

SO YOU WANT TO DO THE GREAT LOOP?



***JOY @ SEA* READY TO BEGIN HER ADVENTURE**

By Madison and Marlene Groves

A Primer on a Couple's 2008 Great Loop Adventure

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Introduction

This is a fresh account (as of 2009) and primer on the Great Loop adventure which involves circumnavigating the Eastern U. S. and parts of Canada in your own boat. My wife Marlene and I made this cruise in 2008. We started from Ft. Myers, Florida on April 1, 2008 and finished the 6,000 mile Loop on December 12, 2009. This little booklet (or electronic version, if selected) is designed to orient you to what's involved in making a trip of this magnitude by briefly covering the basics.

We love boats and the water but do not consider ourselves particularly expert at boating. On several occasions we met fellow Loopers who made us feel a little inferior about our skills when we discovered he was also a pilot or they both had been in boating for many years with lots of experience. When it comes to mechanical expertise, I can get by but by

no means consider myself a gearhead. When confronted with a daunting problem onboard, I tend to go to the professionals to get help instead of trying to fix it myself. It may cost more but that usually permanently fixes the problem.

We spent at least five years thinking about and planning for this trip. It is a review of what we believe you may want to know, including our personal accounts of experiences along the way. You will have your own experiences to talk about for sure. But our reason for putting this together is to cover many of the things we wished that someone had told us before we had to learn it on our own.

Every year it seems to become easier and more enjoyable for people to take this adventure. Because of Americas Great Loop Cruisers Association and others who devote their attention to segments of the Loop, there is little reason to be concerned about the fundamentals of the trip. Also, electronic and internet aids have become so much more proficient in the navigational and piloting aspects of the Loop adventure.

DISCLAIMER

The information provided herein is intended to be an account of our personal experience and in no way should be construed as giving professional advice on navigation and techniques applicable to aspects of piloting a boat.

- **The Commitment Question**

- So what's involved in doing the Great Loop? I think the first question that needs to be answered is the commitment one. If you are the primary person (usually the husband/captain but certainly not always), then what is the level of commitment by the first mate? Are you thinking of her as the person who will merely help you get around the Loop because you need two people to handle the lines and help you anchor? Or do you have a genuine plan to integrate her into the enjoyment and excitement of the trip? This is very important. There are many things that can ruin the experience for a couple where one of them isn't "on board" in the literal and figurative sense, especially when you are talking about the better part of a year in a confined space.

In our case, my wife really enjoyed the five years we owned a boat back in the early 90's on the Mississippi. It became a great get-away for her where she could read books and get out in the sun for an afternoon or weekend – sort of like a cabin on the lake but with the scenery changing all the time. But there were times my passion for boating got in the way of our relationship – especially considering the financial commitment. If she just saw the boat as a source of financial drain on the family where she

got little enjoyment or benefit, there would have been problems. So the point here is to make the experience as enjoyable as possible for both. That is included in the Captain's responsibility as far as I'm concerned. Typically the first mate's specific responsibilities will be line handling, anchoring, piloting (when you need to be relieved for some reason), meal preparation, cabin interior maintenance and the like. Provision should also be made for communicating with home as needed, whether that be cell phone or internet. On each day's trip to your destination, the first mate may be helping to pilot the boat or being the navigator. Both of those responsibilities are critical to a successful and enjoyable journey. I took it as my responsibility to get a fix on where we were to go tomorrow before the end of each day's travel. There were times I was so involved piloting the boat that I really needed Marlene's navigational assistance by reading the charts to keep us on track.

- **Emergency Agreement**

- By all means you should have a plan to follow if either of you should become disabled for some reason. In my case, we agreed that if I became disabled from something like a heart attack or injury, the first mate would know how to stop the boat without attempting to go anywhere and contact the Coast Guard on the Channel 16. I have read that one of the most difficult aspects in these emergency situations is communicating your location to someone who can come to your aid. So we both know how to communicate our location through the coordinates shown on the GPS monitor at all times. (There is also an EPIRB monitor you can buy which does this automatically when activated)

- **Leaving home for an extended period**

- Things got really hectic for us as we neared our cast-off date. Not only do you have to get things ready for the cruise and all that entails, but you also need to figure out what to do about your "land" home while away. There is no one-size-fits-all here. Some will seek to find responsible tenants to lease or rent the house during your absence. This is to help cover the cost of the mortgage and perhaps some of the utilities and maintenance expense. We found a surprising number of fellow boaters who sold their home entirely and pocketed the gain to later purchase a home when boating is no longer desirable. That probably would not be a good idea for awhile with the market on homes down so much.
- In our case, we elected to keep the home vacant with the exception of occasional visits from relatives and trusted friends who would occupy the home for a short period. We really enjoy our home on the lake and feel it is where we will be from here forward on Planet Earth. Looking back now, I'm glad we followed that plan. If you decide to go that way, I have

prepared a suggested debrief memo for incoming guests while away.
(Appendix A)

- We also had my wife's father (age 90) to be cared for while we were away. In this instance, his condition is such that a group home was the only viable solution for day-to-day care. The next step would have been a nursing home. But there is also the social contact with family that is important. We wanted to know he had frequent contact with family along with their children and not feel abandoned. So our three sons and their wives came through big time by making weekly visits (and sometimes more) to keep dad encouraged and connected as much as possible.

