(Jim's account of his trip on the Connecticut River August 26-September 27, 2009)

A Voyage
Down the Friendly Connecticut

I slid the kayak into the waters of the Connecticut River at Canaan, Vermont, a village so close to Canada's Quebec Province that you overhear French spoken in the local restaurant. My destination was the town of Old Saybrook, Connecticut, which lay on Long Island Sound, 373 river miles, and four weeks, away. For years I'd dreamt of making this solo trip through the historic heart of New England, meeting its people and exploring its towns and culture.

The first miles gave me a relaxed paddle through the rural solitude of the far north, my only challenge being to dodge the low-hanging branches of the tree canopy that overarched this rather narrow river. There was surprisingly little water moving down the channel, and it occurred to me that if the banks happened to broaden, the river could become quite shallow. But I had a childlike faith that if God has gone to the trouble of making a river, He makes it deep enough to be navigable by a kayak drawing three and a half inches of water.

At first, my confidence in this Divine plan was vindicated. When the river grew wider, I watched with concern as the bottom rose up and my paddle tips began to strike rocks, but each time, the kayak glided smoothly over all, the river narrowed again and the water deepened reassuringly. Then, several miles above Lyman Falls Dam, I received a rude jolt—literally. Small rapids loomed ahead, I built up speed to gain maneuverability, and thud! I was aground against a rock and the current was twisting the boat sideways. I leapt out into the knee-high water, wrestled the kayak past the rock and clambered back into the boat. A few yards further, I grounded

again, and then again. Even though I was trying to follow the path of the deepest, strongest current, I could not pass.

I decided that the classification of rapids needs to be expanded. In addition to classes I through VI, there should be a Class 0 for whitewater a kayak simply can't get through. Such rapids might not harm a hard shell kayak, but they were a threat to my tender, fabric-covered Klepper Aerius 2000, especially this nine-year-old version that has seen two thousand miles of river trips. Each time the boat scraped, I felt the pain of the rubberized bottom as if it were my own skin.

Ahead lay the breeched dam at Lyman Falls, the first of 14 dams for me to overcome. The guidebooks advised against trying to run the dam, partly because of the unnatural turbulence, but also because there might be exposed rebar—which could be death to my fabric kayak. It was clearly fixed in my mind that I must take out before I reached this obstacle.

I was so preoccupied with the class 0 rapids that I lost track of Lyman Falls Dam. I expected there would be signs warning of the danger and a clearly marked take-out place for the portage, and since neither appeared, I assumed I was still far from the dam. One moment I was climbing back into the kayak after lifting the boat past yet another rock, and the next, the current was yanking me through tumbled concrete slabs that looked like Roman ruins. I noticed two fishermen peering at me in alarm from the bank. Luckily, the boat found the one safe channel and the current swept me safely past the concrete blocks and hidden rebar. When I realized I had just unintentionally run the dam, my first reaction was, *"You idiot!"* Then, thinking of the half-day portage I had spared myself, I thought, *"Cool, man!"*

The second day brought a new kind of challenge. There were more class 0 rapids, but I was developing a technique for handling them. Instead of paddling as fast as possible to gain maneuverability, I back paddled, approaching them as slowly as possible in order to protect the kayak's skin. I dressed for the part, too, in a bathing suit and wearing booties, so I was ready to jump out as soon as I ran aground. In this way, I successfully traversed several shallow spots.

Several quarts of water were sloshing about the bottom, which worried me. Some of it was being dragged into the boat by my booties each time I climbed in, and some came from wave

tops, but, even so, there seemed more water than I could explain. I had been too tired the night before to drag the boat out of the water and inspect the bottom. If it was a leak, it was a slow one, and I hoped I could wait until evening to find and patch it.

Just as I was beginning to feel comfortable about shallow rapids, the river divided around an island. I had to guess which channel would pay off better in terms of usable depth for kayaking. I picked what looked like the strongest arm of the river, but it soon grew narrow, and also rather sluggish. Something was wrong. After several hundred yards I caught a glimpse of the other branch of the river through the trees: it was three feet lower than I was! Obviously, my limb of the river was backed up, and at some point I had to drop down rapidly. I wound my way along in the narrow channel under overarching silver maples, gripping the paddle tightly, peering intently ahead.

