



Down the Depression River

by Frank Dale

Easton native Bill Kleedorfer, left, kept the journal and three other men helped paddle — Pittsburgh to New Orleans, 1935, on \$60. Below: The Smoky City's skyline at about the time they departed (c. 1930).

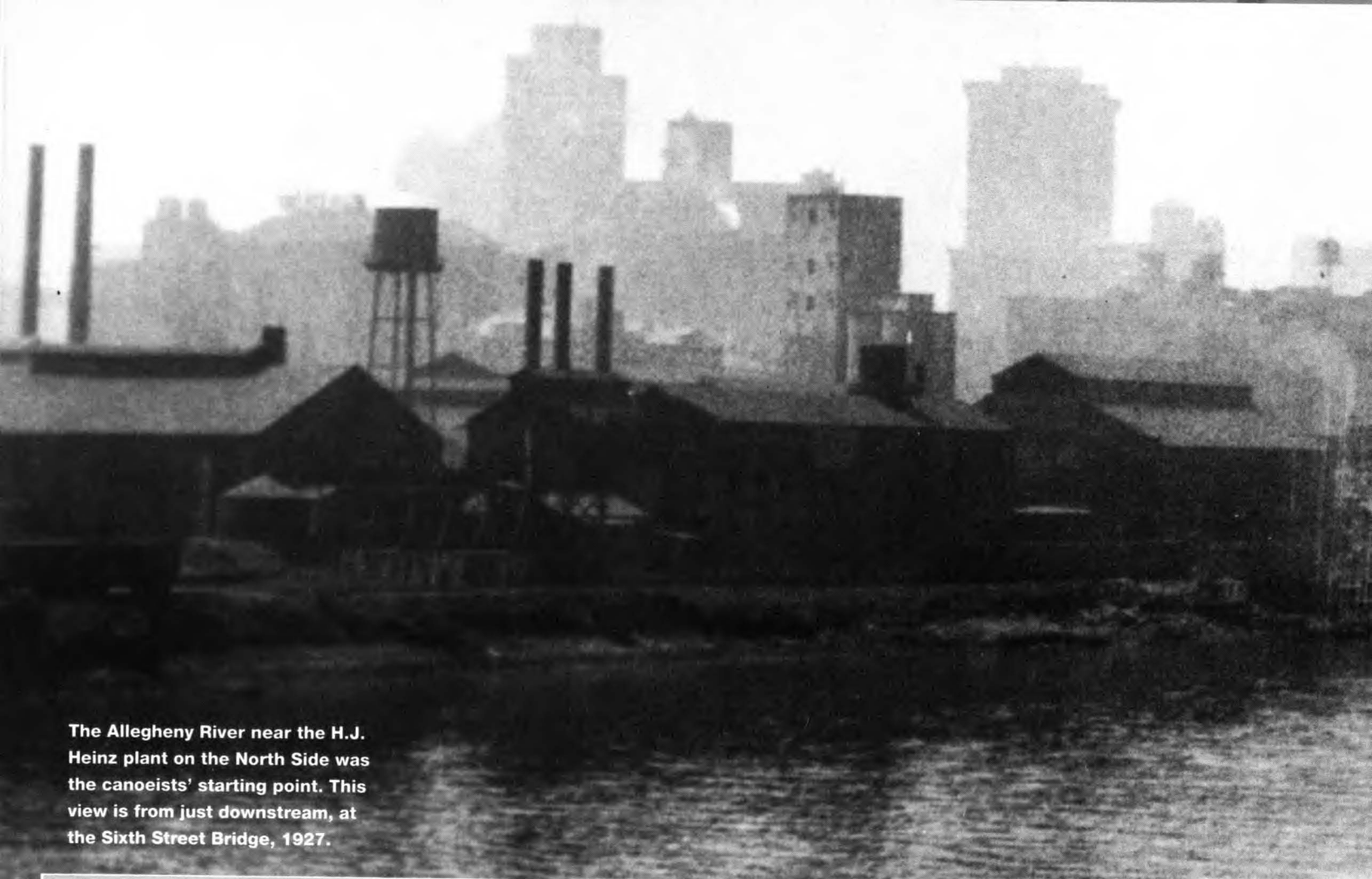
DURING THE GREAT Depression, the nation's highways and rail lines teemed with unemployed homeless men searching for work or looking for a place to make a new start. In those days being broke and on the move wasn't seen as a moral weakness; instead, blame fell on an economic system gone awry. And many a person fortunate enough to have a job, no matter how menial, was haunted by the premonition that "there, but for the grace of God, go I." Rarely was a hitchhiker refused a lift, or a bum knocking on a farmhouse door denied a meal.

