaking basics before launch at Short Stay Naval Recreation Site on Lake Moultrie.



PHOTOS BY RUSS CASE.

Skirting across the lower reaches of the lake, the flotilla approaches the Pinopolis dam and lock.

from the side of the kayak and sit down — not very elegant, but effective. With a push, I was propelled out onto the lake. Tentatively, I dipped the paddle into the water and pulled it back. Sluggishly, the kayak responded. I was moving across the water using my own muscle power! The other kayakers, the ones that were launched before mine, were clustered in a small cove near the landing like so many colored fishing bobbers. I paddled to join them, gaining



PHOTO BY JENNIFER D. LOCKHART.

Disembarking at Old Santee Canal Park's Stoney Landing Plantation for lunch. Waiting on shore was cool sweet tea, spicy barbeque, and creamy banana pudding.



PHOTO BY JENNIFER D. LOCKHART.

After being lowered seven stories from the level of Lake Moultrie to the level of the Tail Race Canal, the downstream gate swings open to allow the kayakers to continue their voyage. Six million gallons of water passed through the lock in the process.

confidence with every stroke. When all thirty kayakers were assembled, the lead guide pointed across the lake in the direction of the dam and took off paddling. I had never been in a kayak before now; “no previous paddling experience necessary” is what the brochure had said. The trip across the lake provided me with a steep learning curve. I was able to test different strokes and rhythms in the

calm waters, discovering which combination gave me the best performance. Soon, I was keeping up with the pack. The slower-paddling kayakers who resisted the temptation to be first to the dam were rewarded with a glimpse of two bald eagles soaring over the lake, one with a fresh catch firmly grasped in its talons. I can't really say how long it took us to reach the staging area for the lock, maybe twenty minutes. There were already several power boats waiting there for the gate to open when we arrived.

The boats entered the lock first and were secured to the floating dock; we followed, with the first kayakers gripping the remaining dock space and subsequent kayakers hanging onto the first kayakers and so on until everyone was rafted together. I didn't realize when the gate had closed behind us, but I soon became aware that the water level was gradually falling. It was a little intimidating to think about all that lake water behind the gate. Spanning the seventy-five feet between the level of the lake and level of the Tail Race

Canal, the lock is the tallest single-step lock in North America. Every time the gates open and close, 6 million gallons of water pass through the lock. The whole process took only about twenty-five minutes. Once the water in the lock dropped to

canal-level, the downstream gate swung inward, and we were free to enter the canal.

The Tail Race Canal is a straight shot from the dam to the Old Santee Canal Park. At that point, the waters of the canal mingle with those of Wadboo Creek to form the Cooper River. While crossing the lake had been something of a sprint, the journey down the canal was more of a hike. It called for endurance rather than speed. Once we cleared the dam and lock structure and passed under an antique railroad bridge, the kayakers began to string out along the canal in small groups. The banks of the canal were lined with overhanging brush; behind the brush were tall deciduous trees already leafed out for the summer in their thick foliage. Except for the occasional power boat passing us on the other side of the channel, urban civilization was far removed. Mindful of what Louis had said about wasps and snakes, I moved closer to the bank and

was afforded glimpses of turtles, herons, and other birds. Thankfully, I didn't see any wasps or snakes, but we did eye an alligator crossing the canal several hundred feet ahead of us. Although there were other kayakers around, the pace and the relative solitude also gave me a chance to think about the people who have passed through history along these same tidal creeks and rivers — Native Americans, European explorers, colonists, indentured servants, and African slaves — not in state-of-the-art, fiberglass kayaks, but in cypress dugout canoes. Although this was properly the canal and not the river, it was not hard to imagine them watching us in our brightly colored craft as we passed by.

The trip down the canal was not all solitude; there was also a chance to paddle alongside and talk with my fellow travelers. In addition to the expected participation from Charleston and the lowcountry, the upstate and midlands were well represented. (I met several lawyers

from Greenville and Columbia, including a sitting South Carolina Supreme Court justice!) Getting the prize for traveling the greatest distance was a family of four from Florida that had come up from the Orlando area specifically for this trip. The mother told me that she had requested this as her Mother's Day gift. I was surprised by the number of adventuresome older ladies in the group. Their spirit and sense of adventure was inspiring. All in all, it was an extremely diverse group with young, old, male, and female evenly represented.

