

## Down by the River



The Ervin Sieracki family lived at 507 East 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, Winona, Minnesota. East means the East End, a distinctly Polish part of town, and 2<sup>nd</sup> means only one block from the Mississippi River. The river was closer to our house than the playground at the East End Recreational Center, so it was to be expected that the river became our playground.

I don't remember my mother ever telling me not to go "down by the river." I was surprised to hear some of my neighborhood friends say that they were not allowed to go near the river. I am sure that my mother thought that since my two older brothers swam well, were good boy scouts, and played incessantly down by the river that I was as safe as they were. But I never joined the Boy Scouts and I did not swim well, so I was at risk. Of course, that didn't keep me from the river and its risks.

I would walk one block downhill to my favorite place to hang out – a tiny inlet called the "dooch." I don't have a clue as to where that word came from. We would ride our bikes to the end of the road and then walk down a path to get to this little inlet. Beyond this

was a stretch of shoreline where a dozen boathouses were moored. At the time, there were no taxes or licenses required. Nowadays, there are no boathouses to be seen. A fifteen foot high flood dike running parallel to the river cuts off any access to the waterfront. In the dooch at that time, 10 or 15 little wooden boats were floating with their bows touching the shore and secured with a chain to some huge concrete block. There also was a one-room boathouse moored on one side of the inlet, where a friendly old bachelor named Felix lived. My brother Robert paid him a few dollars a month to moor his little 12' power boat against the boathouse. For a few bucks, Robert had upped the security for his prized possession. I borrowed the boat one day –maybe I was 11 years old --for a little ride a mile upriver to the city levee. It was a light boat and skipped across the waves. Scared the hell out of me. A good buddy of my brother just happened to see me coming back in. To this day, I don't know if he ever told on me.

A couple of years earlier, I had an even scarier experience “down the dooch.” My neighbor Tommy Breza, who was my older brother's age, invited me for a little boat ride in his leaky rowboat. He took me to a concrete buoy in the middle of the river. The boat was tipsy and if I had fallen in, I would have drowned for sure. My brother Robert suddenly appeared out of nowhere in his little red and white boat. Felix probably had tipped him off. Robert casually asked if I would like to return to the safety of the shore in his boat, an offer that I quickly and gratefully accepted.

Eventually, I did learn to swim. The breakthrough for came in a Red Cross class where I was taught that with lungs full of air, the body would not sink because it is lighter than water. With a variety of strokes, I knew I could stay alive in the water indefinitely. But being able to swim long distances does not automatically result in safety. We had plenty of other risky activities. On occasion we would spray buddies standing in the open door of the boathouse with the spray from the wake of the boat, meaning that the boat would race toward the boathouse and veer off only at the last moment before colliding. Another stunt was to ski past buoys and flip the tow line over the buoy. The most dangerous stunt I was ever involved in was the time my boat did collide with a boathouse. Luckily no one was hurt. I had borrowed a friend of mine's boat to go skiing. The outboard motor wasn't getting enough gas to start. Normally, you start an engine in neutral gear because being in neutral limits the gas to the engine to keep from starting the engine with a roar and having an accident like throwing a rod. To give the engine more gas, I put the gear in forward and advanced the throttle. So here I am, standing in the boat with my foot on the transom, pulling for dear life on the rip cord. Well, the engine roared to life on the first pull. With all the extra gas, the engine shot the boat right under me. I went head over heels into the river. My head bobbed to the surface to see the boat speedily arching away from me. It was a beautiful sight except for the fact that the boat now was empty. The question was where would the boat touch land? Whitaker's Marina was just upriver. If the trajectory of the boat curved too far, it could very well come in at 20 miles an hour and ram some really expensive boat moored

in the marina. So that was an agonizing 10 seconds for me to watch the direction of the boat which could have huge consequences for my future. The curve of the racing boat turned the front of the boat into the shore before it went as far as the marina. But I wasn't out of harm's way yet. The boat was bearing down on the row of boathouses along the shore. Closer and closer, it approached the boathouse at the end of the row, until bam! It rammed right into the back of the boathouse, and there it stayed with its engine roaring. I swam over to climb into the boat and shut off the engine. There was plenty of cleanup work to be done. Patch the damage to the front of the boat and hire a carpenter to repair the boathouse. Luckily, there was no damage to the boat in the boathouse. That would have been pricey.

