

J. P. Bell, Tom Kennon and I, three open boaters with a combined 90+ years of experience paddling whitewater, wanted to go for a Sunday afternoon paddle, probably on Frog Bayou. J. P. introduced me to whitewater canoeing over 20 years ago. He has good river sense, and has pulled me out of rivers on occasion. Tom and I have paddled together and taught together at Canoe School for over 15 years. Tom just completed his requirements for Level 4 (whitewater) ACA Canoe Instructor, solo and tandem. I have been certified at that level since 1995. The three of us paddle together whenever we can. That day we were all paddling solo canoes.

It was May 16, and an innocuous looking line of rain was approaching the Frog headwaters from Oklahoma. Just 6 days earlier, on May 10, a strong line of thunderstorms, some remnant of a bunch of Oklahoma tornadoes, had blown through Lee Creek and Crawford County. Early that Sunday afternoon on the 16th, the line picked up a lot of steam and dumped a bunch of rain at Winslow, Clear Creek headwaters. Clear Creek joins the Frog just above Mountainburg, and we wanted to see if the Clear Creek run from Chester to Ash Street (Mountainburg) was there. In the parking lot of the Baptist Church in Chester, we got our answer—Clear Creek had railroad ties and trees from upstream running with it, and did not offer the experience we sought.

We drove from Chester over to Arkansas 220 to check out Lee Creek. We stopped to look at the 220 Bridge steps, but Lee Creek there just looked like wide fast flowing water. It was up over the bottom step. When we drove to the take out steps below Buck and Flush, we ran into some kayakers from Fort Smith who had just run from the 220 Bridge. They said it wasn't too big, and our quick survey confirmed that. Later I checked the gauge at Short, and Lee was between 6.5 and a little over 7 feet, toward the upper end of optimum. We moved all three boats and gear to my vehicle and left Tom's truck at the take out.

We pulled in to the new Forest Service gravel parking lot just above Fall Creek and drove to within 30 yards of Lee Creek. We did have one other on the trip—John's dog Buckley. John had taken Buckley on many solo and tandem whitewater trips, and Buckley was a good canoe dog. Buckley has his own PFD and pouts if I go canoeing without him. John is living in Honolulu, and Buckley has been staying with us and canoeing with me. I was expecting nothing more than a moderate level, so I decided to take Buckley. He was designed for canoeing—half Black Lab and half Bassett Hound. He has a low center of gravity and readily high sides in a canoe when there is a threat of a flip. Otherwise, he stands very still.

Two things we noticed right away about the water in Lee Creek—it was muddy, and it had a lot of downed trees in it, some falling in from the banks and others out in the middle of the creek.

The trip was uneventful until we got below where Fall Creek flows in. A short distance downstream, the river turned to the right and a strainer made up of several trees extended from river left about 30 feet into the current. The current was fast, and I was following J. P. and Tom.

They had both cleared the strainer to river right, and I was paddling left to right across the current driving hard to get away from the strainer. I had started the move with plenty of time to avoid the strainer. I am a left-handed paddler, and my paddle hit a rock on the downstream side of the canoe, slid off, and the blade went under the boat. I was thrown off balance and flipped to my on side before I could low brace.

At this point things happened fast. I held onto my paddle and got upstream of the boat. The current was really fast, and within a few seconds I was committed to going into the strainer. I did notice downstream that J. P. had pulled his boat onto a gravel bar just below and river right of the strainer. My boat went into the strainer and broached. I was still in a defensive swimmer position until just before the boat lodged against the strainer with the bottom facing upstream. I was slightly toward the river left end of the boat, and the current was forcing me against the boat. I managed to push off the boat, face upstream and slide off the end of the boat nearest the bank. My back was now against the strainer, and I had moved a little closer to the bank.

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The current continued to force my back against the strainer. I made one last attempt to hold onto a limb that was above my head and downstream of me, but that was futile. I was already too far into the strainer. I got a breath, rolled into a ball, turned loose of the limb and let the current push me backward and down into the strainer. During those few seconds when I was upstream of the strainer and swimming, I was acutely aware of the danger. And in that second or two before I turned loose to let the current take me into the strainer, I was aware that my life could soon be over, but I was not resigned to die. I didn't panic. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I still had options. My mind took on a surprising clarity and peace.

When I let go and rolled into a ball, the current immediately propelled me backward and down under the trees. For a few seconds I was held fast under the water, and I could feel limbs against my back. But the limbs either broke or gave way, and I could see light coming toward my face as the current carried me along. When my head broke the water's surface, I don't think it had been more than ten seconds since I committed to go into the strainer.