Boys and young men from middle-class families often romanticized the wanderer's way, viewing it as an adventure and a chance to see the country cheaply while learning something about self-sufficiency. With summer jobs virtually unavailable but the weather conducive to outdoor living, many were lured temporarily into the vagrant life without the excuse of extreme economic hardship.

The experience of three young Pennsylvania men during the summer of 1935 was just such an adventure, and it began for them in canoes on the Allegheny River. Two of the canoeists were brothers in an Easton, Pa., family of 14 children. Among the children, all but one quit school during the Depression to find a job to help the family. That one son who finished school went on the monumental canoe ride, and he kept an almost daily

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The Allegheny River near the H.J. Heinz plant on the North Side was the canoeists' starting point. This view is from just downstream, at the Sixth Street Bridge, 1927.

record of it — his journal is now in the archives of the Easton Public Library — and through it we get a stark but somehow nostalgic glimpse of life “on the bum.”

“Members of the crew are: Frank Ball, alias ‘Baldy’; Henry Kleedorfer, my brother, alias ‘Heinie’; and myself, Bill Kleedorfer, no alias.” In the months before their odyssey, Bill washed dishes and cleaned tables in a restaurant; Heinie worked first in a junkyard but would end up with the U.S. Civilian Conservation Corps on public works projects; Baldy found occasional employment in an eastern Pennsylvania factory.

The earliest entries in Bill Kleedorfer’s expedition journal show the emphasis on straight reportage that characterizes all sections of his account: “Our starting point: Pittsburgh, Penn.; destination: New Orleans, La.; starting date: May 4, 1935.

“When you read this account kindly take into account that I am far from being a writer. Please overlook any grammatical errors and ... confusing statements.”

The combined capital in the fellows’ possession upon leaving Pittsburgh, Bill recorded: \$62.

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The men were not without canoe expertise. Baldy and Heinie had crewed a canoe in the famous Delaware Marathon of 1933,

covering over 70 miles in the daylight hours of one day. Bill, with a friend, had then completed a canoe excursion from the Delaware River to Chesapeake Bay via the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal. But this excursion to New Orleans via the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in their 18-foot-long Old Town canoe was the high point in their navigation careers.

Bill Kleedorfer, at 19, was the youngest, but as the best educated of the three, was considered the proper one to keep the journal.

May 4

We found a spot to put the canoe into the river, it was the Allegheny, in back of the Heinz Co. warehouses. We had our canoe loaded and started our journey at 10:35. A brisk upriver wind and several tugs managed to fill the river with large rollers. The air is sharp, too cold for comfort. It is also cloudy, but that is natural for Pittsburgh.

We found the banks are composed of stone, slag, and other fill from various industries in the city. They are lined with shacks and houseboats of all sizes and contours. There being no decent camping sites in such surroundings, we continued till we hit an island about 5 miles from town. We stopped on the upper end, made camp and dinner.

Bill, in his journal, dwells often on the subject of food, so a



word about victuals at the outset is appropriate. Old standbys were rice, oatmeal, potatoes, beans, pancakes, and bread. On May 11, Bill records that they had consumed 14 loaves of bread in the first seven days of the voyage. If they ate any meat at all it was fish caught on drop lines set overnight, or an occasional turtle. Vegetables, except for wild garlic which they seemed to like, go unmentioned. Their food combinations were unique. Journal entries in May disclose: "We had stewed prunes and lima beans cooked in milk for dinner." "Pancakes and oatmeal for breakfast." "Crackers and molasses for dinner." "[M]ade a batch of rice soup (no chicken though) for dinner" and, another time, "a stew of garlic and potatoes."

