

CHAPTER 14

For Mr. Karl Hoerschgen,
my 11th and 12th grade English teacher.

Daybreak and we were up and excited. We got out our cleanest clothes and packed everything away as neat as we could. Out into the channel and in a few miles New Orleans. There were indeed times that I thought we would never make it this far. The weather, the current, the hidden things in the water, and the raft itself, at times seemed to be against us. In spite of the pitch, yaw, and roll of our craft not one of us ever got seasick. But we hung in there and we had succeeded. I had learned much from this experience, as I have mentioned before. Certainly we all had learned a lot, both the staff and us kids had great on the job training. As much as I had learned from the river, I believe I learned more from the staff, Dennis, Merle, Ron, and Jack. Most of all I learned how to make do with what was at hand and that griping and complaining about your circumstances never made them better. One important thing I learned was to take responsibility for my actions. In the harbors and marinas where we tied up at times, there were signs saying, "Slow no wake". That meant you could not make waves behind your boat. If anyone got hurt or anything got broken because of your wake it was your fault and you had to make things right. Our raft did not go fast enough for us to worry about our wake but we were aware of it at all times. It's the same way with your life. You must be aware of your wake, or actions, or the things that you do that affect others, you are responsible for them and if you harm or offend someone you must accept your responsibility and make things right. Many times on this trip we tried to blame one another for things that went wrong when it was our own fault. Some of us grew up but sadly some did not.

We had all taken turns as lookouts, (both fore and aft) pilots, navigators, cooks, mechanics, housekeepers, inventors, explorers, survivors, and in a sense, modern day pioneers. I would put these boys up against any sailor, perhaps not in the strength department, but as far as knowledge and first hand experience. We passed the test - we were able-bodied seamen. We conquered the Mighty Mississippi.

Several boats started to gather around us as we neared the city. They were full of well wishers and news media. One boat had a crew from Sports Illustrated Magazine and they took photos of us and we hit the cover of the next issue. They sailed along side us and interviewed us for quite a while but we really wanted to get to our destination.

The river was bigger than life. Here we were on this tiny homemade raft competing with barges, pleasure craft, ferryboats, and now huge sea going vessels. The raft was noticeably bowed and we knew some of the oil drums were water logged. It was time to get off of the river and we knew it.

There it was New Orleans. The Crescent City. Three cheers for us. Three cheers for the staff. Three cheers for New Orleans. And three cheers for the river. It was about four miles from our first sight of the city that we stopped. It was at the foot of Canal Street at the ferry docks. There were lots of people there but not all of them were there to greet us. They were waiting for the ferry and we were in the way. We could not stay there or the ferry or the waves from other river traffic would crush us. We would have to go down river about eight miles to the intercoastal waterway then enter the inner harbor navigation canal that led to Lake Pontchartrain.

Now it was dark and we had to go through another lock. This lock was not on the river but between the river and Lake Pontchartrain. Jack had gone ahead to make arrangements. The Lockmaster asked us if we had ever been through a lock before and we all laughed. This canal

went right through the industrial area of New Orleans and we had to be very careful. These people were working and we were in the way. Five miles later we were on the lake.

We passed the airport and an amusement park on our final four or five miles to the Southern Yacht Club. It was beautiful to see the lights of that park and the city in the background. We also saw flying fish, it was fun to watch them try to fly or jump across our bow.

Jack met us at the yacht club and we tied up and made camp in the West End Park across the street.

Dean Felsing, Crew Member of the Unsinkable.

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CHAPTER 15

For Henry and Mildred Stivland

Yes, here we were in New Orleans. Or should I say that there we were in culture shock? I'm not going to spend a lot of time telling you about New Orleans it is a beautiful city and we covered most of it. I would like to share with you some of the high lights, events, and lessons I learned thus far. Also remember the other crew was on the way down from Minneapolis to take our places and take the raft home.

First, the raft was in terrible shape. At least five of the barrels were full of water and needed to be replaced. The brackets that held them in place did not function as they were supposed to and you had to undo almost each one just to get at the one that needed to be changed. These barrels or drums varied in length by at least three inches so it was difficult to make a perfect fit. They were also out of alignment and don't forget the whole thing was bent and they were binding in the center. Jack found people with the know how to get the thing fixed and while we toured the raft was being repaired.

We were also sailing on salt water now and I think that didn't do the motors any good. More about them later.

We were camped within sight of the world's longest bridge. We were taken to Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi in a car caravan and we rode over the bridge. We were allowed to play and swim in the Gulf of Mexico. Some of us thought that New Orleans was right on the Gulf but it is about 100 miles away and that is why we rode in cars.

We met with the mayor and received the keys to the city. We learned how to get around on the busses and streetcars. We were given about .75 cents every day for food and that was plenty. I usually got a poor boy sandwich for .35 cents and that would make two meals. A poor boy is like the sub or hero sandwiches we eat here. One day we were checking out the ferryboats at the foot of Canal Street where we landed at first. It was great fun to watch the pickpockets working in the crowds. They weren't very good at it and most of us could spot them right away as they bumped into people. The police knew who most of them were and they would take them off to jail and they would be back the same day, over and over. We did get into some mischief and I got my first and last chew of tobacco. To this day if I see someone chewing that junk I start to gag.

We made friends with a fellow who lived on a boat at the yacht club and his boat had sunk in the lake just before we arrived. Some of us went out to help him recover his belongings by scuba diving. One item he brought up was his electric coffeepot. I'll never forget him looking at the bottom of the pot and reading, "Do not submerge in water". He just laughed and plugged it in and it still worked. I wish I knew the brand name of it; it would make a great sales pitch.

One day while I was passing the time by fishing in the toilet in the marina and I saw a hammerhead shark swim under the raft. I wonder what I would have done if I had caught him.

While in town I noticed that some of the public drinking fountains were absolutely filthy. I remember wondering why no one cleaned them, perhaps they were broken I thought. Then I noticed a black gentleman getting a drink from one of these fountains and being as I was thirsty I waited for him to finish and then I stepped up and started to get a drink. How was I to know that this was a big no-no. A white man grabbed me by the neck and ask me if I knew how to read and when I said yes he pointed out the sign over the fountain it read "Colored". I told the man that I didn't know what that meant and he wised me up real fast. Black people had their own places in the South and I had better get smart or else I would be in a lot of trouble. This was a sad day for me. Several of my friends back home were Black and many were American Indians. They were never treated any different than any other of my friends. Three of the kids on our crew were Indian and the only thing different about them to me was their beautiful last names. The more I saw of this attitude toward black people the more I hated it. I was only a kid and there was nothing that I could do. I felt very ashamed of being white and I wanted to apologize to every black person that I met. I still feel the same way today many years later. Things have change in the south but they could always be better. The only thing that I can do is live my life and treat others the way I would like to be treated.

The new crew arrived and we had one big group meeting. The crew taking the raft home would be fewer in order to lighten the load. Of the original crew there were 13 of us left and there were only seven replacements. It was decided that four crewmembers from the original crew would be chosen to help get the Unsinkable home. The staff called for volunteers and believe it or not only four of us raised our hands. Yes I was one of those crazy guys. Now I would be going up the river for real.

Dean Felsing, Crew Member of the Unsinkable.

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