



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

River Rafting

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Hello from Your on the River Reporter. I am writing this column from a tent. The tent and I are located on the banks of the Flathead River in Glacier Park, Montana.

I am not writing in the sense of keying-in the sentences onto a computer and passing the report onto the channels of the Internet. I'm located in an area devoid of land lines, cell phones, and broadband. My correspondence is being created by using the archaic instruments of pencil and paper. It's strange to write an essay without the aid of spell check.

I am also using a battery-operated lamp. It's positioned to throw light onto my Big Chief tablet. The lamp also profiles my tent shadow to resident bears. Up here in the wilderness of Glacier, bears have been known to check out resident tent dwellers, occasionally to munch on the tent residents' Snicker bars, occasionally to munch on the residents.

I'm not worried. Our camp guides have informed us they have anti-bear spray to ward off bears. But they've also told us *not* to eat in our tents, to keep *all* food in an area near the guides' campfire---which is protected by the guides' anti-bear spray.

Okay, but the camp guides' campfire is a couple hundred feet away, across a ridge from the tent in which I'm encamped. I asked the guides if I could have one of the anti-bear canisters to keep next to my sleeping bag, but they informed me, "Sorry, Uyless, we have twelve campers in six tents, three guides, and one anti-bear spray canister."

If I were a camp guide, I could see their point. But I was not a camp guide.

They further explained that any bears that might come foraging for goodies would migrate to their area of the encampment because this location was where all the food was stored. I offered that we remote campers just over the ridge might also need some protection, as we ourselves were potential bear food.

After some haggling about the issue, I reluctantly turned in my Snickers bars to the guides and crawled into my sleeping bag for the night.

And what a night. No cars. No sirens. Nothing but the gentle noise of the Flathead River. Solitude and silence. Insulation from the urban cacophonous world. As I drifted off to sleep, I came to realize a regret I now harbored. It was about how I had lived part of my life. When I was younger, I had not made trips into the interior of America's wildernesses. I had not backpacked into the very ground on which I was now laying. But I also thought that maybe, even at my age, I could find some semi-adventuresome treks that would assuage this regret and allow me to once again experience my love for this serene way of spending time.

¹ Definitions of rapids and the map of the Flathead tributaries are sourced from Wikipedia.

First Experience with River Rafting

Several years ago, Holly and I took a raft trip on the Ottawa River in Canada. It was our first rafting outing. We were babes in the woods, so to speak. And Holly ended up being a babe in the water. During the excursion, our raft came across a class IV set of rapids. They are defined as:

Long rapids; waves high, irregular; dangerous rocks; boiling eddies; best passages difficult to scout; scouting mandatory first time; powerful and precise maneuvering required. Demands expert boatman and excellent boat and good quality equipment.

Fortunately, we had an expert boatman at the stern of the raft. Even so, he could not prevent the raft from flipping half of its occupants into the river. The yank of the rubber boat reacting to the turbulence was like a sling shot. Off went Holly into a (fortunately) relatively calm pool of water.

No big deal, except for one minor hydrological point. Just some 300 feet away, in the downstream direction, was a waterfall. Granted, it was not a Niagara Falls waterfall, but nonetheless, it was a waterfall...as in *fall*. The final drop of the fall terminated in deep pools of turbulent, truculent water.

Much to the relief of all passengers, both in and out of the rafts, jetski lifeguards came to the rescue (three were stationed ahead of us for just such an emergency). They kept floating rafts and floating passengers away from the fall while the rafts' boatmen picked up the overboard passengers.

After which, it was time to ride the raft down the waterfall, a very short class IV experience:

...riverbed extremely obstructed; big drops; violent current; very steep gradient; close study essential but often difficult. Requires best person, boat, and outfit suited to the situation.

I had come onto the Ottawa River expecting a gentle and peaceful float. I should have read its user manual. But we made it okay. I suspect we were never in real danger. Besides, someone once said, "The greater the danger, the sweeter its fruit."

I had gained a sense of the sweetness of river rafting. I wanted more. Maybe not flips into the water near a waterfall, but at least an unpredictable roller coaster water ride: cascading down a river, with the protruding rocks creating attendant rolls, all accompanied with cold water onto my body. Paddling away to the directions of the raft guide. Exuberance! Road rage and river rage; all dissipated with the burning of calories, holding on for dry life, and stroking the life out of the paddle. It was a fine palliative to bland but tense every-day trips down asphalt freeways.

