



# AMERICAN WHITewater

A VOLUNTEER PUBLICATION PROMOTING RIVER CONSERVATION, ACCESS AND SAFETY

## American Whitewater Journal Sep/Oct 2019 – Volume 59 – Issue 5

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We're hoping to make some of Colorado's best paddling streams around Crested Butte (CO) eligible for Wild and Scenic designation as a part of the current Forest Service Planning underway in the Gunnison Grand Mesa Uncompaggre (GMUG) National Forest. Access and other management scenarios that will affect whitewater recreation on the Forest are being considered as well, but rest easy knowing American Whitewater is positioned to make sure boater's voices are heard during the planning process. Oh Be Joyful.

Photo Evan Stafford

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# WHITEWATER HISTORY

## TALES OF EARLY PADDLING ON THE CUMBERLAND PLATEAU WITH THE EAST TENNESSEE WHITE WATER CLUB (ETWWC)

BY JOHN TANSIL .... WITH HELP FROM OTHERS



otter's Falls Gang in 1973. Martin Begun published pictures of these guys running Potter's Falls (Crooked Fork Creek, TN) in the AW Journal and got a reprimand from the AW Safety Director. Photo by Robert Humphries

*This article has been split in half to better fit our formatting. Stay tuned for the Winter 2020 issue for the second part of the ETWWC's history.*

**T**HIS IS A story about early history of paddling on the Cumberland Plateau with the East Tennessee White Water Club, the first whitewater club in the state of Tennessee. ETWWC was formed in 1962 in Oak Ridge, TN and it immediately became an American Whitewater (AW) affiliate club, listed in the 1962-2 *AW Journal*.

The club's members started off with a bang with an early descent of Big South Fork of the Cumberland, as described in the article "Pioneering a Tennessee River" (John Bombay, 1962-2 *AW Journal*). One of the quotes from this article reads, "Since man's earliest existence, his curiosity has always driven him from his homestead to explore the unknown." This phrase aptly describes the attitude of ETWWC members from the get-go!

Being just a few miles from the eastern escarpment of the Cumberland Plateau, Oak Ridge is ideally situated for exploration

of rivers on the Plateau. In particular, the wonderful whitewater of the Obed/Emory watershed in the Catoosa Wildlife Management Area became "home rivers" for ETWWC. It wasn't long after they discovered the Big South Fork that ETWWC members did an early descent of the Obed River from Devil's Breakfast Table to Nemo Bridge, as described in the article "River Reports: Tennessee's Obed" (John Bombay, 1964-3 *AW Journal*). However, unknown to ETWWC, two young college students from Oak Ridge, Robert Humphries and Chuck Ochiltree, had already probed the Obed. Their very entertaining narrative follows.

During the period from 1962-1972, the ETWWC had a transition from a mixture of kayaks/open canoes to mostly decked boats (K-1, C-1). Club members obtained a Hahn C-1 and built a mold that other club members could then use to build a C-1. By the time I joined and started paddling with ETWWC in 1972, their paddlers were almost all in decked boats. ETWWC also had a mold for an Old Town kayak and a Lettmann Mark IV kayak, which became my boat of choice. Some of the club members of the time were Robert Humphries (OC-1→C-1), Chuck Ochiltree (OC-1→C-1), John Bombay (K-1), Richard (Dick) Reed (OC-1), Tom Berg (OC-1), Jerry Cosgrove (OC-1), Don Jared (K-1), Reid Gryder (C-1), Martin Begun (C-1), brothers Paul Singley (K-1) and Alan Singley (C-1), Mike Holland (K-1), Monte Meals (K-1), Ken Cooper (K-1), and Mark Hall (C-1).



*Logo of the original East Tennessee White Water Club (ETWWC), which was founded in 1962. The logo was chosen before the word “white water” became a single word. The crossed canoe paddles reflect the club’s canoeing roots.*

**Photo by Reid Gryder**

Naturally, ETWWC members traveled to other parts of the country to paddle, mostly to the upper Midwest and along the Appalachians. They met other paddlers on these journeys and invited them to the Plateau to paddle when water conditions



were right. They developed a special bond with “north woods paddlers,” Fred Young (C-1) and students from the University of Wisconsin Hooper Outing Club, and frequently paddled with them over holiday weekends in the winter/spring. Because Martin Begun was a racer, he was known to many eastern paddlers. Paddlers such as Dan Demaree (K-1), Jack Wright (K-1) and Charlie Walbridge (C-1) came down from Maryland/West Virginia to paddle with ETWWC. First descents of the Caney Fork, Bee Creek, and Piney were done by a mix of ETWWC members and these guest paddlers.