- **Buying your boat**

- There are powerboats, sailboats, and on some rare cases, houseboats that do the Loop. We saw all three. By far, however, the best boat configuration for the seas and waterways is a trawler style powerboat, preferably twin engine. If not a twin engine, a bow thruster will be very helpful in the locks and lateral current situations. Ours was a 1991 Grand Banks 42 foot Motoryacht. It is powered by twin 3208 Caterpillar diesel engines with an 8.5 kw Onan generator for electrical onboard power. We preferred it because of its reputation for quality and reliability and we weren't disappointed. It performed flawlessly the whole trip. But there are many other trawlers in this category that perform well.
- A good book on the topic of fundamental boat mechanics and selection is by David Pascoe named Midsized Powerboats. The book is pricey (about \$60) but is chocked full of observations and commentary from a person with a lifetime of experience working on boats the size you will need for this trip.
- I have owned a houseboat and would not recommend them for this type trip for several reasons: They are not stable enough nor do they have enough freeboard for all but the calmest seas. Also, houseboat systems (refrigeration, navigation, heating/cooling, etc) are generally not designed for the rigors of long-term cruising and anchorages.
- Sailboats can do the trip in all kinds of seas. But 95% of the sailboats we saw did not use their sails. This is because of either the wrong prevailing winds or the narrow passages which consume at least 70% of the trip. Sailboats also have air drafts of anywhere from 40 to 60 feet. Many bridges are below that height. So the practical thing seems to be to step the mast in those areas that have a lot of bridges.
- Speaking of heights, you will want to make sure your boat's fixed height is no higher than about 17 feet if you plan to enjoy the route through downtown Chicago. By fixed height, I'm referring to the lowest height you can get the boat down to by lowering the mast or radar arch and of course, your antennas. In our case, the mast on the Grand Banks is about 25 feet. However, the mast pivots down toward the stern of the boat.

Knowing this would be an issue in Chicago, I rigged a simple mast lowering cable which worked perfectly as we cruised this area. There is also the Trent Severn Waterway which has about a 20 foot height limit.

- One note on the boat selection is the convenience to be able to walk all the way around the boat in a safe manner. You really appreciate front to back walkway access for the 110 locks you will go through on the trip. (the Champlain/Montreal extension has a few more locks) Some boats sacrifice this walkway to have more interior room, which is understandable. But on a trip like this, the safety of my first mate and me handling the lines, dropping anchor, and getting up topside was more important.
- We enjoy being on the flybridge while underway and not closed in. The first mate enjoys sunning and reading her books and I like the visibility of piloting from the topside. Some boats are designed in such a manner that having an open flybridge or a place to enjoy the sun isn't possible. So keep that in mind, depending on your preference. In our case, we cruised almost entirely without the side curtains zipped in. But it is nice to have it enclosed on those cool Fall days as we cruised down the Ten Tom Waterway toward Mobile, Alabama.

- **The Dinghy**

- A dinghy is a must for the trip. I don't think we saw one boat without one. Among the uses are:
 - Taking the dog to shore when necessary. (a few figured out how to get their dog to do his business onboard, but that was the exception)
 - Going ashore from an anchorage to reprovision
 - Exploring the abundance of sights and scenes not accessible by your big boat
 - Safety craft in event of emergency

We have a 11'6" Avon dinghy with a hard bottom and a 4 hp 4 stroke Yamaha outboard. It is positioned off the stern with St. Croix davits. This was a great advantage over others that are mounted on top of the boat somewhere. With this positioning you can leave the outboard motor on the boat and launch it in about 3 minutes. As a result, we weren't discouraged from taking the dingy out because of the longer tasks involved in launching from on top of the boat.

One disadvantage of mounting the dingy at the stern is the potential of damage to the davits when backing into a slip. That is why we always went into a slip bow-forward.

Although I may have preferred an outboard with more like 8 or even 10 horsepower, there were three things that convinced me the 4 hp was the best choice: Weight, fuel consumption, and not needing it for speed. With the 4 hp engine, it was light enough to leave on the dingy rather than having to mount it each time. I didn't have to worry about a separate fuel

tank since it is built into the motor. Fuel consumption was very low per mile. Speed is rarely an issue since trips in the dingy are normally very short.

- **Piloting the boat**

- If you already have your captain's license then you are familiar with the "rules of the road" governed by the U. S. Coast Guard. It commissions schools to conduct training for an examination in what is usually a two week course. I took the course for the learning but did not sit for the exam. It's very worthwhile for the navigation part alone. Before I took the course, those charts looked like another language, which it is. You also get good practical classroom help on piloting, understanding weather patterns, and all those navigational aids.
- It would not be advisable to pilot a boat around the loop without prior experience with the vessel you are planning to take on your adventure. In my case, I had previously owned a twin-screw houseboat in the early 90's. So techniques of maneuvering the boat in and out of tight situations were familiar. But even with that, piloting a trawler is different. So we took several cruises with it before beginning the loop.
- Open water piloting is probably the easiest as long as the waves are manageable. We learned the hard way that cruising into Lake Ontario in beam seas (coming at you from the side) can be very miserable for the crew. Rather than piloting a straight course for our destination, I should have tacked off beam into and away from (following seas) the waves. The distance would have been longer, but the comfort level much better.
- Intracoastal Waterway piloting for me was focused on staying in the middle of the channel and timing passages to coincide with rising or high tides. There are several areas along the East Coast that are too shallow to pass at low tide. The Southeast Salty Cruisers Guide contains an internet based advisory on the trouble spots and that was very helpful to me.
- River piloting is similar to the ICW with some exceptions. On the one hand you don't have to be concerned about tides. On the other hand you do have to be concerned about tows, deadheads, wing dams and the current. We had experience before on the Mississippi river so this was a pretty uneventful part of the trip for us from a piloting standpoint. The key is to stay mid-channel as much as possible, swing (normally) wide in the corners to avoid shoaling. Pay attention to your radio for instructions from the tow captains on which side to pass on.. Passing "on the 1" means to your starboard side, (the tow would be on your port side when passing) "on the 2" means to your port side.(tow is on your starboard side)
- Locks can be troublesome and tiresome if you don't have a good way to secure your boat to the provided holding aides. For us, it was a breeze most of the time because of the ample side walkway access of our Grand Banks. As with any piloting situation in tight situations, there are three

speeds: Slow, slower, and slowest. But even if you find yourself going off track to your intended position, don't follow the tendency to correct by gunning it in reverse. On two occasions during the trip, captains did just that and did more damage to their boat from the fast overcorrection than if they had come in slower in the first place or reversed gears without increasing the throttle.

