

Angels with Cars, Maps and Binoculars

By Anna Segner

After spending weeks paddling and camping along the Mississippi River, paddlers usually welcome a nice place to camp and a home-cooked meal. The opportunity to shower and do laundry is a special treat. As ambitious paddlers set out to travel the Mississippi River, from Lake Itasca to the Gulf of Mexico, there are people along the way ready to provide help in many forms. Paddling pilgrims have coined the term “river angels” for these altruistic folks.

Wayne and Donna have a beautiful view of Lake Pepin through the kitchen window of their home in Lake City, Minn. (They wish to remain anonymous.) They keep a pair of binoculars at the ready to watch for river paddlers. A boat piled high with supplies usually identifies a traveler headed for

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the Gulf. Often times, if they are able, Donna and Wayne flag the paddler over to chat or provide them with some local advice. In some cases, they have been in contact with paddlers prior to their arrival, and they greet them at the shore. This year, they hosted five pilgrims, including Yvonne and Johnny (the Crazy Critters) with their purple canoe, spray-painted with black skulls and yellow flowers. Wayne and Donna fixed dinner and built a fire for the two worn-out paddlers after they set up camp.

“It wasn’t until the next day that I saw the hula hoops,” said Donna.

“We should have had them perform,” laughed Wayne.

They found out later that Yvonne and Johnny are performing artists who dance through hoops and breathe fire.

More often than not, a paddler — looking for a place to stay — will present themselves on Wayne and Donna’s property.

“I explain to them that this is private property, but then I ask them what they are doing and where they are going,” said Donna.

Wayne and Donna have been river angels for a long time. Their property on Lake Pepin has been in Wayne’s family for many years.



Right: Donna and Wayne with their dog, Barney. (Anna Segner)

Below: Yvonne Wrobell and Johnny Rebel, aka the Crazy Critters, on the Upper Mississippi. (Ryan Johnson)



“I grew up in boats, so if I can help them and their experience, it will make their trip that much easier,” said Wayne.

His boat expertise has saved many paddlers from uncomfortably paddling down the Mississippi with the wrong length paddles or inappropriate equipment.

Donna, on the other hand, is a traveler, and she remembers acts of kindness shown to her when she was traveling and in need. She thinks of her help as paying it forward.

“I am just returning the kindness that was extended to me.”

Their experiences have been very rewarding, and they look fondly on old friendships formed this way.



John Sullivan (Dale Sanders)

Facebook Angels

In the past few years, the widespread use of social media by the paddling community has developed into a network connecting river angels and paddlers. John Sullivan is one of the founders of the Mississippi River Paddlers Facebook Page. He founded it with two others, Jeff Pearson and Anthony Grant, but Sullivan is the primary contributor to the page. As a lifelong paddler, Sullivan created the page to connect individuals who are passionate about the Mississippi River. The page remains true to its two goals: to share information about the river and to offer a place for paddlers to share their experiences. With over 500 active members, the page also connects paddlers with river angels, Sullivan explained.

Sullivan, an active river angel, lives with his wife, Beth, in La Crosse, Wis. He goes to the river to meet paddlers and drive them to get food or supplies they might need. He often welcomes paddlers into his home, so that the travelers can enjoy a home-cooked meal, shower, do laundry and sleep under a roof.

"I have done a lot of paddling, so I know what the paddlers are going through and what they probably need," said Sullivan. "Most paddlers don't stay very long, maybe a night, but once we had someone stay two and a half days. They had a bad sunburn that needed to heal."

This year, Sullivan and his wife have hosted seven paddlers, including the duo Ken Robertshaw and Grace Alsanca; the group Two and a Half Beards, Kevin Berrigan, Scott Lehmann and Gabriel Paulone; and Nic Doucette and Gabe Vasquez.

Sullivan is also very knowledgeable about the river, so he can sometimes offer advice and warn against potential risks that paddlers might face on their journey.

Memories of others' kindness towards him during past paddling trips motivates Sullivan to return the favor to other paddlers.

"I do it for their enjoyment of the river and the smile on their face when they recognize that they are going to make it," he said. "When they send emails thanking us and telling us that they made it ... that is very rewarding."

Through the Facebook group, Sullivan is able to keep in touch with many of the paddlers that he assists.

