Paddle Florida and Me: A Personal Reflection

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In March 2021 I completed the first ‘Springtime on the Chipola’ week-long paddling adventure with Paddle Florida. It was a grand introduction to the Chipola! Bill and Janice, along with the on-the-water volunteers, Brack, Paul and Deb, made the week a most enjoyable introduction to a Florida river I knew nothing about until it became a Paddle Florida 2021 adventure. In short, it was a wonderful trip both on and off the water. I hope it returns to Paddle Florida’s itinerary soon!

This personal reflection on my paddling experience with Paddle Florida was triggered by a comment Bill Richards made on the last camping night of this seven-day trip. He indicated to the assembled paddlers that he was considering stepping back from day-to-day responsibilities for Paddle Florida; his competent, enthusiastic, seasoned co-leader, Janice Hindson, was suggested as hopefully taking over the helm. I knew Bill had been considering reducing his leadership role, but this was the first time when I was present that he made a very clear statement to that effect to an evening gathering of Paddle Florida participants. I was moved to stand and make a brief statement about my feelings about Bill’s importance to the ‘Paddle Florida Experience’ and the enjoyment that I received from his leadership and personality! Later, after a conversation with Bill about a week after the last Paddle Florida event of the 2021 season, I decided to put in writing my reflections on my Paddle Florida experience.

This is my personal reflection, it starts by way of a somewhat lengthy introduction to me and my paddling background, to give context and a sense of substance to my comments. Then follows some personal experiences and highlights of selected past trips and PF personalities. And finally, some statements that sum up my thoughts about the Paddle Florida experience.

In prep for this reflection on my experience with Paddle Florida, I attempted to compile a list of all my previous trips. Since I do not keep a diary or specific notes on my many outdoor life adventures, I am unable to state precisely how many Paddle Florida trips I’ve been on. I suppose I could round-up and count all my PF t-shirts, but that would require some serious effort as they are scattered about at several locations. The number certainly approaches or exceeds 2 dozen or so. I am a charter Paddle Florida paddler, who joined the multitude (the largest and longest PF trip to date, I believe) in spring 2008. On that trip I was hooked! I have been on rivers and lakes in rowboats, canoes and eventually kayaks (and power boating for skiing, fishing, and other mischief!) by myself or with buddies and eventually with family and friends since my Boy Scout days (quite some time ago!). My first overnight river trip was self-organized with 3 high school buddies in the late 1950s on Conewango Creek into the Allegany/Allegheny (English versus French) River in western New York and on into northwestern
Pennsylvania. We considered ourselves of age and experience to set off on an unknown (to us) big creek and river in a home-made plywood boat with a downward sloping flat prow and another somewhat leaky metal rowboat we had acquired (abandoned, we decided!) and repaired from our local lake. We were village boys out in dairy, farm, and logging country in the foothills of the Alleghany Mountains of WNY. We had had canoe training as Scouts and Explorers at summer camps on Chautauqua Lake; an 8-day canoe trip in lakes and small streams in Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario, Canada; and numerous day adventures on our local 3 interconnected lakes (Cassadaga Lakes) and associated swamps.

Clearly I survived, as did my buddies, this unsupervised several night trip on water that became increasingly fast and a bit demanding as we chose which side of the Allegheny to take when islands and associated sweepers appeared more and more along our way. We even ran on after dinner the second night under a moonlit sky in order, hopefully, get to a better camping spot and also enjoy some real adventure! PFDs were unknown to us, although we had seen ‘lifejackets’. We carried small pocket-sized emergency packets clipped to our shirts or shorts that when squeezed hard were supposed to inflate into a small float. These were leftovers from our Algonquin canoe trip of the summer before. As I stated previously, some years ago, in a PF paddler profile, ‘Our parents must have assumed we were indestructible or expendable as they were willing to drop us off and pick us up ….’ We had always returned from previous unsupervised summer and winter outdoor overnight adventures!

