

A VENT WINDOW VIEW *Four-wheeler Pilots Afloat*

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CHVA's annual tours quite often take us into realms of Mother Earth's wonders where, instead of traveling across hill and dale in our four-wheelers, we end up aboard a boat plying one or another of the many waterways found in the USA. Quite frankly I'm quite uncomfortable when afloat. In fact, the minute my brain registers the lack of solid ground beneath my feet a mental warning bell suggests I should make ready to abandon ship! I was six or seven years old when this condition was permanently implanted in my psyche. The reason can be traced to the day when Dad and I, (plus a number of other males from our rural area) were invited to sail aboard a rowboat constructed by a neighbor. He had built his vessel using steel barrels that he had "flattened" then cut to shape and welded into a *relatively* waterproof hull. It had been a winter-long project, but at last in mid-May, with the nearby Grand River in flood almost a mile wide, circumstances were perfect for a test run.

Although the craft was designed as a rowboat, it had an outboard motor about the size of a gallon gas can mounted on its stern. To me the little engine looked remarkably like something that had, in earlier days, been utilized to power a Maytag clothes washer. The vessel was soon "filled to the gunnels" with seven farmers identical in bibbed overalls plus my Dad and me. Six years old, I was quite excited and looking forward to telling my mother about my first boat ride when I happened to notice the lack of "freeboard" between the top of the craft's side walls and the water. Fortunately, we were near a shoal that allowed our captain to beach the craft even as water began to slop over the gunwales.

The little engine had not provided much speed, but the current in the flood waters had nonetheless moved us downstream approximately a quarter-mile; in dry weather that was just a short walk, but for our return to the launching site we had to trudge across fields inundated with flood waters varying in depths of a foot to five or more. With the water too murky to see obstacles and debris mislaid by the current, we stumbled into ditches and swales of varying depths hidden by the muddy flood. In fact, after our captain dropped from sight in an invisible gully, Dad latched onto the straps of my overalls just in case. All participants on the boat trip lived to splash another day, but some of the wet and muddy sailors who survived the outbound trip delivered some rather harsh remarks to the builder and captain of the vessel. I've not forgotten that day or that homely craft nor have I since trusted any vessel when transiting water that is over a foot deep. I'm ashamed to admit that even now, when on national tours with CHVA, any water activities planned by the host club sets off a mental alarm. The first National Tour my wife and I took part in was Rte. 66 in 2001. The only boat involved was a tour of Lake Erie prior to the beginning of the car tour which my wife and I did not join until the group reached Joplin, MO.

In 2002, we decided to go along with the rest of the CHVA troupe and took the dinner cruise on the Willamette River. In 2003 we sailed across the Arches National Park in some very basic vessels that made the one from my youth look pretty well designed. In 2004 we toured the two ancient paddle-wheelers moored in Penticton, Canada; they were sizeable enough to seem trustworthy, but, *boy*, was I glad they were tied up. I cannot recall what type of boat (if any) we sailed aboard in 2005, 6, & 7, but obviously they did not sink since we survived whatever type of vessels were involved. In 2008 we enjoyed a tour of the retired aircraft carrier USS Midway; anchored in San Diego, she seemed safe as long as one did not fall overboard. We all enjoyed a luncheon aboard a riverboat in 2009 while in Chattanooga, TN.

During the 2010 outing, while in Clarkston, WA, the group split up for down-river trip aboard a pair of open "barges," one of which suffered engine failure with the result that half our group missed supper. (The wife and I had somehow decided to skip that day's sailings!) In 2011, once again against my better judgement, the group sailed a swamp in Florida aboard "airboats." In 2012 we sailed Caddo Lake (located in East Texas) aboard a vintage "lake" liner with a captain who knew every stump and alligator by name. At Wisconsin Dells, WI, in 2013, we sailed the local river aboard a pair of WW II Army "Ducks." Our next big water crossing was a full-sized ferry that in 2014 took us from Seattle to

the island home of a Tillicum Indian tribe where we were entertained with tribal food and dancing. Our most recent boating venture (2015) occurred in Kansas City, MO when we toured the remains of the Arabia, a steamboat recovered from the silt that had buried her in the long ago course of the Missouri River where she had struck a snag and sunk. The Arabia's end more or less seemed to validate my aversion to water-borne vessels.