

## INTRODUCTION

For “Rear Admiral” John J. Fallon,  
Leader Exceptional, Friend

About 40 years ago I had an adventure that was truly extraordinary. Believe it or not I went down the Mississippi River from Minneapolis, Minnesota to New Orleans, Louisiana, through ten states and many cities and towns. One of all things, a “raft.” At the time I was only fourteen years old and I had had a few scrapes with “John Law.” In other words I was what some people called a delinquent. I wasn’t a gangster or a bank robber but I had a tough time at home and that led to troubles in school. I was sent to an experimental program run by Hennepin, County. It was called the weekend program. After school on Fridays a bus would pick other boys and me up at our schools and bring us to a farm until Sunday. There we had several activities and chores like dish washing, barn cleaning, feeding cows, horse riding and my least favorite activity, group discussions.

These discussions were to help us learn how to cope with problems at home and in school. Some of us learned a few things but most of us just ignored any advice that was offered. Most of the boys were borderline bad. By that I mean they did not need to be locked up in jail but they did need a guiding hand. The trip that I will be sharing with you was a result of the weekend program and these discussions. It was one of the greatest things that ever happened to me. I learned to work as part of a team, and to work with others even if I did not like them or if I thought that they were dumber than I was. I learned the importance of taking orders without question at times. Following orders can both keep you out of trouble and or save your life; it has mine. In simple every day life in such things as driving an automobile. By following the rules of the road not only will you be much safer but also so will others.

This trip opened my eyes to many things that I never dreamed possible. The power of the river, the kindness of strangers, the way of life in the South, and it showed me that I could do almost anything that I set my mind to.

I believe that each and every boy that was on the trip with me learned something. Whether or not they used the information to better their lives is another matter. Some indeed did wise up if you will. Some sadly did not and wound up in very serious trouble with the authorities. One boy was involved in a famous local kidnapping and when he decided to turn states evidence he was found dead the next day. Another boy was a great lock picker and we got into many places using his talents. I would like you to know that he grew up to be a successful locksmith. Some of the guys were never heard from again. No matter how they wound up each and every one of us had to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to the weekend program and especially to Jack Fallon for the respite that the trip gave us from our troubles and woes back home.

I still talk to a few of the guys and we sit back and laugh at our troubles and adventures and of how things have changed over the years. It would probably not be a good idea to have a reunion of the crewmembers because some of them still hold a grudge and have stated that they would like to punch some of the others for some such nonsense that happened on the trip. This cannot be a healthy attitude. As far as I am concerned I only try to remember the good things that happened and not who did what to whom.

When I graduated from high school I wanted to join the Army Corps of Engineers and become a Lockmaster on the Mississippi. Because I was a “goof off” in school I could not get in so instead I joined the Navy. When I was honorably discharged from the Navy I tried my hand at running a group home for boys who were in the same situation that I was in as a kid. That was one of the toughest things I have ever tried and I gave it up after about three years. I have had

many exciting times running my own businesses over the years. Some examples are being a landlord; a hotel and restaurant I bought in northern Minnesota, a retail store on Lake Street in Minneapolis, and a tour company that specializes in camping trips for retarded adults. I founded this not for profit company in 1976 and it was the first of its kind in the United States and was the most rewarding venture I have ever had. Many of the skills that I had learned on the raft trip taught me not to panic and for twenty years I was able to share my knowledge of camping and boating with my retarded clients. I loved every minute of it.

Each time I cross the river in my car I remember this great adventure that had such an impact on my life. It is my wish that you will learn some of the lessons that I learned that summer and that you will never give up when things seem impossible for you. I am sure you will have questions as we go along and I hope I can answer as many as you may have. Thank you.

## CHAPTER 1

It was the beginning of the school year 1960; I had just turned 14. Eighth grade and there we sat in a small room, about 15 of us kids and two or three staff members, it was announced to us that we needed to come up with a plan for next summer's vacation. We could do anything within reason and or legal. We were told that if we did not come up with a plan we would spend the summer at the Hennepin County home school in Glen Lake, MN. For some odd reason this idea appealed to a few of the boys. I remember the first idea, or suggestion, was to ride horses to the Black Hills in South Dakota. I didn't like the idea; I did not care for horses all that much. I said some thing to the effect of taking a raft down the Mississippi River. The idea was pushed aside and all the fellas were excited about the trip to S.D.

The very next weekend the man, Max, in charge of the horses spoke to the group. He told us that it was indeed possible for us to accomplish such a trip; the horses were in fine shape and about all we needed to do was prepare. By the time he got through with the list of things we would have to do to get ready I knew that I would rather stay at the Home School.