My mother liked to tell the story of the torn shirt. Not my torn shirt, my oldest brother's. Actually, it wasn't his shirt; he was wearing a shirt that he had borrowed from our father. If he had not borrowed the shirt, the story may never have come out. Although Jerry did his best to cover his tracks by carefully stitching up the tears, the evidence was clear, so Jerry had to 'fess up. One hot summer's day, Jerry found himself in his little runabout racing a buddy in another boat downriver. His buddy lit out for a big slough called Sam Gordy's across from where the Western Coal Co. docks used to be with Jerry in hot pursuit -- as hot as a 5-horsepower Evinrude 4 cylinder engine will go. When the slough widened out, Jerry's buddy turned around. This was Jerry's chance to cut him off and pull ahead. But when Jerry turned his motor, his boat resisted a sharp turn because it was a flat-bottom boat with no keel to knife through the water. The first crisis then was to avoid a collision by slowing down and turning the motor ever so sharply. The second crisis was to avoid swamping the boat because the boat's movement was too sharp and water was coming in from the back and side of the boat. In a panic trying to keep the boat afloat, Jerry ended up overboard in the drink. The third crisis was to avoid the motor's spinning propeller as the boat whizzed by him. Jerry was only partially successful. The prop barely nicked him, but it sure did tear into his shirt. Crisis number four was to shed the shirt being mauled by the prop so that he could get back to the surface and breathe. Well, we all know the story now. Jerry was able to free himself and get back to shore to hastily sew up the shirt. On the river, there is more than one way to drown a cat.

In another little accident on the river many years later, I caused the demise of this hardy but unpredictable little Evinrude. After Jerry's interests turned to college, getting a job, and raising a family, his little outboard sat lonely, dejected, and run down in a corner of our garage. A friend of my father with many hours of work overhauled the engine for no pay at all. My father told my mother he had to give him something -- a six pack of beer. So the new owner of the engine was my younger brother, who had just bought a fiberglass boat. The boat had two humps on the bottom caused by long-term improper storage and a transom that was starting to rot. But it didn't leak, and it seemed to pair nicely with the reborn engine. It was my brother's first boat, and he was very proud of

it. I could not resist taking the boat out for a little spin, maybe to the Latch Island beach. When coming aside of the former Mississippi Valley Public Service Company (power plant), the front of the boat would not come down to plane well. So as all experienced boaters do, I let go of the engine handle to lean forward to bring the front of the boat down. My bad. The engine just as quickly turned to the side and furiously churned up the water. The energy so created forced the engine right off the transom and into the drink. End of reconditioned engine. I had to row the boat back home. Oars or a paddle were considered a necessity for good reason. I marked the spot as best I could in hopes of raising the motor, but there was no way. It was in the middle of the channel dredged for the deep draft tug boats. Dad said with a frown that he would not tell his friend the outcome. I expect the secret remained safe and can now be safely told.

Time spent down by the river was to enter another world: no adults to speak of, no cops, no purpose really except to enjoy the river. We would play with our dogs, swim, fish, water ski, or keep busy maintaining our boats. Water skiing was the pinnacle of all these activities.

My introduction to water skiing came from Rich Dernek, my good buddy who lived on the next block and whose parents owned a fishing boat with just enough power to pull us on skis. It was always a great day to go skiing. To learn to ski quickly was a matter of pride. I did not make it up to the surface the first time because my attention was diverted to pushing aside a floating branch. But I made it up the second time. We certainly were never competition skiers, but we looked good sweeping back and forth jumping the wake from the boat. And we loved the acceleration made when we would cut a wide arc as the boat turned back.

One halcyon moment is forever etched in my memory as the quintessential moment of youthful pleasure behind the boat. My younger brother and I found an ingenious way to have fun, which also was high risk. Instead of being pulled on skis behind the boat, we body surfed. We would lie on our backs in the water, head toward the boat, stiffen our arms pointing away from the boat and hold onto the tow rope for dear life. When the person driving the boat would pick up speed, we would skim on our backs across the surface of the river with the water cascading over our heads and providing a little cavity of air that we could breathe. We had no life vest on, and our heads were vulnerable to anything that was floating in the water. Safety depended on the watchful eyes of the person steering the boat. The danger of the river was not to be denied, and it may well have added to the allure of the river.