They also ate heartily of berries, especially dewberries, found along the way, forestalling the threat of scurvy. They had ravenous appetites. In the journal entry of May 23, Bill writes: "We are now using a ten-pound peanut can for a cookpot as our appetites have outgrown our regular pot's capacity."

They had no river charts, only gas station road maps that showed the cities along the way. Of dams and other river hazards they knew nothing. They learned about such things the hard way.

May 4 [in the Pittsburgh area]

An easy breeze and we have a sail up. This with our

paddling has us moving right along. We are on the narrow channel of an island; on our right is the low island and on our left rise steep wooded cliffs which are broken by streams of water splashing down to the river. It was the noise of these streams that almost caused our Waterloo. We heard the roar for at least 5 minutes and were intently scanning the hillside for the source of it when a dam in the river popped up no more than 25 yards ahead. We instantly dropped the sail and back-paddled for all we were worth. Our trip nearly came to an end right there and maybe our lives, too. We managed to get to shore, though, and after lugging the canoe and equipment for a quarter of a mile, we were able to put in again.

During the first several days of the trip, it rained and the river began to rise. Bill's entry on May 5, the day after they departed from Pittsburgh, states: "The air is warmer than yesterday but still too cold for canoeing.... At 2:10 it began to rain. We camped on a clay flat just across from Jones & Laughlin Steel Company...." [probably the former J&L steel works at Aliquippa in Beaver County]

May 6

Got up at 8:15 with a rain soaking everything. We loafed around all day [the heavy rain precluded travel] and after

supper got ready for another cold, rainy night. The clay flat has turned into one big, lovely mud puddle. The only dry spot is under the fire. Turned in at 7:15. As I lay here I can see the flames shooting from the blast furnace across the river. It makes me feel that we sure could use some of that heat that is going to waste.

May 7

Got up at 8:10 with it still raining. Are we ever damp?... After several hours of paddling, the wind blew up colder with more rain forcing us to camp at 2 PM. The water is rising fast.... At 8:15 a man came out to the island and told us we had better get off because he figured the river would raise about 10 feet and it needed only 3 to flood us off there. We broke camp and went over to the left bank....

The river had risen 9 feet by the next afternoon, and "was still rising.... We camped on another island at 5:30.... At 8:20 we had to break camp again because of rising water and went 2 miles downriver. We set up camp again in the dark near the Pennsylvania RR yard."

Bill and Heinie wanted to end the trip but the usually malleable Baldy wouldn't hear of it.

Their first run-in with the law occurred in the railroad yard in what they later learned was Martin's Ferry, Ohio, three days' float from Pittsburgh. On the morning of May 8, they built a roaring fire to warm themselves and almost immediately "two railroad dicks [detectives] came running and marched us to the courthouse. It sure was an embarrassing situation being led through the streets like sheep. After questioning, we each had to post a \$10.00 bond to get out, being informed to get back again the next morning at 8:30."

May 9

We got up at 7:15, washed up and went back to the courthouse. We got our bond back and were locked up till the chief was ready to see us. We had a conference with the dicks and walked over to the squire's office, where after about an hour's wait, we were each fined \$3.00 for trespassing. Afterwards, while we were in the squire's office, we distinctly heard him tell the dicks they had nothing on us, but it was too late then. We got back to camp and shoved off. We didn't lose any more time there.

On May 11, \$9 lighter than when they entered the state, Bill wrote: "We passed through Marietta [Ohio] at noon. The Rah-Rah boys were out in the river in two shells."

He was referring undoubtedly to Marietta College boys — perhaps the rowing squad. Bill lived near Lafayette College in Easton and he displayed the disdain and envy that "townies" had for most college boys, certainly an elite group during these hard times.