*The author and his children at the put-in on the lower St. Francis River, MO.*

**Photo by Linda Seaman Tansil**



# WHITewater HISTORY

## 1963 FIRST VENTURES ON OBED RIVER WHEN ETWWC WAS UNKNOWN

This narrative is provided by Robert Humphries and Chuck Ochiltree regarding early runs on the Obed River before they were aware of the ETWWC.

During this period, no one had run the Obed, as far as we know. When we later became part of the ETWWC there were discussions about a man that published a guidebook for southern whitewater, which included discussions about the Obed. I believe his name was Burmister (sic?). His description of the river was pretty close, but many in the club suspected that he simply used topo maps to create the description he used. He also said he ran a "foldboat" that used to be advertised in the National Geographic in those days. A "foldboat" sounded a little light duty for the Obed, adding to the doubts.

We were in college from 1960 to 1964 (UT Knoxville). We made contact with the ETWWC in 1966. Before then, here is the list of trips we took in 1963 and 1964, with the 1966 run, described last, leading to our first contact with ETWWC:

### 1963-Obed 1st trip-day 1

Our very first whitewater trip was from Devil's Breakfast Table on Daddy's Creek that runs into the Obed. Being naive, we had planned to travel all the way to Oakdale in one trip. Worse, we had THREE people in the canoe! Chuck and I paddled, and the other student sat on the floor in the middle. The water was up, but not wild. We made it to what is now called "the rock garden," named that day by Chuck. When our friend saw what we were about to take on, he panicked and tried to jump out, causing us to flip. The canoe ended up wrapped around a middle-of-the-stream rock in a classic "one-rock pin." We kept jumping in the flow upstream trying to dislodge the canoe as we passed by. No luck. We tried to hike out at that spot. No way. So, we swam downstream a mile or so when Chuck saw a worm can sitting on a rock. Sure enough, we found a trail that went through a crevice in the straight-up canyon walls. We called home for a ride, picked up the cars, and went to Oak Ridge.

### 1963-Obed 1st trip-day 2

The guy with us the first day was NOT coming and never went canoeing again. So, Chuck brought two kids from his neighborhood to help us. We hiked back in, dislodged the canoe, and started downstream giving it a try with FOUR people. No good. It had seven holes in it. Chuck sat on the back of the canoe, which raised the holes out of the water. The three of us swam. It started getting dark as we reached Clear Creek. Chuck paddled on to Nemo and the

three of us "scrambled" up Clear Creek to Lilly Bridge. His parents picked us all up and our first adventure was over.

### 1963-Obed 2nd trip

Wiser now, Chuck and I put in again on Daddy's Creek, but had a more sensible goal of Nemo. And, it was JUST THE TWO OF US. The water was up, just right for a good trip. We made it!

### 1963-Obed 3rd trip

We had two friends who heard about our adventures and had purchased a canoe. One of them was a classmate of ours. The water was low. Bad trip. We had to drag many places.

### 1964-Late August, I think. Powell River from Big Stone Gap, Virginia to Oak Ridge, one-week trip

We were going to graduate in December of 1964 and knew that we would be going in different directions, so we paddled this week-long trip. Had to carry all our stuff and canoe over Norris Dam. Many stories to tell about "along the way," including the cooking still we encountered! Yikes! Smoking! Early Deliverance experience!

### 1965 (late) or 1966 (early), not sure. New River/South Fork Cumberland to Leatherwood, camped out half way

I made a trip from Memphis where I worked, and Chuck did the same from Chattanooga bringing two or three coworkers from TVA, and also his Dad. One guy broke his leg. His Dad slipped and hit hard on his back, but recovered quickly.

### 1965 (late) or 1966 (early), not sure.

We ran the French Broad in Carolina with the same two guys in their canoe that were on the third Obed trip. My canoe flipped in the flooding waters and wrapped around a rock. We stopped the trip and went back home. It was too rough for boats without foam to keep the water out.