Delta Angel

Anyone who has scrolled through the Mississippi River Paddlers site will recognize the name Dale Sanders. He is one of the most active river angels on the Mississippi River. Located in Bartlett, Tenn., (near Memphis), Sanders hosts paddlers as they near the end of their journey. This year, he and his wife, Meriam, hosted more than 50 paddlers by late October.

His home is at a great river angel

location: "Once paddlers reach us, they are coming from a seven-day paddle from Cairo, Ill., so they really need a river angel."

Sanders keeps busy accommodating and getting to know paddlers, though, he admits that without Facebook, he would not be able to host so many people.

"In the past 14 to 15 days, I have hosted 12 paddlers in ten different groups," said Sanders as if this was completely normal.

This year, Sanders saw a big increase in the number of adventurers paddling the entire Mississippi. Social media, Sanders believes, has made the Mississippi River more available to more people.

"It used to be more middle-aged, retired people paddling the river, or young people just out of college. They wanted to do something big, but now I have seen a lot more people quitting their jobs to do this."

When a paddler arrives at the designated location on the Mississippi, Sanders takes it from there.

"I have a network of people, and either they or I meet them when they come in," he said. "They can leave

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their boats securely fastened. The yacht club marina has a two-gate system, so the paddlers get a temporary membership card and peace of mind."

From there, Sanders said that he can provide paddlers transportation to shop and resupply. He also gives them a place to stay and the means to wash clothes, shower and recharge.

"So far, we have had very quality people. We basically give them the basement," said Sanders. "Never have I ever had anything stolen. It seems the people traveling the river are characters that you want to meet or be friends with."

Sanders and his wife are so fond of



In early 2014, Dale Sanders hosted a reunion of Mississippi River thru-paddlers. (Dale Sanders)



Dale Sanders (Anna Segner)

their adventuring guests that they have a signature wall spanning the stairway.

“My wife wanted to have the signatures and messages somewhere that everyone could see,” said Sanders. “Now we call it the Wall of Fame.”

Paddlers often write the start date of their journey, and they often call or stop back to fill in the end date. The Wall of Fame is well known in the paddling community. Due to Sanders’ charisma and fun-loving personality, he is able to call most of the paddlers his friends by the end of their stay. To Sanders, being a river angel is about the friendships and community.

“It is just such a good feeling to help someone that really needs help. It is self-gratifying, and that is truly all I need.” Sanders stays in touch with almost all of the paddlers who were guests in his home. Last February, Sanders hosted a paddler reunion.

In June 2015, Sanders, at the age of 80, will set out on his own quest to paddle the entire Mississippi. He claims that he will be the oldest person to solo paddle the entire Mississippi.

Tow Guide

When Sanders is near the start of his journey in St. Paul, he might be spotted by river angel Capt. Bob Deck, who works for Padelford Riverboats. While

Deck is not a paddler, he is an experienced tow and excursion boat pilot.

Most of his interactions with paddlers are short exchange of words as the boats pass, Deck said. If he sees a long-haul paddler, he will often wish them good luck. He enjoys having longer conversations with paddlers when opportunities arise and learning about their plans for the trip. Over the past few years, Deck has seen an increase in the number of kayaks, canoes, row boats, paddleboards and even rafts on the river.

“As a commercial pilot, I love seeing people out and enjoying the river,” said Deck.

Because Deck has been down the entire Mississippi River in large boats, he can share a lot of geographical information. Though, he also has advice regarding rules of the river road.

“I think it is really important that paddlers stay off the river at night. It is really easy to get lost, so bring a communication device, hand held radio with an AIS (Automatic Identification System), and bring a GPS device,” Deck advised.

Most importantly, Deck wants paddlers to remain safe and aware of other river traffic, especially large boats.

“Paddlers should always know where they are. Look around for tows and



Capt. Bob Deck pilots the Hannah in the Gulf of Mexico. (Bob Deck)

keep a safe distance.”

Both the organized and unorganized paddler support system has touched many lives. As paddlers gear up, it may be comforting to know that river angels will be watching, ready to be a part of the journey. 🚣

Anna Segner lives in Winona, Minn. She had two articles, “Fast Forwarding River History” and “River Pilgrims,” in the November-December issue of Big River.