- The current can play havoc with your piloting skills, particularly where there are strong tidal currents and you are pulling into a slip where the current is on your beam. In all cases, I pilot upstream into the slip. For very strong currents, you may want to request that the dockmaster put you in an upstream tie-along position rather than a slip. We spent one night at a gas dock for that reason. This is particularly an issue with deep-V hulls where the current can overpower your steerage while trying to put in to a slip in a cross-current situation.

- **Planning each day's destination**

- With an average cruising speed of between 7 and 9 knots, you will be best advised to plan your end of day destinations at between 30 and 50 (statute) miles per day. Some prefer to arrive at an anchorage a little earlier than if staying at a marina since getting set for the night may take longer than anticipated. Also, good anchorage locations can fill up early, leaving you to scramble for a perhaps a less than desirable location as the sun is setting.
- Getting underway early has its advantages. By early, I'm thinking around 8:00am at the latest. You are not too far from your destination by around 2:00pm giving ample time to get things set and provide time to a quick tour of the town before dark. Two things can hamper that early departure plan: Tides and fog.
- Here's an idea I learned from a fellow Looper that maximizes his time at a marina. He will cruise into a town like St. Augustine, Fl and anchor out near a marina the first night. Then, the next morning, he will check into the marina at around 9:00am which gives him about a full day and a half for the price of one day's stay.
- I was surprised at the amount of time it took to plan where we were going to be at the end of each day's travel, especially in the first couple of months. By nature of the trip, you are exploring unfamiliar territory so you must be dependent on your charts and guides and whatever local knowledge may be available. And when you are piloting a 38,000 pound boat, it's not like you can just stop anywhere and drop anchor before the sun sets. I also made use of internet-based advice like Salty Southeast Cruisers Guide and Active Captain.
- Of course, we were frequently at places for a couple of days and sometimes a week or two. So it's not like this was an every day chore. But it occupied a significant part of my thinking on the day of departure.

Now that I've been around the Loop and made it fine, I would be less anxious.

- The procedure I follow is to:
 - Review the charts for our destination anywhere from 30 to 50 miles away.
 - Then I would check out any bulletins posted on shallow areas or problem bridges.
 - For coastal areas, I would try to plan our day trip so as to avoid low or lowering tide, particularly along the ICW from Jacksonville to the Chesapeake Bay. There are some places in that region not passable at low tide.
 - I would then select one or two preferred anchorage locations near our destination. If a marina is selected, then we would call to make reservations.

- **Understanding Navigation**

- Decide now that you must have paper charts for your trip. We bought a set from another Looper who had just finished the year before. And although we supplemented the set for some areas, they proved invaluable, even with our Garmin GPS chart plotter which performed flawlessly. From Mobile, Alabama to New York City you will likely refer to your charts much of the time, just to track your position in case things go haywire with the GPS.
- Chart plotters have become an essential tool of waterway navigation. When I think of how difficult it must have been before chart plotters, many would probably opt not to go on this ambitious of a trip. Ours is a Garmin 2010C, about 5 years old, but very adequate for the trip. There are newer ones out now that do more. If you have two helm stations, you will find it very nice to have two chart plotters, particularly if you have to go down below in inclement weather.
- The autopilot was new to me with this boat but quickly became an invaluable navigational and course correction aide. We had the Garmin chart plotters linked to the autopilot so you can set a course on the chart plotter and push a button on the autopilot to follow the designated course. You will need to manually override the autopilot when you are heading for a crab pot, and there are many in Florida waters, especially the Western coast and Chesapeake Bay. But even on the ICW and rivers I used the autopilot to steer the boat with a hand held remote controller without having to be right at the helm all the time.

- **Dealing with the weather**

- Wind, rain, and to a lesser extent, temperature should be of prominent importance to your loop adventure. On our cruise, we experienced only

moderate wind and rain issues. That is mostly because we did not hoist the anchor or leave the dock if the weather looked threatening. On a few occasions we turned around after realizing the weather or waves were too much for our comfort. There is no shame in turning around after getting underway so you should get over it! After all, this is supposed to be fun, right? Which brings up another issue: Don't put yourself on a schedule that threatens your safety, comfort and enjoyment. Many Loopers (us included) made commitments to meet some of our family at certain locations by a certain time. The result was we either got there too early or too late. It's ok to commit to a location, but not at a specific time. There are just too many issues that can get you off schedule on a trip like this. Weather is one of them. Mechanical breakdown can be another. We know of one couple who were stranded for 3 weeks waiting for an engine part.

- I used the internet almost exclusively to get my weather information for planning. There are many good resources out there but the best I've found are the NOAA sponsored sites. My son happens to be in the business of weather forecasting and has developed a terrific program to which you can subscribe for very good forecasting on land or water. It's called Weather Defender. Am I biased? Yes. Does that mean it isn't the best there is? No.

- **Understanding the waves**

- My expectation was that the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico would present the most difficulty when it came to wind and wave action. I was wrong. For some reason, fresh water waves in the Great Lakes were more challenging to us. I can't confirm this, but it seemed the time between waves (called waver interval) was shorter on fresh water lakes and the waves themselves were steeper. On an ocean or the Gulf, you are more likely to have swells where the boat has more time to adjust to the ups and downs.
- When in open water, we planned our trip for the days that were forecast to have waves of less than 3 feet, and preferably 2 feet or less.
- Sometimes the forecasts are wrong. On one occasion in Lake Michigan, we were 2 hours out from Charlevoix heading south toward Frankfort, Michigan. The waves on our bow began to grow as we entered the channel between the Manitou Islands and the Michigan coastline. My best judgment was to press on instead of seeking the shelter of a cove in the Manitou Islands. And although our Grand Banks was certainly built for waves of 6 to 8 feet and larger, we weren't. The First Mate made me promise that the boat would not capsize, which I did. To make matters worse, one of my blocks holding the dinghy broke, dropping it partially onto the swim platform. So as she took the helm to keep it heading into the waves, I went astern to fashion a temporary fix till we could make it to port.

