



Four-Foot-Wide At The Chines

A Western river guide-kayak instructor takes a weekend off to run a McKenzie River Boat through the rough-and-tumble paces of Oregon's Illinois River.

by Paul Hoobyar

JUST AS THE LEAVES were turning up gold in the late August sun, the whitewater craft on the Rogue River were changing from rafts and kayaks to drift boats. Our paddling school's seven kayaks and support raft were suddenly outnumbered by coveys of drift boats, which heralded the oncoming steelhead fishing season. I was teaching the last kayak class of the season, and my thoughts, future-bound, tended to trail after those drift boats... I'd been hoping to make some bucks by working a few fishing trips this fall, but so far all my leads had turned up dead ends.

One day, a drift boater passed the class in a real hurry. His boat was heavy with gear; he had no passengers aboard, but he looked pretty businesslike. While my kayak students were preoccupied with a couple of waves, honing their surfing skills, I chased after that boat.

"Hi!" I yelled, paddling hard to catch up. (Drift boaters and kayak paddlers don't generally mingle too much on the river.) "My name's Paul Hoobyar. Who's the outfit here?"

"Schaefer's Guide Service," came the quick reply. The oars kept on stroking. I looked at the man more closely.

"Well, who are you?" I asked, cautiously. "Steve Schaefer."

"That's what I thought," I said. So this was the man in charge. I was desperate enough for work to blurt out, "Do you know anyone needing a guide this fall? I've got my own wood boat and gear..."

The oars quit rowing while Schaefer looked off in the canyon. "Well...maybe. Give me your name and phone number. I might be takin' a trip in October."

While I scribbled down the info, my gears were spinning. Steve Schaefer was the name I'd been hearing in connection with drift boats on the Illinois River. To run the spirited Illinois in a wooden McKenzie boat, as he'd done many times, seemed to me the pinnacle of rowing experiences; and here I was, talking with the man himself. This was my chance to go and do it!

"I hear you guys take your wood boats down the Illinois in the spring."

"Yeah, we do. We like to get down there every spring at least once."

"Any chance of my getting on that trip with you guys?" I had been working on my drift boat skills and was eager for a chance to take my wood boat down the Illinois with some veteran boaters.

The author checks out a different sort of whitewater craft — the McKenzie River Boat on Oregon's Illinois River.

Schaefer's face cracked into a grin. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe." Now that I'd passed him my address, he was rowing hard again.

"How do I stay in touch about the Illinois?" I called after him. He was moving fast.

"I'm listed with 'Guides and Packers.'"

"Hey, thanks," I yelled across the water.

MCKENZIE RIVER BOATS are a unique breed of craft. They are to rafts what kayaks are to Orange Torpedoes: more technical, more dynamic, with edges and lines that carve paths in the water and surf waves across the currents. Like fiberglass kayaks, wood drift boats are fragile beasts.

It was back in the early '50s that two men, Woody Hindman and Prince Helfrich, hammered out the final design of the boat. They had tried as many variations as the boat had ribs, looking for a craft made of wood that was light and responsive enough to maneuver in the crazy

Western waters, yet stable enough to make a body feel comfortable while riding through the big stuff. They finally hit on a 16-foot boat with a transom stern, a pointed bow, and a flat, rocker bottom. Plywood was coming into use, and the McKenzie River Boat was born.

Some 30 years later, that same craft, with few revisions, is popularly used on a number of rivers in the Northwest: rivers of large volume, like the Snake; rivers of changing topography and gathering hydraulics, like the Middle Fork of the Salmon; and rivers of wild pool-drop beauty, like the Rogue.

The Illinois River lies within the Rogue River drainage. An independent-minded, spontaneous stream, it drops out of the Siskiyou Mountains near the Oregon-California State Line and prances north toward its confluence with the Rogue. The Illy's wild in the spring, but it's visited in summer by families who come to picnic and swim in its deep, clear pools. The high water of spring runoff doesn't last very long, normally not past the end of May. But in those early months, when the rains still douse the surrounding mountains, the Illy's mood is explosive and temperamental.



