

All About Boats

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I pull my van up to the Saline River near my house. The water has gone down from all of the recent rain. The ground looks as though it has been rinsed with the rains of the past week. I sit for a moment in the van watching the water roll by, calm and steady. The water has a slow rhythmic pattern constant and solid. I think about the boat in my yard and the desire to put it in the water. I notice the river splits and wonder where the water leads too. *How far down does the stream go? Is it deep?* I will only know when the boat hits the water, and I can putter over there to find out where it will lead me. I believe it is the road less traveled by some, and that is the road that I want to be on.

I open the door of my van, stop and listen. The water splashes on the shore line against the rocks, lapping into little pools here and there between them. The melodic serenity is soothing to my body. I feel my pulse slow to the rhythmic pattern of the water. It is as if nature is beginning to flow through my body.

I walk along the uneven shore line. The trees wave with the warm breeze that blows from time to time. I notice a man in a canoe with a pole in the river. His pole is not moving, no bobber to watch, just a line disappearing into the flow of the river. I feel his stresses disappear right along with the fishing line to be washed downstream by the river.

I look around on the river. I notice the life all around. Then, I see something in the distance. *What is that?* It jumps up and splashes on the water. As I try to focus on the critter in the water, I notice a family of squirrels jumping from limb to limb. While I am watching the animals in and on the water, I realize my problems have drifted away. I am not thinking about the project; I have left the bills on the table. The chore list is forgotten for now, and my only thought is the water in front of me.

I begin to bounce back and forth about my own boat. Thoughts float through my head about all of the different things I can be doing with my family. The water sprays in my face as I am bouncing over the waves. The boat slows, and the waves push the boat a little more. Water is slapping the sides of the boat. The rocking lulls me into a sense of calm. Then, I go back to the day I received the boat.

It is cold and windy. The grass crunches under my feet as I walk up to the door. A typical brown brick house in a basic subdivision. The trees creak and groan around me with each icy breeze. The howl of the wind along with the clatter of branches makes the dark night seem even colder than it is. I shiver to try and shake off the passing winds. Alfred greets me kindly with a quick hand shake before jamming his hands back into his pockets.

Alfred quickly walks over to the boat that he has advertised.

“So, this is her, what do you think?” Alfred states as he slaps the back side of the boat. Before I can answer he begins telling me why he has the boat and why he is giving it away. “

“I got the boat for the motor for this here other one, and I just have too many boats and cannot keep them all. Have you ever owned a boat before?”

I quietly state, “No, this would be my first.”

Alfred stiffens up a bit with a proud smirk on his face, “Well, let me tell you, this here is a good little boat and just about the only type that I would own, How many in your family? Don’t matter, there are no holes and the craft is solid. Whatcha thinking?”

Again I can hardly speak before Alfred is walking around the boats to show me another boat that he owns.

Before I know it Alfred wants us to go into the back yard to look at the other crafts that he has. I large wooden door to a privacy fence splinters as Alfred lifts it open fighting the wind all the time. We squeeze through the opening in the fence as the winds howl and push against us trying to get through the gate. The back yard is small, mostly dirt, a small concrete patio is to my right, and directly in front of me are several boats. Some of these boats are covered with tarps, but mostly they are just sitting in the elements of the night. Dark fiberglass, chipped paint, leaves, and even a few branches are inside the boats. Some have seats that are all together, while in others there is only one seat, and it looks as though it has been in a bad knife accident.

The excitement that Alfred has, as my son and I begin to look over the boats, is not contained for long. “This one the lower half of the engine is bad.” I spin around and squint into the darkness to see which one Alfred is pointing too.

“I have the motor to this one in the garage, and this one I like to take out on the lake but she is weak.”

Weak I thought *what does he mean by weak?*

“I then have this fun little sea dipper over here.”

He rips a tarp off and there is an older looking jet ski. It is rough looking with the paint faded and the edges seem like they have bumped into several things on the docks.

“Let’s head back to the garage, and get out of this wind.”

We all agree and tread back through the crunching grass following a beam of light that lingers slightly over the old wooden fence. A tight squeeze through the gate, and the clanking sound of the latch, and we are all by the garage lights.

He opens his garage door and everywhere in little piles were organized boat pieces from different engines. He points to the different pieces, explaining in detail what each is and how each of these items got to his garage. Being that I’m a total novice about boats, he

could see the lost look on my face and began to describe things in simpler terms so I could put things into perspective.

“A boat motor has a top half and a bottom one. This is like a car with the engine and transmission. Each has to work together for you to go anywhere.”

I nod while shivering and try to crack a smile as my cheeks feel as though they have frozen in the winds.

“Did you know to put transmission fluid into a carburetor to clean up the engine? The fluid is a detergent and she’ll smoke like crazy ‘til she burns the fluid off but before you know it she will be running like a top. May have to do it more than once and try to be some place remote on the water or it can cause quite a fuss.”

