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Hardbergers travel miles in boat called Aimless

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By Phil Hardberger

- Special to the Express-News

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Editor's note: After Phil Hardberger ended his term as San Antonio mayor, the veteran sailor and his wife, Linda, set off on a trip through middle America, from Port Aransas to the shores of Lake Michigan, finding solitude and friends along the way as they traveled upriver in a boat named Aimless.

HOLLAND, MICH. — Fall comes early in these high latitudes. The trees are already splashed with little dabs of yellow, oranges, reds and purple. Although we are in middle America, we are at 43 degrees of latitude, as high as Boston on the map. Mornings are cold, sweaters part of our normal dress. We've come 2,481 nautical miles since leaving Port Aransas. Aimless, our 42-foot trawler, runs at 9 knots per hour (10 mph), so these distances take a while — 2 1/2 months in our case. Slow travel brings its rewards. You absorb the country, accents changing with the temperature.

Everyday beauty absorbs us, seeps through our skin. Eyes, dimmed by age and common experience, brighten, and we see with refreshed vision the beauty of our country and the glory of our skies. Traveling our rivers teaches us how many shades of green are possible. Sometimes clear and sparkling, sometimes obscure, dark green and unknowable, sometimes simply a dirty brown, full of soil, waste, alligator gars and catfish. The flow of the river connects us with the passing of time and foreshadows eternity.

Swimming with alligators

When we left Texas at the end of June it was extremely hot, and our first days of traveling left us with a desire to hide from the punishing sun. One advantage of being on a boat, though, is that your swimming pool travels with you, right off the back of the boat. We took advantage of this at the close of each day's travel.

We had an especially hot, long day getting to the Sabine River, the dividing line between Texas and Louisiana, arriving in late afternoon. Jeff Berven, a friend from Corpus Christi and a fellow sailor, had joined us for this part of the trip. I knew of an attractive anchorage on the Sabine called Shell Island that is protected from passing barges and the occasional summer storms. We could not wait to go swimming in those protected, clean waters.

We anchored there, rushed for swimming suits and soon we were all on the swim platform at the stern of the boat. Just as we were about to plunge in, Linda cried out, "There's an alligator!" While we were locating this prehistoric beast, Jeff said, "There are two more!" Sure enough, we were sharing our anchorage with three alligators we could see and likely some we couldn't. We stared at them; they stared back at us. The sun beat down, the sweat poured. We jumped in. At first we stayed near the boat, prepared to climb out in a hurry. But the water was so delicious, we swam farther away, reveling in the cool water many miles from any civilization. The alligators watched us but did not leave the banks and the cool mud. There was an unspoken pact — you don't eat us and we won't make a pair of loafers out of you.

This was to be the pattern for the seven days it took us to reach New Orleans. Every day we hoped there would be no alligators. Every afternoon we found alligators. We swam every afternoon anyway, though there was a frisson of danger when an alligator took it upon himself to join us in a little swim of his own. I found our own swimming skills improved enormously as we raced back to the boat.

We saw no more alligators after New Orleans. The mosquitoes also departed. The rest of our trip was bug-free — surprising because we were surrounded by thick vegetation and were always on the water. But there were many birds and fish, which would rather dine on mosquitoes than we would on a T-bone steak. So perhaps the normal order of things is better than bug spray.

The cold front

We stayed a week in New Orleans. It was unspeakably hot, the only time on the trip that I felt we might have made a mistake coming this time of year. We planned this stop as a celebratory milestone in the trip. It was Linda's birthday, and New Orleans for many Texans symbolizes a good time, undiluted with responsibility. But the heat overcame our enthusiasm, and we were glad to get under way once more. Jeff went home when we reached New Orleans, and we were joined by Katrina Meredith, formerly of San Antonio. She's Linda's good friend and a returned Peace Corps volunteer. She is in her mid-60s and is not a stranger to adversity. Unfortunately, we were to give her a little dose.



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Linda and Phil Hardberger on the Mobile River.

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Moving from New Orleans to Mobile Bay involves crossing Mississippi Sound, a portion of the Gulf of Mexico unprotected from the Gulf except for scattered barrier islands that run east and west. Under normal summer wind conditions, a southerly wind blows across these islands, giving good protection when you are on the north side. I had seen these islands many times from airplanes and on the charts. This was my first opportunity to visit one.

We were tired when we arrived, having already been underway for 10 hours, but we made our way to Ship Island to find all the trees and other vegetation had been killed by the hurricanes. The absence of any life — human or plant — presented a bleak, melancholy, depressing prospect. The seas were disturbed, and it was not the peaceful anchorage I had envisioned. Nevertheless, we anchored and swam. Linda took a pass, saying wisely that it was too rough. Katrina and I gave it a go and enjoyed the cool salt water.