Z. Austin



"Wait a second there, fella. There can't be wood boats and Levis down this river. It says so right here in the guidebook..."

In the guidebook, *Handbook to the Illinois River Canyon*, the author warns: "This is not a river for the novice or for the average weekend family outing. It is not a river for drift boats, only for rafts and kayaks..." I read those lines frequently that winter while thinking about my wood boat on the Illinois.

I made it through the winter. Spring came! But the drift boat trip stayed up in the air throughout most of the Illinois' seasonal rampage. Finally, I got a call from Steve: "Paul, we're gonna do her this Tuesday. Wanna go?"

Wanna go?!! Hell, yes, I wanted to go! ...Hey, wait a second. What was I saying? I really could lose my boat down in that canyon, not to mention my flimsy mortal hide.

OAK FLAT, THE put-in to the Illy is nothing but a gravel bar that offers access to the water. Normally, a put-in on this creek is a time consuming process: blowing up rafts, tying down loads, changing into wet suits and river apparel. Not today. We simply take the boats off the trailer, throw the grub and dunnage in, and take off. Here there's no need to change clothes or tie in gear. Hell, if the gear falls out of these boats, more'n likely the boater is on his way out, too, kissing his boat goodbye.

There are five drift boats sporting downstream on this four-day trip, four wood and one aluminum. Each boat has a rower and a rider along. Earl, my partner, and I had talked about how the rider could act as ballast, or shift his weight like a side-car occupant in a motorcycle race, hanging his body over the off-side to keep the buggy from tipping over. Not knowing what to expect on the Illy, we had covered a number of contingencies.

The river begins to pick up momentum. About three miles from the put-in, I stop watching the wildflowers and the waterfalls that splash into the river. With Labrador Creek Rapids, then Nome Creek Rapids, the river begins to tumble over itself, losing altitude and turning white. We come to what the guidebook calls "Rapid No. 18," which for lots of folks is known as "Salud!" as in the Spanish toast, "To your health." This Class IV drop is a toast to what this river is all about — steep, technical drops and powerful hydraulics.

We skate our boats to the bank and get out to take a look. These boys in the McKenzie boats don't spend much time scouting. "Get a look at 'er, and let's do 'er."

We all watch as Schaefer disembarks

to run "Salud!" He slows his boat down as he slips into the top of the falls. His boat eases up on a cushion of water that's piling onto a rock, he pivots off the rock, and the boat rocks and rolls on down through the rapid. *Jeesuz! That's some pretty fancy stickin' in a wood boat.*

"Okay, Earl," I say, "Our turn. I'll try what I just saw, but hang on, 'cause I'm not sure it's gonna work."

I sneak into the top of the falls, slow my boat down and park the oak chine on that very same cushion. There's not the expected sound of wood hitting rock, and the boat plays off the cushion and falls over the edge, rocking and rolling as we drop. I tense, waiting for the thud that slams into the pit of your stomach and tells you you've just found a rock in the midst of the white froth. No thud, not this time. Unscathed, we glide through the run-out and pause in an eddy to watch the rest of the boats come through.

THE HEAVIES ON this stretch of river come in quick succession: After "Salud!" come Rocky Top ("No. 19" in the book), York Creek Falls, and Carl's Corner. The guidebook calls this last one "Rapid No. 23," but to these boys of the McKenzie boats, she's named for a friend, Carl Juza, who had a fateful run on this particular piece of water.

Carl's Corner drops about 12 vertical feet in less than 30 yards. A gravel bar extending across the river from the right bank forces water over its knobs and points, and creates a natural weir in the river.

