

Tom Boyko - Three Forks Montana to St. Louis 2023

I am 60 years old and was born and raised in Stanton, ND. I obtained an Electrical and Electronics Engineering degree from North Dakota State University. I have always wanted to explore the Missouri river and read a few stories of people that had paddled it. Fortunately the timing worked and my son was able to paddle MT with me making it a trip of a lifetime. (Tom paddled with his son from Three Forks to North Dakota, then his son departed while Tom continued solo.)

#1: What was the most difficult part about your paddle trip and how did you overcome (if you did overcome) the situation?

Physically, it was Lake Oahe—constant wind on a lake that went forever. Mentally, the most difficult part was leaving Gavins Point Dam. I live in Madison, SD, so up to that point I was padding home. I got to spend a few days at home, and when I left Gavins Point, that changed to paddling away from home. My new goal was to just get to St Louis. It took a few days to change my mental picture and enjoy the paddle again.

#2 What do you feel was the most important thing that you planned for on your trip that you actually benefited from?

Reading and re-reading David Miller's "The Complete Paddlers" book. It contained thorough, specific details, and gave me a complete overview as I gathered information for the trip. It helped us (my son Jacob, 22 years old, paddled the Montana section with me) feel prepared for the trip. This took much of the uncertainty out of the trip. David, great job on the book! Another thing that helped: reading these Q&A's from previous paddlers on MORP. Being able to read what gear and strategies worked for past paddlers and what did not was invaluable. Thanks for keeping it up, Norm.

#3 Was there anything that you planned for then you felt was

unnecessary or overdone? Explain.

I think the amount of maps recommended was overkill. Having David's book and if you have state road maps and are using a GPS you have everything you need.

#4 What were the 5-most important pieces of gear you carried on the trip? Explain.

This is a hard list. I will leave the canoe for a later question. 1. A good tent. I had a MSR 2. 2. A good sleeping bag. I had a Coleman 20 Degree bag and a light blanket. 3. A comfortable PFD. You wear it all day and in many different types of weather, so make sure to get one that is comfortable and wearing it will become second nature. It's very important to wear it on the river when loading and unloading your boat—especially if you cannot see the bottom. We unloaded our canoe around Cascade, MT, along the river and the bank was only about six inches higher than the river. The next morning as I was loading the canoe, I stepped into the water, again down a 6 inch bank, and the river had cut away the ground along the bank and I ended up neck-deep in the river hanging onto the canoe. Thankfully, I was wearing my PFD. If you cannot see the bottom, wear your PFD. 4. Bending Branches wood beavertail paddle. It was a great paddle. Maybe a little heavy by the end of the trip. I would probably go with a carbon fiber build next time. 5. Long-sleeve sun/wind shirts and a hat. It's very important to cover up against the sun. Paddling with the long-sleeve shirt and hat in addition to my beard and gloves, there was very little skin exposed to the sun.

#5 Prior to your trip, what was your weakest asset or least skilled or qualified trait for the trip and how do you overcome this?

Probably tent camping and cooking. Once you start doing it everyday, you get a routine that works. Camping on sandbars was one of the most enjoyable parts of the trip.

#6 What was the least important item(s) that you brought and discovered there was never a need for?

We used virtually everything we brought. Fortunately, we did not use some of the emergency medical supplies. But we are still glad we brought them.

#7: What was the biggest surprise of the journey? Something you did not anticipate.

The best surprise was peoples' willingness to help you out just because they wanted to. There were so many instances where people just offered help when they heard what you were doing. People we did not know, as well as some people we did know, let us use their vehicles to get supplies or go to a restaurant. People gave me food and drinks, and once even brought food and beer to me up the lake 15 miles. People were great. The whole group Norm coordinates of river angles and MORP paddlers is a great asset to help anyone paddling the river. Makes it much safer and more enjoyable knowing there are people to help if needed.

#8 What kind of boat did you paddle and what were its good qualities and also the things you did not like about it?

I used an Old Town Discovery 174. The canoe was a great option with two of us padding through Montana. It can haul a tremendous amount of gear and performs great. When I was solo, I had a six-gallon water jug in the front along with four one-gallon jugs which helped trim the canoe but also made the trip easier with sufficient fresh water. We also had a Northwater canoe cover for when we paddled tandem, and I had a homemade cover for when I was solo. I HIGHLY recommend using a

cover for any canoe on the big lakes. You can do it without a cover, but the cover kept a lot of waves out of my boat and just made it overall safer and easier to paddle in the wind.