We ate dinner but occasionally had to chase after plates as they slid from one end of the table to the other. In due time, we went to bed and fell fast asleep — a short sleep, as it turned out. By midnight the predicted cold front hit, with accompanying thunder, lightning and stronger wind. The wind switched to the northwest and we had no protection from the island at all. We were never in any danger, and we were well anchored with plenty of chain scope. But it was rough as a cob, and sleep was just a wishful memory.

Katrina became seasick and spent the night with her face in a bucket making strange sounds. Linda spent the night sitting up, sleepless and, no doubt, contemplating that her husband was an idiot. She claims that the captain (that would be me) snored the night away without a care. I dispute that, however, because I remember the night as being distinctly unpleasant. And, like sailors through the ages, I wished for the dawn to come — gray and shapeless as it always seems to be in such circumstances.

When the dawn finally arrived, the boat continued its wild gyrations, and there were no votes to hang around to see what happened. At first light we were underway to Mobile Bay. We arrived at the utterly charming town of Fairhope, Ala., on Mobile Bay by the close of the day, just as the cold front was dying. We turned north at Fairhope, and for the next six weeks this was our primary direction. The rivers turn and twist, and we went in all cardinal directions, but the sum total was north.

On our second day in Fairhope, an attractive woman stopped by the boat and asked, "Is the mayor aboard?" She was Sherry Stuart, formerly of San Antonio and the daughter of a prominent San Antonio attorney, Henry Christopher. She married a man from Alabama, and they now live in Fairhope. It was the first time I had been called mayor since leaving San Antonio. I will own up to enjoying it.

Fairhope is an interesting town. It was formed by a group of American Communists in 1894 seeking to build a Utopian community where everyone shared their wealth, with mutual goals and an absence of conflict. They named it Fairhope. Despite these lofty goals, their fair hope was not realized. After some years it became an artist's colony and a highly desirable place to live. Fairhope has a lovely location looking west across Mobile Bay, with many high-end stores and fine restaurants. Maybe not Utopia, but a good-looking American town.

The next day, while touring the Bellingrath Gardens outside Mobile, we ran into another San Antonian, Donna Rodgers. Bellingrath Gardens is a botanical masterpiece, a garden complex built by Coca-Cola magnate Walter Bellingrath, whose family left behind a wonder of nature for everyone to enjoy.

America's rivers

Many people from Texas to Michigan have expressed amazement that you can get from Port Aransas to Chicago and Lake Michigan by boat. But it can be done on America's rivers, the arteries of the United States.

In the beginning of our country, people arrived by boat to the Eastern shores of what became the United States. In due time, people pushed inland from the Atlantic Ocean. The main form of transportation was boats along our natural highways, the rivers. Towns were settled as incoming and outgoing goods traveled by the rivers. It was easier and safer than going by land.

Though we now have alternative sources of transportation, much freight traffic still moves on the rivers. We passed tugs pushing 36 barges at a time: six across and six deep — about the size of a city block. We passed barges all the way from Port Aransas to Chicago, all carrying the products that give our country such enormous economic strength. The barge loads got bigger and bigger the farther north we went. Along the Texas coasts, one or two barges was the average. By the time we got to the Mississippi, 20 or 25 seemed to be the average.

You have to stay out of the way of these monsters. Half of the time they can barely see you because of the mound of goods they are pushing. And they are working in the sometimes narrow confines of a twisting river, with currents going every which way. In turns, they may take up the entire river with their barges going one way and the tug pointed in a different direction. I have enormous respect for these river masters. Every once in a while you read where some pleasure craft has been run over by one of them. The result is predictable: The pleasure craft occupants don't survive. The tugs are not sure whether they ran over a good size log or just hit a sandbar.

The good news is that they are consummate sailors and don't want to hit you. If you communicate with them, they'll usually give you good instructions. We had no trouble with any of them, and we passed hundreds.

This is how we traveled from the Gulf of Mexico into Chicago and the Great Lakes. From Mobile Bay, we turned north on the Mobile River, then north on the Tombigbee River, then north on Tenn-Tom waterway, which connects the Tennessee River with the Tombigbee River, then the Tennessee River until it reaches the Cumberland River, which then intersects the Ohio River, which in turn meets the Mississippi River at Cairo, Ill. We stayed on the Mississippi past Paducah, Ky., and St. Louis until we reached the Illinois River at Grafton, Ill., then went northward to Chicago.

The Illinois River ends at Chicago, on the southern shores of Lake Michigan. By the time you come from Mobile to Chicago, you've traveled 1,500 miles. The river portion took us five weeks.

Most of the time we were going against the river's currents. This is considered the "wrong way." But when you travel away from Texas at the end of our country, you don't have much choice. Everything is upcurrent and usually upwind as well.

