

Adventure on the Youghiogheny River



As fog rises above River, Randy Gra known as a mini tinue the Sojourn

Carol Bobby is no couch potato, but she harbored no illusions of herself as a hard-bodied Meryl Streep in "The River Wild" as she eyed ominous white caps in the Youghiogheny River.

She and her husband, Ron, both 55-year-old teachers in Charleroi, Washington County, are experienced hikers and canoers, but they had never ridden rapids.

The Bobbys were among about 100 people celebrating the Youghiogheny's status as Pennsylvania's 1998 River of the Year with a week-long canoeing, rafting, hiking, biking and camping sojourn along 72 miles of its meandering length.

The sojourners signed up for the trip, which cost \$125 for all six days or \$20 for individual days, including three meals a day and all equipment.

It started in Confluence, Fayette County, on Sunday, June 21, when participants gathered at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers campground in Confluence. The real adventure, however, started Monday, June 22, when "duckies," or inflatable kayaks, transported sojourners from Confluence to Ohiopyle and ended Saturday, June 27, as sojourners paddled canoes into McKeesport, a Pittsburgh suburb, where the Youghiogheny flows into the Monongahela River.

A 10-minute crash course on whitewater rafting from trip leader Scott Downs of Wilderness Voyagers in

Ohiopyle didn't eradicate the Bobbys' fear of 7 and 1/2 miles of the Youghiogheny's rapids.

"We need someone who's done it before in our raft," Mrs. Bobby told Downs after all the raft assignments were made and she and her husband had no experienced partners.

"Don't worry," said Downs, 33, with a mixture of impatience and nurturing. "Trust me. I've been doing this 14 years, and you'll be fine."

He didn't ask the Bobbys if they wanted to back out. He said older people and little children do it all the time, and the Bobbys could handle it too.

They tried.

But the couple panicked at the first round of rapids when they nearly fell out, and Mrs. Bobby wanted to leave the river. Now.

Downs, determined to convince them that they could enjoy the rapids, plunked 22-year-old Tim Knapp of Clarion, one of several guides along for the ride, into the Bobbys' raft.

That's all it took. With soft-spoken Knapp's paddling commands, even raft-capsizing rapids near "Pinball Rock," a rock known for bouncing rafts into nearby "Diamond Rock," didn't phase the Bobbys. They traded terror for excitement.

"I'm ready to go again," a jubilant Mrs. Bobby said when she joined the rest of the rafters at the end of the course.

Downs congratulated them.

"I've worked climbing and skiing too, but people fear

this the most," he said.

"They feel so out of control. But this group is typical — not many here have done this before. Once you get past the first set of

rapids, the fear goes away. The whole trick is reading what the water's doing."

Don Dreese, section chief of rivers programs for the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, said the DCNR started sponsoring an annual journey along its chosen river of the year in 1991. The idea is to promote awareness of rivers as water resources and sources of recreation.

The Youghiogheny, pronounced "YOCK-uh-gain-ee," won the designation this year so that its nomination would coincide with its placement on the state Rivers Conservation Register, Dreese said. That placement makes the Youghiogheny eligible for state development grants that can be used to improve water quality monitoring or increase the number of access sites.

Most sojourners are just along for the fun.

Of those people were members of the Hamilton family with origins from Dawson, Chambersburg and Ithaca, N.Y.

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