Some of the others felt the same way; it sounded like too much work. Then one of the other boys said, "Why not look into the possibilities of the "raft trip". The seed was planted, it would be easy, just toss a few logs together and off we go. At this point I think some of the staff would have been happy to spend the summer at the Home School. I only learned this fact just this year, 2000, the head of the weekend program, Jack, stood in the lodge kitchen with his staff and said that he thought we could pull it off. I wish I could have been there for that brief moment, I guess it was quite a sight to see the faces of what was to become an incredible crew on an incredible adventure.

The very next weekend we were told to come up with ideas and plans for a "raft". We were all assigned a hand full of towns along the way and we had to write a letter to every city. The letters stated about when we would be through and asked for info on that town, i.e., things to see and where to get supplies, gas, and food, etc.

We were enrolled in a water safety class given by the Coast Guard in Minneapolis. Wow, locks and dams. Yup, 26 of them between here and St. Louis. After St. Louis there are no more locks and the current is much stronger. The one thing I will never forget from that class was that life jackets are not to save you from drowning but to make it easier for someone to find you

body. We learned about whirlpools, currents, wing dams, buoys, the channel, and much more. We were given certificates after several classes.

Now for the “Raft” itself. None of us had any idea how to build a raft or any thing else for that matter. It was decided that we could put a bunch of 55gal oil drums together, (some how) and that would be that. Well, that was not as easy as that. Several ideas were looked at and we found a company that made brackets for just such a raft. These brackets were for people who wanted to put together 4-6 drums for a diving dock. But it was the best we could find. As soon as the snow was gone the oil drums arrived, all 40 of them. We laid them out into 4 rows of 10 each with a 3foot nose cone to be bolted to the front of each pontoon. The length of the raft would be 33 feet. We then built a frame in two parts, each 8feet wide, this would make the raft 16 feet wide. It was very difficult getting the drums to stay in place but we did it. The two halves were taken to the river on a flat bed and put in the water just a few yards above the Showboat and across the river from Fairview Hospital. We joined the halves together with large “U” bolts and nailed on a diagonal deck of planks. Then a railing of 2x4 s was put all around and a “cabin” of approximately 12’x12’ near the front. It was given a canvas roof and sides that could be rolled up when weather was nice. Around the railing we put chicken wire, which proved to be too weak, it was always being replaced or let go all together. There was a transom put out back and two 40 horse out board motors were donated. The cables used to steer with were above the deck and the steering wheel was behind the cabin, so the driver could not see where he was going. (One of our smarter moves.) We would have been shut down in a flash by OSHA. It would take 7+ people to operate the raft. One staff member to keep the two look outs (stationed up front) on the ball, and one person to steer and one to navigate, that is read the charts, or maps of the river. Believe it or not it is possible to get lost on a river. More about this later. There was also a gas team on call to refuel the main tanks and mix the oil.

Each of us built a footlocker for our gear and we made drinking cups out of soup cans with a coat hanger for a handle. Each of us had our own mess kit and we were responsible for it. That meant that if we lost it we went without or we had to buy another, now remember we were poor kids and didn’t have much if any money. We did not have tents like you see today. We had mosquito netting and a piece of plastic tarp 10’x10’ to put over the netting incase of rain. No cook stove either, just a large frying pan and a few pots. We cooked over an open fire, or wrapped our food in tin foil and tossed it in the fire until it was done. We loaded up 24 - 5gal gas cans, gear, and little knowledge of the adventures that awaited down stream.

A few days after school got out we met on the banks of the Mississippi River and said farewell to our families.

Dean Felsing Crew Member of the Unsinkable  
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## CHAPTER 2

### For Dennis, Merle, and Ron

Lots of people down by the riverside to see us off. We were given a flag of the state of Minnesota to give to the governor of Louisiana. We had our gear stowed and charts out. The staff had agreed not to shave until after the trip and they hadn't done so for some time. So when one of the boys spotted Dennis, clean shaven, the word spread quickly. A few of us went down one side of the deck and a few others took the other side. We then grabbed Dennis and tossed him overboard, right into the river. What a shock, he screamed and hollered, as others were pulling him back onboard we spotted his twin brother the, "real" Dennis. He had not shaved. We were off to a good start we had already had our first assault.