After high school, as I went to college, moved to Florida, matured some, married, and entered grad school I had basically become a flatland landlubber. Moving from southeast Florida to Seattle changed all that! Mountains, lakes, rivers, and saltwater were everywhere. Canoes and then inflatable rafts and kayaks entered my life. A geography grad student was now surrounded by outdoor enthusiasts! Real white water became a new challenge as did backpacking and skiing of both types. I went for it all! After 5 years of grad school I graduated, took a faculty job back in southeast Florida, but spent a good part of my unpaid summers for decades in the PNW backpacking, paddling, and power boating, and eventually my family and I signed up for extended guided whitewater trips on northwest rivers. I quickly got out of paddle rafts into double and then single inflatable kayaks. In these fun river boats, I mastered Class III rapids and an occasional lower end Class IV! My first longboating (sea kayaking) began on PNW estuaries and the lower sections of Oregon rivers, including the Columbia. My exposure to Florida waters was entirely in coastal southeast Florida until I retired and discovered a new paddling organization, Paddle Florida. If you are still reading this indulgence on my part, my observations and comments on Paddle Florida are ahead!

I knew I wanted to explore central and northern Florida, on foot and on water. I moved two hundred miles north to the Daytona area. I joined a regional day hiking and paddling organization and visited local kayaking shops for information on and equipment for paddling. I probed the web for interesting sites and organizations. And presto!, there was this newly
formed organization, Paddle Florida! Their advertised first trip was for spring 2008 on the fabled Suwannee River! How could I resist! I knew bits and pieces of the famous song that I soon learned had a strange original name and spelling for the river. But that is history and I’m a geographer! So I signed up to see and experience some north Florida geography, grabbed a nephew’s 14 foot sit on kayak and prepared for my adventure. This first Paddle Florida trip is still a source of enjoyable conversation among the many paddlers who joined that multitude for Bill and Jan’s first ‘go with the flow’ event. Details have become somewhat fuzzy, but a baby beaver, Florida springs to paddle or swim in, a 25-mile day or two, cold weather shopping at Branford, interviews by a paddling journalist, a poem about the journey composed as we paddled and read the last night by its chief author, and of course Bill’s excellent advice which continues to this day: ‘7:30 am for breakfast and 6:00 pm for dinner’, be there or miss out implied!

And so began my association with Paddle Florida. Over my two dozen or so trips I have experienced many momentous events: paddling with manatees, noisy limpkin, close-up tall and short herons and egrets, freezing nights, rain day and/or night, sun, river swims (intentional and otherwise), the insides of a functioning river lock, spring runs and swims galore, shoreline alligators, knowledgeable speakers, entertaining talented musicians, friendly cooks and servers, diving fish hawks (successful and not), underwater fishing anhingas and cormorants, windy, choppy lakes and bays, power boats that try to be friendly and those that do not, and many, many fine evening campfires, and so on... Each river trip has its unique imprint forged from its particular setting and condition and the mix of enthusiasts who launch each morning for the day’s adventure.