- **Understanding the tides**
 - When on an adventure like this, every travel day will usually have some level of surprise, even with the best of planning, which is part of the fun of the whole thing. You know what the charts say and the GPS is of great navigational comfort, but there is always something lurking to catch you off guard. Tides are one of those things that can ruin your whole day if you don't keep on top of the predictions. Fortunately, running aground anywhere there are tide variances (at least for the Loop trip) is more of an inconvenience of being delayed for a few hours if you are on sand or mud. Note: Skipper Bob has good advice on what to do when you run aground. His books are invaluable for so many things. I used them almost continuously on the trip even though some were several years old.
 - Anyway back to the tides. They are generally in the two to three feet range in all of the Florida coastline and begin to grow in variance as you proceed north up toward Savannah, Georgia where it is around 7 to 8 feet. As you continue north, the tide variance begins to lessen until it is again around 3 feet in New York City.
 - So if you drop anchor in 6 feet of water in the evening, you could easily end up on dry land in the morning especially around the Georgia and Carolina coasts
 - There are also trouble spots along the ICW where passage should be made only at mid-tide or higher. These are well noted by internet accessible cruising guides. The Salty Southeast Cruisers net is a great resource for these trouble spots.
 - Tides generally come in and out twice in a 24 hour period. There is no rhyme or reason to the actual timing of occurrence other than the information provided by the tide prediction forecasts of the NOAA and others.
- **Instruments to watch while underway.**
 - The two key gauges I constantly cross-check while underway are the oil pressure and water temperature. If I had a vacuum gauge for the fuel flow, I would check it too--perhaps every couple of hours. Absent a vacuum gauge, I check the relative position of the tachometers to each other. If one started dropping there could be a fuel flow issue. Thankfully that never happened.
 - But I did have the starboard engine temperature gauge start climbing on me about one hour out of Steinhatchee, FL. I shut the engine down to check the coolant, which was low, and we were back on our way.
- **Anchoring out**
 - Anchoring out is usually an enjoyable experience but can result in some sleeplessness if you haven't done your homework. Truth be known, my anchoring out nights are more restless than when we are parked safely in a slip. This is particularly the case when we are anchoring near other boats.

But the trade-off is the tranquility and beauty of the anchorage, not to mention the lower cost. For a few months in 2008, the cost to run the generator was only slightly less than the cost of a slip. So if there was a marina nearby, we would opt for it.

- This is definitely a two-person activity. Depending on your preference of who does what, one person is at the helm while the other is at the bow paying out the anchor chain (rode). It seems to work best when I'm the one at the bow and my first mate is at the helm. We have developed our own hand signals to motion whether the port engine or starboard engine is to be put in forward or reverse. So essentially, I am guiding the boat by "remote control" from the bow using just those signals.
- There are whole books devoted to the topic of anchoring so my purpose is not to be too detailed here. The key thing is to set the anchor properly and attach a snub line to the anchor line to absorb the stress that would otherwise be on the windlass. This is particularly true of conditions where you have moderate wind tugging against the rode. Another advantage of the snub line is to lower the angle of the rode to afford maximum setting conditions into the mud, sand, or whatever is on the bottom of your anchorage area.
- Once the anchor seems to be holding, it's usually a good idea to give the anchor another good little tug by reversing the engines. This will sometimes break the anchor away from its hold, requiring a redo. If this happens a lot, it may be a signal you need a bigger or different type anchor.

- **Mooring Balls**

- We left on our adventure never having attached our boat to a mooring ball. We quickly learned that these are great alternatives to anchoring if you can find them. The mooring field is usually owned by a municipal marina and the cost is a fraction of the cost of a slip. Once tied up to these you don't have to wonder if the boat is going to hold. Further, they are spaced so as to prevent your swinging boat from hitting (or being hit by) other boats.
- Grabbing a mooring ball can be a little tricky, especially in the wind or current. In this case, I usually stay at the lower helm and have the first mate grab the mooring ball loop with the boat hook. It usually takes a couple of passes so be patient. Once hooked, you should take your own line and loop it through the mooring ball eye at the end of a rope attached to the mooring ball.

- **Free Docks**

- Check Skipper Bob notes on free docks, usually on downtown waterfronts or at public parks. We enjoyed these on several occasions except on a couple of weekends where they had a late outdoor concert on the riverfront.

- **Staying at Marinas**

- I'll have to say we got the most from our stays when we were at a slip. We would get there around 2 or 3 in the afternoon, hook up the electrical and water, and sometimes cable TV, then scout out the place before the next day's excursion. Although we had a washer and dryer onboard, most marinas have them as well as shower facilities. Our boat has two showers which work fine, but I like the feel of a good hot shower with strong flowing water. On occasion the marinas would have a swimming pool which the first mate thoroughly enjoyed.
- Depending on the area, we found the cost of marinas in the Florida area to be from \$1.50 to \$3.50 per foot per day, with most in the \$2.00 range. As you go up the ICW toward the Chesapeake Bay, the cost varied more, with most in the \$1.50 range. I usually always made marina reservations in advance by scouting the locations on the internet.
- We used the Active Captain website to select our marina and anchorage locations for most of the loop. On more than one occasion we made good decisions on marina selection based on the comments of other boaters reporting on that site. When possible, I would go the website of the marina itself to get an idea of accommodations
- If you are a Boat US member, always remember to ask for discounts on marina stays as well as fuel stops.
- Book exchange. Most marinas will have a small library for you to bring the books you have read and to take some you haven't. My wife is an avid reader and made maximum use of these exchanges for the entire trip.