By the way, God bless our national parks. Give generously to the National Park Service.

Roughing it on the Flathead River

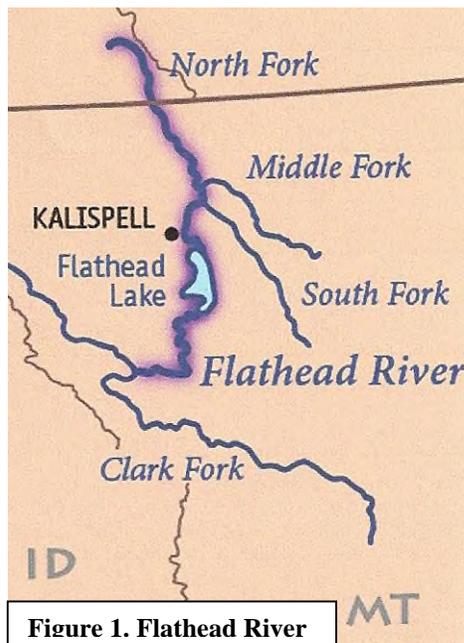


Figure 1. Flathead River

The Flathead River is located in the northwestern part of Montana. Originating in Canada, near Glacier National Park, it flows southwest into Flathead Lake, and empties into the Clark Fork.

Our two-day raft trip traversed about 32 miles on the middle fork of Flathead, as seen in Figure 1.

The party consisted of three rafts. Two of these boats transported twelve passengers, along with two guides who navigated the boats with oars, and sometimes paddles. The other raft contained the passengers' gear, all furnished by the rafting company: tents, sleeping bags, foam mattresses, water, soft drink beverages, food for four meals, portable latrine, cooking and eating utensils, first aid kit, fold-out chairs, tables, grill, ice chests to hold our libations. And one can of anti-bear spray.

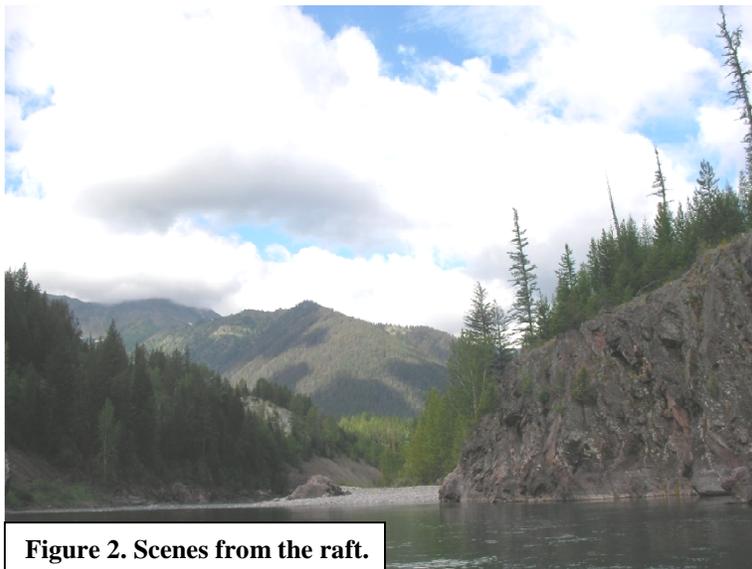


Figure 2. Scenes from the raft.

The raft held an entire setup for the overnight camp in one of America's most beautiful national parks.² Tough duty. It was a far cry from my youthful camping experiences on New Mexico's stark plains. No camp guides there. But then, I'm not twenty. I'm seventy. At some point in our trip through life's highways (and rivers) we should accept that twenty-something guides should take over the helm. Let's sit back and relax. After all, we're all going downstream. And while we're at it, let's enjoy the view, as seen in Figure 2.

Not too much Relaxing

For this excursion, the waters on the Flathead were lower than usual. Montana's northwest had a meager snowfall the previous winter, and the glaciers at Glacier National Park were not melting fast enough to feed the river. Consequently, we often had to resort to the crab walk. When the raft wedged onto rocks, our guide would order, "Crab walk!" We six passengers would place one of our legs outside the raft, hold the rope attached to its side and push our water leg against the

² Due to concessionaire contracts, we camped and ate lunches on the non-park side of the Flathead River.

bottom of the river while we tried to lift up the raft with one of our hands. Crab walking was not my idea of river rafting, but it was a necessary invention to combat the low water level.

