


Paddling the Shell Rock by Moonlight

BY NATE HOOGEVEEN PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH

Full moons
bring a
band of
friends
together
along the
river



There's a place on the Shell Rock River where a riverside ridge studded with cedars presides over a westward view of the setting sun. Almost like one of nature's rhythms, a canoe with two men and an armful of firewood arrives once every 28 days at the sandbar below. If the weather is fair, maybe 10 more canoes will come with them. If not, it'll be just the one.

The men will build a fire and set up camp chairs. They may cut a few lengths of arrow-straight sandbar willows to roast hot dogs. They may cast a line to see if the catfish are biting. They may crack open a cold beer. They absolutely will tell stories, and for this, the more canoes full of characters, the merrier the evening.

And, after moonrise on a cloudless night over open water on the Shell Rock River, you can bet Jim Hegg and Bruce Juel will shove off from that sandbar, bellies full of hot dogs and s'mores, guided by the half-light of a full moon.

Every month there has been open water and open sky for the past couple decades, Hegg, 59, and Juel, 51, paddle south of Shell Rock, Iowa, a bit before sunset. When it's cold, they don't always stop for long.

Tonight, I'm invited for the moonlight float. The leaves are just beginning to turn, and I'm looking forward to paddling under a harvest moon. We load up and launch, shoving off behind the old creamery. Our group numbers ten, and



it's one of those glorious fall 72-degree afternoons.

I've been privileged to paddle across Iowa, but this river stretch is new to me. For these folks, it's about experiencing the river like an old friend, telling jokes everyone's heard, singing songs everyone knows the words to.

Just out of town, we paddle under the golden light of evening sun which illuminates cornfields along the banks,

scrubby trees and gaping scars on banks, covered in places by junky-looking concrete slabs sometimes used to keep riverbanks in their place. Rounding a bend to the right, though, the banks instantly become sloped with wildwood, and the character of our journey changes.

"It's a nice stretch," says Hegg. "It isn't rough, so novices don't have to worry. It's convenient. It's just kind of become a tradition for us."



FRIENDS ON THE WATER

Hegg and Juel have been friends since 1977, when Juel built a home next to the Hegg. They were never just the “good fences” kind of neighbors. They began taking occasional paddling trips to Minnesota’s Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

“We fish together, we camp and we do projects,” says Hegg. “When he builds a garage I help him. When I put a roof on he

helps me. He’s a good friend. He’d do anything for you.”

Juel has since moved to an acreage outside Shell Rock, but the two continue to connect for home projects and fun on the rivers.

In the mid-1990s, in the late afternoon before Juel’s daughter was to perform in her Christmas program, the river was open, although the air temperature was quite cold.

“Have you ever dipped candles before?” asks Juel. “The



Bruce Juel

Jim Hegg



ice kept getting a little thicker on our paddles each time we took them out of the water!”

They didn’t bother to stop at the sandbar that evening, and they did make it to the pageant in time.

LUNAR RHYTHMS

These trips put Hegg and Juel in touch with the moon and its cycles. Most folks don’t know the difference of a waxing

or waning moon all that well. Jim Gates, a moonlight float regular who teaches physical education for the Waverly-Shell Rock School District, for years had followed Hegg and Juel’s lead. Having missed the full-moon float, he once tried paddling by the light of a waning moon, two nights after a full moon. After sunset, he couldn’t figure out why the moon wouldn’t rise like it normally did on the moonlight float trips.



“I didn’t realize that even though the moon still gets pretty full, that it won’t rise until nearly two hours later.”

SONGS AND STORY ON THE SANDBAR

Today, it takes less than an hour to arrive at the sandbar. Everyone slides their canoes onto the sand. A fire is going as the sun sets, and soon we are eating and telling tales. Jim and Judy Meyer of Waverly, are obviously valued in

this group for their senses of humor. Jim, a natural-born storyteller, regales the group with an animated telling of “Old Blue,” an only slightly off-color tale of the pucker-factor of crossing a mountain pass on horseback.

Then Jim Gates begins tuning his guitar. I wonder what sort of acoustic melodies he will grace us with for the evening. Turns out, Gates’ plays the sort of humorous country tunes with verses in spoken word popular in

PADDLING BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON

HOW DO I KNOW WHEN THE MOON WILL BE FULL?

Check out www.farmersalmanac.com and click on "astronomy" for the dates.

CAN I GO ALONE?

Paddling alone is never a good idea, but even more true at night. There should be people who are not only experienced paddlers in your group, but who also are very familiar with the segment of river or lake you choose. A full moon can help you see, but it is more difficult to anticipate what's ahead. Paddlers with poor night vision will be challenged even more.

WHAT SHOULD I BRING?

A headlamp is a very good idea. LED headlamps use very little battery power and are available at discount stores for as little as \$15 in the camping section. Bringing along a life jacket for each person in the boat is the law—wearing it makes you smart.

WHAT SORT OF STRETCH SHOULD WE PICK?

A short stretch will be plenty, and one that isn't terribly challenging during the day is best. Snag-riddled stretches of river are a problem for most paddlers at night.



my childhood, songs along the lines of Johnny Cash's "A Boy Named Sue." Gates' specialty was a Ray Stevens song called "The Day the Squirrel Went Berserk," about a squirrel that gets loose and creates all kinds of mayhem at the "First Self-Righteous Church."

It occurs to me that the sandbar is a place that all these folks are perhaps most themselves. The sandbar has begun to feel like a living room outpost for all of

us. On a sandbar, in front of a fire, it seems you can say anything.

INTO THE MOONBEAMS: THE FINAL LEG

After an hour or so, conversation and song winds down, and we get back into the canoes. The silvery moon reflects on shimmering waters. If the sandbar is about friendship, the last leg of this journey is about silent reverie. As our



canoe slips through inky water, the plops of water droplets falling off our paddle tips are magnified. The crickets' slow autumn song is punctuated only by occasional murmurs from the human interlopers in canoes.

Past an island, we round an east bend to face straight into the moonlight. Here, the river widens and slows over a shoal. The surface looks metallic, almost like a pool of mercury, except the glassy sheen is strewn with large

rocks protruding from the river. Downstream of the rocks, the even and gentle current creates triangular shadows of flow called eddies, pointing at us on the surface like arrows interspersed across the water's surface.

Just downstream is a bridge, and below the bridge is our landing. It's a little swift here, and Hegg and Juel are sure to help everyone get their canoes safely ashore. It's a friendly end to a friendly evening. 🐼