

Karthaus To Keeting

My brother Paul had promised a canoe trip to his two sons, PJ and Tae. A weekend trip through a wilderness area had captured their imaginations. I had been canoeing for several years and offered to organize the trip. May seemed the perfect time - the streams in Central Pennsylvania still ran high with the spring rains and the weather was warm enough to enjoy being outdoors. Plans, for better or worse, often go astray and this trip was no exception.

Art Davis was the Secretary of Environmental Resources and an avid canoeist. As Secretary, he was always being sued by one of the hundreds of entities that our agency regulated. Being the Litigation Coordinator, I frequently worked with Art, so he was the first person I thought to ask about a good trip. "The West Branch of the Susquehanna from Karthaus to Keeting," he said without hesitation. "Talk to Jim Nelson - he'll know where you can put in."

Jim headed the Bureau of Forestry and that section of the river ran through state forest land. He knew the outfitters in the area and the best routes to get there. I called an outfitter in Karthaus and arranged a canoe for Paul and a shuttle from Keeting.

On a partly cloudy Saturday, Paul and the two boys arrived from Clarksville, Maryland, and loaded their gear into my minivan. We drove north from Harrisburg, following Jim's directions to Karthaus. Late in the afternoon we arrived at the outfitter's small shop abutting the river. With map in hand, we loaded our gear into the canoes and tried to ignore the rain drops that greeted us on the water. The plan was to paddle for two hours and find a place to camp.

Paul and PJ paddled the rented canoe, a Coleman with soft vinyl sides. Tae and I paddled my Malecite, a light canoe made of kevlar. We all enjoyed being on the water, scanning the steep sided hills that bordered the river, and hoping that the rain gods would be merciful. Before the rain fell, we found a level campsite high above the stream bed, pitched our tents, and ate most of our dinner. A downpour drove us into the tents and kept us there until morning.

Dawn brought the challenge of finding rain gear for everyone. Paul and I had rain parkas and I had brought rain ponchos for the boys. That protection made breakfast bearable but we wasted no time getting back on the water. The rain stopped in a few hours and the sun made its appearance when we pulled over to shore for lunch.

A field with high grass provided our rest stop. The high grass made it easy to find bathroom facilities. It also hid a snake that I almost stepped

on. The snake coiled as I backed away and called for the others. It rattled when they arrived, to the delight of Tae and PJ. Delight was not my reaction. I decided that it was time to get back on the water.

Energized by the now bright sun, we had a race. Although Paul and PJ out powered us, my canoe was faster than the Coleman. Much to Tae's delight, he and I won the race.

The nicer weather made it practical to examine the map and see where we were on the river. Several bends in the river gave us clear landmarks and we found the takeout place without difficulty - a tributary crossed by a railroad bridge. Negotiating the tributary did prove difficult - we needed to paddle 100 feet upstream and the water quickened as it approached the river. With effort we landed at Keeting, bringing a challenging trip to a happy end.