#9: How did you plan your meals/food? Did this system work good for you and what would you change regarding this?

We started with mostly dehydrated meals, like mac & cheese and peanut butter. It worked well for the first month and while we were doing the manual portages. After Williston, ND, I switched to canned foods, like beef stew, soup, and chili. The canned food is heavy, but you do not need to cook it—just open the can and eat. When it got hot out, I did not want to boil water and eat a hot meal, so the canned food was a better option.

#10 What was your system for obtaining drinking water and what were the benefits as well as the disadvantages you had dealing with water.

We brought water filters but never used them. We relied on two six-gallon tanks and some expandable containers. The expandable containers all ended up leaking. I transitioned to one-gallon water jugs, which were old milk jugs, along with the six-gallon jug. Having multiple one-gallon jugs and then the large container made it easy to access and trim the boat.

#11: What was your strategy for getting across the large reservoirs, including dealing with bad weather?

Take your time! If the wind is too much, stay in camp another day. Crossing the reservoirs takes a long time, and you do not want to get caught in a storm mid-way through a crossing. I generally stayed close to shore and would cross if I needed to and the weather was good. Again, the crossings on the big lakes take a lot of time, so always make sure you have good weather.

#12: If you were going to give advice for someone planning the same journey, what do you feel would be the best advice and things to consider that you now know about this journey?

Take your time. It is a strange dichotomy that you feel you should go faster, but when you are done you know you should have taken your time and enjoyed the trip more. Enjoy the time on the river, the towns, and the friends along the way.

#13: Something about your personality that helped you succeed, whether it being a personal belief, lifestyle, family upbringing, mental state or learned quality?

I am fine with being alone, and I enjoyed the solitude of the trip. The camping, other than the mud in the upper Missouri, was enjoyable. It is a beautiful river and worth enjoying your time camping.

#14: Worst moment of the journey?

I cannot say we had anything that rose to the “worst” moment. At the Yellowstone confluence we had a lot of mosquitos, and there was a lot of mud on Fort Peck. In Kansas City, there was heavy rain, and there was a high heat index at St. Louis. But there was nothing we couldn’t not handle.

#15: High tech Gear– Did you bring solar or computer/ gps/ inReach type of gear and what strategy did you use for it?

We used Garmin’s inReach on the Montana 700i and solar panels to charge it along with our cell phones. I highly recommend using something with inReach or similar. Our family and Norm (who still confused me with some guy named Toby), were able to track us throughout Montana, which happened to be the most difficult state for electronic communications. With inReach, we were able to text family and receive detailed weather forecasts. The weather forecasts are

critical when crossing the big lakes.

#16: Did you modify any gear to help in the safety or efficiency of your trip? (A rudder, Spray cover, sail, pontoon etc?)

I made my own solo spray cover which worked great. I also used an umbrella for shade, rain and sailing. The umbrella worked great for sailing if the wind was just right.

#17: How did you determine where to camp and did you have a specific place that you preferred such as secluded as not to be seen by others?

Camping varies depending on where you are on the river and what time of year it is. The upper river actually had a lot of campground campsites available, and many were easily accessible from the river. Other than the official campgrounds, I always camped at sites not accessible from any roads and preferably not in sight of a town. I did not have any issues other than some irritated deer or antelope snorting and stomping.

#18: What was your typical meal plan/food and snacks? (Did you resupply, and how?)

At the beginning of the trip we had oatmeal or breakfast bars to start the day, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch, and dehydrated Mountain House meals for dinner. After Williston, when I was solo, I would eat protein bars for both breakfast and lunch and then a can of chili, chunky soup ,or beef stew for dinner.

#19: An interesting unknown fact that may surprise someone and/or has nothing to do with the trip? (This may include an accomplishment, hobby, former job or experience?)

I spent 37+ years working in the electrical power industry, 28 of those with the _Western Area Power Administration and nine with the East River Electric Power Cooperative. WAPA marketed the power from the Missouri dams and East River was one of the cooperatives that received an allocation of power. I grew up near the Garrison Dam and lived in Bismarck ND, Huron SD, Fort Peck MT, and

Madison SD. As a result I have been very involved with the Missouri river throughout my personal and professional activities.