I look amazed, and thought *I wonder if that would work on my son’s old truck*. I wanted to record the night as to not forget all of the information he was trying to tell me. Some of it was lost in the night due to the cold and just trying to keep up. Alfred kept bouncing from one thing to another.

“This is a tongue to another trailer I have, and all of these hitches go to one boat or another. You gotta hitch on that big old van of yours? I am sure she’ll pull this boat no problems. I use my little truck over there to pull all of this.”

He pointed to an older dark green base model truck in the dark. It was a midsized truck and looked like a Chevy S-10. There were several hitch balls attached to different receivers on the ground. Many of them were of different heights and sizes.

“You never know what type of trailer you will be pulling, so you have to have these different types of hitches in order to pull anything. Your van looks about the right height for the boat I am giving you.”

“Let’s hook her up! Ya’ll look a lil cold.”

Then he chuckles and smiles. It seems that he is in his own world and nothing bothers him at all once he gets to talking about boats. I quickly bounce up and down trying to get to my van quickly. I jump in hoping to find some sort of warmth left in the van, but we have been at Alfred’s house for almost an hour. The van is just as icy as the outside, just without the winds. I start it up, and begin to turn it around. Alfred smiling waving his hand in the air;

“Come on back, almost there..... a little further.... Good!” I think for a minute as I feel the air from the van slightly warming, *can I just stay here a little while longer*. I open the door and feel the cold slap against my body.

The boat is heavier than it looks as we lift it onto the hitch. We check the trailer lights, blinkers, and brakes to make sure we will be seen driving home.

“Call me if ya ever wanna talk about the boat, or have any more question.” Alfred sticks his hand out to shake mine. “It was great meeting you and I hope ya enjoy her.”

Alfred seems to care for these boats like they are part of his family. We drive home with the boat waving in the wind. My son, occasionally peeks at the mirror and watches the trailer wave in the lane on the highway.

A week passes, and I have passed the boat in my driveway each day. I feel that she has been calling out to me, wanting to be brought back to life. I look at the boat in the daylight. Some of the wires are just cut, and hanging under the dashboard. A large thick cable is in the back that leads to nothing. I follow it to the front and realize it connects under the dash to the steering wheel. Dirt and leaves are in abundance on the boat, and a good cleaning should help these problems out. The paint is old and chalky looking form of dark blue on the bottom and great with little sparkles of metal flake on top. I need to head out to a boat shop while I have time today, instead of just staring at the boat.

Staring will get me nowhere, I think.

I take my paperwork that I have received from Alfred to the Revenue Office. Just like a car, the boat has to be assessed and titled along with the trailer. This is the only downside to a boat, taxes. I take a number and wait. Looking around, I notice there are all sorts of pamphlets on boating and boating safety. Great, reading material while I wait. There are only 14 people in front of me!

The first pamphlet I pick up is, "The Handbook of Arkansas Boating Laws and Responsibilities." In this book there is basic information about where to place the decals on the side of the boat. These are the decals concerning the registration numbers of the boat. The registration shows that the boat is legal and allowed on Arkansas waterways. This is important information that is needed to be allowed to enjoy my new boat on the water.

Next, I find out about the laws on who is allowed to drive the boat. If a child is under the age of 12 then someone else has to be over the age of 21. This goes on about the age requirements, but I notice that everyone born after 1986 must undertake a boating safety course. Some rules affect larger boats than the one I currently own, and the cutoff seems to be at 23.5 feet.

Type II fire extinguishers, life jackets for everyone on board, and ventilation systems. *What do they mean by a ventilation system, it is an open boat?* I read on and realize that the ventilation system is for keeping engine fumes moving out of the boat near the engine in the back. This also prevents carbon monoxide poisoning. I did not think that being in an open area such as a boat could cause someone to get carbon monoxide poisoning. Of course there are the basics such as waste dumping and driving under the influence, which all seem like common sense, so I skip over them. Looking up I still have six more people in front of me. *On to the next pamphlet, I think.*

Thicker and a lot more reading involved, the pamphlet states a lot of the same information that was in the first, just in more detail. Navigational rules seem to be an important section though. These are similar rules to the ones on the roadways. Horns seem to be a way of communication on the water. When passing a boat from behind, blowing a

horn twice indicates that you are about to pass the boat in front on the left, if one short blast is used then you are passing on the right. This does not happen until the boat in front acknowledges with a duplicate horn blast.

Waterways do not have lines to mark lanes similar to roads. Two boats can actually be heading straight towards one another. Port to port passing is preferred (each boat moves to the right) is done by signaling with a single horn blast. This does not mean that a boat cannot pass another on the left side. Left side is considered starboard passing and is done by two short horn blasts from each boat. Many things seem to be communicated with a single or double horn blast to another boat. One blast means to the right (port) and two blasts is to the left (starboard). Simple forms of communication allow for safer travel on the waters.