I had intended to spend a lot of time in the river. But even in August, the water temperatures were too cold for bathing and swimming. Our guide claimed the water was in the 40s. I didn't think so, closer to the low to mid 60s, but still not conducive to immersion. In addition, for most of the trip, the sun was behind clouds. At times, it rained. Most people had two to three layers of clothing on for a typical August in Glacier National Park.

Tater, Katie, and Vince

Our boat guide and overall boss of this trip was named Tater. As far as I know, he's still named Tater, but I'm using past tense for most of this essay. As you may guess, Tater hails from Boston and derives his name from the immigrants who fled Ireland for America to escape the tater famine. Okay, just pulling your tater, as Tater is from Tennessee.



Figure 3. Tater.

On the surface, Tater is more southern than the stereotypical deep south itself. In addition to his physical persona (see Figure 3), he's outfitted with all the good old boy pedigrees: a twang and drawl, interlaced with country humor, a dyed in the wool gun toter, an avid hunter, a supporter of capital punishment.

But these traits do not capture Tater's complete personality. Along with his "southern" traits, Tater is an ardent environmentalist. He's, gasp, a tree hugger...and an unapologetic one at that. Today's FOX-tuned media would listen to him talk about proper behavior on the Flathead, and would describe him as a pointy-headed liberal. What a shame and mistake, because Tater is a spokesman for causes sorely needed in our wild country, causes that are politically incorrect to many people. Many people don't appreciate the Taters of this world, but they should. Tater:

- Hunts only for what he and his family and friends can eat.
- Asks all his rafters to make no alterations to the rocks along the river.
- Asks us not to remove anything *at all* from the park (not even one pebble; it's the principle that matters---among billions of rocks).
- Requests each of us deposit absolutely nothing onto the terrain or into the river.
- Informs all of us to police our camping and resting areas for any debris left by us, or by earlier visitors.
- Let us know absolutely *nothing* was to be left behind except our urine. He and his crew even shoveled the remains of our campfire into a bag to tote back to civilization.

In addition to these characteristics, Tater is an intelligent man, and to boot, a fine storyteller. Being an adroit raconteur is a fine trait to possess for a raft guide. Although Tater's taterisms sometimes impinged upon the otherwise bucolic milieu of the Flathead and Glacier National Park, the trip would have been diminished without his interludes.

Katie was in charge of the other passenger raft. She too is an environmentalist, and made strong comments against trophy heads of elk and deer displayed on the walls of local lodges.

As a former hunter, I agree with Katie. The practical killing of an animal for food is appropriate. We humans have been doing it for centuries. So have many other animals. But the “sport” of shooting an elk for a rack of horns is not sport. It’s simply pathetic. If we are going to wall mount these facades, testaments to our superior thumbs and frontal cortex, let’s at least give the prey half a chance. Say, finding a way for them to play a cat and mouse game with the hunter. But no, with the aid of a gun scope, we just shoot the critter. We then cut off its head and place it---accompanied with our macho pride---above a fireplace.

Prep Work

In preparation for our trip, the three guides showed us how to pack our personal gear into waterproof bags. During this time, we became acquainted with Tater, Katie, and Vince. I learned Tater was indeed named Tater and that he was happily married. I learned that Katie was a cool, humorous, open, and friendly woman, one who loved rafting and loved joking about life.

Vince: I also learned during this packing exercise that the third guide, Vince, was taking a break from white-collar life. He was to navigate the third raft, the raft with all the gear. He had recently graduated from college, with a degree in international business. We talked a bit:

- *Vince, how come you are a river guide on the Flathead River? With your background in finance, why aren’t you in the international investment banking industry, mucking over unwary people?*
- *Uyless, I want to do something different.*
- *Did your folks send you to college?*
- *Yes.*
- *What do they think about your occupation as a river guide?*

Vince smiled.

Katie: During the time of our bus ride upstream with our rafts (see Figure 4), Tater entertained us while he gave directions and guidance for our behavior these next two days. He stood at the front of the bus while explaining basic rules about rafting and camping. During this time, he provided many homespun southern jokes.



Figure 4. Bus and rafts.

Sitting next to Tater was Katie. I watched her as she watched him. His comments evoked laughs from Katie as she patted his legs. Clearly, she was smitten with this mountain/river man. I thought to myself, *Katie has a crush on a married man. This will make for an interesting camp night ---at least for them.* Later, I discovered they were married to each other. So much for marital intrigue.