Needless to say this didn't make many points with the "real" Dennis. Now pay attention. This was my first lesson. And I seem to learn the hard way. That is called the school of hard knocks. What do you think my lesson was? From then on I always try to look very closely at what is going on and try not jumping to any conclusions. Even if Dennis had shaved that day it was not right for any of us to toss him in the river. I am thankful that we have remained friends for all these years. Dennis became a counselor at my old high school in Minneapolis, Roosevelt. He retired from there last year.

Things calmed down and we posed for some photos. Some one made a big sign that said New Orleans or Sunk, and we had two signs with the name of the raft on them. We would attach these underway. The name was the Unsinkable. Jack, our fearless leader said that if it did sink we would turn it into a submarine and rename it the "Unbelievable". I don't think many laughed about that, we worked so hard and the thought of it sinking was unimaginable. Never the less it did look as if it would go under at any time.

We had four staff members. One leader, Jack, and three mates Merle, Dennis, and Ron. A crew of 15 kids, all boys, from 12 – 15 years old. The plan was for us to get to New Orleans, 1742 miles down the river from Minneapolis. We would then tour the city for a few days and then a replacement crew would meet us and trade places. We would take the bus back home and they, the raft.

The raft was shoved into the current and we were off on the first leg of our journey, the 680 miles to St. Louis, Missouri. It was 4, miles to the first lock and dam (The Ford Lock & Dam) and Jack took the helm for the first time. We had an air horn to signal the Lockmaster that we wanted to enter the lock. At each dam in the river there is also a lock, this is a very large area that barges and other boats must use to pass around the dam. Any one in a boat or even a canoe may use the locks for free. They are operated by the Army Corps of Engineers. The drop is anywhere from 4 feet to 27 feet. The drop at the Ford lock was 19 feet.

The huge gates were opened and we entered a lock for the first time. The lockmaster tossed us two lines, (rope) so we would not drift around in side the lock. The gates were slowly closed and the water was let out of the lock through holes in the bottom of it. We went down 19 feet it was very exciting. If you wish you may visit this lock any time in the summer and take a tour. There are also two more locks that were built after our trip, these are the Upper and Lower St. Anthony Falls locks, and you may also visit them.

The Lockmaster sounds a loud horn when it is safe for you to leave the lock. As we left the lock we had our first rhubarb over who was going to steer or pilot the raft. Yes, you can imagine, we all wanted to steer our creation. There were some very loud arguments over who would be next to steer. A list or roster was made and each of us would have a two-hour shift of steering and lookout duty.

Lookout duty was never boring. You had binoculars and a river chart and you had to keep us in the channel. That is between the red or nun buoys and the black or can buoys. Even a few feet out of this channel could be very dangerous. You could hit many things that are just under the water, tree stumps, or wing dams, a wing dam is an under water dam that directs the water in the river into the channel. You also had to watch for other boats, barges, and floating junk in the water, mostly logs. If we hit or ran over something we usually broke something.

The first thing to break was the shear pin in one of the motors. When this happened we had to switch engines, (We usually ran on one engine at a time). We would head for a safe place and drop anchor, or just float along. At first a staff member would jump into the water. Later we all got to be good at this repair. The motor was tilted up and a string was tied to the propeller so that it would not drop to the bottom of the river. Then the prop was removed with a wrench and the broken shear pin was removed and replaced with a new one. This pin was designed to break because if it didn't, much harm would come to the engine.

Many, many times during the trip you would hear the cry of "Shear pin" and the shear pin crew would go into action. Well into our journey we didn't even yell, "Shear pin" any more because we all could recognize by the sudden roar of the engine what had happened and we responded automatically.

The other thing to break was the steering cable. If this happened and we were under way some one had to jump out and hang over the transom and lower the handle on the motor and steer by hand. The lookouts had to be extra vigilant during this time and instructions were shouted to the rear of the raft to the person steering. If the cable or the shear pin broke because the lookouts were goofing off there were severe consequences. They were given the silent treatment, punched by other boys, (this was not approved by the staff) or not permitted to eat the next meal. If we were heading to a town to tour they may have been kept on the raft for punishment. Being kept on the raft was not too bad because as soon as the others were gone you could always sneak ashore and explore on your own.

As much fun as steering was, it got old. We had to cover at least 100 Miles per day and at 10 M.P.H. That was 10 hours per day. This did not take into account for what we called lock time. Lock time could run from 20minutes to several hours. Barges had priority use of the locks and if a tow with several barges was ahead of us we had to wait. I believe our longest wait was ½ a day. What do you think I learned from this? Do you think it was patience? We used this down time to make repairs or prepare meals, or just read, or plan our next activity.

Dean Felsing Crew member of the Unsinkable.

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