### 1966--Obed--The connection with ETWWC

Chuck had moved back to Oak Ridge and shortly after that, by coincidence, I did the same, coming from Memphis. We decided it was time for another Obed trip. Same route: Daddy's Creek to Nemo. Good water level. Good trip. No problems, as we had gained some skills along the way. BUT... guess what we saw as we went through the "Rock Garden"? A canoe wrapped around the mid-stream rock... the same rock that crunched Chuck's canoe on our very first run. We got it off the rock OK. It had some sort of dealer

## 1963 FIRST VENTURES ON OBED RIVER WHEN ETWWC WAS UNKNOWN

sticker on it that said "Nashville," but no other info. One of us paddled it and the other Chuck's canoe....I suppose that was him.

When back in Oak Ridge, I put a lost and found ad in the local newspaper. The very next day I got a call from a man named **DICK REED**. I told him that if he could describe it he could have it. He said he was not interested in the canoe, but the fact that we had found it on the Obed, meaning we had **RUN THAT RIVER!** He explained that he was the President of the ETWWC, and that they had been hoping to find someone who had run the Obed. He asked if we two could lead them on a trip. I said, sure, we're **EXPERTS!** (meaning: ex=a has-been. Spurt=a drip, under pressure).

Sure enough we set up a trip with them and had 13 canoes that day. The water level was good. We had a good trip, became good friends with all of them, and joined the Club.

We got to one rapid and I hollered back to some of them, "be careful, this is a 90 right/90 left turn that is tricky". The name stuck for that rapid.

A second rapid was also named that day. **TOM BERG** was behind me. I shouted out to him, "This is a good one..wheee!" As we approached the drop and he could see foam floating up in the air, I could hear Tom saying over and over, "Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh my God." (nervous). I went down, turned around and watched him screaming, "OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD!" (totally scared). He made it, eddied out, and I heard: "Oooh myyyy GODDDD" (proud. "I did it").

I'll leave it to you to guess the name of **THAT** rapid.

### Canoe and Hiking Club at University of Tennessee (my first time in a kayak and disaster on Daddy's Creek)

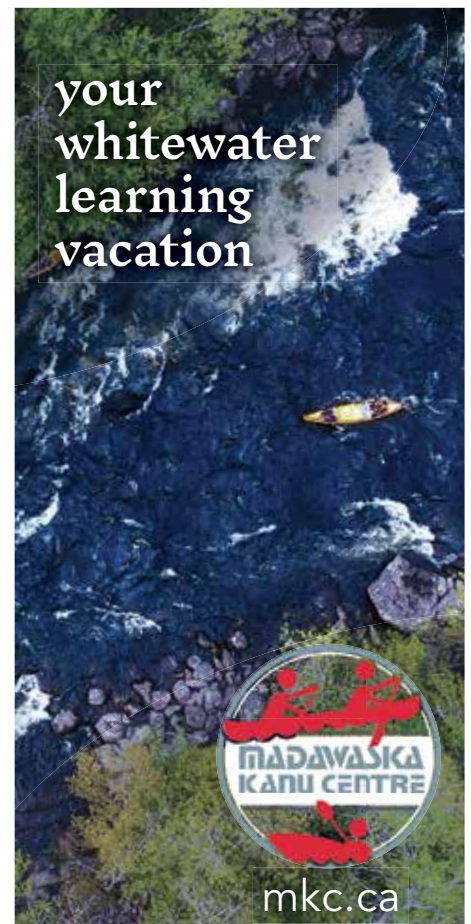
The author joined the student Canoe and Hiking Club at Tennessee about 1970 and met Bill Krueger, the club faculty advisor. Bill and I were around the same age and we became good friends while sharing adventures together. My first whitewater trip was on the Class II Hiwassee River and I rented a canoe so that I could take a friend along. We turned over three times and got cold and wet. All the way down the river I noticed the students in kayaks were far more maneuverable than we were in the canoe. I mentioned that to Bill and he invited me to his place to see the stash of UT club kayaks. It was then that I learned that Bill had built all the kayaks

out of fiberglass and that some boats were more "complete" than others. They all had a complete shell (i.e., hull and deck seamed together). Beyond that, it was a crapshoot (i.e., maybe a seat, footbrace, kneebraces, etc.). The common thread was the Tennessee colors, orange for the deck and white for the hull. Every time we got to a river put-in there was competition to get the most complete kayak.

The student club paddled many of the easier rivers (i.e., tributaries of the Emory/Obed, Nantahala, French Broad, Chattooga, etc.). Certain paddlers became "usual suspects" on these club whitewater trips. That was how I met Monte Meals. Monte and I became good friends and he talked me into entering a flatwater race on the Holston River. I bought a cheap boat for

\$50 and finished the race in hands covered with busted blisters.