On the second day of the trip, I mentioned my observation to Tater. He seemed pleased. And why not? All of us want our mates to be smitten with us. Even macho river men.

Camping on the Flathead

After several hours of shallow waters and crab walks, Tater had us pull in to an inlet on the Flathead River. Here, we pitched camp.

I had not put up a tent since my teen days of erecting “pup” tents. The mechanics and pieces of modern tents have assumed the dimensions of a complex three dimensional jig-saw puzzle. The very exercise of just putting up a tent---one of the most primitive instruments of the human race---can be an exercise in futility. I’m not very mechanically oriented. I’m good with logic, but not with tools. (My buddies caution me, “Stay away from that screwdriver. U. You don’t know anything about machinery!”)



Figure 5. Tent ready for occupancy.

Still, in my defense, I was not alone. Katie, a tent erecting guru, had trouble with our tent. Coming to the rescue? Reporterette. She has an uncanny ability to visualize mechanical and physical relationships. It sounds silly, but erecting a modern tent is not all that easy---especially without detailed directions. Katie and I were happy and thankful that Holly figured out how to create our night-time escape, as seen in Figure 5.

Tent done, Tater then had all us campers assemble as a group to take a short hike in the woods.

The Flathead River and surrounding country are pristine. Not one sign, nary a billboard, not even a candy wrapper can be found anywhere. We were not even allowed to use Mother Nature for our personal deposits.

Vince carried a portable toilet (latrine) in the gear raft for all to use. The purpose of Tater’s hike was to first, show us where Vince had placed the toilet, and second, to explain how to use it. He boasted that he’d wager none of us had such a beautiful view from the toilet in our homes. No one would take him up on his bet. Figure 6 shows Tater talking about number two. Figure 7 shows our view while so-indulging.



Figure 6. A walk in the woods.



Figure 7. Room with a view.

We learned Vince was responsible for (later) cleaning the toilet at the raft company's home base. I asked Vince if his international business degree came in handy during this exercise. He smiled but said nothing. Later, Vince mentioned that he knew he would enter into the white-collar world, but for a while, even with latrine duty, he was happy to be rafting the Flathead. I smiled as well.³

As we were settling in to our campsite, Mother Nature gave us a treat. She presented us with a double rainbow, as seen in Figure 8.

Before we knew it, Tater, Katie, and Vince had setup a kitchen, with a dining and living room positioned around a fire. As night came in, we were served thick steaks that had been cooked over the fire. Tater was the chef for the four meals we had on this short trek. For this feast, he also prepared green beans (flavored the way I had them as a kid, with bacon). Katie made up mashed potatoes from scratch. Bread, dessert, coffee; they were all served by our guides around the campfire, as seen in Figure 9.



Figure 8. Double your pleasure.



Figure 9. Roughing it.

John Muir once spoke about a wilderness campfire and the rustic way of eating at a camp. He put it well, "Grand tea and potatoes---the pomp of the kings is ridiculous!"⁴ I'll drink to that, John.

Second Day

Around 8 am on the second day, we were greeted with bacon and eggs. Our chef made certain ample portions of both, along with juice, rolls, and coffee, were ours for the asking. By now, the twelve rafters and three guides had gotten to know one another a bit. During yesterday's trip and campfire talks, I learned a lot about some of my paddling partners. One man, who initially came across as a jokester-with-tatersims, was teasing us. He had a master's degree from UCLA and a doctorate from USC in comparative literature. Having burned himself out on Dickens and de Maupassant, he was currently an avid reader of historical biographies. He and his wife had read

³ And we later talked about how his degree was different from one in general business administration. Vince had to take classes in a foreign language, as well as courses in social science and cultural histories of (in his specialty) South America. We spoke of how different (and usually difficult) it was to do business outside of the U.S. We both agreed America's transparent and easy application of property law had a lot to do with America's success. I mentioned I was planning on writing some essays about this topic. He asked for copies, and I urged him to read Hernando De Soto's *The Mystery of Capital*. (I was surprised his college did not have this title for required reading.)

⁴ John Muir, *Journal*, 12 July 1888, in Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary* (New York: Random House, 2001). 84.

every book title I mentioned to them (even Edgar Snow). The only gap I detected was a lapse about Stalin's (depraved) life.

