

Pikes Camp Public Access

Sept. 11, 2006 .



Steve Lovelace (my son-in-law) and I left Adrian at 6:30 a.m. on Monday morning. It was a cloudy day and had rained the night before. However, the weather didn't dampen our spirits. We were going to take the "Big Jon" boat down below Bagnell Dam in the Osage river and stay a couple of days just camping out and fishing a little. I wanted to do more research on the rock jetties, wing dikes and controlled reaches that were built in the late 1800's. They were built to control the river depth in order to allow the steamboats access to the upper Osage River.

We arrived at Pikes Camp Boat Ramp about 10 a.m. It's located up stream from the Missouri River at Mile Marker # 20.4 on the Osage. We were about four miles south of Wardsville, MO. off State Route "W". We were still some 60 miles down stream from Bagnell Dam.

We launched “Big Jon” in the clean, clear, 77-degree waters of the unoccupied Osage and began our jaunt upstream.



Aboard “Big Jon”

We hadn't gone but a few miles before we encountered shallow waters. There was evidence of the river dividing itself into two channels creating long sandbar islands. However, only one of these channels would be passable. Since the area of these islands and channels were wide, the water was only a foot and a half to two feet deep. It took a considerable amount of navigation to work the boat upstream against the current with out damaging the propeller against the rocky bottom. It was slow going.

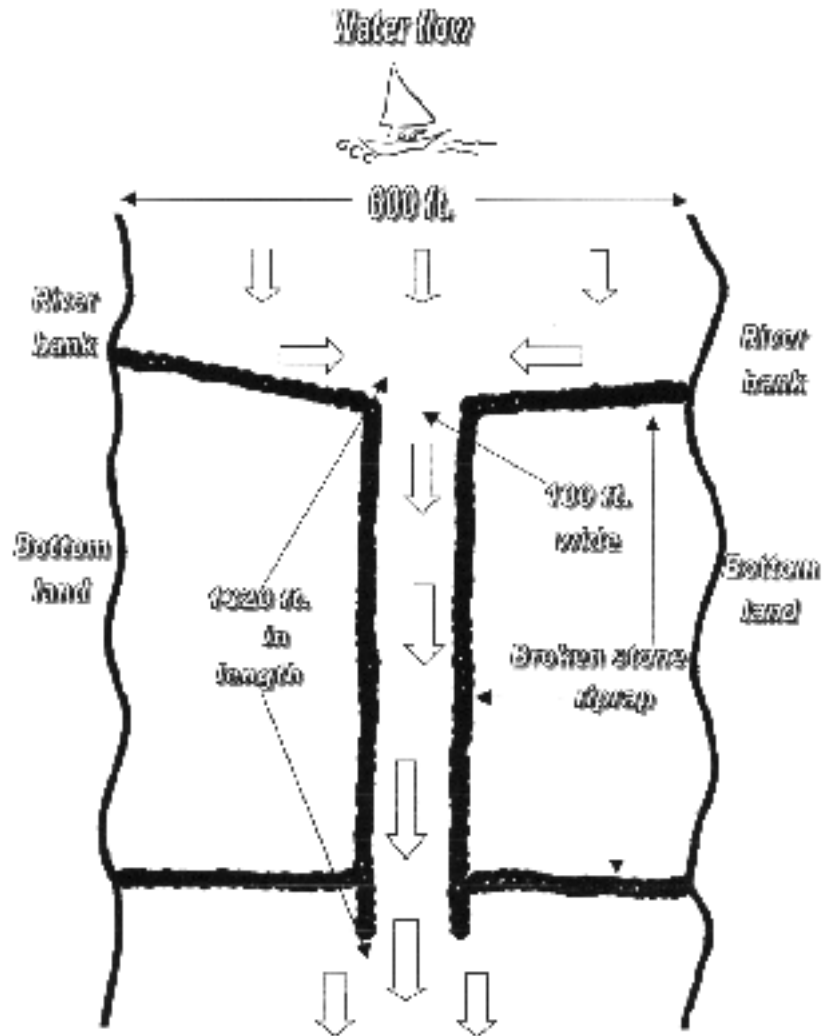
When we arrived at mile marker # 27.5 we had a pleasant surprise. There lay in front of us was an original wing dike setup that was built in the late 1800's.