Word has it that the name arose because ol' Carl was errant by a foot in his set-up at the top of the weir. As his boat spilled over the face, it was pushed too far left at the bottom and shoved into the rock wall there, receiving the brunt of the water's force. Upon impact with the wall, Carl acquired three holes in the bow of his boat: one in the floor, and two in the bow panels. His stern, which still hung in the current jetting by, was swept downstream, and the boat was plastered against that same rock wall. An oar was rammed through the upstream side as the boat was brought about. Hmm, another hole... This one was curious, though, because it was so round, so true to the shape of the oar handle that made it. Water jacuzzied through that perfectly round hole, filling the boat even faster. Now, where was that little Dutch boy when ya' needed 'im?

The upstream side continued to dip closer to the water. The stern took a shot

when it was whipped around. Not bad. Five holes in less than a minute. If the water came over the top of the gunnel, you could kiss that boat off, buddy. Nothing left but the swimming, the crying, and the retrieving of gear. And all because ol' Carl was a foot off in his entrance to the falls.

But I'm at the entrance, and I don't need to hear all these horror stories. I've still gotta' run this thing, and there's enough going on out there without the added phobia of what will happen if I blow it.

Why am I here, Lord, sitting in this peanut shell of plywood and fir stakes atop Carl's Corner? From up here, I can't see those marker rocks I picked out from the bank, and those rocks are important — they alone tell me ex-actly where to aim for that skinny piece of water that'll carry me through safely.

"Ya gotta' remember, Paul, your boat's only four-foot-wide at the chines..."

I hear Steve's words again. So what if the slot you're gunning for is only four-foot-six inches wide? So what if it's out of sight while you're poised in this eddy? So what if it's a rock concert of skinny passages and slim pickin's amongst chunks of serpentine and pieces of sandstone, their ugly heads held defiant above the water's rush, or worse, barely submerged under the surface of the water waitin' for ya? *It don't matter, Paul. Just remember, your boat's only four-foot-wide at the chines.* Uh-huh.

As I watch another boater, Kenny, slip over the lip of Carl's Corner, I study where he positions himself as he drops... *looks good, looks good. "Ka-chunk!"* His boat makes a sharp little bounce as the sound of tin slamming rocks reaches my ears. *Boy, those aluminum boats sure broadcast your mistakes. So Kenny found a rock in there, too. Well, it's gonna be to the left a little, then. But not too far left. Don't forget about ol' Carl, now.*

My turn. The moves are so tight and critical that the passengers are on the bank, watching. A solo flight. *Alright, now, just sneak this little plywood toy out there in the current. Slow yourself down... that's right. Slip past that rock on the left there, 'atta boy. Now, tuck in behind it to grab some of that slower eddy water. There ya go. Now, where is that damn channel? Oh yeah, there it is. Inches. That's what we're talkin' about here: inches. I've got to get my boat within a couple of inches of that exposed rock below me. Watch that downstream oar. Don't let it get caught between some rocks to hang up on, or snap off. There ya go, li'l darlin'. Now, tuck those oars and hang on, 'cause for better or*

worse we're committed to this here nozzle of water going over the drop...

My guts pucker, braced for the inevitable "Chunk!" accompanying a collision with those rocks I see going by two, three, four inches from my boat. I'm certain, with all those rocks around me, I'm about to connect with one of those little pieces of delight.

I drop into the hole at the bottom. Again my guts suck up involuntarily, but no, it's only water we're going through. *Phew! Got through that little dandy without taking a shot. Jees-Louise, and we call this fun?*

SITTING IN AN eddy after lunch, we're drinking a beer, feeling good about the day's run. There are only two miles to camp, and all the day's heavies are behind us.

Around the bend comes a group of inflatables — three oar rafts and a paddle boat. What strange season is this?! The sight of them, with their neo-20th Century outfits of neoprene and Gore-tex, booties and bailbuckets, is a jolt. Oh, yeah: That's the way people usually run this river, in full wetsuit regalia.

Earl and I watch as they paddle up — wet, black-skinned bodies, all smiles and questions. I look from them to my Levi's — all dry except the cuffs — and feel the comfort of my flannel shirt, also dry. My eyes travel back to them. Seems like we just passed through a time warp here! When we put in this morning it was April 6, 1951, with Woody Hindman and Prince Helfrich ahead of us, probably at camp by now. And these people come floating around the corner like they're from the planet Kuron.