During that evening, I spent at least an hour talking with a retired investment banker. I was glad I had not told a joke during the day's rafting. Tater was posing "What's the difference between this and that?"...Furnished with a funny answer. I was going to pose, "What's the difference between an investment banker and Las Vegas bookie? The answer is, "You know *before-hand* that a Las Vegas bookie is trying to fuck you over." But I did not pose the joke as there were youngsters in the raft.

It turns out that this man as was as put off and repulsed by Wall Street as I. He was not a trader. He did not create phony financial instruments. He served in positions where he actually performed a useful service to his clients. *And he never shorted (fucked) his own customers.* I liked the man. I hope he will someday comment on my financial reports.

As for Tater? He and I had fun speaking to the virtues of country life and of the inherent nobleness of bacon and bacon fat. I told him my dad raised pigs; that I had my first taste of pork for dinner only after I had left home in my late teens. He was impressed. He asked what I did for a living before I retired. I said something to the effect of working in computer networks.

On one occasion, we talked about folks who got their hands dirty doing their work. I offered that the work I did as a youngster made my hands dirty enough for me to look for other lines of work. He said he could relate. For sure, for there he was, manning an oar or paddle that dipped into the water of a crystal clean river. No dirty hands here.

Toward the last part of the second day, we talked about his commitment to keeping this part of the world as natural as possible. He offered, which I paraphrase, as I did not have my recorder on:

You know, if someone comes across this river or a campsite where there's a discarded beer can, I think that just makes it easier for the person to toss his own beer can alongside it. Before long, this place won't be much different from Memphis.

I asked if he had ever heard of Hurt City, one of the most dangerous and degraded ghettos in America (and located in Memphis)? He said no. I talked about his point in relation to Hurt City, in relation to a subway. I asked him if he had ever heard of the Skinner Effect? He said no. I mentioned that a famous behavioral psychologist, named B.F. Skinner----after God knows how many hours of "research"---came up with the very same theory that Tater did: One's trashing leads to more trashing. In contrast, the absence of trashing leads to yet more absence of trashing. Common sense, however clothed in country clichés, still remains common sense. It is part of the wisdom of our folks and of our folklore. I know the wisdoms of Tater. I came from Tater's milieu. Not southern, but southwestern. Tater's taters are my okras.

Anyway, Tater need not gain his Skinner-like PhD to have the common sense wisdom to understand human nature. In a nutshell, Skinner said: A chewing gum wrapper in a subway breeds thousands of chewing gum wrappers in the subway. Tater said the same thing.

Also, Tater is onto something about preserving a dear and vital part of America: our park system. And it can only be done if all of us get just a little bit anal about the matter.

By the way, Katie told us Tater runs a very clean kitchen at the campsites. We could not argue, as Tater allowed none of us into his culinary domain.

Finishing the Trip

We had been skirting big time rain storms for the entire trip. The last hour, within a mile or so from our endpoint, Mother Nature got even. The sky turned black, and the clouds turned wet. The temperature dropped and icy rain, in thick sheets, came down on us.

Throughout these two days, when Tater was asked the time or distance to some point, he would respond with (a) not too far, (b) not too long, (c) just a little bit more, (d) real close, (e) pretty soon, or other vague encouragements.⁵ One of our rafters, the comparative literature man----and seemingly inclined toward the binary world---finally asked in exasperation, “How about a definitive answer?” We agreed with our scholar, but Tater stayed with his ambiguous status reports.

Tater admonished all to paddle like hell. We were “pretty close” to the endpoint. Ha! We were “not too far.” Ha! All six of us joined-in; we gave Tater back some of his own. We began chanting his put offs: *Not too far! Not too long!* ...as we almost fiendishly stroked the water with our paddles

Elation! Misery! Exuberance! Exhaustion! The purging of any residual elements of road rage.

Cold and soaked, we pulled in to the final endpoint. There, the bus and trailer awaited us. No worse for wear, we were taken back to the rafting company’s base camp. There, we dried off, reclaimed our personal gear, and bade goodbye to our short-lived friendships.

We thanked Tater, Katie, and Vince for not only taking care of our need for safety and security, but for taking care of our wish for pleasure and happiness---however short lived.

⁵ But what is a raft guide to do? When asked about “how long?” to lunch. Is he to say, “Suck it up, wimp. We’re nowhere close.”