Soon I heard the characteristic roar of turbulence ahead. The obstruction was a four-foot tree trunk that had made a dam across my channel, with some of the water running under it, and the rest cascading over the top in a waterfall. Just three feet past this barrier was a smaller tree trunk across the channel, suspended a few inches above the water. I grabbed hold of a branch to stop myself, and tried to figure out what to do. The channel was hemmed in by brush that stretched into the water on both sides: it was quite impossible to land. I clung to the limb, hoping that some bright idea would occur to me, but soon the current dragged the boat sideways overpowering my grip on the branch. The boat drifted against the obstruction sideways, completely out of control. It seemed almost certain that I would be overturned, my gear soaked, and maybe even get badly wrecked.

Instead, a miracle occurred. The current washed the boat up to the log dam, then gently carried me over the top and down to the pool below. Then the current drew the kayak along the second log until, at the far end, there was space to slide under the tree out into the open river below. All this time, I did little paddling, figuring the river knew better than I did what the boat needed to do—and it certainly did!

That evening I found an idyllic campsite 20 feet above the river at the edge of one of the cornfields so common in the fertile upper Connecticut River Valley. Most of the farmers leave a

border between the corn and the river—a recent environmental innovation to reduce chemical run-off—and I found this swath of grass an excellent campsite: clean, level, and secluded. I had a great vista, with the river below and the purple mountains in the distance. After pitching my tent, I went back down to the river and turned the kayak over to inspect the bottom. I found no tears or cuts: I rendered thanks unto Klepper for making such a sturdy craft.

Though I was camping on private property, I saw no one. As it grew dark, I heard a "kerplunk" that sounded exactly like a ten-pound stone being dropped into the water, suggesting the presence of some strong, dextrous creature, and I wondered about it for a while. (On a later evening, I watched a fish jump and make exactly that kerplunk sound). Besides that, the only noises of the forest were falling hickory nuts clattering through the branches and the occasional huff of a deer.

The highlight of the next day was chasing fleeing ducks—not on purpose, but because they didn't have the sense to avoid me. The broods of mergansers that had been raised along the river all summer were almost fully mature, with the youngsters as big as the adults, and with the same attractive rust and white coloring. Mature ducks know that the only way to escape an oncoming boat on the river is to flee to the side and let the boat pass. This was the principle I saw the merganser moms trying to impart to their offspring—the ones still willing to follow her—as I came by. But many of the youngsters were getting too big for their britches. They wanted to think for themselves, and what their own little brains told them to do was flee, flee, flee.

Eventually I had a group of some 20 ducks ahead of me. Each time I drew near, they fled further down the river, half flying, half running across the top of the water until they were exhausted and stopped to rest. Then I would catch up, seeming a diabolical Dr. Doom pursuing them unto eternity, and they would spurt another few hundred yards. I took satisfaction in the fact that I was giving these ducks a good workout, strengthening their muscles for upcoming challenges—like flying to South Carolina for migration. The chase went on for hours until, in the early afternoon, we came to a wide stretch and the ducks crowded to the far side, and then headed up river behind me,

learning the lesson that all ducks eventually learn about not trying to outrun a boat.

On the third day, I approached Wyoming Dam at Northumberland, New Hampshire – another breeched barrier I really didn't want to go through. Watching the water ahead carefully, I saw where it started to speed up and I pulled ashore by an empty folding chair positioned on the bank. Though the banks of the Connecticut are natural and unspoiled, in most places civilization lies only a few steps beyond the trees that fringe the river. I found a dirt path, followed it, and came upon a house, being painted by its owner, Dick Cook, a retired paper mill worker. I asked if I could bring my kayak ashore and make a portage. Dick not only agreed but offered to drive my kayak and me to nearby Lancaster where there was a motel and restaurants. I didn't need much urging to accept his offer.

