

The Splendid Warefaring in the 21st Century

By Gerry "Lucky" Messmer

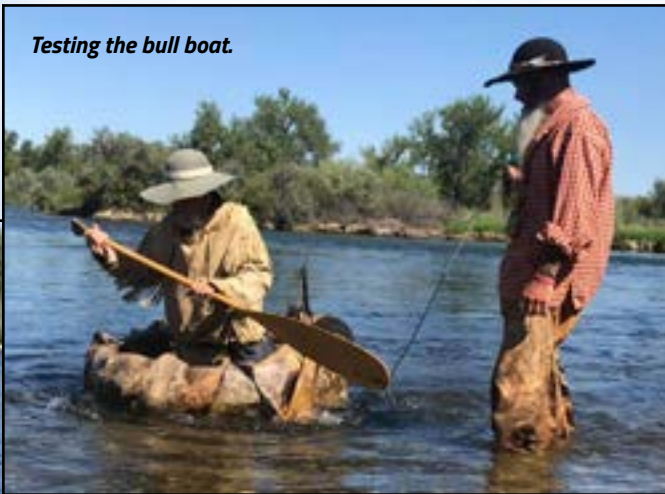
-Ashley's Return: The River-Part 3

While the end of the ride and leaving good friends was a bittersweet moment, the next leg of our journey on the Big Horn and Yellowstone Rivers breathed a new life into us. Exhausted and physically beat down from the

ride Poncho, Amish and I had five days to rest before we started again. Incidentally, William Ashley had been at Ft. Smith for exactly five days to make his bull boats.

This break allowed us time to sort gear, re-pack, mend clothing and equipment and to complete the arrangements to have our three horses sent back to Indiana. Pat and Donna Ingram would take us to Ft. Smith, Montana, our start point, and then take Ponchos' Mule, Harley, to a new home in Denver on their way back to Indiana, and graciously care for our horses for the next two months.

Testing the bull boat.



First Day!



The first task in building the bull boat was to get our dried buffalo hide into the water to re-hydrate it. Simultaneously, we had to soak the willow branches which we brought with us to make the frame. Ashley and his men would shoot, it is believed, 23 buffalo and build bull boats of some configuration to move him, 23 men and as many as 100 packs of beaver pews. The exact number has never been determined. Amish, Poncho, and I would build the boat in a few hours. She was not as perfect as we imagined Ashley's would have been, but Ol' Runaway, as she would come to be known as, made the entire trip.

The few days had really dragged on leading up to the start of the canoe trip. As we put the pirogue in the water and loaded and secured our gear the water was brisk as the snow melt water was still making its way down stream. However, after nearly a month of riding through the Red Desert and surrounding areas with minimal or no water, we were excited to have fresh water every day!

Amish was the first to give the bull boat a try. Fearlessly, he climbed in and started down the Big Horn River as Poncho and I would man the pirogues. We had two, which we put together in a catamaran fashion like they did with dugouts in 1825. This configuration did make it hard to maneuver especially when rowing into a headwind, but due to their height it would be more stable and safer.

The first day was much like the first day of the ride, a serious learning curve. Amish found the bull boat nearly impossible to steer and he was pretty much at the mercy of the current. Within an hour or so, Amish floated quietly past a black bear that had made its way to the water to drink and look for food. It waded in with little interest in Amish, walked a bit downstream and then disappeared into the woods again. As we moved quietly down the river we would see not only that black bear, but many ducks, geese, pelicans, deer, osprey, and several magnificent bald eagles.

Our first night, Poncho and I pulled off to river left to camp just before the first diversion dam at Two Leggings, which we would find help to portage around. Amish was behind us and as he saw the diversion dam, he pulled off

to river right to camp for the night. He started a nice fire to warm by and that also let us know he was ok. While Amish was building the fire and setting up camp the bull boat broke from its tie from the strength of the current. Poncho and I happened to be watching in despair as it floated out of sight! This is when it became known as Ol' Runaway! We thought for sure it was gone and we would never see it again. The next day we found Ol' Runaway was about six miles downstream and no worse for the wear. We tied it on the bow of the pirogues to dry out in the sun as she was quite waterlogged.

On August 5th, we would make what would be our most miserable and exhausting portage on what seemed like the hottest day on the river, easily approaching 100 degrees at mid-day. As we approached the diversion dam, we had to make a choice of going to the right or left of a huge island. We chose left. As we pulled off to river right on the bank of the island the only spot we had to land was against a very high bank, probably 10 to 12 feet high. Given the situation we had to unload and dismantle the pirogues and drag or carry everything up the bank and down the island about a quarter of a mile to re-assemble them in the water, reload and resume the journey.

