


THE RIVER RATS





It was the summer of 1965, my 13th year, and I was a juvenile delinquent. The River Rats had three other members: Kenny, Mark, and Eddy.¹ Together, our gang of four wreaked havoc on the factories lining the Monongahela, Allegheny, and Ohio rivers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was the year we flirted with everything forbidden: rivers, railroads, and crime.



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We lived on the steep hills overlooking the Monongahela River Valley, a small area that lies just southeast of the confluence of Pittsburgh's three rivers. Pittsburgh in the mid-'60s was a company town, and most of the men in our little part of the region were company men. They were proud and loyal people who revered their company, never understanding that it was also made up of men just like them.

Pittsburgh was an industrial workhorse, dominated by monolithic steel mills that clogged both banks of the Monongahela River. They rumbled and soiled the earth 24 hours a day, 365 days a year — spewing black soot, polluting the rivers, and lighting the night skies red. The steel mills may have demanded and received respect, but our fathers never passed the same requirement onto us. The steel industry reigned as the monarch, our fathers were their subjects, but in the summer of 1965, the River Rats were the enemies of state — out to loot, plunder, and steal from the king's coffers.

At rare moments of intoxication or resignation, our parents expressed their true senti-

ments. I remember my father's words: "Get an education, son, and move away from the shadows of the mills ... be your own man and never look back." Our fathers' latent emotions gave our wicked enterprise meaning and endowed it with honor and purpose. John Paul Jones and Sir Francis Drake — both admitted privateers — loomed high in our imaginations. History can be interpreted differently by preadolescent boys, and instead of pirates and scoundrels, our schoolteachers unwittingly cast these men as heroes and adventurers, images we magnified many times over. The River Rats had no Spanish galleons or English merchants to plunder, but we did have the steel mills and coal barges, the North Pole Ice Cream Company, and the Good Ship Lollipop.

In 1965, the mills, railroads, barges, and mines made the landscape a booby trap. Stories abounded about some who were caught in the clutches of moving trains, buried alive in abandoned mines, or sucked under by one of the many river undertows. The Monongahela was a cesspool of every imaginable pollutant, including raw sewage from the

surrounding communities, sulfuric acid wash from the coke ovens, slag dumps, and a host of residual oils and solvents dumped by the steel mills.² We couldn't imagine anything living in the Monongahela Rivers save for catfish and river rats, the latter giving us our name.

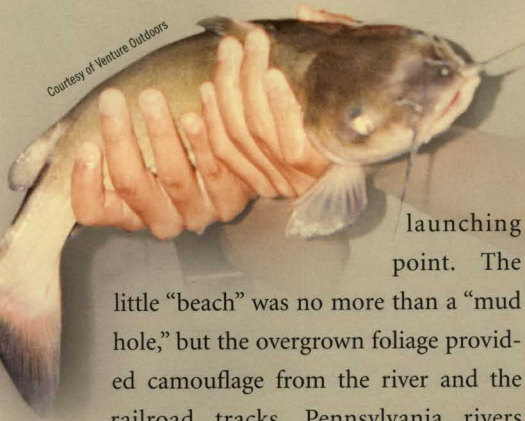
Our parents were adamant in forbidding us near the rivers, and we were equally as deviant in disregarding their warnings. It was in this water that the sons of steelworkers too poor to join the country club learned to swim. Filthy industrial stink-holes, they still offered an irresistible appeal. I believe our experiences on the rivers built up resistance to childhood and adult diseases. We weren't sickly kids.

It was the attraction of the rivers that brought Kenny, Mark, Eddie, and me together. We talked all through the school year about building a river raft and using it to explore the hidden valleys and coves along the Monongahela and Allegheny. The ultimate dream of course was to raft down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans, following the exploits of other American legends such as Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain. As family stories go, my paternal grandparents were associated with the Dravo Corporation, and in the 1930s through their connections, my father finagled a trip to New Orleans on a river barge. It was a favorite dinner time tale.