There were two rock dikes about a hundred feet apart, laying long ways down the center of the channel. These rock dikes stood some five feet above the water and were approximately a quarter mile long. At the upstream end, there was a rock dike running from the center dikes at a right angle to the riverbank causing the entire flow of water to be channeled down the center of the river. By confining the flow between the two rock dikes it allowed the water to erode the bottom plus raised the level of the river flow. This is what the captains of the steamboats were looking at out the windows of their pilothouses in the late 1800's.

Osage River below Bagnell Dam

Wing dikes and riprap levees



Above depicts a riprap wing dike system built in the late 1800's

Located 27.5 miles upstream from the mouth at the Missouri River

54.5 miles down stream from Bagnell Dam

Those dikes represented a respectable amount of engineering and certainly a lot of hard work. As we entered the raceway the water became swifter due to its confine space. Therefore it was necessary to increase the power on our outboard motor to push our heavy-laden Jon boat upstream against the current. I could only imagine the apprehension those steamboat Captains must have had some hundred years ago. They would invariably struggled to find their way upstream between the shallow shoals and damaging snags of the Osage. This method of transportation continued into the 1930's. Even though Bagnell Dam blocked the river in 1929, the steamboats continued delivering goods up as far as Tuscumbia, MO.

We continued up river after leaving the rock levees and could see various wing dikes protruding out from the riverbanks on either side in an effort to force the water flow to the center of the river. Those riprap structures were evident for the next twenty miles.



Riprap structures

We had traveled only a half a mile before our minds were separated from the past and we were reminded of the present. We were crossing under a set of cross-country power lines. Those were certainly not part of the scenery enjoyed by the river travelers as recorded in our history lessons.

We had motored upstream about 13 miles to mile Marker # 31. Again, we encountered a set of rock levees and wing dikes arranged in such a manner as to increase the depth of the river flow. Since Bagnell Dam was allowing only the minimum flow (450 cubic feet per second) through its gates, there were areas we had difficulty finding enough water to accommodate our small craft.



We continued southwest, upstream and with extreme caution. There were times it got so shallow the motor prop would bite into the sandy bottom.

Steve would move to the bow of the boat to change the distribution of weight thus allowing the stern to rise slightly and just enough for the outboard to clear the bottom of

the river. Other times, we came across long reaches that were twenty feet deep. The river bottom was ever changing and required a boatman's full attention.



Steve on the bow of "Big Jon"

Further up stream at Mile Marker # 33.5 we came up on another set of wing dikes and rock levees. This area gave us the same challenges as the lower dikes but these structures had been somewhat dislodged over the years and the water was allowed to flow over a wider area.



It was difficult to find any channel deep enough to accommodate our demand for an eighteen inch depth. After several attempts, we finally made it through.

We were now fourteen miles upstream from Pikes Camp access and could see the M.S.H. route “B” Bridge that spans the Osage. As we went under the bridge we took note of a nice concrete boat ramp and a sign of “ST. Thomas Fishing Access, Missouri Conservation Department”. By this time, we were in water measuring six feet to fourteen feet deep. For the next few miles we were able to enjoy the ride!



MO State Highway Route “B”

The last hurdle we came across was at mile marker # 39. There we struggled to worm our way in between sunken snags and over shallow waters. The channel was forced to one side by an island that was in the center of the river.

After slowly inching our way upstream, we came into a large body of water that was twelve to fifteen feet deep and would maintain that depth for about a half of a mile long.

It was three O'clock when we reached the next shallow area at Mile Marker # 41. By this time, we had traveled about 20 miles and decided that was as far as we needed to go. So Steve dropped the anchor. Besides, we were looking forward to some fishing.



Steve was anxiously dropping the anchor



Steve making up jug lines

We set out ten jug lines and started fishing with rod and reels. Steve caught a nice bass plus a smaller one. The water was clear and inviting at 77.4 degrees. We were fishing in an area along side of another large, wooded island. We tuned in to the weather channel on our VHF radio. The weatherman was promising rain to our south but the skies overhead were beginning to turn dark. By six O'clock a light rain began to fall.