- **Locking Through**

- If you start your Great Loop adventure in the South, you will have only one lock on the East coast as you approach Norfolk, Va. or alternately the Dismal Swamp channel. Then, as you leave the Hudson River near Troy, NY onto the Erie Canal, locking through becomes a part of your normal travel days until you arrive at Lake Ontario. (Note: There are several alternative routes in this region. We took the route from Troy, NY to Oswego, NY on the Erie). With this in mind, I planned our travel days mostly in the 30 mile range.
- Each locking system whether in New York, Canada or the river system leading to Mobile, Alabama provides instructions on locking through. And since locks are different all the way around, you will have to adjust some on how you approach and tie up as your vessel is being raised or lowered.

- Before arriving at the lock, put on your life jackets and prepare the fenders and lines as needed for the type of lock you will be entering. Having two boat hooks (aluminum poles) at the ready to grab the line or push away from the wall is advisable.
- When approaching a lock, it is very important to enter very slowly so as to prevent unnecessary wakes and to account for unexpected maneuvers by other boaters. On one occasion, my starboard engine died as I was reversing the engine to maneuver the boat. Fortunately I was able to get it started again in time. Had I been going too fast, there would likely have been a bow pulpit to repair.
- If you are the first boat into the lock with one or more boats following, you should proceed to the far end of the lock.
- As mentioned earlier, we found the big round orange fenders to be very useful in mooring to the walls. By “big” I’m referring to 18” in diameter.
- Most of the locks in the Trent Severn Waterway are manually operated by two people. It is a much more quaint and interesting experience you will likely enjoy. One problem on these locks, however, is the current that pushes upward locking boats to one side of the lock. Be aware of this in your placement of the fenders. In addition to the two orange ball fenders, we used an additional two cylinder fenders on the side of the boat to prevent possible bumping directly against the wall.
- Strong crosswinds can play havoc with your boat in a lock. If possible, try to moor your boat on the side of the lock toward the prevailing crosswind. In other words, if you are entering the lock northbound and the winds are coming in from the West, then try to moor your boat against the West wall. Then, when exiting the lock, your boat will naturally float away from the lock wall. If you find yourself against the East wall in this instance and without bow thrusters, the lock attendant may help you spring your boat away from the lock wall and then throw the line to your first mate on departure. Alternatively, you can reverse the boat out into the middle of the lock toward the wind to provide space to turn upwind and then exit.
- Once you exit the last lock in the Trent Severn, you will be lock-free for about a 1200 miles of the Loop.
- Compared to the Erie Canal and the Trent Severn Waterway, the locks down the Central U.S. river system are much larger. I found them easier to manage although this could have been more from our accumulated prior experience. On occasion, you may be asked by the Lockmaster to enter the lock with another tow and barge. If so, be aware of the potentially strong current generated by these huge tugboats. Most will exit slowly but it may be wise to request them to exit slowly to protect your boat from damage.

- **Security**

- It is always wise to be alert to any suspicious activity near your boat, particularly in downtown locations where there is no secured access. Our experience was very positive with one exception. In Chicago, we were docked at the wall at Monroe Harbor downtown near Grant Park. Someone took one of my pannier bags attached to my bike rack. In retrospect, I should have put the bike back on the top deck instead of leaving it next to the wall where someone could easily have taken the bike.
- Guns are not permitted onboard in Canada and I would question the wisdom of carrying one in the US.
- As for trips in the dinghy, I had West Marine make a cable about 20 feet long with an eye at each end and with a padlock to use in securing the dinghy and the motor to docks we visited. I think that was worthwhile, just for the peace of mind in knowing it was secure and that we could get back to our anchored boat.
- And no, we didn't see one pirate other than the plastic one at a restaurant in Clearwater.

- **Staying in communication**

- Marine Radio – Top priority
 - You will become very familiar with communicating on your marine radio transmitter and receiver. We had one at both helm stations and a third handheld marine radio to use as a dedicated line to other boaters. It is common to be traveling in groups of two or three boats and having one radio stay on a non-working channel like 68 permits conversation between boats while you are still waiting to hear from someone like the lockmaster or tow that is heading your way. Speaking of tows heading your way, one of our group traveling with us down the Mississippi and up the Ohio had a satellite-based tow locator. This came in handy on several occasions. The data showed up on his GPS screen, providing the location of tows in the area as well as their direction and speed. He would radio the information to all the other boats in the group. Could I have made it ok without it? Probably yes. But it is one of those “nice to have” gadgets that added to our information during potentially hazardous conditions.
- Internet and email access
 - If you are accustomed to having access to the internet (and who isn't these days?) then you will want an air card from your cell phone provider. We have AT&T but Verizon and T-Mobile have them as well. The air card plugs into your laptop and provides services along the following lines
 - Broadband high speed connection in and around the larger cities

- Good dial-up like access in the smaller cities and many rural areas near interstates
- Limited and sometimes no service going down the rivers in the rural areas
- Additional cost for service in Canada, although most of the time we could get wi-fi in the Canadian Marinas for no additional cost.

Speaking of Canada, I can't say enough good about those folks. When I ran aground in the channel on the Trent Severn, the Parks Canada people were extremely helpful to us in working through all that had to be done to get things back on track. I'm already sort of longing to go back up there to see more of that beautiful area and spend time with some of the greatest friends the USA will ever have!

- Phone access
 - In the US, phone service was virtually uninterrupted except for a few occasions coming down the rivers, and then for only awhile
 - In Canada, we passed on the AT&T phone package and communicated mostly by email as needed. Without a package, the rates were 56 cents per minute.

- Coast Guard Communication
 - When there is neither phone nor internet access, you can still be reached in an emergency over the Coast Guard channel 16. Tell your friends if you are going to be out of cell or internet contact for a few days that they can call the Coast Guard for emergency contact if they know the general area in which you will be.