On May 23, they arrived at Louisville at noon: "We camped on an island above town. It being so wild and isolated, we thought we could all go into town safely. We got ourselves polished up and paddled down to town where, on landing by a bridge pier, we put the first leak in the canoe."

We found ourselves in the lower-class section of town. What a place! Every other store is a second-hand store whose chief motto is 'We buy and sell anything of value.' To look at some of

the articles, their values run way below our penny minimum. You can buy bits of chain consisting of half a dozen links, used, ten-cent baseballs, and many other items we would throw out as junk. When we got back to camp later we found that someone had paid us a visit and had taken all our fishing tackle, except for half a dozen set lines. We were lucky they didn't take the whole camp.

These set lines became their principal fishing gear. Bill tells of a giant catfish taken on a set line and describes how they are made: "Take about 100 feet of rope, put half a dozen hooks on it and a couple of sinkers. [Then] take two wooden blocks or sealed up tin cans and fasten them on each end to serve as buoys. [B]ait up the hooks and stretch the line out in the river."

Shortly after passing Louisville, Bill makes the first mention of encountering grand riverboats reminiscent of another era: "We just passed another big passenger paddle wheeler," he writes at one point. "The boats that we've seen have been all white and very clean looking. They are four decker boats with large side paddle wheels. Regular tugs look like row boats along side of them. They make a very attractive sight with their sparkling white railings and lattice work."

On May 24, they had a close call with a dam.

The river makes a sharp right bend and we cut across to take the corner close.... We heard a siren behind us. We looked around to see a big police boat coming.... One of the policemen hollered for us to turn back and go through the canal on the left bank. He said we might make it over the dam, but he had doubts.

We paddled over into the canal. A tug had just gone ahead of us and it was pretty rough. It took us an hour to go through and get locked down. I had to go into the power house to get a manifest and get locked through. They keep those powerhouses shined up like a new dime.

After a break in the bad weather, the rain returned. "What a restful night was last night!" Bill jokes in one entry. "At 12:00 it poured and we were lighting matches for light to dig trenches by. It was so dark, you could have hit yourself in the face and not know who had done it. After digging the trenches, we managed to curl up in one corner and get some sleep with our feet in the rain."

May 30

Got up and took a swim before shoving off.... We saw only one small tug today. The population is very sparse. We camped in a perfect spot on the Illinois bank. It is all sand and the first time we can get in and out of the canoe without wading through mud. Had fried potatoes, baked beans, and boiled rice for supper. It rained during the night.

One morning they confronted an animal — or a herd of them — that northern city boys weren't familiar with. At about 4 a.m., Bill writes, "Heinie and I ... heard something charging down through the cornstalks and sat up to look about 20 mules in the face. They stopped no more than 15 yards from us and stood watching us."

The men didn't know whether to fear the mules or not. "Not knowing what they might do," says Bill, "we woke Baldy up, and he and Heinie ran down over the bank, leaving me to gather up

the blankets and tent and get down myself. I got everything and wasn't far behind either."



They reached Cairo, Ill., on June 1, anxious to see the confluence of the Ohio and the Father of Waters. They were disappointed: "The Mississippi is only half as wide as the Ohio and we had a hard time believing we were looking at the 'Mighty Miss'.... The water in the Mississippi is faster and dirtier."

After several days on the meandering Mississippi, they arrived at Caruthersville, Mo., and were immediately arrested. Three youngsters, it seemed, had stolen a canoe in St. Louis and were headed downstream. Our heroes were mistaken for them. Bill gives a vivid description of the local jail's accommodations.

I found that I was in a room 20 feet square, having a single small window. There were no beds, not even a chair to sit on. The center of the room was occupied by a steel cage which was divided into 2 cells. One of these held a negro woman and a white girl no more than 15 years old. The kid was decent and clean looking but I guess you can't tell the sweetness of an apple by the color of its skin. She was in for public drunkenness.

