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Descendant of William Clark finds solace through canoe journey

DANIEL CHRISTIAN *11 hrs ago*



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Churchill Clark paddles along the Missouri River during a several-month trek on Friday. Clark carved the canoe himself in under three months while partially blind.

Ellise Verheyen (<https://columbiamissourian-dot-com.bloxcms-ny1.com/users/profile/evp64>)

COLUMBIA — Churchill Clark has been alone for five months paddling the Missouri River in a canoe he carved himself from a cottonwood tree. He's had time to reflect on the past few years.

"You get a lot of time out there," Clark said. "You're all by yourself, and I do some singing and stuff. But also a lot of thinking on different things, and you get introspective and start doing self-reflection. And that, I will tell anybody, is the place you got to go if you want to be a better person."

Clark's hair is long, and he keeps a patchy gray beard that he insists is out of character — his razor took a drink of water and he never saw it again, as he puts it.

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For 2 1/2 years, Clark reenacted the journey of his great-great-great-great grandfather William Clark through the Lewis and Clark bicentennial exhibition. Clark chose to sport the same frontier-style outfit he wore for the exhibition for his trip along the Missouri River.

Part of the outfit is a leather pouch he keeps around his waist. The accouterments found in the pouch are Clark's essentials—a corncob pipe that sounds like something William Clark might have packed on his journey, a cell phone, charging cords and a pocketknife.

Despite his fashion choices, Clark's current journey isn't a tribute to his ancestry, he said. This trip is for him.

"The journey from 2004 to 2006 was my way of honoring William," he said. "That was the reenactment, and that's over now. Now, this is purely because I enjoy it. And the canoe was built for it."

Before carving the canoe in 2011, which he has affectionately named Knotty, Clark said he fell off an electric scooter going 20 miles per hour and landed face-first on pavement. The accident crushed his right eye socket, broke his jaw and damaged optical nerves, he said.

Temporarily blinded by the accident, Clark was let go from his job as a waiter in Denver. He then found the tree that would become Knotty, he said. With help, he carved the canoe in three months. He was still blind during the process.

It was a labor of love, and he often refers to Knotty as "she."

Clark said the carving process was difficult but also therapeutic after all that had happened.

"I was in a very good healing state," he said of the time he spent carving Knotty. "She kept me relaxed and focused. It definitely helped."

Three eye operations later, Clark said vision in his left eye is restored, but his right is "not even close to 100 percent."

He's been chasing trees out west ever since, looking for suitable candidates that could eventually become canoes. For the past five months, Clark has camped in sites along the Missouri River.

"Honestly, I don't have a home right now," he said. "I've been bouncing around between Colorado, Washington and California chasing cottonwoods, pines and redwoods."

Making dugout canoes for a living has not been the most stable financial endeavor for Clark, but as someone who feels at home in nature, he doesn't see too many alternatives.

"I'm on disability, and I've been living off that, but I can't live in town," he said. "I can't afford it. It's not enough money to live on. I'm better off on the river, frankly."

And that's where Clark has been.

In 2011, he couldn't paddle the Missouri River due to severe flooding. But Clark still wanted to go.

"I decided right then and there when they wouldn't let me on that I was going to do the whole Missouri again," he said.

He started his journey traversing the Missouri River in Twin Bridges, Montana, and has now canoed somewhere between 2,200 and 2,300 miles.

Steve Schnarr, program manager at the Missouri River Relief, said Clark's ambition is unique.

"I think it's a pretty astonishing accomplishment for Churchill to not only carve a canoe that is so functional and so safe he can take it on a long journey, but also just the persistence of paddling that thing," Schnarr said. "These days people keep looking for the lightest boat they can, and it's hard to imagine anything heavier than that."

Knotty weighs approximately 250 pounds.

The weight of the canoe hasn't inhibited Clark. Paddling the lakes has been the most difficult part, he said.

"The lakes will beat you down mentally. They get you wanting to quit because you fight all day, sometimes really big waves, and it kills, especially with my back."

Despite his ailing back, one working eye and no one to talk to on the river but himself, Clark remains a well of optimism. Canoeing the river causes him physical pain, but it's also his cure. What gets Clark through the difficult times on the water, he said, is actually the company — Knotty.

"I baby her," he said. "She's what I got."

Clark set up a Facebook page for Knotty to document his trip. His next stop is Jefferson City, and he's completing his trip in St. Louis.

He'd planned to sell Knotty, but now he's not sure. Clark said he has become emotionally attached.

"Knotty is going to be a special one because there's no way I'm going to paddle the whole Missouri River again," he said.

Supervising editor is Daniela Sirtori-Cortina (<https://columbiainmissourian-dot-com.bloxcms-ny1.com/users/profile/dlsirtori/>).

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