Building a river raft was a big project and required planning, hard work, and materials — the latter easily scavenged from the many surrounding industrial junkyards. We constructed it like a dinghy, with a flat plywood bottom placed over six over-inflated inner tubes for buoyancy and fastened together with rope. It ended up a rather cumbersome craft, but proved maneuverable, stayed afloat, and suited our adventuresome purposes.

A hidden cove located on the southeast bank of the Monongahela River served as our

Courtesy of Venture Outdoors



launching point. The little “beach” was no more than a “mud hole,” but the overgrown foliage provided camouflage from the river and the railroad tracks. Pennsylvania rivers would normally have run low in the summer, but because of the barges, dams reduced the current and kept the water at a constant level. The reduced flow also caused the water temperature to run higher than normal.

River rafting offered glimpses of sites that were already familiar to us but from unique angles. The inner workings of the steel mills grabbed our interest because they were close and accessible. Unlike the street side, where 20-foot corrugated-steel walls obstructed the view, the river exposed the real lives of the mill workers and the secrets of the steel-making process.

Our little criminal gang met three or four times a week, usually before seven in the morning, trekking two miles to our secret hiding place in the woods, reclaiming the raft from the underbrush, and carrying it across the railroad tracks to the mud hole. We usually had a plan for the day and brought provisions: lunch, fresh water, fishing gear, a bicycle pump, a Swiss Army knife, rope, and a few other tools to repair the raft, which seemed to constantly deteriorate in the moisture of Pittsburgh’s humid weather.

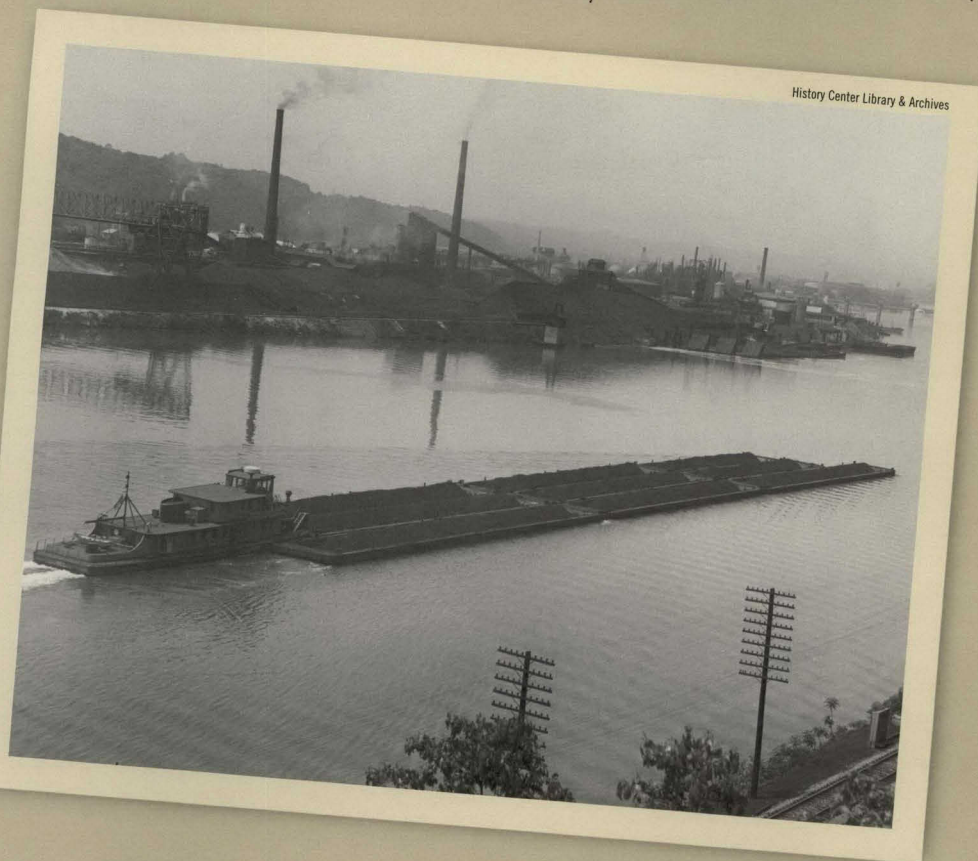
The raft wasn’t deserving of a name; it was barely maneuverable. Fully loaded, the inflated inner tubes elevated the plywood just inches above the water, our bodies keeping it balanced, the water splashing over the rails each time one of us leaned too far overboard. We kept close to shore, venturing out no more than 50 feet, crossing under the shadows of the bridges, leaping from pylon to pylon. We soon developed a cadence for paddling, oftentimes singing to the steady tempo of a popular song, “I’ll Be Doggone” by Marvin Gaye and the Miracles or “Bernadette” by