Sometime in the spring, Bill and I decided to paddle the Class III/IV section of Daddy's Creek, TN. It was a warm day and the river was low, really low. These days no one would paddle it with the little water we had. That's probably why I didn't drown that day. Getting down the creek was more like sliding over wet rocks than paddling. We passed the mouth of Yellow Creek coming in from the right and knew that Daddy's was about to get steeper. Looking ahead, I saw a horizon line next to the right wall and paddled straight over it. My boat stopped dead and I was vertically pinned with a rooster tail of water coming over my head. I pulled the skirt but couldn't exit the boat and was afraid it would shift so that I would be pinned upside down. My \$50



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boat had a very flexible layup and as the boat started to fold the seams split. I used my thighs to push outward and the deck opened up, delivering me into the river. Bill and I drug the useless boat up on the bank and I started walking downstream as Bill continued down river to the take-out at Devil's Breakfast Table.

I called Monte shortly after getting off Daddy's Creek and he said we should hike down Yellow Creek and retrieve my broken boat. About two weeks later I met Monte and a friend of his at the Yellow Creek bridge. As we walked down Yellow Creek, the friend in very animated dialogue described what running Yellow Creek was like. When we got down to Daddy's Creek, my broken boat was gone. As it turned out, the young friend of Monte's was an accomplished C-1 paddler from ETWWC named Alan Singley. Although he didn't know it at the time, he would make history with the first runs of Overflow Creek, GA.

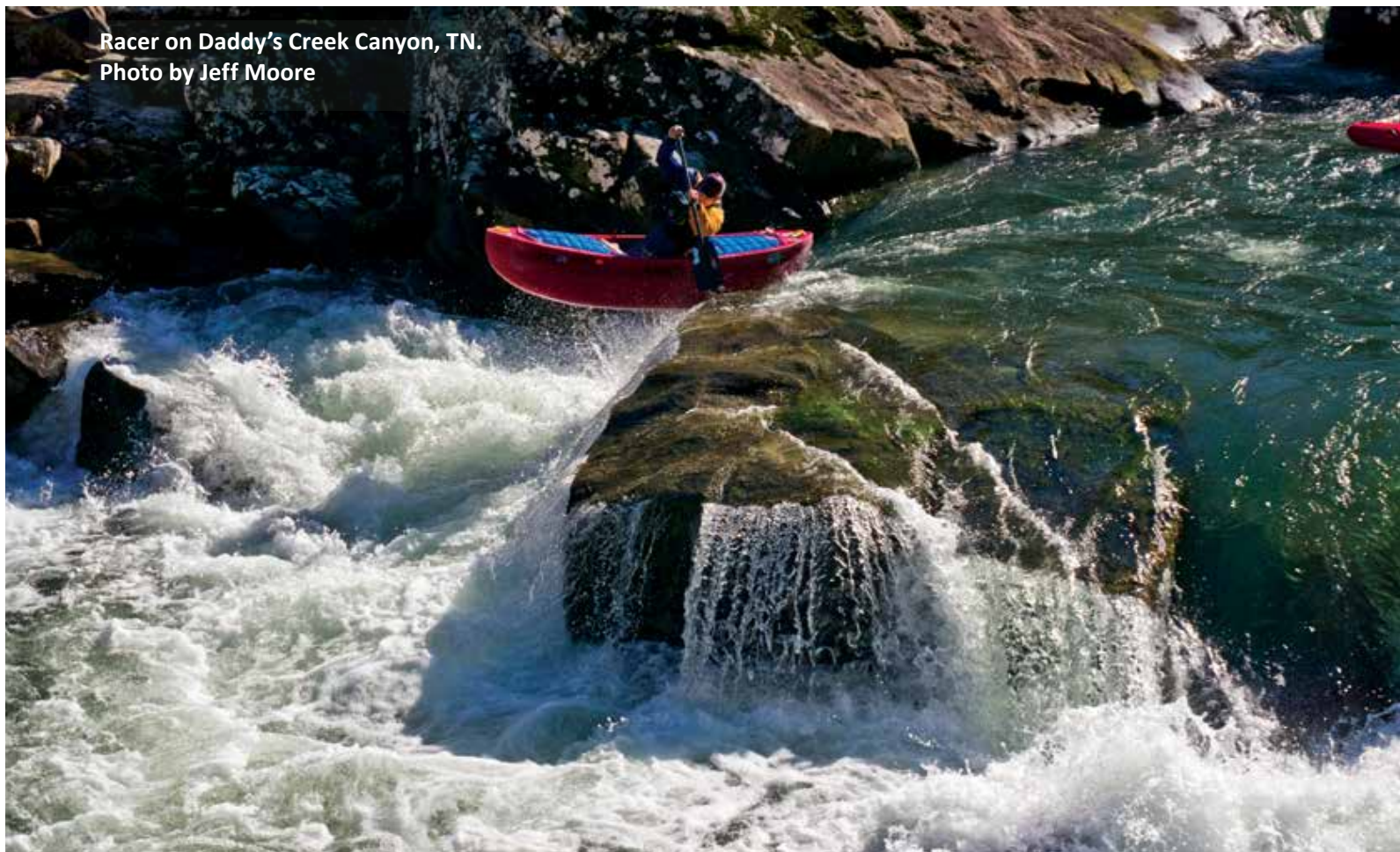
## "CANEY FORK!"