Several days later, I arrived at the Gilman Dam portage at 8:15 in the morning. There wasn't a soul about to help me, and I was forced to make a real portage on my own. The ordeal started with breaking down the Klepper and packing it into the carrying pack—a job I hate because, despite having done it scores of times, I still can't get all the pieces to fit the first time. I staggered with the 60-pound pack along the half-mile trail to the put-in below the dam, taking rest stops and snack breaks along the way. Then I returned for a second trip to bring all the gear: the sleeping bag, the tent, the food bag with its supply of peanut butter, beef jerky, sardines, and Planters Deluxe Mixed Nuts, the supply bag with my gloves, booties, and the battery charger for my digital camera, duct tape and about 20 other vital items. Crouching and squatting, I reconstructed the kayak and re-stowed everything. An entirely self-propelled portage is a five-act, incredibly boring melodrama. It wasn't until 12:30 that afternoon that I took my final curtain call and lifted the boat carefully over the jagged rock outcrops that guarded the put-in.

I wound my way downriver through two shallow rapids, dinging the bottom on a few more stones, and entered Moore Lake. The largest lake on the Connecticut, extending nine miles long and a little over a mile at the widest, Moore Lake's perimeter is public land, so there is not a single structure anywhere, no house or cabin to be seen. Traversing it on a Monday afternoon in September, I had this popular scenic lake

all to myself. Though it had been heavily used throughout the summer, I found very little litter along the shore where I camped: the principles of polite camping seem well ingrained among users of the Connecticut. The wind died, turning the lake into a shining, shimmering mirror; the sun lowered in the sky behind me, setting aglow the White Mountain range on the far horizon. I set my tent up on a patch of sand, carried the kayak high up the beach and tied the mooring line to a stone in case changing hydroelectric needs radically raised the lake level during the night.

The next morning I was enveloped by a dense morning fog, a quite common experience on the Connecticut in the fall. On clear nights, moisture boils off the warm river water and condenses into a dense blanket that fills the valley, a fog so thick the sun often doesn't burn it off until 10 or 11 AM. On Moore Lake, it presented an unusual challenge of navigation, since once underway, I couldn't see 20 feet through it and instantly lost my sense of direction. The GPS saved the day: I set the GO TO function on the dam at the head of the lake and followed its command. (In case you were wondering, no, I didn't let it guide me over the lip of the dam).

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On Comerford Lake the next day, I spotted two figures in a tandem kayak on the other side of the lake—the first kayakers I'd seen—and paddled over to greet them. They were an older couple in a red, plastic sit-upon kayak. The woman was paddling very lightly and inexpertly while the man was relaxing and taking in the sun. I asked about the portage around Comerford Dam, which they knew little about. When I asked them why they were out on the water, George said, "We want to do things we've never done before it's too late."

I jokingly said, "Cross it off your bucket list, is it?"

This wisecrack didn't get the expected laugh, and I soon found out why. Nancy had a grave case of leukemia and was shaking off the effects of 21 days of chemotherapy. (That explained the pink hat she kept on at all times). Having just turned 70 myself, I could appreciate their choice of kayaking as an excellent way to spend the time we have left.

The conversation circled around to my trip, and I mentioned that I was running low on supplies and needed to get to a store

and a cash machine. George offered to drive me to Littleton. Pretty soon I was being invited to spend the night in their ancient farmhouse high in the hills!

A visit with new friends was just what I needed to rebuild my depleted psychological reserves. For supper George cooked up a superb vegetarian stir-fry, and we passed the evening in animated exploration of our life histories. George, who grew up in Jamaica, showed me photos of his recent three-months' stay in Australia, camping with the aborigines who knew his grandfather. Nancy showed me video clips of friends and family who visited her while she languished behind the plastic in the isolation ward. One friend gave her a cello recital; her talented daughter composed and performed a calypso song about how "Mr. Leukemia" made a big mistake picking on her mom, sung with a perfect West Indian accent.

The next morning, the three of us went in search of a put-in for me to continue my journey (we had said we would start at 8, but it was 10 before we put aside our chatting). We made a leisurely exploration down the river, until we found the perfect sandbar for my put-in. After a round of picture-taking, I gave George a hearty handshake and Nancy a hug, and a second one extra tight, and took to the water.