Aboard Aimless, this was not too much of a problem because the currents were modest and easily overcome by our two trusty 350-horse Caterpillar engines. (Thank you, Peter Holt!) The Mississippi River, though, is in a class of its own. The routine current is about half the speed of Aimless and against us. Our 10 mph was reduced to 5 mph, more like the speeds I was used to on a sailboat.

I had worried about this strong current and had been advised against even doing this by some sailors. Fueling places are few and far between, and the river carries a fair amount of debris — from trees to refrigerators — coming at you at 5 mph under their own power.

There are too many stories of broken rudders and bent props to discount the dangers altogether. And then there were scary stories of whirlpools and underwater dams called weir dams that extend into the river, awaiting with malevolent intent the

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opportunity to rip the bottom out of your boat. Plus there were the tugs and barges larger than a congregation of 18-wheeler trucks at a truck stop, bearing down on you as they come down the river.

The mighty Mississippi

I spent a restless night at anchor on the Ohio River on a rainy, stormy night before entering the Mississippi, mulling this over in my mind at 3 a.m. Fortunately, we had been joined on this segment by Eugene Simor of San Antonio (the Alamo Beer guy), who is an excellent sailor and companion. We have sailed together on many sailboats and power boats in different parts of the world. I have a lot of confidence in his ability, and he is cheerful, besides. Eugene is always up for anything.

Linda was eager to move on toward Chicago. As the day dawned bright and calm, we steamed ahead, entering this most powerful and longest of the American rivers. It is 2,000 miles long, but we were only on it for 250 miles, exiting it into the Illinois River. I loved it. All of the hazards are there, though in a manageable way, and the river is beautiful. The banks are thickly wooded, with some terrific sand beaches and mighty cliffs.

It's like traveling with Mark Twain and Huckleberry Finn. The voices of our forebears murmur in the night against the hull. Traveling this mightiest of rivers is the quintessential American experience. I shall never forget it and hope to come back again.

Speaking of Huckleberry Finn, we met three young men from the Minneapolis area who were floating down the river on a homemade raft to New Orleans, a distance of 1,700 miles. It was a true raft, the flotation device being plastic barrels bound together by metal straps. On top of the barrels was a plywood floor. Two-by-four planks supported a tarp covering to protect the crew against sun and rain — somewhat. Their only nod to modern times was a 10-horse outboard motor to maneuver their way out of the path of oncoming barges, and a handheld GPS.

When we met them they were about halfway to New Orleans and being propelled along at 5 mph by the current. They were sunburned and fly-bitten but looked happy. I almost lost Eugene, who wanted to abandon Aimless and join the raft crew. If he ever disappears from San Antonio, I'm pretty sure I'll know where to find him.

In addition to the Mississippi, I thoroughly enjoyed all of the eight American rivers we traversed. They each have their own personalities and all are beautiful.

The Tennessee River was the most beautiful. The white limestone cliffs, the clear water, the 60-foot trees are beguiling. I can see why many sailors "swallow the anchor" and retire to the banks of the Tennessee River, spending the remainder of their days watching this gracious water make its way to the Mississippi.

I was impressed enough with the Tennessee River to invite my sister, Jan Peranteau of San Antonio, to join us for five days of lazy cruising up and down the river just for the sheer beauty and exuberance of the landscape. This was the only time of the trip that we didn't try to go anywhere. We just enjoyed ourselves and justified the name of our boat, Aimless.

The size of these rivers is surprising. They are all big, a half-mile width not unusual. They are also deep, up to 200 feet in places, and often richly wooded. Industrial sites are few. Mostly it is virgin country with nothing but an occasional passing boat. A chorus of birds was heard every time we stopped. Fish would jump, frogs would give guttural love calls and all was still. We swam, we ate, we slept, and thus the days passed.

The final river

Our last river was the Illinois, which joins the Mississippi on one end and Lake Michigan on the other. We left the Mississippi there and turned north toward Chicago, some 350 miles away. To our pleasant surprise, we found the Illinois River pastoral, with so many beautiful anchorages on the backsides of islands and in oxbows that we were constantly tempted to call it a day well short of our planned stop.

We greatly preferred anchorages to marinas for the entire trip because of the serenity and beauty. Most nights were spent peacefully swinging on our anchor with no sign of civilization. Stars take on a new meaning so far away from light pollution, and only nature's night sounds can be heard — time and the river flowing away to some distant and unknowable place.

We sailed past Peoria, the home of Caterpillar, and approximately halfway to Chicago on the Illinois River. For some obscure reason, Peoria has become the town where America's values get hammered out. "What will the people in Peoria think about this?" commentators ask.