the Four Tops, Kenny leading with the verse.

Kenny, short and pudgy, hailed from a musical family and took private lessons on the violin. His family had emigrated from Poland soon after World War II, six years before Kenny was born. They were a raucous bunch whose outward appearance resembled a gypsy clan, ragged and free. Kenny’s house lacked order and routine, but they were a happy lot, and embraced us all with love. Kenny’s father played the accordion and sang. His mother, a monster of a woman, accompanied him on the piano. Kenny’s older brother and sister played a variety of instruments including the trumpet, guitar, and drums. The family performed together at Polish weddings and cultural events. I enjoyed spending Sunday afternoons at Kenny’s house: his mother would play the piano and sing to us in her beautiful soprano, then feed us, sing some more, then feed us again. She was a wonderful cook. Kenny made it his habit to memorize the words to all the popular songs, especially the Motown hits. We were his chorus.

Mark boasted the brains of the group, at least the academic kind. The Pittsburgh public schools had recognized his abilities and pushed him into a special accelerated program designed for gifted children. He had already advance two years ahead of us in school. Mark’s father and mother had divorced several years earlier. His mother was a hot-tempered psychotic with a violent streak who often lost control and took her frustrations out on the china, sometimes breaking every plate against the wall of their little apartment. She rationalized it afterwards by claiming the family deserved fine European porcelain. She regularly cursed her lot, her son, and her ex-husband in the same breath, even in my presence. They ended up using unbreakable, cheap plastic plates.

Mark’s father arranged for a private tutor. An electrical engineer, he was an even-tempered and responsible man. He was grooming



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Mark for success by pushing him rigorously toward academic achievement, but he had to be content to shout from the sidelines. In today's world, he would have been awarded custody. Mark's brains did not extend to building a river raft, however; he had no mechanical aptitude whatsoever.

Eddie was a romantic dreamer with a talent for storytelling. His fantastic imagination inspired the whole idea of river rafting. He was convinced our little craft could make it to New Orleans if only Mark used his brilliant engineering mind to correct a few deficiencies. For one, he thought we could build a hull that displaced water instead of using inner tubes for buoyancy. He even had ideas for a gasoline motor and a rudder system. Eddie had some mechanical skills, but his major contribution was enthusiasm. He could tell an incredible story with sincerity and conviction, and when people looked into his dewy-eyed face, they wanted to believe him. He'd often scare younger boys with tales of six-foot snapping turtles and poisonous water snakes. According to Eddie, the River Rats had discovered no less than six dead corpses floating down the river. Every floating tree log was another corpse.

To listen to Eddie, you'd think he hailed from a privileged background, but the truth was somewhat more pedestrian. In fact, our families were very similar: conservative Presbyterians. At various times, Eddie claimed to be an orphan, a run-away scion from a wealthy New York family, or a fugitive on the lamb. He bragged about his grandmother, a wealthy heiress who owned a mansion in the Shadyside neighborhood of the city and possessed a vast fortune that he'd soon inherit. The truth was she owned a boarding house in the neighborhood of Oakland and rented rooms to retired bachelors on Social Security.

I was a regular guest at Mrs. Ayers's table. Just as her name suggested, she put on airs of sophistication. Slightly pompous, animated,

and elegantly dressed, to a 13-year-old she appeared a caricature right out of the movie *Arsenic and Old Lace*. She rented rooms to old men, just like the movie characters, and she also aided her lonely tenants in their final deliverance. It was her favorite subject; she welcomed the opportunity to entertain us with play-by-play accounts of their last moments of life. She consoled us by adding, "They never died alone."