I was already below J. P. and probably out of reach of a throw rope from him. He told me later that he was seriously considering trying to hit me with a rope when he saw me pop out downstream of the strainer. But when he beached his boat on the gravel bar, he pulled up next to a large water moccasin. His ethical dilemma was resolved for him when I swam past the reach of his throw rope. He was left to deal with the snake.

Tom was in his boat in the current and several yards downstream of me. He slowed his boat, and I caught up with him in probably a hundred yards or so. We were able to talk, and Tom offered his stern to me. I crabbed on, and he paddled us into the first available eddy. The eddy happened to be on river right, and the accident had happened on river left. I thought about Buckley for the first time. I could only imagine that he had drowned in the strainer or had gotten caught between the boat and the strainer. I couldn't wait to get back upstream to the site of the accident, but the vegetation on river right was incredibly dense and hiking through it seemed impossible. I could see J. P.'s boat still beached on the gravel bar about 300 yards upriver. We could see a reasonable eddy just downstream on river left, and Tom agreed that it was reasonable to put me on the stern of the boat again. He made that maneuver without any trouble.

I secured the boat's bow line to a tree. Tom and I each took a paddle to help us on the hike. Tom took his dry bag with the river survival and rescue kit he has accumulated over the years. We also took Tom's throw rope with 3/8" 4500# test Spectra line and a loop of tubular webbing about 8 feet long. We both had on swift water rescue PFDs with knives and quick release rescue belts and cow tails. I had prusik loops and carabineers in a PFD pocket. Tom also had prusiks and carabineers along with some pulleys. We were ready to start our hike along the river back to the accident site.

Larry Pearce

(To be continued)





The Lee Creek strainer two days later with about 2 feet less water.

Strainer Tale Part 2

The hike back upstream on river left probably wasn't more than 300 yards, but the thick river cane and lack of a trail we could follow made it seem much longer. I was somewhat aware of minor pain from my back and left thumb, but I was focused on getting back upstream to find out what had happened to Buckley. About half way back to the site, it began to rain heavily. We were in the middle of another brief thunderstorm. Tom got to the accident site ahead of me. As soon as he saw me, he yelled that Buckley was all right.

J. P. had resolved his ethical dilemma with the water moccasin, and was poised on the gravel bar in the middle of the river. He was probably 40 to 50 feet from the boat and had a clear view of the accident site. He had decided to stay with Buckley, but he had seriously considered pursuing me and Tom downstream to see if he could be of any help. For purposes of the recovery still ahead of us, he had made the right choice.

While waiting for us to return, J. P. had tried wading out into the current to see if he could get to Buckley. The water was swift and quickly became deep. Soon he was swimming in current and had to make it back to the gravel bar and his boat. He decided to stay put rather than risk becoming another victim.

J. P. could see that Buckley was hung up on the strainer, but he couldn't tell whether he had any injuries. He was convinced that the look in Buckley's eye was intended to communicate "Don't leave me here." He was afraid that if he pushed off downstream, Buckley might struggle to get loose, get more hung up and possibly drown. Then the thunderstorm had hit, and he was standing on the gravel bar in the middle of the creek.

Buckley seemed to be all right, but he was standing in water on top of the strainer and couldn't move. Some of the limbs from one of the cedar trees in the strainer were caught on his PFD.

The strainer was made up of three trees that had fallen into the river from the left bank and a bunch of other debris. The trunks of these trees extended into the river and their roots were still up on the bank. The river had cut away the river bank here, and from the bank where we were standing to the water level below was probably 4 or 5 feet. The largest of the trees was a hardwood with a trunk 15 to 18 inches in diameter. The other two trees were eastern red cedar with largest trunk diameters of 6 to 8 inches. Out in the worse part of the strainer and next to the bank other debris was caught by these trees, including a limb about 3 inches in diameter that extended upriver over the gunnel of my boat contributing to the forces holding it and pushing down on it. Buckley was not more than a foot downstream from the boat. The boat's bottom was facing upriver, and it was firmly pushed against the strainer for its entire length. The airbags were still inflated, and probably 1/3 to 1/2 of the boat was underwater.

The first decision was whether we could use the trunk of the largest tree to gain access to Buckley and the boat. The tree was very stable, and we decided that the risk was acceptable. I climbed down the trunk on hands and knees until I reached Buckley. The paddle I had been using when I turned over was still in the boat along with the foam pad I sat on to raise the height of the pedestal. They were not fixed to the boat, and I pulled them out and tossed them up to Tom. Then I stood up and started breaking the small cedar limbs that held Buckley. When he was free, I grabbed the loop on top of his PFD and assisted him up on the trunk. Then I attached a carabineer to the loop and attached the end of the throw rope Tom tossed me to the carabineer. Buckley walked up the trunk with Tom's rope providing him an extra margin of safety.