As we started working, we realized that the journey had taken its toll on us. None of us were as strong as we were a month ago, weak from the day-to-day efforts of what I call "primal survival". Early to rise, packing, unpacking every day, riding, or rowing, gathering wood, constantly moving to get things done. For folks who do living history and go to the woods for the weekend, perhaps even a week, as we all had previously done, there is no comparison to the efforts required to make a journey like this. Once you get beyond a week or so, eating scant food, your body begins to break down. You lose weight and muscle mass and must adapt to the changes.

Quiet days went by after the portage and working up an appetite for some fresh food, Amish caught a couple of catfish and I was able to harvest a squirrel, and to top it all off we slept on a sand bar that felt like a mattress. It's the little things. We cooked up the squirrel and shared the abundance of meat.



Author relaxing.



Catfish dinner.

(Continued on page 52)

The day of the 11th and the subsequent night we would experience one of the most hair-raising events of the entire 2000-mile journey. Now on the Yellowstone River we were floating in a rainstorm and pulled off to river left to sit out the storm. The three of us hunkered down under Russian olive trees with our rain ponchos on. It seemed like the rain would never stop as we listened to the pitter patter of the rain bouncing off our hats onto the ground. The landowner, Ed Beyl, came by and we introduced ourselves. He enjoyed our story and later would bring some friends down to the river to meet us as we launched again. Here he gifted us an abundance of elk meat. What a treat!

It seemed like an eternity as we rowed into a strong headwind. Exhausted, we pulled off on an island just before dark and set up a camp to ride out the storm. A quick meal of catfish was enjoyed before piling into our shelter. Because Ed had warned us the severity of the storm, it was decided a flat camp would be best to know that a lean-to would never withstand the winds. With the ground cloths laid out we climbed under a large oilcloth tarp pulled over us in an attempt to conquer Mother Nature, or merely survive.

The three of us had chosen not to bring blankets on this leg of the journey. In the autobiography, "Journal of a Trapper", by Osborne Russell he makes comment of riding into a camp in January, in the Rocky Mountains, where most of the trappers did not have a blanket and were curled up close to their fires to stay warm. In a group decision to put our metal to the test, we did the same. It was a challenge, but not a regret. If you don't challenge yourself, how do you know what you can conquer?

As we lay on the sand sleep was scant, the water was pooling in our makeshift bed, and we were all soaked to the skin and cold. The relentless rain was penetrating everything coming down sideways and with a force that made us hold tight to the oilcloth over us in fear of losing it. Poncho was on the windward side, Amish in the middle and I was on the leeward side of the bedroll. At one point, curious about our gear and the damage the wind was doing I looked out only to see the logs from our fire flying down the riverbank three feet off the ground and out of sight as the water doused them into a cold death.

The debris hit my face like a sand blaster forcing me to retreat under the thin layer of protection. Somewhere in the middle of the night, with Amish fast asleep, Poncho and I heard that sound you never want to hear in the wilds, the sound of a freight train signifying a tornado! All I could think about was how we were out in the open and if the tornado picked us up, would they find our bodies? Unbeknownst to me, Poncho was wondering the same thing. He was wondering if the adventure was worth it only to be flung miles away to our death in a shallow grave where our bodies would never be found.

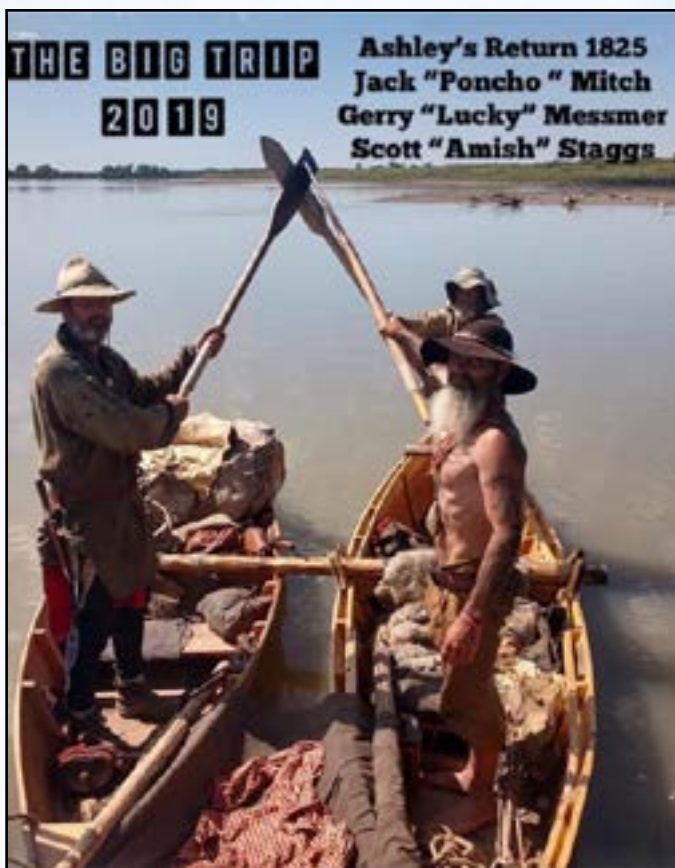
The morning found us cold, shivering, and miserable, and our fire from the night before had disappeared without a trace. It was completely gone, not even a small piece of charcoal to help our quest for fire and coffee. Everything was soaked except our food bags. Our provisions were in individual cotton bags that were then stuffed in-