We enthusiasts come in all sizes, flavors, and experience. Some are very outgoing, others more restrained. Like many, I enjoy quiet time separated to some degree from other paddlers; a chance to reflect on the river’s character, the vegetation and wildlife that are all about, and my own feelings and aspirations. I also enjoy conversations along the river with new to me paddlers and the PF regulars that I have come to know and enjoy for years. And then there is Eric! A seasoned paddler of high skill and esteem! Eric adopted me some time ago. I believe he was looking for someone who might try to keep up with him and who would accompany him into the bordering swamps on central and north Florida rivers that PF enjoyed. My earliest remembrances of paddling with Eric go back to early Ochlockonee paddles (PF has done a half dozen or thereabouts). I had that 14-foot sit on mentioned above. It (I) was slower than Eric’s natural gait! But I was willing to go off the main channel into the cypress and tupelo trees following his lead. The upshot was that Eric and I bonded! I now carry a hand saw, a kayak compass (Eric has the GPS), and lunch snacks, as sometimes we miss scheduled lunch stops. I have moved into a fine 17-footer, having been so encouraged by Eric and other Paddle Florida enthusiasts. My keeping up is a lot easier in this longer, lighter sit in!
On one later Ochlockonee trip morning Eric had left earlier than I was ready. Leaving me to catch up or paddle with the main group. This was fine until I decided that Eric must be up this rather large west side lake like arm of the river and into the associated swamp. Looking for him I went.... As I neared the head of this long lake, I noticed that two boats were continuing to follow at some distance. Two female paddlers who Eric and I had been chatting with on previous days had followed me when I turned off into this arm. I stopped and waited for them at a campsite at the head of the lake. I explained that I had thought of going a-ways into the swamp where I might find Eric, but that perhaps we should now stay together and head back to the main river. However, they wanted to try negotiating between the cypress and tupelo trees, so we did some exploring and finally headed back to the long arm and down it to the main channel. We were too late at the lunch stop, no one was there, and so we shared our snacks and continued on, finally arriving at the campsite around 5 pm. Eric was there, wondering where I had been. We had missed each other in the swamp as he came out along a different track and somewhat earlier than us. And, I was in a bit of trouble for leading (?) a small party of less experienced PF paddlers on an unscheduled side trip, especially having missed the lunch stop and check-in and then coming in late after the sweep was already in! After this, I coordinate with Bill and at least one of the on-water guides about my intentions. Eric had been doing that all along! My campfire and occasional ‘warm-up/fill in’ jokes while musicians assemble their gear and tune their instruments go a long way keeping me in leaderships good graces given my occasional missteps!

My reputation with Bill received some additional enhancement on another Ochlockonee trip. This time I was paddling with an experienced paddler who had a GPS. We had taken an east side river channel that should have been a short-cut eventually going through the swamp more directly to the campsite than the main river. However, it began to seriously narrow, and the way was not clear. We saw branches and trees blocking the various possible avenues ahead. We conferred and then turned around. Almost back to the main channel along came Jerry and another paddler intent on pushing through the perceived shortcut (it showed on the GPS) to the campsite for that night. Brushing off our advice, following their GPS, onward they went! Late that afternoon they still had not arrived. Bill’s checkoff system alerted him, and he asked if anyone had paddled with or seen Jerry and his companion. I was helping paddlers with landing and positioning their boats for the night and I relayed the above. Time marched on, finally Bill called for professional help and he asked me to join the campground host in his small power boat to return upriver to where I had last seen the missing paddlers. We pushed off and made maybe 30 yards and the engine quit, unwilling to restart! Paddling back to the landing, I then explained to the Fish and Wildlife rescue personnel, now launching a much larger power boat, where my last contact with the missing paddlers had been and their intended route. Off they went, sending out a nice wake! Darkness was approaching, the searchers were just off, when Bill’s phone rang! The missing paddlers, having had a difficult time in the swamp ‘shortcut’, had given up and returned to the lunch stop as night was falling and they were tired and unsure how
far and difficult it might be to our campsite. They had walked out to the road and flagged down a passing pickup truck, had loaded their kayaks in the truck bed, borrowed his phone for this call, and were being transported to our campsite by a true Samaritan! The FWS rescue boat was contacted and all ended reasonably well. At the campfire that night, after I told my PF standard Brian O’Mally joke, Jerry commented, after having told and retold his tale, that ‘if Ron says not to go, don’t go!’ My PF status shot up! On another Ochlockonee trip, Eric and I conquered that shortcut… Hand saws are very useful!

There are many latent stories about PF trips. Everyone who paddles can offer interesting insights and experiences on their adventure! As you, the reader, have likely concluded, I could go on, almost endlessly, with personal tales and memories of PF paddles and enthusiasts: Eric’s life-saving rescue, Paul’s playing of the hammered dulcimer, assisted re-entries, Doug’s ghost stories and hikes, overly windy intense lake and bay crossings, beautiful days on wonderful waters, and much more, but this essay is already overly long. I sat down to write a brief review of my Paddle Florida experience. I wanted to let Bill, Jan, Jill, Janice, all the many dedicated volunteers and enthusiastic participants, past, present, and potential, know that Paddle Florida experiences truly are ‘Inspiring. Meaningful. Adventure.’ I look forward to many, many more.