Several days later, plying the long straight stretch below Sumner Falls with Vermont's Mount Ascutney growing in my field of vision, I came upon the longest covered bridge in the U. S. at Windsor, Vermont. I went ashore to have a look. I wanted to walk across the bridge, but the two-lane bridge had barely enough room for the two-way traffic, and it was pitch dark inside. Peering along the roadway from the entrance, I could just make out the car scrape marks on the oak planking along the side, and deduced there was not enough extra room even for an undernourished kayaker. I retreated and walked up the main street of Windsor. Along the way, I noticed a man working on his porch and a green plastic gold pan at his feet.

"There can't be gold in Vermont!" I exclaimed.

"Oh yes there is!" he replied.

He went to his car and brought back a water-filled vial with respectable-sized flakes, flakes a lot bigger than the pin-points I'd lately been finding back home in Idaho. He gave me a complete account of where he has panned, and what the rules for

panning are. He reported that Vermont had a gold rush in the mid-1800s, with a six-ounce nugget found.

Further along, I took a picture of the Congregational Church, built in 1898, with its white spire soaring against the blue sky, and came upon the Windsor Diner, a local institution over half a century old. Theresa, the young brunette who owns and manages the place, is also the cook and she had her hands full that morning with orders pouring in from three waitresses. She was breaking eggs, chopping potatoes, sprinkling omelet fixings, flipping pancakes, opening and closing cabinets, her fingers and arms flying like a concert pianist playing a Chopin mazurka.

"When do you open?" I asked her when the pace slowed. Seven in the morning, she said, and she closes at seven at night, and they're open seven days a week. (With this number dominating her life, I think she should play the dice tables!). She bought the diner from her father last year but has been cooking there for, you guessed it, seven years.

"Sounds like you have a long day," I commented.

"I love my job!" she volunteered. When I tell her about my trip down the Connecticut River, she says she's always wanted to go kayaking, but is afraid. I promised to send a copy of my book to encourage her.

Don't think that for a kayaker such socializing excursions are without their price, however. If you drove to Windsor in a car, you would merely turn off the motor and step out. For me, getting ashore was a half-hour ordeal because of the mud that lines the Connecticut's banks. Before disembarking I had to remove my shoes and socks and pull on rubber booties. I wrestled the boat higher on shore and tied it up, my feet all the while sinking and sucking in the mud. I forced my way up the bank through heavy vegetation—hoping to avoid poison ivy—to reach the street. There I took off the booties, wiped my muddy feet as best I could with leaves and grass, and put on my shoes and socks, leaving the booties beside the road. The operation was reversed when I returned, except that at the end I had the muddy booties to deal with. They couldn't be allowed in the boat to mess everything up, so I tied them to a line, and dragged them in the water for half a mile to wash them (they really slowed the boat!).

Several days later, I faced the challenge of getting around Holyoke Dam, in Massachusetts. I pulled ashore at the ramp of the Red Cliffe Canoe Club, wondering how I was going to contend with the mile-long portage. Two older club members were enjoying a beer up by the clubhouse and I asked them if it was okay to moor. Sure, they said, we let all kayaks and canoes use the ramp for launching and take out. I asked for advice about the portage. One man suggested calling the power company, since they sometimes give portage, and he lent me his cell phone. My call yielded a recorded message: the office was closed for the day. "Well, then," said Alan, "I can take you around in my truck." And so he did, helping me accomplish in five minutes what would otherwise have taken me a day.

The portage was yet another example of Samaritans at work. The Connecticut River Valley has an abundance of friendly, helpful people who assisted me at every turn—with car rides, meals, phones, directions, advice, and free mooring. One man lent me his guidebook of the river to use for the rest of the trip; another, a concert pianist, gave me a private performance of Schumann's second piano sonata. At the start of the trip, I thought it might be interesting to count the number of people who contributed to my welfare, but the task soon proved overwhelming. If I include people who gave directions and advice, the total of Samaritans would easily pass several hundred.

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Bellows Falls marked the transition to a more urbanized New England, but on the river, it still felt amazingly rural. Even at Springfield, Massachusetts and Hartford, Connecticut the buildings and freeways extended for only a few miles before trees began again.