The sound of the water made communicating with J. P. difficult, but we managed to communicate that I wanted him to throw me his throw rope. He made a perfect throw covering the 40 to 50 feet and hit me squarely in my right hand. My perch was so precarious that I had already determined that I would not risk moving anything other than my hand and arm to catch the rope. I got access to the throw rope next to J. P. and looped the end of the rope under the

communicate that I wanted him to throw me his throw rope. He made a perfect throw covering the 40 to 50 feet and hit me squarely in my right hand. My perch was so precarious that I had already determined that I would not risk moving anything other than my hand and arm to catch the rope. I got access to the thwart closest to J. P. and looped the end of the rope under the thwart. I used another carabineer to connect the loop in the end of the rope to the rope extending back out to J.P. He pulled the rope, and I kicked against the gunnel that was out of the water.

The boat moved, but the limb extending upriver over the gunnel held it while the current continued to push it against the strainer. The ABS bent, and the boat reached a point where we couldn't move it any more.

Tom and I were close enough that we could talk, and we decided to attach his throw rope to a thwart on the end of the boat closest to the bank. The airbag below this thwart was pushed tightly against the thwart. I didn't have great access to the thwart from where I was, and my left thumb had really started to hurt. I couldn't push the large knot below the throw bag under the thwart. I untied the figure of eight knot below the bag and fed more rope through the foam block in the bottom of the bag. Then I was able to push the single strand of rope under the thwart. I tied a trace figure of eight in the end of the rope leaving a loop through which I placed a carabineer attached to the rope still in Tom's hands. We now had a rope around a thwart on each end of the boat. Tom's angle of pull was about 45 degrees relative to the bank. J. P.'s angle of pull was about 90 degrees to the current. He would be able to get the boat to the middle of the river and to the gravel bar when it came off the strainer. They both pulled, and I kicked against the gunnel where the limb held it. The boat came loose, and J. P. pulled it over to him.

J. P. released Tom's rope, and Tom reeled it back in. The worse was over, but I was getting tired, and still had to get back on the bank. Tom threw me the end of his rope, and I attached it to the carabineer on my cow's tail. When we were both ready, I began to climb back up the trunk on all fours while Tom kept tension on the rope. I got back on the bank without any problem. We sorted and packed gear. J. P. prepared to tow my boat down river to the eddy where we left Tom's boat.

The hike down river was uneventful. When we got to Tom's boat, we decided that Buckley could ride with him. We also decided to cut the run short and take out at the steps above the 220 Bridge. J. P. would hike to get Tom's truck at the steps below Buck and Flush.

My back injuries were minor, and the sprained thumb is improving in a splint. All in all, I was unbelievably lucky to survive going into the strainer. Had I been pushed under the boat, which is what the current would have done, I doubt that I would have survived. Managing to get away from the boat and going through the strainer where the limbs didn't hold me were keys to my survival. Surviving the experience was mostly luck. None of us saw Buckley approach the strainer. But since he ended up on top of the strainer, he must have learned more than how to high side. He must have swum aggressively toward the strainer and managed to pull himself up and onto it.

The recovery of Buckley and the boat went about as well as it could have. The three of us worked well together. Our river experience and swift water rescue training combined to help us do several things that led to a good outcome. We had the gear we needed to recover the boat, and the strainer provided a satisfactory platform for the dog and boat rescue. Most importantly, we didn't create any additional victims. We evaluated and managed the risk factors for each step of the rescue and recovery.

I am still exploring the "what ifs" that might have either prevented the whole episode or have put me in a safer position on the river. My first choice for how I could have avoided the strainer is a river bend set. As soon as I recognized the hazard, I should have begun a river bend set maneuver (back ferry toward river right and away from the strainer). As a left handed paddler, my paddle would have been on the upstream side of the boat where striking a rock would have been far less like to cause me to turn over. The back ferry maneuver would have also slowed me down as I crossed the current moving away from the strainer and given me more time to get where I needed to be. Trying to paddle forward across very swift flowing water had accelerated my approach to the strainer.

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The other thoughts relate to what I might have done differently once I was a swimmer. I knew immediately I was in great danger, but I stayed with the boat. Once I was in this position, I should have pushed the boat away from me and gone into an aggressive (forward) swimming position. I would have had a hard time pulling myself up and onto this strainer, but my odds of surviving would have been better. Another swimming maneuver which would probably have improved my chances would have been to face upstream, swim aggressively and set an upstream ferry angle toward the left bank. I might have reached the bank above the strainer. I would have at least slowed my approach to the strainer and given myself more time to consider other options. The bank was so steep and cut away on that side that I might not have managed to pull myself out even if I had reached the bank. Generally trees that fall into rivers are less likely to have limbs along the trunk closest to the roots.

I welcome your suggestions and your thoughts. I look forward to paddling again soon. Larry Pearce