We found a spot at the lower end of the island where we slide the front end of the Jon boat up on the sandy beach and secured it with an anchor rope.



By the time we dropped the canvas sides on the canopy it began to rain harder. This lasted about an hour. By 7 O'clock the rain had slacked off so we unpacked our little propane stove and frying pan. Out of the cooler came a "Jimmie Dean skillet mix". It consisted of ham, potatoes, peppers and onions. We thought it was excellent! Besides, when you are on the river, it's no time to be picky.

After supper the rain began again! It hammered away at our metal canopy and by this time we had dropped the canvas curtains on three sides. By 8:30, we made our beds on plywood bunks inside the enclosure and retired for the night.

The sounds of the night began. The blue heron could be heard in the distant with its mournful cry and the sounds of fish flopping broke the night air. Mixed in these noises was a faint sound of a dog bellowing some where back in the hills. The rain continued off and on through out the night.

After a good nights sleep, the morning brought daylight accompanied by fog. After rolling up the sleeping bags we prepared the boat for the day. But not before relying on our little propane stove to cook a menu of bacon and eggs. Bright red sliced tomatoes and an orange drink was also in the offering. There was no way we were going to go hungry!

It was about 7 a.m. when we rolled up the canvas curtains, stowed the cooking gear and shoved off. We picked up the jug lines from the night before and started our way down stream. Fishing had been slim, however my main objective of this trip was to get a feeling of the river. To experience what the old steamboat captains must have experienced in the 1800's while trying to find their way up and down the Osage.



The navigator plotting our course downstream

There was a fine mist in the air and the boat floated leisurely and effortlessly with the current. The temperature had fallen and I was thankful for the coat that Steve had insisted I would need.

While retracing our route back down stream, we saw a wild turkey quenching his thirst at the river's edge. He raised his head, shook his waddle and disappeared back into the woods where I imagined the rest of the flock was hiding. The valley of the Osage is home to deer, turkey, beaver and an assortment of wild birds.

There was very little fishing activity on the river that morning. We saw one other boat, bass fishing above a shoal below St. Thomas Access. We took our time, enjoyed the scenery while we motored the reaches between the shallow shoals.

When we arrived back at the ramp at Pike's Camp, we checked the truck and trailer and decided everything was still intact. By then, Steve's fishing fever had risen to an undeniable high. We motored on downstream a couple of miles where I used the electric trolling motor to position him along a rocky shore. It wasn't long before Steve had made contact with something he absolutely knew would produce "bragging rights"! He was hollering, "get the net, get the net"! He was reared back, rod bent and cranking the reel as if his life depended on it!

At that moment, I remembered fishing earlier in the season when our positions were reversed. As I was reeling in what I thought might be a large striper, Steve made the remark it was probably an old drum. He was just making a friendly gig!

Now as I was retrieving the net from it's hanger, I couldn't resist making the remark, "It was probably a ole drum and I didn't really want that nasty fish in my boat"! But nothing I could've said would have diminished his excitement.

He continued whole-heartedly to reel in that challenger from the deep! As he brought the fish close to the boat it came to the surface. I leaned over with dip net in hand and lifted up his prized possession.



Unfortunately for Steve, it was a big ole drum! Even though he was disappointed, he had to laugh. He remembered back to earlier in the season when he was trying to “take the wind out of my sails”.

Time passes fast when you're having fun! It was already passed noon so we motored back up to Pikes Camp access and loaded "Big Jon" for the return trip home. Again, I left the Osage River with noteworthy feelings. I wished that we'd had more time to spend on this particular stretch of water. It's an area where the limestone bluffs in their entire splendor, have stood for possibly thousands of year, even before man himself roamed this valley. And though the water flow is influenced somewhat by Bagnell Dam upstream, the river with it's rock filled dikes have survived in tacked for over 150 years. This area still produces an abundance of fish, wild turkey and deer just as described in the daily logs of Lewis and Clark back in 1804. Yes, it had been another worthwhile experience, spending time in "The Valley of the Osage".



"Big Jon"