Just above Hartford, Connecticut I came to the breeched Enfield Dam. I pulled out a mile above this obstacle and asked the locals in the parking lot whether it was runnable. The guidebook said not to do it, but the portage was over two miles, an almost impossible challenge for me. Having received mixed opinions at the parking lot, I began a hike to the dam to see for myself. On the way, I came across the open doors of the Thompsonville Fire Department. I thought, *Who should know better what's safe?* The fireman I asked wasn't a kayaker, but he

phoned upstairs to a fireman who was. The report: “It’s doable; just keep to the left.” I decided then and there to trust Authority (for the first time in my life) and go for it. As I approached the dam, the roaring sounded like Niagara Falls, and I rued not having examined this hazard with my own eyes, but the fire department proved to be a dependable guide. The passage was ridiculously easy, with nothing more than fast water in the left side channel I followed.

Throughout the trip I’d been able to find clean, peaceful and private places to camp, but on my next-to-last night, at a spot on the river just north of Middletown, Connecticut, it looked like this record of undisturbed camping was about to end.

I had selected a fine spot: a sandy spit on a peninsula alongside an incoming creek, no houses in sight. Walking along the shore at dusk, just before retiring, I noticed hoof prints in the mud. They were much too large to be a deer’s, and I wondered what animal made them. The only hypothesis that came to my mind—reflecting my mindset formed by hiking in the mountain wilderness of Idaho—was moose.

The night was passing uneventfully, the only sound being the church bells half a mile away striking the hours, when, at about three AM, I heard the splashing of a big animal crossing the brook to my peninsula. Was this my moose? Peering out the flap of my tent I saw the silhouette of a cow. *Well, that’s no problem,* I thought. Then I thought some more: *Don't cows travel in herds? Why is a solitary cow wandering about?* I looked at the animal more closely. This cow had meaty, husky chest muscles; it also lacked udders and had that other thing below its stomach. *Ye gods, it's a bull! I'm camping in a bull pasture!*

I suddenly remembered my kayak, which was tied with two mooring lines strung out to tree branches. If this beast wandered by it, it could tangle itself in the ropes. I had a vision of the bull dashing over hill and dale, dragging my splintered boat clattering behind. Hoping to scare it away, I flashed my light at it: a very dumb thing to do, since it only succeeded in attracting the bull’s attention. It turned to face me, 20 feet away, aggressively pawing at the dirt with its foot, like a bull in the Pamplona arena. I stared at him while he stared back. I considered leaping out, screaming and waving my arms to scare him away, but then I recalled that’s what matadors do to get

bulls to charge them, and this matador had no sword! After many long minutes, the bull concluded he was imagining things, swung his massive head around, and splashed away across the creek. I let the air out of my lungs and collapsed with relief on my sleeping bag, my record for undisturbed Connecticut River camping still intact.

On my last full day, approaching the mouth of the river, I set off early in the morning, alone on the water, watching the wisps of fog lifting to reveal a brilliant blue sky, my paddles cleaving the mirrored pillow of the water. Then powerboats began to appear, bigger and bigger boats with higher and higher wakes. It was an end-of-summer Saturday and the owners were moving their craft to the boatyards to be cleaned and stored for the winter. I saw more powerboats this day than on the previous 29 put together. Sometimes there were several at once, racing alongside each other, not slowing down for anybody. The wakes from several boats would occasionally combine to raise a breaking wave that forced me to turn to take it head on. When my route compelled me to cross the river, I felt nervous and exposed; it was like crossing the Santa Monica Freeway in a baby carriage.

Around noon, a south wind came up, dead against me, giving me tough paddling. Then the flow of the incoming tide added another opponent. At Essex, Connecticut, a dark green 26-foot sloop was leaving the harbor and heading down the river right in front of me. It was manned by an older couple who looked like serious long-distance cruisers, too proud to use their engine. They had to tack against the wind, crossing back and forth across my course. With unrelenting paddling, I eventually overhauled them—we exchanged greetings—and then outpaced them, so that by the end of the afternoon, I was a full mile ahead—a victory for kayakers everywhere, I thought.

