

Adventures on the Kankakee

I, like so many country kids before me spent much of my childhood on the muddy Kankakee River. My folks told me early on that they had spent many hours on the river in their Old Town boat while mother was pregnant with me in 1958. Then, when I came along they actually put me in the boat in my bassinette! Today we would have to have the child strapped to a flotation device at the very least, and at the most, folks would frown on taking a child of this age on the water in such a small vessel!



*Bill and Ardith Cullen's first boat with me in a bassinette in the bow, summer of 1959.
The Kankakee River, Jasper County*

My folks were very familiar with the river. Bill Cullen, my Dad, grew up in Jasper County in and near Tefft. He and his friends Louie and Don Ketchum and others would walk north to Dunn's Bridge and swim the summer days away or fish with Dad's brother Bob's little boat. They even fitted a plank to the edge of the old Dunn's Bridge and dove off of it when the river was high. One boy would survey the river upstream for logs or other floating debris then call down when it was safe to "jump"! When I think of all the ways they could have killed themselves!

So the story goes.... my Dad's brother in law Harry Kasl got his first brand new car in 1954. Harry hooked the boat to the Chevy and drove down to the dock on the Kankakee for a day on the river. But, when he backed up to slide the boat in he forgot to set the brake before he got out and the whole thing, boat, trailer and new car went into the drink! They got it out, but not before taking photos of the hilarious soggy tragedy!



*Bill Cullen and Harry Kasl in 1954 with Harry's brand new Chevy
In the Kankakee River*

I loved my time on the river, and I am sure I got that from my Dad. What exactly was it about this brown, shaggy tree lined, winding waterway? Certainly not her vast beauty, though at times you could call her beautiful. It was not the pristine swimming, as you never knew what you were touching under the water. Fish, logs, glass, who knew? As a little one I never cared, but as I got older, the question loomed in my mind each time I waded in! But it was something that made me love her, even if I couldn't put my finger on it then.

My earliest memories on the water are from our red and white Glasspar boat. The low hum of the Mercury engine as we glided along on the rather slow flow of the water. I would look up at the trees, the clouds and birds passing by my field of view, sometimes closing my eyes just to feel the warmth of the sun on my face. I would let my arm fall over the side of the boat and skim my hand along the surface of the water "motor boat like" as we went along.

Sometimes we were just out for a tour of the water, and other times we were on our way to a special place to anchor or tie off. Dad knew all of the spots to stop and play. Mother would pack meals and we would feast on her wonderful cooking along a sandy bank. Sometimes just us three and sometimes meeting friends and family along the way.



*On the Kankakee River summer of 1959 I am just a few months old.
Left to Right Harry and Adelaide Kasl, Celia and Larry Hittle and
my Mother Ardith Cullen with me.*

In the summer, my folks would plan an evening on the water. Mom would have dinner packed with all the fixin's when Dad arrived home from work at precisely 4:20 pm. He would change, hook up the boat to his Chevy pickup and down we would go from Kouts to Dunn's Bridge where we often put in. There is nothing like burgers on the grill and potato salad enjoyed amongst the sounds of the river. Birds singing, bugs buzzing, and an occasional fish jumping. Of course, no meal was complete without roasted marsh mellows on a stick!

Speaking of fish, Dad took me fishing just once. I could not keep quiet as he begged "Stop talking, you are scaring the fish!" He soon tired of my failed efforts and we pattered back to shore, never catching a fish. Those moments when I had all of his attention were a treat though, and I didn't think of this day as a complete failure.

Time spent on the Kankakee wasn't always on the water. We hiked her shores and swamps too. Morrell mushrooms. I hated them, and still do, but my folks loved them. We would drive down to Mrs Hoehn's farm land along the river and park on the "Old Coaley" railroad as everyone called it back then. From there, paper bags and walking sticks in hand, we would venture out checking each and every tree for those little cream colored delicacies. "Check the north side of each tree", my Mother would call out to me, and shhhhh, watch for animals". But it was hard for me to be quiet as I ran from tree to tree, leaping over logs and running around briars and standing water. When I would tire from all of this activity Dad would carry me on his shoulders until years later when I became much too big.



The “ Old Coaley” Rail Road embankment today running up to 500 East near Tefft. I remember it not that long after the rail ties had been removed. There were no trees growing alongside it and Black Angus cattle grazed happily along it. I also recall large wooden pilings and beams at the water’s edge on both banks; the very last remnants of the bridge that took the track over the river and west. The bridge, rails and cattle are gone now too.

When we had found enough mushrooms for a meal, we would head home and Mother would cut and soak the mushrooms, then dip them in egg batter to fry on the stove. But to me, the joy was in the searching and not the eating!

One weekend Dad got it in his head we were going to borrow the old Benkey family cabin along the river. Again, Mother dutifully packed all we would need and we set off for the “great outdoors”. When we found it I can remember Mother gasping! She spent the next hour sweeping, cleaning and checking for mice. I don’t think she slept much that night, for worrying that I would run off to explore or a mouse would curl up next to her on the cot! It was all great fun for my small town Dad and his adventurous daughter. I imagined we were out west in the mountains dodging Indians and mountain lions! Well, I was many years too late for the Indians of Indiana, and as for large predators, they were long gone from the Kankakee marsh as well.

The river changed for me over the years; changed for all of us. From the early stories of hunting and trapping her vast swamps and bayous, to the time I knew her in the 1960’s with few homes or people along her shores, to today, with new bridges and low water levels tarnishing her natural charm.

Mother is gone now, but Dad and I drive down and visit The Kankakee from time to time when I come home. I cannot help but feel at home there. Fond memories flow over me and questions about her history arise.

I have learned a great deal from others in our area who are also interested in the history of the river. One such source is the Kankakee River Historical Society. Articles and books on the river can be found in the extensive genealogy department of the Porter County Public Library in Valparaiso.

I am thankful for my time on the river with my family and hope others will explore this historic waterway as well. There is still time to hike, swim, boat and fish, and to make family memories of their own.

*Kendra (Cullen) Helvey
Poplar Grove, IL*