"CANEY FORK!" .... Those two words in large capital letters are burned into my brain forever. They were written by Fred Young, C-1 paddler from upstate Illinois, at the top of a letter he wrote to the ETWWC after the first descent of the Caney Fork River, TN. The letter was being shared with club members and Monte Meals gave it to me to read in summer, 1972, when he was helping me build my Lettmann Mark IV kayak from the club mold. The vivid description of whitewater mayhem, combined with a successful run, made such an impression on me that whitewater sport has been a part of my life ever since.

Late 1971/early 1972 ETWWC hosted north woods paddlers Fred Young and the Wisconsin Hoofers, who had come south to paddle some whitewater. They chose to paddle the Caney Fork since no one had done it before. Fred related the following to me in an email:

"John, your letter brought back fond memories of many Tennessee expeditions that have melded together. I first got into whitewater boating as many of us did paddling a 15-foot open Grumman canoe fitted with plastic sheeting to keep the boat from filling and sinking. Our first expeditions down modest Wisconsin whitewater ended with our canoes wrapped around Wisconsin granite, caused by the inevitable upstream leans. Somehow, we managed to pry them off the midstream rocks. With great effort we pounded out the dents. After a number of those trials we kept seeing whitewater canoes (C-1s) and kayaks on our rivers, which led to the acquisition of molds in Madison, Wisconsin and a nascent boat-building industry led by Jim Fahey. From 1966 through most of 1968, I was on active duty in the navy but commissioned an order for a maneuverable C-2 to be ready for me when released from active duty. Let me preface that with citing a number of expeditions down spring-melt Wisconsin rivers in full runoff mode. Somehow, we

Racer on Daddy's Creek Canyon, TN.  
Photo by Jeff Moore





managed to escape with our lives and boats still useable. Participating in slalom competitions improved our skills. I had some great mentors, among them Russ Nichols, Al Button, and Walter Brummond, to mention but a few. At some point we received an invitation to go test our skills on Tennessee whitewater in late winter/early spring, which we (Madison Hoofers outing club members) gladly accepted. Since I had a big Mercury Marquis station wagon that would hold up to eight boats, I hosted Madisonians to join me for the overnight expeditions to Oak Ridge with layers of boats on the roof and layers of people in the car taking turns driving. After a quick morning breakfast we headed to the myriad rivers plunging off the Cumberland Plateau escarpment. Of course Daddy's Creek and the Obed were early ventures. Reid Gryder, Martin Begun, and Mark Hall guided us to some of their favorite waters and together we craved higher and steeper creeks branching out East and South. Wednesdays and Thursdays we developed a plan for the following weekend; depending on rainfall predictions, groups of midwest boaters would meet ETWWC members at various put-in launch points.

Hungering for more dangerous, challenging waters, we were introduced to Caney Fork and Bee Creek. On one of those expeditions, after a fun and challenging run, we encountered the local sheriff, who announced we were trespassing. We talked our way out, but it made quite a greeting. Caney Fork introduced us to holes in the riverbed which sucked up much of the river's flow, which was a new experience for many of us. I particularly remember receiving a post card from Martin Begun



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**Top:** *Mary Ann Grell on Caney Fork, TN.*

**Photo by Jeff Moore**

**Middle:** *Paddler at State Line Falls, Watauga River, TN/NC.*

**Photo by Jeff Moore**

**Bottom:** *Brandon Stephens at Upper Potter's Falls on Crooked Fork Creek, TN.*

**Photo by Jeff Moore**



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featuring the words, “Fred Young got stung on Bee Creek!”