Lights are an important factor with boats too. On the bow of the boat should be two lights. Unlike headlights, the port side should be red and the starboard side should be green. There is a white light that should be on a pole near the transom or engine area. These lights make it easier to figure out which way a boat is heading by the lights that are visible. The colors are always the same to avoid confusion. This gives me a basic knowledge of what I need to have on the boat once it is water ready. Now I want to understand more about the reasons for boating itself and the community of people within.

Finally, my number is called. I pop up like I have won a prize. In a way I feel I have, I am next, and it only took 45 minutes! The lady looks over the bill of sale for signatures in the right area. She then asks me how large of an engine does the boat have. I explain that I have not put an engine on the boat. "Anything over 50HP will require you to have insurance on it." Then she goes on shuffling papers and typing on the computer. The tags for the trailer cost \$41.00 and she hands me some paperwork to fill out and mail back in. I look at the paperwork and it is about placing the numbers for the trailer and boat and how I do this. I am to check a box and mail it back in, after that the department will send me my title to both the trailer and the boat.

I go to a local boat shop and begin to browse around aimlessly, but truly looking lost, not knowing exactly what to look for. The walls are filled with all sorts of different items. On shelves there are several colored seats. Grays, whites, blue, and tan seem to be the colors on anything with a cushion. Silver or satin aluminum was the color for almost everything else. Many of the items, I have no idea what are, and by the dust on some items, others don't know either. Everyone inside seems too busy to notice my meandering through the store, and I decide that it is time for me to come back another day. I turn around, and there is a man standing behind me. He is darkly tan, wearing cutoff jean shorts, a tank top, and a hat that is curled up on the edges and looking old and tattered.

"My name is Donnie... Whatcha lookin fer?"

His accent was thick and southern. He seemed to be totally relaxed and looking for a conversation.

"I am not sure, I haven't figured out where to start first." I say softly.

"We'll whatcha got. What kind of boat do yer have?"

I give a short synopsis of my little boat and the condition. Donnie seems pleased as he is smiling from ear to ear leaning on a metal shelf as I am talking.

"Well hell son, do you know about the type of lights to keep on the front of the boat, do ya have any flares, what type of safety equipment do ya have on her?" He was quick to roll with the questions. The blank looks on my face told him all he needed to know about my boating knowledge.

"Let's get down to basics." He points to a metal light on the shelf with a green lens on the right side and a red one on the other. "These have to be on the front of the boat. Do ya have a beacon light on a pole on the boat, gotta have that light, helps others ta see ya in da dark. Easy to stay out too late in and it a get dark on ya." I thought about it and nodded, remembering where a pole was on the back of the boat that was broke in too. *So that is what that is*, I thought to myself.

"How many people she hold?" Donnie asks quickly.

"I am not sure, four or five I think." Donnie smiles, and then he begins to explain on the boat there is a plate by the steering wheel that will give me all sorts of information. The plate will tell me about the proper size motor to put on the boat, along with size, weight limits, and the amount of people it will safely carry. "There is even a formula to figure out how many people a boat can hold."

Donnie's voice fades into the distance along with the dusty parts, I could hear the voices of others talking about boat parts and if orders have come in. The shop was dimly lit, with a grey concrete floor. I saw where the shelves had been once before and wondered what could have been there in the past. The windows were dingy, and there was red painted writing that I could see the paint brush strokes. Thoughts of all the new information, along with prices began to flood my head. The guy's laughter disrupts my thoughts as I hear the sound of an old cash register drawer being slammed shut.

Donnie seemed to enjoy teaching a novice about boats, and he explained the serenity of being on the water. A calming sensation seemed to come over him, as he drifted into another world describing his sail boat and a setting sun.

"There is something to be said about watching the sun rise and hearing the waves lap against the side of the boat. Gently rocking back and forth, hearing the gulls in the distance. It's a whole other world!"

I notice a light in Donnie's eyes as I hear his voice gain a sense of peace. His accent seems to drift away by the sea of thoughts. I began to imagine being out on a lake with water all around as the sun slowly sets. I have always enjoyed the lake, and I drift off to a camping trip with my family on the lake. I remember watching as people pulled up in their

boats bouncing about and talking about being on the water. Their happiness seemed to spill out of them as they bounded out of the boat.

Donnie walks over to a boat and begins talking about the motor and what needs to be done to keep the engine running. Looking at the cables and, he ran his hands down them almost as if he was checking to make sure they were hooked up correctly. The boat is new and gleamed in the dull light. The black paint on the engine reflected images in the light. He grips the cables, and begins to explain that the one he was holding is called the trim. This one controls steering as he pointed to a thick cable.