The place was full of big roaches, the size of mice. In one of the empty cells was a rat lying on its back and kicking feebly. For toilet purposes in this filthy joint are two hoppers, one in the women's cage and one in a corner for the men. There are no curtains or screens for privacy. For drinking water and for flushing these hoppers, there is a faucet over each one.

The boys were released in the late afternoon after the confusion about their identities was cleared up. The jail served a morning and an evening meal, and they missed both. After returning to their campsite, Bill writes: "[L]oading up under the belts and breathing some fresh air, we felt none the worse for our jail term."

At one of their campsites below Memphis, they met what Bill described as a "pretty nasty looking individual. He told us he'd been in the World War and the Memphis-Helena race war back in 1920. He really hates negroes. He said he was sentenced to 25 years in the pen for killing a negro but was paroled. He doesn't believe that he has killed his last one."

After this introduction to the ugly side of southern life, the boys were glad to move on. The next day they made the best mileage of the trip, from Memphis to Helena — 92 miles — in one day.

On June 12, they reached Vicksburg, Miss., and went ashore to pick up mail. "We were told the city was built on hills and it was no lie," Bill records. "The streets running up and down ... have stop lights at the intersections. I don't know what cars do on slippery days to follow these signals."

As they proceeded south on the river, the mosquitoes became vicious — especially at night. Soon, biting ants joined in. Bill writes that he would remember the ants for years, while Heinie felt the mosquitoes more: he would go home with a dose of malaria. Often they would stop during the day for a nap, according to Bill's journal, having been kept awake the previous night by the insects.

The boys were constantly drawn to the dark and mysterious back channels and swamps in the bayou country of the lower river. On one such diversion, Bill commented: "The silence was broken by the sad wailing of a victrola. Some old hill-billy, or should I say river-billy, must have been trying to chase away the blues. There wasn't a house or a boat in sight."

They got lost in one backwater area.

As we progressed, the channel got more crooked, breaking off in different directions. The passage is more like a tunnel; the trees spread out overhead and are thickly hung with Spanish moss, giving everything the appearance of some primeval forest.... [W]e passed a tumble down shack floating on rotting old logs, several dogs raised an awful racket, which brought a dirty-looking man out to stare at us. Finally, he hailed us back and told us we'd better get out on the river again. He said if we lost the channel we might never get out.... [W]e headed back the way we'd come.... I'd like, someday, to spend more time in there.

On June 15, it rained all day but they could nevertheless make out an imposing tower in the distance. At 8 p.m., they arrived at Baton Rouge; the tower was part of the magnificent state capitol recently constructed by Gov. Huey Long. In less than two years, "The Kingfish" would fall victim to an assassin's bullet there.

Bill writes that "the town is very attractive here. Palm trees line the streets and you can see the the state house from practically everywhere.... Did nothing all morning but lay everything out to dry and play cards. After dinner we swam around and scrubbed the canoe. We haven't much ambition now that the trip is nearly over."

They rested at Baton Rouge for a couple of days and then began the last lap to New Orleans.

Bill describes their grand entrance:

At about 10:00 the wind came tearing downstream with a real shower behind it. We 'hoisted all sail' and ran at the head of it till 4:30 when we got so cold we had to go to shore and get warm. Thus we arrived at New Orleans. We pulled up on a levee behind a wooden breakwater. There are some shacks and houseboats near us and almost at once someone offered to buy our equipment. Our faithful canoe seems mighty out of place among the big freighters. This part of New Orleans is called Algiers. Here we declared our last camp of the trip.

The boys did some sightseeing, but not much. For them, everything after reaching New Orleans was anti-climactic.

They got haircuts, cleaned their clothes, sold their canoe and camping equipment, and picked up a small money order from home which brought their funds for the return overland to a princely \$41.

Early in the morning of June 22, they began a new expedition — one to be told, perhaps, at another time in another magazine — by departing New Orleans for home. They made their return overland by train in the Depression's most popular berth: the freight car. ❁