We did not stop, partly because Peoria Lake is uncomfortably shallow and, to be honest, I did not feel a compelling interest to know what they thought in Peoria. I'm more interested in knowing what they think in Floresville or Hebronville.

The city of Joliet has recently built free docks beside a city park for passing boats such as ours. Joliet, for whatever reason, has a bad reputation among boaters, though, for theft and other unpleasantness. A state prison is there, and there have also been race riots.

We were advised to notify the Police Department if we were going to moor to the public docks overnight. We did so, and the police did not sound surprised. In fact, they said they would keep an eye on us, and did so. We experienced nothing unpleasant. In fact, the damp smell of the river and the lovely park alongside was most agreeable.

We encountered an amazing phenomenon on the Illinois River that I had never seen before — Asian carp, an invasive species that is wreaking havoc with our native fish. They eat everything in sight, including the larvae of other fish. They breed prodigiously and multiply at a great rate. Before long you have Asian carp and nothing else.

Fish and wildlife officials are terrified they will move from the Illinois River into the Great Lakes. They have put up electric barriers along the river to provide the piscine equivalent of the electric chair. Whether this will work remains to be seen, but it certainly discourages the old sailor tradition of relieving yourself off the back of the boat.

These destructive fish have one redeeming quality. They jump every time a boat goes through the water. Not a little jump — a marathon leap. All of them. It is a veritable cascade of fish following the boat's wake. Dozens are in the air at one time.

Two jumped into our boat, which is 5 feet off the water. Each of these fish were 2-pounders. One almost brought Linda down as he crashed into her leg. There are instances of fisherman being knocked out of their fishing skiffs by these flying objects.

The new sport on the Illinois River is to shoot them with bows and arrows. I saw a lot of shooting, but not much hitting.

We had two sets of friends with us to witness these fish antics. Serge and Judy Abend of Palo Alto, Calif., were with us on the first half of the Illinois; John and Ruth Cain of Canyon Lake on the second half. The whole length of the 350-mile river we heard yells: "Look at that one," or "Wow, a new record leap," or "There are two that have crossed in the air."



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Three hours in hell

When we pulled out of Joliet at 6 a.m., we were one long day from Chicago and Lake Michigan. Part of this day we were passing the quiet pastoral Illinois that we had grown to expect. But three hours of this day were about the worst hours I've ever spent on a boat.

Shortly after leaving Joliet and going through our last real lock of the trip, we entered an area of Dante's Inferno. It was awful. It was very narrow — the sides being rock or concrete. The waterway was no wider than a highway, and large barges were parked along both sides, not just one or two, but 100 or 200.

The water had nowhere to go, so it was bouncing off the sides and constantly being churned by working tugs. The air was thick with dust and smoke. There was no room to pass anyone, but plenty of barge traffic. Our job was to get out of the way. I needed no convincing as it took little imagination to visualize how easily one could get smashed like a bug or run into the rock wall and rip the sides out of your boat. I wanted to get out of there.

When you meet a tug and its barges, you have to somehow find an opening between the parked barges and pull in between them until the moving barges pass. There is no question of them pulling over. In the first place they are too big, and in the second place they have no intention of doing so. This is their workplace, and you, a mere pleasure boat about the size of a gnat to them, are the unwelcome interloper. So you get out of the way.

I have no great desire to prove my manhood by running this gantlet again.

The agony finally stopped, and rural Illinois came back onstage for a while. Finally there was a flurry of low bridges, barges and more industry, though with a wider channel and less dirt and smoke. We turned a sharp corner and there was Lake Michigan — sparkling, deep Mediterranean blue with a few pure white lacy jewels adorning the edge of the waves. The barges were gone, the air crystal clear and the backdrop of this masterpiece was the glorious skyline of Chicago. Our trip was complete.

We had crossed the wake we left a long time ago. Five years had passed. A tough, divisive campaign had been fought and won. Four years as mayor of America's greatest city (my assessment, admittedly) had also flowed past, as certainly as the rivers had flowed past our hull.

We are five years older, greyer, perhaps wiser, perhaps not. A significant portion of the latter part of our lives has become vanishing wave patterns, a trace of time and water moving inexorably toward eternity.

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HENRY 8:26 PM

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When is he coming back because we may need for him to run again for Mayor.

WOW-LOL 4:08 PM

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Finally got around to reading your story, Mayor. Great trip. As a teenager, I traveled the East Coast, from Montauk Point to St. Jean, just outside Montreal, Quebec on the Richelieu River. Though I'm land-bound now in San Antonio, I still remember the peaceful nights and the "slow" days. We had a smaller (26') 1936 Steelcraft Boat that had an old flat-head Hudson engine for power. Went 7 knots, tops. And yes, the trips were so relaxing. Thank you for sharing with us your experiences.

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