

american whitewater

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Inset: Johnnie Kern on Canyon Creek by Dieter King



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Waiting for Bill

by Chuck McHenry

It had been one of those perfect, Missouri, June days on the Saint Francois River. Warm water, 76 degree air and a perfect level of 27 inches. We'd been surfing our brains out through the Millstream shut-ins, catching enders here and there, splatting Cat's Paw and feeling that good ol' sun on our shoulders. At Double Drop, the very best ender spot in the universe, there'd been the usual lineup of rodeo moves, linkages and sky-high camera poses. Everybody was in swim shorts and bikinis, and those up on the rocks were sun tanning and catching up on the news from the winter. Tall tales were being swapped while we were swapping ends. We were catching doubles (two kayaks side-by-side catching air), inverts (kayak completely out of the water and upside down), and 720 pirouettes, hoping for that one picture that might make the cover of American Whitewater.

I think every kayaker in the state (plus half from every surrounding state) was there. We'd had a rough winter and a cold spring so it was nice to warm the bones. It was a day we didn't want to end so, of course, we stayed late — last ones on the river — and it was dusk before we started for the take-out. Bill had to get back to St. Louis and had gone on ahead. The rest of us were starting to talk about going into Fred'town and getting some pizza and beer, then coming back to do a moonlight run. While it's a little colder and you miss out on a lot of shut-eye, there's something about catching air at night that makes it that much more fun.

We'd just come around the last bend, with the take-out bridge just a hundred yards downriver when it happened. There was this really bright light just to the east and it started getting steadily bigger and brighter. We just planted in an eddy with our jaws flapping, watching this thing. There wasn't one bit of noise, but something was obviously coming toward us. We figured in was one of those secret stealth jets and we kind of hunkered down waiting for what we figured would be one helluva sonic boom. Closer it came, and still no noise.

You know, I think after you've been pumping water through your ears and sinuses over an extended period of time, the brain must get a little waterlogged and go into la-la mode. Information has to slowly slosh through before you understand what's happening. Slowly it dawned on us: this was one of those danged old flying saucers! There it was, all round and lit up with circles of lights

and rays and beams spilling out everywhere; and it was slowing down!

"Ohmigawd," I thought. "This is it! It's coming for me." This was surely my destiny for, after all, hadn't I been voted "most likely to be contacted by aliens" by my high school class? And now here it was, really happening. Wow, I was stoked! I couldn't help but think how lucky I was. I'd just had a few beers before leaving double drop and I hoped that they had a bathroom—I had to go real bad.

Imagine my disappointment when they slowed down and dropped over the parking lot at the take-out. We could hear all the freaked out people hollering and we could see a few running along the bank ducking for cover.

"Hey!" I yelled, "I'm over here guys." They just ignored me.

All of a sudden this door under the saucer opens and a big, super-bright column of light shines down. Then I see Bill rising in the air with that old, wet stogie in his mouth cussing and kicking, and shaking his fists and belching how he's going to kick some major alien butt as soon as he gets inside. To tell you the truth, I was already feeling sorry for those aliens.

Sure enough, Bill went in through that door and into the ship. The beam of light quit, and all those colored lights started spinning around again. Just as silently as it'd come, it went straight up into the sky like a bolt of lightning and disappeared.

We didn't know what to say. It was just one of those moments when everyone is simply stunned into silence. How were we going to explain this one? Especially to Cindy, his fiancee of seven years, who was expecting him at home tonight. Cindy (a seasoned veteran of countless Bill vacations out west—trips that, despite his promises to the contrary, always turned into an extended series of shuttles), had heard it all already—every single excuse known to mortal man. I was already thinking how this would go down with her.

"Cindy, we're calling for Bill. He's been abducted by aliens and we don't know when he'll be back. You need to call work for him tomorrow and tell them he's sick."

"Well, you just tell Mr. Bill, and I know he's right there with you now, that if he doesn't get his \$#!%* tired, old %\$#**\$% butt back home tonight in time for dinner with my parents, he can forget about coming home period. And if and when he does show

his sorry excuse for a %&*#ing "%^\$# behind, you can tell him I won't be there."

Yep, this would be a standard response from Cindy, we'd been through this scene before, and I have to tell you truthful-like that Bill usually WAS standing right beside us, and every time Bill would hear that last part about her being gone, he'd smile this strange little smile.

But this time, he really was gone....

Suddenly we saw that light again. I knew it! He'd lit up that stogie, belched and farted a few times, and started raiding their cooling unit for Stags and High Life. They were bringing him back. Actually, I had to give them credit—they'd managed to stand him about two minutes longer than any of my non-boating friends could. They'd realized they'd made a terrible mistake and gotten the wrong guy. They were coming back for me!

But dang-it-all, that saucer went right back to the parking lot and hovered over Bill's truck. People who were just recovering from the last visitation, started hollering again and jumping into the river, or just running around like they had ants in their dry suits. The saucer bay door opened and that big column of light shot down again. I figured Bill had probably blown it for the whole human race. They were going to dump him as quick as they could and wipe earth off their maps as a place of intelligent life forms, skeedaddling for better planets.

No Bill came down though... instead his boat started floating up, plus his paddle and all his gear. All that stuff went in through the bay, the light blinked off, and away it went. This time for good.

Of course, it wasn't five minutes later that the woods exploded with all these air force guys. They were all over the parking lot, interviewing us and asking questions. I think they took great pleasure in photographing us in our kayak skirts and Hawaiian shorts and tevas. And you know what? I think the fact that we'd had a few beers pleased them. I heard later that even though they'd tracked it on radar, and seen it themselves, it went down as "unreliable sources; sighting cannot be confirmed." And they called us the "lunatic fringe."

