

Generational Journey

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Obstacles are nothing new for an explorer named Clark — Churchill, that is. And he has seen more than most.

Clark, a fourth-generation grandson of famed explorer William Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition, is paddling his own dugout down the Missouri River in what is a reunion trip of sorts. He passed through the Yankton area late last week.

The last time Churchill Clark was in the area was for the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial journey that began in St. Louis and traveled up river to Long Beach, Washington. Once on the coast, the group traveled back down the river to end the trip back in St. Louis. In the nearly three-year tour, Clark took the trip to heart.

"I wanted to do it in honor of William (Clark)," Churchill said. "I fell in love with the canoes; every tree will teach you something. It has changed my life."

But Clark's life has seen a few other life-changing events.

Clark was involved in an accident in 2009 that left him blind for the several years afterwards due to an orbital fracture, along with a broken jaw, several broken teeth and a crushed T5 vertebra. Despite the difficult road to recovery, he has continued to do what he loves and inspires that kind of perseverance in others.

"There are a million reasons why I shouldn't be able to finish this trip, but it just keeps going because I'm here," Clark said. "If you see an obstacle, it's there. If you don't deal with it, it will always be there in your mind. If you stop letting things be obstacles and just go, it will all unfold."

Clark was portaged across Gavins Point Dam Saturday with the help of Lewis & Clark Recreation



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Churchill Clark (back), fourth-generation grandson of famed explorer William Clark, passed through the Yankton area Saturday in his homemade, hollowed-out canoe, "Knotty." Members of Lewis & Clark Recreation Area helped Clark and his friend Jeff Troupe (front) portage the canoe across Gavin's Point Dam to continue Clark's journey down the river to St. Louis where the Mississippi and the Missouri meet.

Area District Park Supervisor Shane Bertsch.

"The people have been wonderful here — South Dakota in particular," Clark said. "The parks guys have been amazing by lining up to help us with this."

Bertsch heard about Clark's journey from Jim Gunderson of Mission Hill, who was over at the Tabor Lakeside Use Area when he ran into Clark and Jeff Troupe of Oakland, Nebraska, who has been a friend of Clark since 2004 and decided to paddle a few days with him.

"Jim gave them my number in case they needed help getting across the dam," Bertsch said. "They called me on Friday and we got the logistics down to help them out."

The group had dinner at the Lewis & Clark Resort, where Jeff Wahl, owner and operator of the resort, offered Clark and Troupe a free night's stay. The next day, Bertsch acquired a trailer to transport the canoe, and the group drove over to the Chief White Crane area to get it back in the river.

"Over the years, we have helped shuffle about 40 or 50 people going across the dam, most being during the bicentennial," Bertsch said. "We always try to help people out to get to the rest of their journey."

Knotty — Clark's handmade, hollowed-out canoe which he built while he was blind in the aftermath of his accident — has helped him make the ride from his starting point in Montana's Beaver Creek River last June.

Both Knotty and Clark have received quite a bit of attention throughout their journey. He is always surprised by the people who comment on his "old-school" technique.

"They see the dugout and they automatically think you are going to do it like they did it 200 years ago," Clark said. "Lewis and Clark would not and could not portage their keil boat, but we have to because these are lakes now."

Now that he has crossed the Gavin's Point Dam, Clark will continue down river to Confluence Point just north of St. Louis, where the Missouri meets the Mississippi. With no destinations in mind, Clark is perfectly happy doing what he does best -- admiring the journey.

"I don't care about time," Clark said. "The canoe attracts attention, so I pop into marinas and show her off. People don't get to see something like this every day."

For the past couple years, Clark has been in California, Washington and Colorado chasing redwoods, pines and cottonwoods. He finds donations wherever he can and makes his canoes using only hand tools.

"I go where the trees are," Clark said. "I just pitch my tent and they find me, so I get chopping."

Clark takes everything he needs wherever he goes. He usually carries at least two weeks' worth of

supplies, which is no light load. The canoe will weigh anywhere from 600 to 700 pounds fully stocked, he said.

Throughout the year, Clark participates in canoeing events across the country, getting the word out about his canoes and his paddling down the Missouri.

"People tell me all the time that they are living vicariously through me," he said. "I have inspired a few people to get on the river, and that is what I want to do with this journey."

This journey has also seen its share of obstacles. Clark has faced storms and difficult water.

"I've dealt with every kind of storm," he said. "I'm usually very aware of where the water is big and where I can fall back if I need to, but it's easy to get caught."

During his travels, he did run into some major inconveniences. A couple incidences involved a tornado near Pierre and a major storm on Fort Peck Lake in Montana.

"It shows you what could happen and what my canoe can do," he said. "You can't sink her, so I tied myself to the canoe and my paddle to me and waited it out."

Even with his unpredictable occupation, Clark said he loves to share his experiences and teach others to love canoeing as much as he does.

He runs several canoe camps throughout the year for kids, who work together while learning the art and value of hollowing out their own canoe.

"Everyone walks away smiling," he said.

Not only is Clark excited about teaching kids a new skill, but he is also teaching them to rely less on technology and appreciate the hands-on work.

"I tell them right away, there is no app for this. We are going to do it one chip at a time and it's going to take a couple months, so let's go," he said. "They are mesmerized by the chopping like I am, and they see the creation that is coming to be."

Clark also has a website and a Facebook page called Dugout Canoe Love, which allows people to follow his excursions and purchase his canoes. He posts pit-stop updates and videos on his YouTube channel. He hopes that the publicity will help him continue doing what he loves.

"I'm to the point where I would like to set up a shop somewhere but I would still need access to big trees," Clark said.

But a steady homestead won't stop the passionate traveler from exploring the world, just as his ancestor did two centuries ago. Clark will continue to make his way down the Missouri River, enjoying his canoe and his voyage all the way.

"Doing this journey, I have run into so many old friends and met new ones," he said. "I love the area

and I'll probably visit again, but I don't do the sightseeing; I see it out there."

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