Another favorite moment in the boat was when I would find myself alone on the river early on calm mornings. The river was not filled with pleasure craft traffic as is it nowadays. My oldest brother used to claim that his 5-horsepower engine was one of the fastest on our section of the river. This, of course, was due to the fact that it was one of

the few powerboats on the river. I loved best the days when there was no wind, no breeze to ripple the water. The surface of the water would look like a blue mirror contrasting the dark green of the trees along the river bank. At 18 miles an hour, the little boat would smoothly skim over the water as smooth as a skate on ice. And behind me, the wake caused by the propeller would create an ever widening “V” on the pristine surface.

Down at the river, we had so many options to choose from. We could play among the boathouses, jumping from one to the next. We could swim off the boathouses or take out boats to the public beach on Latch Island. John Latch, a lumber baron philanthropist, donated island property directly across from Winona for use as a public beach. During its heyday, it was the most popular place to swim. With its crew of lifeguards and wooden booms, our parents felt confident dropping us off for an afternoon of swimming. Once we had our boats, we could go to one of the many islands to swim in the river. The most popular islands were those upriver or downriver that featured a sandy beach and a safe approach for the boat. North of the Winona bridge was our most popular island that we called Cotter Island. South of the town below the railroad bridge was another island with a nice sandy beach. Close to that island was a little hidden slough that offered a tiny bit of beach. This was the place we chose one warm sunny day during Easter vacation to swim for a few seconds in the ice-cold water.

Camping on the islands was another option for adventure. We camped in the hidden slough near Cotter Island. We camped on the back side of the island below the railroad bridge. Our preferred site was on point formed where the second channel joined the main channel. We could take the channel behind Latch Island and go under the old high wagon bridge. This was the concrete bridge rendered obsolete by the “new” suspension bridge built as a WPA project. This older bridge would have been the one used by my Polish relatives who decided to settle in Pine Creek, Wisconsin, where my great-great grandmother Mary Sieracki is buried. Anyway, on this grassy point, we had a great view of the river and the barges slowly working their way upriver and downriver. Late at night, the barge searchlights would sweep back and forth across the channel to keep the barges within the buoys and to be sure no obstacles were in the path. We would shout across the inky darkness of the water to get the attention of the barge pilot, who would respond by splashing the campsite with the blinding light of the searchlights. Camping always meant a big fire on the beach, and when that was reduced to embers, bright stars in the sky not visible from the city.

Other activities not quite as exciting included maintaining our boats and boathouses. All these accoutrements were paid for out of the profits from our paper routes, so it paid to keep the “investments” in good shape. We had to keep everything as clean and dry as possible and keep the motors tuned. Repainting the boats was saved for the winter, a job to be done in the “freezer garage” built by my father to freeze the chicken meat

harvested from the chickens raised in the “chicken garage” before he sold it to local restaurants. The freezer garage was equipped with a stove made from a barrel. When my neighbor complained about the sparks spit out by the little chimney flue, my father brushed him off. Always proud of my father for doing that even though I probably would not have. We had to keep the boathouse afloat, meaning to replace any barrels that sank. Our boathouse was originally owned by the man whose new boathouse I rammed with the runaway boat. Small world. Boathouses then were kept afloat by a row of barrels along the two long side walls. We used a wooden contraption to leverage new barrels underwater until they bobbed into place under the boathouse.

Always the river awaited us with its charms. There were the warm breezes to be enjoyed after the cold, dark Minnesota winters. The blue river captured the color of the sky. The white fluffy clouds floated above as we floated below. The light green of trees and shrubs on the islands contrasted with the dark green of the bluffs above the valley filled with hardwood trees. And Sugar Loaf Mountain with its exposed block of limestone presided over the entire valley – our own Mt. Parnassus. Time moved slower then, the summers were longer. We were certain that the river would be there for us forever. Indeed, the river still runs its course; Sugar Loaf still presides majestically. But the dooch and the shoreline is bereft of boats. The Latch Island beach house is gone as is our youth. The river has not abandoned us; we have abandoned the river for different adventures and risks. And although we have gotten older in the bargain, the river still awaits if we decide to return.