

A Ride Down A River
By
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The Kinnickinnic River was here long before I was, and will be here long after I'm gone. The years I spent growing up on the Kinni are but a moment in its life, but are lifetime of memories for me. This is one of them...

“Oh-Oh” my brother screamed, as we rounded the bend in the river, “we’re in big trouble, Dale.” We stared in shock at the angry water. From our perch atop what now seemed to be quite a small tractor tire inner tube, we could see the river attacking the lower beams of the bridge that we were headed towards at break-neck speed. Just ten minutes earlier we had launched our “riverboat” about a quarter-mile up stream from the bridge. We hadn’t realized the fury of the river that early spring day.

This was supposed to be another of our many “fun” adventures on the Kinnickinnic River. At ages 12 and 13 the river had always been a part of our lives. It ran through the middle of the land that was a part of the dairy farm we grew up on in Kinnickinnic Township. Now our fun had turned into what could be a struggle to survive the rage of the swirling cold waters of the Kinni.

It was late April and my brother and I had decided to celebrate spring with a tubing trip down the river. We walked down to the river’s edge. It was just a hundred yards down the cow path that lead from the barn to the pasture. We could see that the river had spilled over its banks with the added spring snowmelt. The normally calm stream, which was usually no more than ten yards across, was now at least thirty yards wide. It was deep enough to completely cover the fences that stretched across the cattle crossing. “Wow,” I said, “this looks like fun.”

Excited by the prospect for adventure we raced up to the machine shed to find the inner tube. As my brother looked for the tire pump, I searched the rafters to find the large tractor tire inner tube I knew was stored there. “I see it!” I hollered.

The large black inner tube tumbled down from the rafters as I pushed on it with a two by four that I had found leaning up against the north wall of the shed. The tube was out of air, and covered with a winters worth of dust and grime. My brother had returned with the tire pump and was watching as the tube hit the ground. “We need a piece of plywood to put on the top of the tube,” he said. We looked around inside and outside the shed. He found a nice piece that was about four foot square. “This will work great,” he said.

We both took turns pumping. Slowly the tube filled with air and was soon bulging like an oversized glazed donut. We set the plywood sheet on top of the tube and admired our “riverboat”.

My brother rolled the tube down the cow path while I carried the plywood sheet. We pushed the tube out into the river, put the plywood on top, and climbed aboard for what was to be an exciting ride. Our “riverboat” was immediately grabbed by the fast moving current and pushed downstream. The normally placid river, strengthened by the melted snow, was now in

control. While we were able to somewhat steer the tube with our hands, it was apparent that the Kinnickinnic was in charge of this ride, not us.

We sat side-by-side watching the water boil around us as if it were heated by an unseen flame. The angry water grabbed at the sides of the inner tube as we were swept downstream. My brother laughed, excited by the adventure of it all, while I started to worry about what was happening to us. He yelled for me to look ahead downstream. What was normally a wide gentle bend in the river was now a whitewater course with large trees blocking our path. The powerful water pushed us toward the trees. We paddled hard with our hands to avoid them, and just missed several large tree trunks as the current pushed us around the bend.

Just as my brother yelled I looked up and saw the bridge that we were racing toward. I was scared, as scared as I have ever been in my life. There was no way that I could imagine us making it under the bridge without being wiped off the inner tube. I screamed at my brother, "We're never going to fit under the bridge!" He looked at me and we both moved to lie down on our stomachs, hugging the plywood. I didn't know how we were going to survive this.

The river was crashing against the center support beam of the bridge and swirled left and right as it raced to reach the opposite side of the structure. The water seemed to be only inches from the bottom of the bridge. The gap seemed too small for our prone bodies and the tube to fit through. The noise was deafening, it was almost as if a freight train were riding on an unseen track right beside our inner tube.

We tried to make ourselves somehow smaller. My only thought was to try and maintain my grip on the plywood. As we got closer to the bridge the sound of the water rushing under it increased in pitch. Our speed increased as the angry water pushed us just under the first crossbeam of the bridge. The daylight turned to darkness. At that moment we grazed the center support beam. The inner tube was violently spun around and I lost my grip.

Both of my legs slid off the plywood and my winter boots were immediately filled with cold water. I struggled to hang on and tried to pull myself back onto the plywood. The crossbeam caught my right arm and I was thrown from the safety of the inner tube into the river. In what seemed like a slow motion movie I watched my brother and the inner tube clear the bridge and race toward another bend.

Like an angry opponent in a desperate fight the cold dark water took a tight grip on my clothing and pulled me down deep into its soul. I struggled to pull myself to the surface, but the river slammed me into its gravel bottom taking total control of the moment. I lost all sense of direction and felt a calming darkness spreading over me.

"Are you ok?" "Dale, are you ok?" I could hear my name being called. As I opened my eyes I could see the outline of my brother standing over me. I was lying on the west bank of the river, just a hundred yards from the bridge. I didn't have any idea how I had gotten there, but somehow I had survived, and so had he.

We never told anyone about our wild ride down the river that day. I guess we both knew it was something best kept to ourselves.