- Television is nice to pass the time, especially on those days you are socked in due to rain, fog, or windy conditions. I noted about 20 to 30% of the loopers opted for the satellite connection with KVH. The prices keep coming down on these but you should still plan on a minimum of \$3,000 to \$4,000 plus the cost of monthly service and installation. Another system is called Follow Me TV and is quite a bit cheaper, but I understand the reception can be spotty at anchorages and if the wind is up. We chose to use a regular Shakespeare antenna which transmits the new digital channels to our digitally wired TV. It worked adequately from Florida all the way up to Canada. On the rivers we were less than impressed. However, about half of the marinas we stopped at had cable service with all the channels you would want. Major Point: You are not going on this adventure to watch TV. If you find yourself going overboard to have everything just like at home, you might want to rethink this whole trip. Most of us will go around only once. So plan to get off the couch and get

out there and do some exploring in some of the most beautiful places in the world. Invite fellow loopers over to your boat and get acquainted. Those will be the times you remember.

- Radio can be nice to have, especially while underway. In addition to the radio in the consoles of the boat, we had two portable radios. The first mate is a “ditto-head” and managed to listen to the show about everywhere we went except Canada.
- Another form of electronic communication are those headsets you and your first mate can wear while pulling into a slip or anchoring out. Perhaps these occasions are the most tense moments of working together. So the headset may be a good way to keep from sending those familiar hand signals to each other after you’ve hit the dock or run into the lock wall. If your boat is, say 42 feet or less, I think the headsets are not needed. For the first few times, yelling and correct hand signals work fine. After about 5 or 6 times, you will know what to do. We bought a set of nice headsets for \$300 and never took them out of the box. My first mate doesn’t like to mess up her hair. Now I’m trying to get a refund.

- **Snail Mail – Procedure on Forwarding Mail from Home**

- Arranging for mail to be delivered to you from home is like aiming for a moving target. We wanted to get our mail every couple of weeks, if possible, but we aren’t sure exactly where we’ll be on the dates of delivery.
- The first step is to determine if you can have your mail delivered by a friend or relative or a commercial service set up to do this. The latter is more expensive but it may be your best reliable option. In our case, we made arrangements with our very reliable daughter-in-law to send our mail every 2 to 3 weeks. Attached as Exhibit B are our instructions to her on procedure.

- **Boat Cards**

- I didn’t get around to printing our boat cards till we were about a third of the way along on the loop. There were so many things to do this one just got dropped. But we finally designed one with our pertinent information on them with a picture of our boat in the background. It was a nice little graphics shop in downtown Portsmouth, Va. We paid \$56 for 250 cards. Information on the cards is as follows:
 - The name of our boat
 - Brand and model of boat
 - Home port
 - Both of our names and cell phone numbers
 - Our email addresses
 - Our blog address.

We decided against listing any information on our permanent residence. Just know that everybody exchanges boat cards and we returned home with quite a collection to put in our scrapbook.

- **Keeping the boat maintained during the trip**

- Exterior – wash down every day, especially coming in from a salt water cruise. As we neared completion of our loop, I waxed the entire boat above the rub rail over a several day period.
- The orange mustache that forms as you travel the rivers and ICW can easily be removed by a solution of oxalic acid. Home Depot has it by the gallon, called Rust Aid. Another product available in marine stores is On and Off, essentially the same thing but at about triple the price per ounce.
- Barkeepers Friend is a powder cleaning agent that I wound up using for many things like brass cleaning and tough stains or marks on the hull.
- As for the engine room, I always check the oil level, coolant, transmission oil level, generator oil and coolant and just give the place a final look over to make sure things are in good shape before we depart. Once you leave the engine room and take the helm for the day, you don't want to have to look down there at the end of the day to discover you forgot to put the oil filler cap back on.

- **Cruising speed on the Loop**

- If you are primarily interested in cruising at the most efficient speed, you will determine what the hull speed is for your boat. To determine the hull speed take the square root of the length of your hull at the waterline and multiply the result by 1.33. For our Grand Banks 42, this works out to around 8.5 knots per hour. To maintain that speed I ran the engines at around 1,400 RPM. At this speed we were able to go about 2 miles per gallon of fuel, surprisingly good considering we had two Cat 3208TA's with 750 HP.
- Most every day I would power up to wide open throttle for a few minutes, just to blow out the soot. From what I've read on the subject, this is good for the engines anyway and may help you identify a performance issue if one of the engines isn't topping out as it should.
- Having the extra power available comes in handy when you need to make a bridge opening or need to make your destination before sundown. (Although we were with several boats with a top speed of around 9 knots and they did just fine.)

- **Re-provisioning**

- Depending on your refrigerator and cupboard stowage capacity, re-provisioning can be a weekly or perhaps bi-weekly event. Most of our groceries were for breakfast and lunch, with two or three evening meals

per week. We would have preferred to grill out more, but many marinas prohibit grilling at the slip. So the grill was usually the way to go at anchorage. Because some of the best restaurants are on the waterfront, we probably wound up eating out 4 times a week. It doesn't have to be an expensive place so be wary about asking someone "where is a good restaurant?". They will likely give you the name of one of their finest restaurants, which is understandable. We, instead ask them, if you were going to go somewhere for a good meal, where would you go? And we try to get there early for their pre-6:00pm prices.

- **Getting where you want to go on land**

- First of all, the internet is invaluable to find places you need to go after docking or anchoring, whether that be for groceries, parts, restaurants, church, or sightseeing. In addition, I purchased Microsoft Streets and Trips software for my laptop which came in very helpful for locating places in all the cities we visited. This was considerably better than relying on Mapquest or any of the web based finders because they only work when you have a good signal. And many times we were in a situation where web access was either slow or non-existent. But having the software on my hard drive eliminated this concern. The newer Garmin handheld or smart phones can now do the same thing in the palm of your hand but they, too, are subject to web access.
- If you have bicycles, make sure you rig them with racks and panniers to be able to carry two grocery bags. You can get these at most bike shops. On one occasion in near Troy, NY, I was able to carry on my bike two full bags of groceries plus 24 bottles of water.
- We elected to rent a car (Enterprise) at many of the larger cities. It was a nice way to get a lot done in a short time rather than the bike thing.
- Many marinas offer courtesy cars. Make sure you ask about this before renting a car. If you go that route, make sure to put a little more gas in it than you used.