Eventually we reached Moncks Corner, a lovely little town with over 300 years of history that was named for Thomas Monck, a local plantation owner. After crossing under the bridge carrying U.S. Highway 52 over the canal, our guide pointed out our lunchtime destination, the grounds of Stony Landing Plantation at Old Santee Canal Park. The pace now quickened as most of us were hungry and Mama Brown's barbeque and fixings were waiting on shore. When we arrived at the dock, Louis was

already there (he had made the journey from the embarkation point by truck) to help us pull the kayakers out of the water and onto the lawn. After taking a few minutes to recover the use of my legs, which were a little cramped from being confined in the kayak for two-and-a-half hours, I made my way over to the table where the Historical Society staff was busy passing out the



PHOTO BY RUSS CASE.

Preparing to launch the kayaks after lunch for a leisurely tour of the ricefields along Wadboo Creek.



PHOTO BY GARY RAKE.

Kayakers approach a majestic cypress swamp that once served as a plantation "reserve" during the early period of rice planting in South Carolina.



PHOTO BY GARY RAKE.

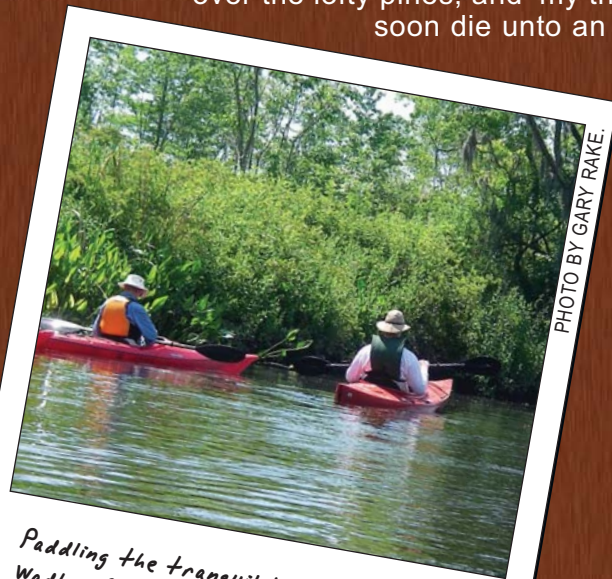
Guide Louis Nexsen (second from left) discussing the history of rice cultivation with kayakers as they float through the serene Wadboo ricefields.

barbeque plates and directing us to the sweet tea. What could be better than sitting in the shade of a live oak tree, looking out at the water, and enjoying “Q” and tea?

Those kayakers who remained after lunch were treated to a guided tour of the swamps and ricefields surrounding Wadboo Creek, directly across the Cooper River from Stony Landing. Matthew Lockhart, editor of the *South Carolina Historical Magazine and Carologue*, later shared his impressions with me. “It was a maze of old canals and ditches — some rather shallow and narrow — radiating from the creek out into the marshy ricefields, where the reeds and stalks of wild rice were above our heads. Louis talked the entire way as we paddled the Wadboo, telling the group about how planters and slaves harnessed the tides to cultivate rice and about Francis Marion’s exploits in the area during the Revolutionary War. The tide was going out by this point in the afternoon, so there were some parts of the creek and its tributaries — including a beautiful blackwater cypress swamp that had once been a plantation ‘reserve’ (a freshwater impoundment used to flood ricefields before tidal cultivation was developed)—that had too little water for us to enter. While in the ricefields, we saw several ospreys and their huge nests in treetops, as well as a number of egrets, herons, and turtles. This trip up the Wadboo was probably the highlight of the day.”

And so our day on the Cooper River ended back at Stony Landing. In 1842 Stony Landing, which

was named for its high marl bluffs overlooking the river, was part of Fair Lawn Barony and the head of navigation for this branch of the river. This is where John Beaufain Irving’s journey up the Cooper from Charleston ended. I can think of no way more fitting than to end this article than with the words of Dr. Irving: “My task is now done. A day on the Cooper River is drawing to a close. The sun has gone down over the lofty pines, and ‘my theme will soon die unto an echo.’ ”



Paddling the tranquil black waters of Wadboo Creek.

History by Kayak: Tyger River

Sunday, October 8, 2006



Join the South Carolina Historical Society and Blackwater Adventures for a day of upcountry kayaking through Sumter National Forest in Union County on the wild, scenic, and historic Tyger River. According to local tradition, the river’s name is derived from either a French fur trader named Tygert or the “tygers” — possibly Carolina panthers — that early settlers encountered along its banks. Our day of fast-flowing fun will also include a tour of beautiful Rose Hill Plantation State Historic Site, home of South Carolina’s “Secession Governor,” William H. Gist, and a casual lunch on the plantation grounds. Tickets are \$60 per person. No paddling experience is required. Lunch is included. Space is limited, so please make your reservations early!

To purchase tickets, contact Mike Coker at (843) 723-3225, ext. 19
or mike.coker@southcarolinahistoricalsociety.org