I was the fourth and least interesting member of the River Rats. At the time of this story, I stood indistinguishable from Eddie, but without the spice of his imagination, the electricity of his charm, or his audacity to tell fanciful lies. I have always compared myself to

chicken noodle soup, everyday fare and purposely under-salted. I was seduced by Eddie's fascination with the rivers much as Mark and Kenny had been. I added mechanical skills, common sense, and most importantly, vigilance to the group. My persistent cautions were largely ignored or put to a vote. In a battle between Eddie and me, Eddie won on the strength of personality, but my constant words of caution kept us on guard.

Compassion is a learned human trait that, it seems, young boys acquire later than young girls. The River Rats hadn't yet discovered it, and the summer of 1965 would only push us a little bit along the way. I believe our lack of



compassion protected us against human predators. There were other trespassers on the rivers and railroads: railroad bums and deviants. I never liked the riverbanks and felt a heightened sense of fear at the beginning of each excursion. We knew there were predators of all sorts on the banks, and given the opportunity, they would do us harm. After we launched our little raft, our fears subsided. We didn't worry about drowning; we knew how to swim. As an added measure of protection, we all sported bright orange life-vests, an involuntary donation by one of the riverboat companies.

Our curiosity took us up close to the bright flames and loud noises of the steel mills. The men in the neighborhoods reigned proud and walked tall, but in the mill, they stooped, wore uniforms, and became one with the factory. The synchronicity between men and machines, the powerful furnaces, and the buckets of molten steel provided hours of entertainment. It also surprised us how completely oblivious they were to our presence. It was as if we entered an alien dimension with an invisibility shield. In fact, invisibility was a common phenomenon everywhere we went. We embarked on an odyssey, sailing aboard a magical vessel, and the factories of Pittsburgh were too busy to take notice.

Eliza, the main blast furnace for the Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation, proved a better show by far than any Fourth of July celebration. It had all the elements, including dramatic spurting flames and explosions. We were told that Eliza was named after a woman because it had a history of temper tantrums, just like Mark's mother. The blast furnace occasionally exploded — killing and maiming all around her. I had read Eliza once took 18 steelworkers in a single day. My father told me she hadn't exploded since the 1930s, but often got her revenge by gassing workers to death.² The Eliza furnace stood on the north bank of the Monongahela River between the

old Brady Street Bridge and what is now called the Hot Metal Bridge. Because of its prominent position between Oakland and Downtown Pittsburgh, she was the most famous of all the Pittsburgh furnaces — certainly the most photographed.³ To the River Rats, she was majestic, and we spent hours watching the slag and hot metal pour out of her belly and into their respective caldrons.

We also explored the other parts of the steel mills, including the open-hearth furnaces on the south side of the river. They had a unique way of tapping them with dynamite packs, a process that created a distinctive explosion that ricocheted off the hills in both directions. The rolling mills on the north side served as the brazen muscle of the mill, and watching the steel crushed and stretched by tremendous rolling pins projected a feeling of strength and made us proud. We also visited the Hazelwood coke ovens, protected as we were by the "Shield of Perseus." The River Rats soon grew tired though and looked for more promising quarries beyond the Brady Street Bridge.

Fishing was a diversion. Catfish poisoned by pollution were the only catch in the Monongahela River. We collected them on a string for one rather cruel reason: to hurl at people on the clipper boats and the Good Ship Lollipop. Catfish were harmless, but they were sinfully ugly and difficult to kill. They were the river's revenge, slimy brown-green and monstrous looking — little devils with whiskers — perfect for making girls scream, and at 13, this gave us so much joy. The Good Ship Lollipop had a ship-to-shore radio, however, and reported us to the river patrol, which cruised by in their sleek motor craft soon after a sneak catfish attack. We made a quick get-away by skipping under the overgrown foliage, beaching the raft, and waiting them out.