My original plan was to camp at the beach near Old Saybrook, but with the wind and current against me, I saw I would never be able to make it. I began to inspect the shoreline for possible camping spots and saw the prospects were not good. In general, as boats increase in value lower down on the Connecticut, so do the houses. For the first several hundred miles, there are few houses, and they are vacation cottages or modest homes. In the last miles near the sea, the homes become

more substantial and more numerous, multimillion-dollar mansions one next to the other, their manicured lawns marching down to the water, and no doubt supervised by security firms staffed with German shepherd guard dogs: not good pickings for a commando camper. Where was I to sleep?

When my arms wouldn't paddle any further, I pulled into the Island Cove Marina near Old Saybrook. It was a very posh facility, with wall-to-wall cabin cruisers tied up in its slips. I found the most inconspicuous place to tie my faded red kayak and scrambled up to the marina office. It was closed for the day. Out on the dock alongside one of the larger cabin cruisers I saw a group of boat owners chatting, and went over.

"I need some advice," I said—my standard opening line. We got acquainted. Lisa said she wouldn't mind my camping on the marina's lawn. She gave me the access code for the rest rooms. "But don't tell anyone I gave it to you," she said under her breath. Everyone else agreed it was fine with them for me to camp; the trouble was the marina owner lived right across the lagoon, in plain sight.

A 10-year old boy in the group expressed an interest in kayaks. "Want to see my boat?" I asked. I led him, along with his father, Ernie, to the backwater where I had stashed my boat, told them about my trip and answered the usual questions about my strange, portable craft.

Suddenly, Ernie said, "Hey, why don't you sleep in my boat? It's right over there." He pointed to one of the cabin cruisers.

"Do you think I could?"

"Sure, screw the tent. Sleep in there! We're supposed to have heavy rain tonight. You don't want to be in no tent!"

He and Chris led me to the boat, unsnapped the cockpit covering and we crawled into the enclosed forward cabin, which had a horseshoe-shaped leatherette padded bunk area. The area was neat and clean; I was amazed he would entrust it to a complete stranger, and a scruffy one at that.

"Hey, you know, we got showers. Go ahead and use them," said Ernie. "The restroom has everything you need, hair dryer, whatever. You got the access code, right?"

So it was settled. I thanked him profusely and got his address so I could send him and Chris a copy of my book. It did indeed rain hard that night, with cascades of water beating against the

great plastic cocoon in which I snuggled in perfect comfort and safety.

As I lay celebrating my marvelous deliverance from camping woes, my freshly-showered body luxuriating against the silky nylon of the sleeping bag, I found my antagonism toward power boaters dissolving. Not again shall I raise my paddle in anger as a powerboat hurtles by. It might just be Ernie!

The next morning, I tackled the last three miles to Old Saybrook. A nasty south wind, right in my face, picked up as I passed under the majestic six-lane I-95 bridge. When I reached the railway bridge half a mile further—the last bridge over the Connecticut—ocean waves were coming at me, some of which were breaking. I rigged my informal rain skirt, which keeps out some of the water in wet conditions, and pulled for a row of houses a mile ahead. It began to rain, hard pellet-like drops, and the wind blew wave tops into the kayak, thoroughly soaking me with the ocean's salty water. The adverse wind and waves cut my speed to less than one mph, and I couldn't pause for even a second's rest without losing precious distance. After an hour of vigorous pulling, I reached a little bay and moored at someone's dock. That last mile was surely the toughest workout of the whole trip.

I cut across a lawn and headed for the center of town to see about lodging. On my way, I came upon an Episcopal Church whose bells were loudly ringing for the 10 AM service. A man at the door urged me to enter and, seeing a useful way to rest out of the rain, I accepted his invitation. I was a mess, my hair a wet, plastered mat, and my rain jacket dripping. I found I could use the red velvet cushion of the pew to blot my pants; every few minutes I would subtly shift my bottom a few inches over. By the end of the service, my pants were nearly dry and the pew was soaked.

I was invited to coffee afterward in the social hall where, despite looking like a homeless person, or perhaps *because* I looked like a homeless person, I was treated with an outpouring of generosity. Two parishioners offered rides to wherever I needed to go, one invited me to his home. One asked if I needed money! The priest urged me to sleep in the church basement that night; he would arrange it with the custodian, he said.

As I say, the Connecticut is an amazingly friendly river. Go paddle it, and if you happen to forget your kayak, don't worry. There's undoubtedly someone there who's willing to lend you one.