side oil cloth bags and then placed into a larger oil cloth bag creating a double barrier. We laid out our tarps, most of our clothes and went to work looking for anything dry to make a fire.

As a team, we scavenged the island to no avail, unable to find dry material to start a fire. Eventually Poncho and I found and hacked our way into a dead cottonwood tree until reaching dry wood, prying out a few small pieces with our cold, stiff hands. Taking them to the beach where Amish had begun collecting small, but wet sticks, we went to work with our flint, steel, and striker. Finally, we got a small ember to hold in the wood by taking turns blowing on it to keep it aglow, slowly building the intensity with a fragment of heat drying out the small branches Amish had gathered. After about an hour and a half, through teamwork and perseverance, we had a fire.

With success at hand, we admired the flames while we slowly began to dry out. Wasting no time, we put the coffee on and waited for the elixir to boil. In short time we all had a cup in hand, and it was the best cup of coffee any of us had ever had! We cooked up a breakfast of oats, repacked our gear and headed down the river. Later that day, a local resident would confirm that the storm sported 80 mph winds and the tornado we heard had decided to spare us and had skipped over that section of the Yellowstone River before touching down again.

In mid-August we would encounter another of the 7 diversion dams and we would need help to portage around. Walking over a mile, Amish and I went to look for help.



Arriving at the Missouri River.

The owner answered the door and seeing us in our rough state of dress and smell, we took a minute to explain what we were doing. Without hesitation, another angel volunteered to help us! He worked alongside of us to move our gear to a spot where we could safely re-enter the water.

Making another 5 miles or so, we pulled off the river to make camp before dark. The location we chose happened to be right across the river from the August 1st, 1806, camp of the William Clark camp that was on his way to meet Meriwether Lewis at the confluence of the Missouri River. Jack and I woke the next morning and stoked the fire for coffee. While doing so we had the most curious sight. Upstream about 200 yards a coyote had made its camp for the night on a sandbar. We stood in silence and watched him as he slept, eventually waking to stretch and trot off without any concern for our presence. Perhaps he enjoyed the company for the evening. While scavenging for firewood we kicked up a herd of deer that had been bedded down a short distance from us. All in all, we would see about 10 bucks ranging from four to ten points with only two does in the group. We made 22 miles before camping for the night. Much to our chagrin it was another rainy night. We made the best of it listening to the sound of the coyotes serenading us in the distance and the beaver slapping their tails in the river.

Our final day on the Yellowstone River was a calm day with no wind and no current. Poncho was on the rudder while Amish and I paddled non-stop for the last 9 miles, exhausted and approaching the Missouri River it was clear why there was no current. The Mighty Mo was so flooded it was pushing water upstream into the Yellowstone River. Slowly we crept forward scanning the confluence and deciding our path.

Entering the confluence of the Missouri River, Amish and I paddled hard in the raging waters of the Missouri. Poncho aimed us upstream and at the last minute turned the pirogue downstream to make a safe landing on the left bank of the Missouri River. Poncho's lifelong experience on rivers made the difference between a safe landing and potential disaster.

Our crew landed the same day and time, mid-day, just as William Ashley had on August 19th, 194 years later. This portion of our journey had been the most solitude we would experience. It was also the portions that required the three of us to bond as a team and survive. Each day a test, each night a respite from exhaustion, but dependent on each other, just as Ashley's men had been. We encountered many "River Angels" who helped us and became lifelong friends. Before meeting up with the Keelboat Muskrat we would spend five days at Fort Union in a teepee meeting with and educating the public. Ironically, one of the Park Rangers who helped us put up the teepee was a direct descendant of the Native Americans who had attacked Ashley and his men, stealing their horses. He reassured us we would be safe at Fort Union! Now we had to meet the Keelboat Muskrat for the final 900 miles of the journey. MB



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