Four hours on the river was our limit. The summer was endless, the days long, and by

one o'clock in the afternoon, it was time to beach and hide our raft, return to our homes, and scrub the filth, stink, and slime of the river from our bodies. Kenny had music lessons Mark met with his tutor, and Eddie and I had afternoon jobs. We donned halos and morphed into responsible boys.

In the days and weeks that followed, the River Rats inched our launching point west, closer to Downtown Pittsburgh. We fancied ourselves pirates, and nurtured fantasies about sacking the Point and raising the skull-and-crossbones over city hall. Each new day on the Monongahela also netted valuable experience in the art of riverboat rafting. The tugboat workers were quick to offer advice on basic design and construction, and the factories and junkyards along the banks unwittingly provided supplies. In one day we moved our base from the Brady Street Bridge to the 10th Street Bridge, a distance of 13 city blocks, within view of the "downtown enemy port." Beyond 10th Street, the river crowded with private pleasure crafts filled with young people, some of whom took great pleasure in ridiculing our ragtag contraption of discarded plywood and inner tubes. They paid for their disrespect with a barrage of catfish, but their motorboats nonetheless took some of the wind out of our spirits. We thought of adding improvements to increase our respect — perhaps a mast and sail — and started scanning places along the river that could provide poles, canvas, and rope.

The rivers and the summer's humidity under a more natural environment would have created a haven for insects of all sorts, especially mosquitoes. The reality was quite different, however. In 1965, a giant haze of



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pollution hovered over the central city, which must have acted as a virtual mosquito net, stunting the insect population.

Pittsburgh was just starting to be a wannabe community, and the city fathers attempted the quixotic: beautification with an emphasis on the downtown section. Plans were drawn up for a brand new skyline with big changes to Point State Park.⁴ The Fort Pitt Bridge was completed too, which linked the South Side to the North Side via the Fort Duquesne Bridge. Because of funding problems, the latter's construction stalled, and it soon after became known euphemistically as the Bridge to Nowhere.⁵ There was a small caged workroom underneath the lower roadway on the main span of the bridge, accessible only by a narrow catwalk. It became a meeting place for another group of River Rats, hereinafter known as the West End River Rats.

We met our Ohio River counterparts by accident while scavenging the construction junkyard at Point State Park. The West End River Rats were doing the same, and had their raft docked just around the corner on the

Allegheny. We welcomed each other like two cats: slingshots drawn and ready to do battle. In fact, we were too similar: four preadolescents with a river raft made from pilfered construction and industrial material. I thought how dare anyone copy our unique idea, even adopt the same name! I often wonder how many others shared the same experience.

Over the next several days and while exploring the Allegheny River, we crossed wakes several times, and on one occasion, came close to an old-fashioned rumble. They had a legitimate complaint; we were in their territory. As the cautionary voice, I wanted nothing to do with the West End boys, preferring to concede and let them have the entire Allegheny River. Eddie, of course, wanted to challenge them for exclusive rights to both rivers, even arrange a little competition — a race to the far bank — the loser retreating to either the Monongahela or the Ohio, leaving the Allegheny and the Heinz plant to the victors. We weren't fighters, and they weren't into games. In the end, I offered an olive branch and made an attempt to be friends, which was a mistake.

The West End River Rats were a little more aggressive in their plundering of the factories along the Ohio River, just to the west of Downtown Pittsburgh. They had been pursued by the river patrol on several occasions, and for more serious crimes than hurling catfish. Their leader, Kevin, was a hot-tempered Irish boy who liked to fight. He kept the rest of his crew in check with the use of physical threats. He was tall and good looking with

wavy, jet-black hair combed in the doo-wop rock-and-roll style of Elvis Presley. Kevin arranged a meeting to discuss a joint operation, and we reluctantly agreed.