- **Comfortable seating while underway**

- I toyed with the idea of putting in one of those Stidd chairs at the flybridge helm position to make my hours there more comfortable. But given they are about \$5,000 each, I passed on the idea. We had already replaced the cushions on the flybridge just before the trip. As it worked out, I added a couple of cushions to the helm position on top of the bench seating and it worked out fine. Besides, I am an active person around the helm, getting up and around frequently to check on things.
- The first mate needs a good place to sit too, of course. During good weather days (about 80% of the time) she lounged on the flybridge settee, taking in the rays from the sun and reading one of the 97 books she read on the trip. When the weather turned bad, we would both usually go down

below, me at the lower helm station (which does have a helm seat) and her to the saloon on the settee.

- **Boat tools and spares**

- I keep a tool bag with wrenches for both metric and standard needs. It is not the purpose of this review to cover all you will need. Suffice it to say, you should be prepared to fix things with tools that match your boat's systems. Of course, there are great marinas all along the Loop trip with mechanics skilled in boat repairs. I'm not too mechanically inclined so when the fresh water pump failed, I hired a mechanic to replace it.
- Anything that spins, sucks, or flows will eventually fail or cause a failure if not replaced. We had spares of most everything that usually needed replacing within a 750 hours of engine time, including things like duck bill valves for the Vacuflush heads which I replaced once. Depending on how mainstream your systems are, you may not need to carry as much onboard since places like West Marine can get you what you need in a couple of days. But spare propellers, for example, are pretty much standard for most Loopers. We, in fact, did need to replace our props after hitting something in the Trent Severn Waterway. Having the spare props saved us at least a week in down time.

- **Meeting up with Family and Friends along the way**

- Our immediate family is now 14 counting our three sons, their wives and 6 grandchildren. All but one was able to join us somewhere on the Loop, sometimes twice. In addition, we met up with other friends and relatives at some great locations like Annapolis and Chicago. Most of them stayed with us on the boat and some stayed at a local hotel.
- We had some enjoyable times just being with fellow loopers, hearing about their stories and sharing ours. Some of the more memorable times with other loopers was our journey from Chicago to Mobile on the several rivers. This was the year of significant flooding on the Illinois, Mississippi and Ohio rivers. As a result, several of us loopers were bunched at the top of the river system waiting for the rivers to subside. As they did, we stayed together in packs of 4 and 5 pretty much all the way down Green Turtle Bay in Kentucky. Having a group of us also was appreciated by the Lockmasters who locked several boats through instead of one or two at a time.

- **Documenting Your Adventure**

- Before leaving, I went to Best Buy to get a camera that I thought would provide excellent pictures for a lifetime of memories. We were very pleased with our decision to get a Sony Cyber Shot with a Zeiss lens and 8.1 megapixels of resolution. The cost was about \$700 with everything,

including a spare battery and a remote controller. I also brought my tripod but didn't use it much.

- Also before leaving, I learned how to create and post to a blog sponsored free by Google. The web address is www.grovesboat.blogspot.com The first few days I had difficulty posting the pictures but then figured it out. If you create a blog, make sure to upload your pictures to the blog in areas where there is a broadband connection. Otherwise you'll be waiting for a few minutes to transmit each picture.
- In addition to the internet pictures, the first mate created a scrapbook loaded with many more pictures than were on the blog plus a lot of other memorabilia like church bulletins, post cards, boat cards and brochures from some of the places we visited, like the Holocaust museum in Washington, D. C.

- **The three most meaningful portions of our loop cruise**

- A lot of people we have seen since returning have asked us about highlights of the trip. They will say "what was the best thing about the adventure?" And after going over our blog and seeing our scrapbook, it is impossible to really give an answer. What I may feel was great today may be overshadowed by remembering an event or scene a year or two from now. But here's a try on the top three:
 - The Eastern Coast of Florida to Hilton Head and then starting again up the Eastern Coast from Charleston, South Carolina to the North were most enjoyable. We left Chesapeake Bay after about a week thinking we had just touched the surface. One very interesting place was Tangier Island, so named by Captain John Smith in 1608. Visiting Tangier Island and realizing it was settled over 400 years ago by a group of people who have their own language is amazing – only 100 air miles from Washington, DC. During that same time we also visited Colonial Williamsburg, the Holocaust Museum and the U. S. Naval Academy. But the Bay had its own intrigue and mystery, especially after reading James Michener's book entitled "Chesapeake."
 - There is only one word to describe the Great Lakes: Magnificent! This huge body of clean and mostly very clear water started for us at Oswego, NY as we crossed Lake Ontario for Kingston, Ontario. Then, as we went up and over the 300 miles of the Trent Severn Waterway through 44 locks we entered Georgian Bay, accented with granite rocks along much of the small craft channel. Almost everywhere you look could have been a post card shot. Then the North Channel of Lake Huron provided its own beauty,(much of which we only were able to see for a short time). Then to Lake Michigan, starting with Mackinac Island where we spent our honeymoon 43 years ago. Our next leg followed down the Eastern shore of Lake Michigan, starting from Charlevoix and ending in

Chicago, we marveled at all the great ports and sandy beaches. Parts of this leg of the cruise had its tense moments as the waves crashed into our bow, but it also has its lure that only a true sailor can appreciate.

- The Western coast of Florida starting at Tarpon Springs to Marco Island could be enjoyed for many years without going any farther. It has just about anything you want. You will find mostly great weather year around (except for about 2 months in the steamy summer) to great places for a boater to enjoy and places to visit.