Little details began to spill out of his mouth. Different little things such as the lights in the front of the boat, he points to. He quizzes me to find out more information about what I knew and did not know about the boat.

“What type of fire extinguisher do you have? You should get a flare gun. Don’t just buy any type of life jackets, and be sure to have extras.”

I stumble to answer, only not fast enough as I do not know the answers to all of the questions. He grins, and laughs a little.

“Let me share some information with you,” he states in a calm and prideful voice.

“Being safe and having what you need to make sure you are safe will make all the difference when you are out on the water. Check with the DMV about the laws in Arkansas, ‘cause the fines can be steep. For extra parts, check with a boat junk yard; they are a great place for some things cheap!”

He seems to get excited about this idea. He mentions that there is an abundance of boat yards in Florida, and it is where he goes to find the extra parts.

“What size anchor do you have?”

“I haven’t picked one up yet.” I state thinking *What difference does it make?*

“An anchor is an important factor, and you should always cast it on the port side of the bow of the boat, and make sure you have the proper length of cable and chain. An anchor just danglin in the water does no good, if it is not on the ground, stopping the boat. Also, if ya toss it off the stern of the boat by the motor you risk sinking the boat!”

This makes sense as I listen and try to understand. I feel as though I am a student in a classroom about to learn from the Great Whale himself. I listen as Donnie explains about how the engine weight and the anchor can pull the back end of the boat down and before I would know it the boat would be flooded with water. *Not a good outcome for a first time boater*, I thought.

Donnie shares with me the information about his love for boats. He tells me how all of his life he has always owned some sort of boat and is now living in Florida on a sail boat. As he talks about the sail boat, I can see his eyes almost get misty. It is as if he is back on the boat enjoying the serenity that the boat creates. He explains that there is nothing like

waking up in the morning gently rocking back and forth on the ocean. He then explains that he gets up and walks out on the deck watching the fog from the night before lift as the day awakens.

“It is as if the sea is personally saying good morning to you. The water splashes against the boat telling you in a calm voice that everything is going to be ok for the day.”

He then stops speaking like he is going there for a moment of calming. He talks about the water being part of us and how we are all in some way connected to the water. I can feel his love for the water and how the ocean has become part of who this man is. He speaks of such a passion, but in a calming way about the water and his boat. He even explains that when he had a small boat and would spend the weekend on the lake how he felt the same way.

“Water is water, and being on it is wonderful, no matter where you live, and a boat gives you that ability to go where others are not so ya can see things that are only obtainable by a boat.”

Now I am beginning to understand about the water. I think back to a time when I was in Boy Scouts as a Scoutmaster and we went out on the lake in canoes. The water was cold, as it was early spring. I had been to this lake many times before on camp outs but this time was different. I was able to explore a small part of the lake that cannot happen without a boat. I watched the wake each canoe in front of me carved through the water, and listened to the sounds of the oars rubbing against the metal canoes. It was so fresh, I could almost feel myself going back in time to that day. . . .

The trees lean over in the water as if taking a drink. When I dip my paddle into the water, I notice the water teeming with life. We stop for a moment to watch a turtle walking on the bottom of the water. Our presence is of no concern to the turtle. The water is crisp and clear except for the small green clouds from the turtle’s movement. I look around and realize that we are about fifty feet from the shore. What a wonderful site to sit for a moment and just watch the life in the water all because of a little boat.

I notice how easy we are all communicating with one another. As each of the boys talk in their canoes their voices echo off the trees and carry from boat to boat. The laughter is everywhere amongst the five canoes. Joking, fun, and a sense of freedom fill us all while we paddle through the water.

We stop on a shore line and scamper out of the boats to explore the newly discovered land. It is the woods and there are no roads, paths, trails or anything to suggest people have been here before. Our imaginations run wild as if they have discovered a new world, never discovered before. This discovery is because of a simple boat and a couple of paddles. There are no big motors on the boats, no fancy radios, just a simple metal canoe and some wooden paddles, that create this world of fun and entertainment. Everyone seems to be relaxed while on the water and enjoying the moment. We all get lost in the time on the water and forget about all things that need to be accomplished during the day.

It is as if the water takes us to a place we cannot imagine and blanket us with a sense of joy while washing away our worries of the day.

These thoughts cause me to lose focus for a moment as they come flooding into my memory. I think about how I want to get my boat on the water so I can enjoy these same experiences with my family. A weekend camping trip can become an exploration on the water with a boat. A little work can create a summer of fun and enjoyment. My family has always enjoyed hiking trails and fishing on the shore line, but with this boat I can see the excitement in their eyes as they dream of the day we put this boat on the water.

I thank Donnie for all of the information that he has given me. I feel refreshed in the thoughts of my boat and what it will become. I do not see all of the work ahead, but the years of fun and relaxation that the boat will create. The thought of something bringing my family closer together is definitely worth the work.

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