In their four-meter-long, composite Hahn C-1s, Fred and Mark Hall would run the most challenging rivers of the time. Together they had early descents of the Green Narrows, Linville Gorge, and upper sections of the Chattooga. (For more information, see <https://www.canoekayak.com/whitewater-kayak/the-secret-history-of-the-green/>)

## “Piney! Piney! Piney! ...”

I witnessed a strange phenomenon at the boater meeting place in Oak Ridge after joining ETWWC in summer 1972. Assuming there had been a lot of recent rain on the Plateau, paddlers who pulled into the parking lot of Hilltop Market would be welcomed with the chant “Piney!..Piney!.. Piney!..” as if to announce the trip of the day to newcomers.

The Piney River, TN was first paddled in 1971-72 by Martin Begun, other members of ETWWC, and guest boaters from the upper Midwest and Maryland/West Virginia. Begun had scouted the whole run on foot before paddling it. There were three runs of the Piney in 1972, all high water, and each with carnage. Don Jared painted the first gauge on the bridge at the take-out and the Piney quickly became a favorite run.

The “Piney chant” was played out to me one weekend in early 1973 and that became our destination for the day. We dropped a car off at the riverside picnic area close to Spring City and headed for the put-in up on the Walden Ridge escarpment. As we drove up the steep winding road with majestic views of the valley below, it occurred to me that we were going to lose that 1,000 feet of elevation by paddling down a whitewater river.

There were no other cars at the put-in so it was just Monte Meals, Ken Cooper, Mark Hall, and me on the river. Kenny said, “John, this isn’t the second run, or the third; maybe it’s the fourth run,” but it didn’t deflate my ego. I was just happy to finally be paddling the river that I had heard so much about.

I don’t remember a whole lot about the run except that the gorge was incredibly beautiful and intimate. We ran “Sentinel Falls” and a long slide that got my attention with a swim on the far right. We scouted “Hungry Jack” and the drop with dogleg left/dogleg right to avoid a pin/undercut. By the time we got to the take-out we were basking in the glory of paddling a river that few others had experienced.

For several years after, the only groups on the Piney were people from the first runs and a few others. When I paddled it a second time in spring 1975, we were again

Kemper Begley on Piney River, TN.  
Photo by Jeff Moore







Unknown paddler from UT, Knoxville student club on the Nantahala, NC in 1971. The fiberglass boats had orange decks, white hulls, and black seam tape.

Photo by John Tansil

the only group on the river even though none of the other creeks farther south on Walden Ridge had been discovered. The Piney was discovered at about the same time as the Caney Fork/Bee Creek combo and these three were the first Plateau creek runs other than Obed tributaries. Both the Piney and Caney Fork are true classics that should be enjoyed by everyone with the skill to paddle them.

Ken Cooper was correct about the number of runs on the Piney. According to Dan Demaree who paddled the flooded Piney in December 1972:

“My trip was the 3rd trip ever down Piney River. Martin Begun, the Singley brothers, others from ETWWC had paddled it twice earlier in 1972. But they said our trip was the highest it had been run by far. It was a very scary run!!!”

**Charlie Walbridge also shared his memory of this high water Piney run:**

“That was our trip. High water. About 15 people started; six or eight finished. Donna Berglund and Jack Wright walked

out at the first ledge after she banged herself up. Kenny Cooper broke his boat at Hungry Jack. He walked out, hot wired a logging skidder, and met us at the put-in. I remember there was a ledge towards the end that Martin Begun ran, and I portaged. As I carried around I met Alan Singley coming the other way. He got to the top of the ledge, and before launching he stood there and shouted, ‘You ain’t out-guttsin’ me, Begun!’”

*To be continued...*

**About the author**

*In 1972 the author joined American Whitewater (AW) and the affiliate East Tennessee Whitewater Club. He also became a life member of both Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association (TSRA) and Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness Planning (TCWP). After moving to Missouri, the author and his wife Linda became active in Missouri Whitewater Association (MWA) and were later elected to life membership in MWA. Although age has taken its toll, the author continues to paddle whitewater, mostly in Missouri but also along the Appalachians and Rockies.*

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Tallulah Race 2016. | Photo: Emrie Canen