- **The Rivers**

- Not on our top three list but interesting for most of the time was the river system, starting in Chicago and ending in Mobile, Alabama.. It was just below flood stage during the Illinois and Mississippi legs. After that, the cruise became much more enjoyable starting up the Ohio, then for a short stent on the Cumberland to the Kentucky Lakes and then to the Tennessee River which connects to the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway till it gets to the Alabama River. From the Alabama River at Demopolis we continued to the Gulf of Mexico at Mobile. Three notable places as must stops are Hoppies on the Mississippi, Green Turtle Bay on Kentucky Lakes, and Bobby's Fish Camp on the Tenn-Tom.

- **Tricky situations on the Loop for us**

- Given that you are mostly in water of 12 feet or less for 80% of the trip, it is important to maintain surveillance on your depth. We set our depth alarm at 5 feet, meaning the alarm would go off anytime the depth was 5 feet **below** the keel. On several occasions, this alarm permitted me the time to steer away from more shallow areas.
- The bottoms in most of Florida up to New York City are pretty forgiving should you run aground. As you travel into the Hudson River north into the Erie Canal, the bottoms become less forgiving. And once you get into the upper Trent Severn and into Georgian bay, please pay utmost attention to your charts and depths. We're talking granite. One note to make the point: The prop and shaft repair operation in Kawartha, Ontario repairs upwards of 10,000 props per year in the area, including two of mine.

- **What to do when.....**

- The engines or engine shuts down while underway.
 - Shut off ignition
 - Put gear in neutral
 - Stop or idle other engine depending on location

- If both engines are idle, decide if you need to drop anchor to secure the boat from shore or other objects.
 - Inspect probable cause, like fuel flow or potential of propeller striking object in water.
 - Contact tow service for advice if not remedied. They can sometimes solve your problem on the phone or radio
- You've underestimated the time to get to your destination
 - Assuming additional speed will not get you there in time, begin scouting out locations to drop anchor outside the channel.
 - Seek anchoring locations with enough depth to allow for tide variances and position the boat on the leeward side of any island or channel. Make sure there is adequate distance from shore in case of a change of wind direction through the night.
- The sea conditions are dangerously rough
 - This is a simple one that too many macho pilots refuse to consider: When this happens, you just turn around and go back to the port from which you started. Again, you should not make this adventure one in which you must get to a certain place at a certain time.

- **Charts and guidebooks**

- The ALGCA provides a message board for loopers and looper wanna be's. On the year of your trip, be on the lookout for postings. We paid \$500 for our complete set of charts and guidebooks and added a few new versions then sold the set for \$500 on the same board.

- **Inverters**

- I thought I would miss an inverter more than I did. The one area I would have liked it would be to maintain power to the refrigeration system (3 Grunert cold plate boxes) while underway. Even though Grunerts are designed to go up to 30 hours without power, we usually left them off no more than 10 to 12 hours to be on the safe side.
- Inverters need to be complimented with ample battery capacity, which means more space consumed in the engine room. You can have the best inverter in the world but it must draw from charged batteries. Usually the more the better.

- **Diesel fueling**

- We never let the fuel tanks get below around 1/3 full. With 600 gallons of capacity, we could easily go 800 miles without a re-fuel. This came in handy in Canada where the prices approached \$6.00/gal in the summer of 2008.

- Another reason to keep the tanks nearer full is the condensation that can form in the insides of a tank, particularly in changing temperatures.
- **Heads and Holding Tanks**
 - We had the Vacuflush system which is far superior to and less smelly than any I have had before. The smell is sealed off from the interior cabin by water, just like a home toilet. There is a vent pipe on the holding tank, however, as with any system that does not completely eliminate the odor, especially when the tank is full.
 - When pumping out, be aware that some pumps can be extremely powerful. That sounds great when you are trying to get all the crud out. But all that suction that power has the potential of collapsing your holding tank which could ruin you whole day. So I usually do this activity myself and watch to make sure the suction isn't left on too long after it starts gurgling.
- **Bikes – to have or not?**
 - I say yes. As a practical matter, if you are not a biker by now, it's not likely you will be on a boat. I bought two Schwinn's at Target for \$145 each, knowing they would probably not be worth much by the end of the trip considering all the salt water. Another factor in this decision was to make them less attractive to thieves. They worked great!
 - If you do get bikes, make sure you have a place to store them, preferably as high on the boat as possible to stay away from the salt air and salt spray.
- **Other stuff to know**
 - For obvious reasons, I don't recommend reading a book while piloting the boat. But you may want to have handy some way to occupy your time during some of the boring segments of travel. In addition to a radio, you may want to keep your I Pod or I Phone charged and stocked with your favorite music, messages from teachers, or even digital audio books.

Another Reason We Went on this Adventure

As a married couple with three sons and their wives plus 6 grandchildren, we have benefited greatly on this earth through the influence of our parents who are of the Christian faith. The principles of Christianity became the foundation of our lives as children and continued as we became adults. Thankfully, our children and grandchildren of age have also personally committed themselves to the Christian faith.

One statistic that is rather well known about Christians is the likelihood of an adult not becoming a Christian unless that faith was developed early in a person's life, usually the pre-teen years. But there are exceptions. I wanted to know more about those exceptions.

How did it happen that people made a commitment to their Christian faith as adults and why?

So as a part of this adventure we purposely visited churches along the way to seek interviews of people who became Christians after they became adults.

The findings from this research will be published in a forthcoming book entitled; *I Came to Know You Late*.

Conclusion

In the years preceding our adventure and especially following we have enjoyed talking about our cruise to our friends and acquaintances – and many with whom we find the opportunity to become acquainted. It was a dream fulfilled which has, itself, spawned more dreams and opportunities in the years ahead.

At our ages of 64 and 65, we still felt we were in good enough physical, mental, and emotional shape to do this. In fact, that seems to be about the average age of the Loopers.

So if you are on the fence for whatever reason, we would encourage you to take that next step. At this writing, the economy is still in the tank. So this may be a bad year to start the cruise. But planning the cruise is almost as much fun and rewarding as the adventure itself. So maybe this is the year you plan for the 2010 Great Loop Adventure!