The Greater Pittsburgh River Rats hardly fit in the little maintenance room under the Bridge to Nowhere. The meeting initially took on a jolly camaraderie, but then became serious at the insistence of Kevin. He had a plan. I listened attentively, remaining suspicious, wanting to retreat as soon as decorum allowed. Our lives were already too uncontrollable without the likes of Kevin and the West End River Rats mucking up the waters. Eddie was game to strike up a deal; Mark stood behind Eddie. Kenny sided with me initially, but was swayed. I stood my ground — always the nay vote — but in the end allowed myself to be won over, mostly out of loyalty to my friends. I could have forced the issue; without me, the raft wouldn't have been maneuverable, but we were a quartet and dependent on each other.

Kevin's unscrupulous plan was simple enough, and the sheer elegance of it impressed us. Years afterward, I came to believe there had to be co-conspirators hidden in the shadows — boys who were older and wiser in the wicked ways of the world. At the time, however, I looked at Kevin with grudging awe, accepting everything he said at face value.

The target was the North Pole Ice Cream Company, which, according to Kevin, doubled as a candy distribution company. Its offices, production facilities, and warehouses were on the Ohio River, discreetly hidden inside a protected industrial park on the South Side; protected, that is, from every approach except the river. Railroad tracks lined the Ohio just like the Monongahela and Allegheny. There was also a floodwall in the form of an eight-foot stone embankment on the river's edge. That meant there was no easy place to bank the raft, or any prospect of shal-

low water. Kevin assured us the floodwall was old and veined with gaps large enough to grip and would present little difficulty to climb straight up and over. The rails had never presented an obstacle. The cyclone fence had security wires and was topped with barbed wire, both easily circumvented with the careful use of wire cutters.

According to the intelligence Kevin (mysteriously) possessed, the plant and offices were closed on Saturdays, the day of our planned heist. There was a security guard, but Kevin assured us he was a drunk and usually asleep. Instinct told me Kevin knew him, possibly a close relative or acquaintance of the family?

The information about the guard and the layout of the company pointed to an inside job, the exact details of which have faded with time. I do remember it worked, and with precision. We were in and out within five minutes, each of us carrying two jumbo boxes of candies. Kevin admonished us to leave everything orderly and exactly as we found it, an opening for future heists. The boxes of candy were hidden behind cyclone-wire cages in a dark warehouse to the rear of the building. I distinctly remember row upon row of candy boxes diminishing off into the distance like objects in a perspective drawing.

We left the spoils to the West End River Rats, only taking one small box of chocolates that eventually melted in the summer heat. Before bidding us goodbye, Kevin promised to split the proceeds at an unspecified date. We returned to Point State Park, climbed up over the river wall, and sat quietly amidst the construction debris, feeling a collective remorse. We knew we had stepped over the line, and our consciences wasted no time in exacting

revenge. Mark and Kenny were Catholic and expressed their desire to ask a priest for forgiveness at the earliest opportunity. Eddie and I conceded the devil was possibly responsible, but were quick to rationalize our own ill feelings.

In the end it dawned on us there was no choice left but to destroy the very thing that had led us to our life of crime. We wasted no time in standing around the raft to ceremoniously deliver the final eulogy. Kenny hummed taps while the rest of us methodically ripped it apart. It took only 10 minutes to slash the inner tubes, separate the rails from the plywood base, and cut the ropes into small pieces. We turned and walked away, leaving our dreams behind in a heap of rubble. That ended the River Rats, and with it, our summer of rivers and crime.

¹ Real names within this essay have been changed by the author.

² Joel A. Tarr, *Devastation and Renewal: An Environmental History of Pittsburgh and Its Region* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003).

³ Mark Perrott, *Eliza: Remembering a Pittsburgh Steel Mill* (Charlottesville, Va.: Howell Press, 1989).

⁴ Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation Collection, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection, Archives Services Center, University of Pittsburgh.

⁵ Robert C. Alberts, *The Shaping of the Point: Pittsburgh's Renaissance Park* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980).

⁶ Rick Sebak, Producer, "Flying Off the Bridge to Nowhere! and other tales of Pittsburgh Bridges" [video recording]: (Pittsburgh WQED-Pittsburgh, 1990).

The editors would like to thank Brian Cain for his assistance with this article.

Emory MacAlister is from Pittsburgh. These days, he only crosses the rivers by bridge.

Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh

