Bestselling author Rinker Buck wanted to - Berkshire Eagle, The (Pittsfield, MA) - October 8, 2022 - page C09
October 8, 2022 | Berkshire Eagle, The (Pittsfield, MA) | CHRISTOPHER MARCISZ | Page C09

'LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI'

Eagle correspondent

Long before he hit the bestseller list with his new account of floating a modified raft from Pennsylvania to Louisiana, Rinker Buck started his career as a general assignment reporter for The Berkshire Eagle. It was 1973, and the paper had earned a national reputation as a great small newspaper, even winning a Pulitzer for editorial writing.

Buck was just out of college and talked his way into a job by impressing publisher Lawrence K. "Pete" Miller with his command of tactical details at the Battle of Gettysburg. As a reporter, he quickly developed a reputation as the kind of reporter who would find his own way of doing things, which didn't always sit well with more traditional- minded editors. Some of the older ones hesitated to assign him sensitive stories because, as they put it, "he would do something with it."

In a recent interview in Williamstown, Buck recounted that backhanded compliment with pride. "I was ambitious beyond my abilities," he confessed, though he already understood that "there's always something more if you want to find it."

Buck only stayed in the Berkshires a few years, then moved on to write for magazines in New York and spent a long time as a feature writer at The Hartford Courant. And he wrote books, including a memoir about The Eagle, "First Job: A Memoir of Growing Up at Work," and one about his experience as a teenager flying a Piper Club airplane cross-country with his brother in "Flight of Passage."

In his more recent projects, he has taken his approach - a nerdy obsessive reading and research, diving headlong into experiences, and writing it up with his self-deprecating charm and honesty - to big topics in American history. In 2015, he wrote "The Oregon Trail," in which he retraced the 2,000-mile journey from Missouri to Oregon in a mule-drawn covered wagon.

And his new book is another take on a great historic thoroughfare. "Life on the Mississippi: An Epic American Adventure" is the story of how he conceived and carried out - against the advice of a chorus of concerned friends, family members, and strangers - building a wooden flatboat and traveling by river from Pittsburgh to New Orleans. The book came out in August and spent several weeks on the New York Times bestseller list.

"I couldn't possibly reinvent word-of-mouth traditions that had lain dormant for more than 150 years," Buck writes. "I was doing something different, more realistic for my times - intellectually stalking, but not slavishly imitating, a formative era in the expansion of America.

His improvised boat - appropriately named Patience - traveled a well-known 19th-century route along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. It bobbed along enormous and powerful rivers, chocked with fallen trees and shifting sandbars, amidst a steady flow of commercial barges steaming back and forth on what remains one of the nation's most important and busy waterways.

For Buck it is about unlocking something more than can be found in books - though he did seem to read every memoir, pamphlet, and account of river travel from the era he could find.

"It wasn't a stunt, it was a way of placing yourself where history happened," he said. "You can't help but discover what [those travelers] were going through."

It was a way to jump into a "blind spot of history." Buck described how river transportation was an enormous accelerant of growth, "the Rosetta Stone for understanding the American economy," which explains how a still primitive agricultural society could expand into new space and cheaply bring to market huge amounts of goods. It was 10 times cheaper to ship cargo on a flatboat floating down the river than to haul it overland over

the Appalachians to the Eastern seaboard.

And the rivers became their own social ecosystem. The sturdy, no-frills boats were built on riversides up north, loaded up, floated down, unloaded at port, then broken up for lumber for buildings or pavement. Every step of the way included a whole system of tradesmen to feed, supply, and entertain the travelers.

It became another kind of melting pot. While on remote farmsteads and even in city neighborhoods people tended to cluster with people of their own background. "You couldn't do that on the rivers," Buck said. "Everyone was mixed up."

The book became an experiment in seeing how that might have worked. Unlike a straightforward history, Buck's voice becomes a character itself. He is an easy-going storyteller, sometimes

IMAGE PROVIDED BY SIMON & SCHUSTER

perhaps a little pompous, but with a deep reserve of self-deprecating charm. It comes across as he recounts learning the art of river navigation, managing his revolving crew, and in little disasters like breaking several ribs in an ill-considered effort to preserve a breakfast tray as the boat hits an unexpected wake.

Much of the journey was trial and error. "Go slow and trust common sense," Buck writes at one point. "The practical coping invited by the river had once allowed hundreds of thousands of 19th-century boatmen, former farmers, adventuring preachers, out-of-work schoolteachers and printers, mostly amateurs like me, to float through and find the new America."

The romance of the American frontier quickly moved from the rivers of the Midwest and South to the Great Plains and the Rockies. Travel by dumpy boat was replaced by technological marvels like the railroads, and later cars and airplanes. But the layers of the story are there as Buck and his crew move along it, past withering old industrial towns, once-thriving river-ports, and long stretches of wilderness.

And he doesn't flinch at the other parts of the story that have been shoved aside. Long passages discuss the details of the genocidal policy and removing Native Americans from their ancestral lands, and how the entire economy of the lower Mississippi was built on the labor of enslaved people.

"I realized I was making a passage through the darkest chapters of American history," Buck writes, and felt "more profoundly informed about the country I love."

Learning how to get along is a part of the project, especially with the crewmates he gathers for parts of the trip. Some earn his respect and admiration, but others plainly get on his nerves. He frequently complains about the historic reenactor he invited to come along as a guide, who brings several costume changes. The boatbuilder he works with flatly ignores specific requests, like for a working compass. And he notes many of them have sharply different political viewpoints, which they are happy to explore while tied up for the night along the river but have no place in maneuvering a clunky wooden box through a busy shipping channel between enormous cargo barges and sandbars.

Buck defends his candor and honesty about his impressions of his crew.

"Writers articulate what you can't articulate yourself," he said. "You are licensing people to feel normal about themselves."

But there is throughout an awareness that things aren't what they seem, and Buck is the one telling the story and reaching to connect with readers. That includes a lot of what he was personally going through, like caring for his elderly mother at the end of her life, a situation he knows he shares with many other Boomers. And he notes the sharp differences between the rumors and fears he hears about river travel with the reality he experiences. "The flatboat experience was an ideal vehicle for learning about human nature," he said, and that "going down the river isn't about what you think it's going to be."

Buck said a lot of his approach began here in the Berkshires, recalling those Friday evenings when he would have a chance to try out new things, even if it sometimes got him into trouble. He remembered covering a veterans group meeting in Pittsfield and focusing on their raucous socializing rather than the somber

patriotic speeches. Or checking into the cars at a drive-in showing X-rated films so he could report that "all the social pillars of Pittsfield" were there ("Well, I wasn't there," a furious Miller scolded the young Rinker on Monday).

Charles Bonenti was a desk editor those Friday nights who went on to a long career as an editor and writer at the paper, and remembered him well.

"He was a likable guy," Bonenti said. "He was not mean, you know how some reporters can be aggressive or arrogant. He wasn't that way, he was funny and warm."

About Buck's memory of him as an editor, Bonenti said he always tried to be a collaborator with writers.

"The other editors were older than I was," he said. "Maybe I was more sympathetic, maybe I didn't know as much."

Bonenti said even while it could still be straightlaced, in terms of design and tradition, it was a place that nurtured its writers and built a real sense of camaraderie.

"It was a wonderful time," he said.

Buck said it gave him just enough room to find his style, along with a respect for hard work. "I think the origins of what I'm doing were all there," he said.