Now I've been called a lot of things in my life. Women have complained about my lack of political correctness in ways I won't repeat here. I've been called a river show-off, an adrenaline junkie, an accident waiting to happen... but lunatic fringe? I guess I could get used to it.



It's been five years and I haven't seen or heard from Bill since. But you know, anyway I expect to round some bend in a river and see him, or walk over to some campfire where the BS is especially deep, and there he'll be, lying about some creek and stretching the facts on volume and classification.

We all talk about how that UFO came back and got his boat. Where the blazes are they taking him that he needs his yak? Let your mind wander a bit. . . not too far though. I mean I still shudder when I think they might be using him for breeding purposes and a

whole bunch of little Bills might someday return as part of some advanced colonization group. . . but think about this — what's a 200 foot waterfall like at 1/5th gravity? What's a green wave like at twice gravity? How many worlds have rain all the time? Even in our own solar system we've discovered canyons and mountains that far surpass anything we have on Earth. Just imagine what else might be out there among the stars. In an infinite universe there's a hell of a lot of first descents waiting.

So we're waiting for Bill. I sure do hope he comes back in my lifetime. I don't know why, but I miss seeing him on the river. It's kind of like when you break your arm and they put a cast on. The dang thing irritates you like hell at first. It's smelly, itchy, grubby and inconvenient — but then the first few days they take it off, you miss it.

Bill and I go way back — in fact, he was one of the first people to take me down the river. Maybe he's teaching those aliens how to kayak.

Just waiting for Bill

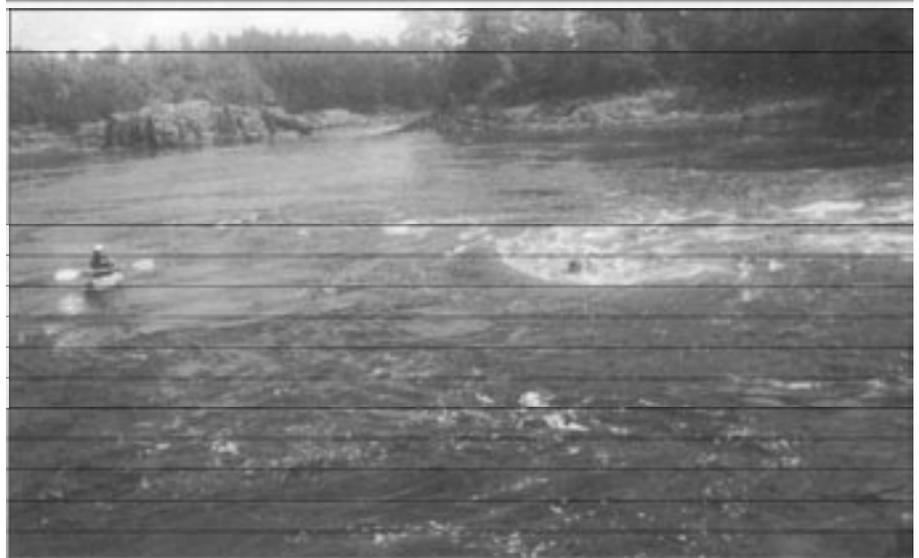
Whirlpool Follies

By Fred Lally

It was very dark and quiet; I was nearly weightless. A few moments before it had been light, noisy and I had been trying to take a picture. Except for the uncomfortable pressure on my ears, I was sensory deprived. I was having a difficult time grasping exactly what was happening. At the same time I felt that I was on a narcotic: I knew this was not a good place to be, but I wasn't especially alarmed about it.

We were paddling the Ottawa. It was our annual summer pilgrimage from Pennsylvania, a trip I have been making since 1983. What a great cruising river the Ottawa is, with reliable summer flows, good play spots, and lots of warm water. The warm water is an especially nice change from the frigid water we endure to boat during spring runoff or late fall and winter storms. Of course, like most rivers these days, the Ottawa is considerably more populated with kayakers than it was back in the early 80s. Those of you who have paddled it are familiar with the large volume that creates big waves and holes, surging eddy lines, boils, and whirlpools.

Last year, we had stopped to play below Butchers Knife on the Main channel, at a point where some well defined kayak-sized whirlpools are created by the current caroming off a rock on the left bank. As usual we rode and played in these with out boats, gettingspun around and partially submerged, even my larger volume boat. Encouraged by a younger kayaker we got out of our boats, jumped in and swam in the whirlpools. It was avertiginous sensation, like being on a tilt-a-whirl, spun about, sucked down, and eventually being released by the current. Of course, while we were doing this we were treading water, wearing our life jackets, and keeping our arms out helicopter-like to provide some lift for our bodies.



"Open your eyes, you jerk," I said to myself slowly, at first thinking my eyes were closed and that was why it was so dark. Then I got to thinking... "My eyes are open!!"

Well, here we were again this year, playing in the whirlpools in our boats and the notion seized our group once again to get more intimate with the water. So be it. I thought I would swim in with my camera held out in front of me to catch a couple of pictures of us being swirled about, so I could show the folks back home what I was talking about.

Three of us jumped in one after another within a few seconds. Soon I felt the surging tug of a whirlpool grabbing me. I started with my elbows sticking out, wing like, but I was

having difficulty stabilizing the camera up at my eye, so I tucked my elbows in close to my body as I was getting buffeted about. Almost immediately, it got very dark and I felt a great deal of pressure on my ears and cognitively realized it was absolutely pitch black.

"Open your eyes, you jerk." I said to myself slowly, at first thinking my eyes were closed and that was why it was so dark. Then I got to thinking... "My eyes *are* open!!" I looked around for the lighter which would show me where the surface of the water was,