Holy chit, mon! Look at those outfits! Full-length wet suits, one-piecers, color-coordinated with gay greens, billowy blues, yapping yellows. The jet black legs flare out at the bottoms, straight out of Marvel Comics. Uh, excuse me, but are you Aquaman? Again I look at my Levi's. Is this a dream?

The absurdity of what we are doing is driven home by contrast. *Wait a second there, fella. There can't be wood boats and Levi's down this river. It says so right here in the guidebook, something about "...not...for drift boats..."* So, whad-yathink you're doing coming down here in that wood boat? *You can't do that. Don't you know that's suicidal?*

As the rubber-coated bodies slip out of sight, Earl and I are dazed. Isn't that the way we've always run this river, dressed in wet suits that stay wet all day, turn your

skin into an itchy, prune-like consistency, so that by the time you reach camp you can't wait to peel the damned thing off?

We take another pull on our beers. Now that the party is out of sight, the time warp fades. It feels even better to be sitting in this boat, dry, in street clothes.

WE PORTAGED ONE rapid on the trip, the Green Wall, head honcho to this creek, with a solid Class V at its bottom end. As a rapid, it's too steep, too chancy, to run drift boats through. Not only could someone easily lose a boat there, but the entire trip would be jeopardized as the remaining boats tried to absorb bodies and dunnage left behind by the deceased craft.

As far as anyone knows, a hard boat has never been run through the Wall. One of these years, though, an old beater will be brought downstream with only one person aboard and no gear, to test the Wall. At that rate, the only risk is to the guy sitting at the sticks. A swim through the Green Wall would definitely leave an imprint in his cranial cavity... And the boat? The river would make quick work of a wayward wood boat. Kindling and drift wood is about all that would be left once the river's appetite was satiated.

Past the Wall, the rest of the trip is a dance, a skate of high adrenaline outputs and fast, powerful water. The bottom falls out of the river canyon in the middle of the run, and the river spills about 70 vertical feet a mile for three-plus miles. In rafts, with their slower reaction times and heavier masses, this part of the canyon would be difficult, technical boating. In our drift boats, however, except for two drops, we boogie on through the gorge.

We glide around a corner at the end of the third day to find that the river's exuberance has given way to serene, reflective pools and babbling waterfalls held by high-walled canyons. We've left the heavy whitewater upstream, and we're pleased with ourselves — our boats have sprinted through the wild places without incident.

From where we're parked on a beach in front of a large pile of drift, Earl and I see the other boats downstream. We figure there'll probably be a good party in camp tonight, this being the last night. We stop to pick up a little wood for the fire, and lodge it in the stern.

A half cord later, we slip off downstream toward camp. We've got about a mile to go, and my boat rides with her nose in the air, her tail's so laden with wood.

Now, Rapid No. 131 is a funky little

drop of too many rocks and not enough water going over them. As we slip into it, I realize I've misread and maneuver to place the boat in the right slot. Too late. A rock barely under the surface takes a shot at my chine, and, with all the weight in the stern, chews into the boat. *Damn!* All that insanity upstream without a hitch, and at this messy little rapid I split my chine on a knob. Well, here's a message from the gods, I figure. *Yeah, you've just negotiated this stream in your wood boat, buddy, but don't forget who's boss on this here creek.*

The next day we slip out of camp in the early morning light and crisp, clear air. Our boats skim like slippers across the mirroring surface. As we pass Buzzard's Roost, somebody mentions that this is where the dam site is proposed. Hmm... from an engineer's viewpoint, it seems like a good spot for a dam at that: a narrow passage of rock walls and short expanses. But it's hard to think of people water-skiing over the graves of all these rapids, or trout fishing in the reservoir that drowned this gorgeous canyon.

As we drift to the take-out, I'm thinking about Woody and Prince, appreciating their genius in creating these craft. It's going to be hard to climb back into a decked boat after this trip...

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