

**Article by Rick Carter, winner of the Second Annual Powell River Regatta on April 23, 2016. Article appeared in Chattanooga SurfSki and in Charleston SurfSki magazines.**

Eight miles north of Tazewell, Tennessee lie 158 acres tucked into a loop of the Powell River. Nearly surrounded by two and a half miles of riverfront, this high hill could be a medieval fortress on the Rhine. It is where Don Oakley established the Well Being Retreat Center. He is the founder of a non-profit foundation of the same name. Last year, the Claiborne County Chamber of Commerce, along with Don, his wife Patti Bottari, his staff and a large force of volunteers, hosted the inaugural Powell River Regatta, a 12-mile canoe and kayak race <https://www.wellbeingretreatcenter.org/>

Fourteen miles north is Cumberland Gap National Historic Park. This part of Tennessee is the perfect getaway for a family seeking to escape fast food, hotel chains and shopping malls. Whether a harried executive or weary drone under the yoke of commerce, it is the ideal location for mental decompression.

The afternoon before that first race, Chris Hipgrave conducted a free paddle clinic. By nightfall we were sitting around a campfire in a large grassy area near the water's edge. War stories and tales of drunken cruelty ensued and I found myself explaining to Ted Burnell how I had removed the brakes from my bicycle to reduce weight for a triathlon. (My background was running and I was a little obsessive about lightening the load). When I loaned this bike to a friend for another race, he had issues about the missing brakes. Ted listened thoughtfully, nodded and declared, "Brakes are for quitters."

Validation is so gratifying. I liked Ted immediately.

This year, I rolled up to the launch site just before dark, eager for more paddling fellowship. Before I could get out of the cab, fat raindrops began to pelt the truck and roll down the windshield like small white marbles. There would be no campfire and it was too wet to pitch the tent. I slept in the truck.

Dinner was served that night in the conference center. Not only was tent camping available, but also brand new, sparkling clean showers. Kayaks could be rented from Riverside Kayak Rentals. You pick up the kayak at the starting area and leave it at the finish line – no transport required. The modest \$30 entry fee included a shuttle back to the start for all participants. It is without question the most well organized paddle event I have ever attended. My only regret is that I failed to get all of the information in time. Here is a link for those of you considering next year: <http://www.powellriverblueway.org/>

By morning, the rain had stopped. It was a short walk across the parking lot to where they were serving hot coffee and breakfast. Things were looking up. The water level was lower this time and the river a little bony, but at least the sun was out. People busied themselves with race preparation and the anticipation began to build.

A skinny, old man showed up with an Epic V-7. He looked too frail to take it down off of his truck, but if the man was slow, at least the boat was fast. I had seen Eric Mims paddle this model over 10 mph in a short sprint at James Island County Park. It was as if some geezer had shown up at a Volkswagen Beetle Rally with a Ferrari. Thanks to the boat, he had a good shot at the purse if he didn't get lost on the way or forget why he came.

Mississippi may be the Hospitality State, but the warmth of those in Tennessee is unmatched. Attendance had more than doubled from last year. Folks came from as far away as Pennsylvania, Ohio, Minnesota and even California. This thing will explode as word gets around. Despite the number of participants, starting times were staggered by category so that things remained comfortable and orderly. Fifty-four volunteers were there for any assistance you might need. The launch site incorporates a huge cement "staircase" of five or six steps which allows you to enter your boat without muddy, wet feet. Trees line the banks and shade is abundant throughout the 12 miles.

Approaching the finish line, the throb of Rock and Roll could be heard from the pavilion of Riverside Kayak Rentals where they were serving delicious BBQ. Combined with the cheers of spectators, it was the perfect motivation for that final push. Predictably, that old man in the V-7 took first place. Athletes with real talent will soon discover this race and those at the tip of the spear will provide an exciting contest. Watching Hipgrave and Mims dice it out in the last 200 meters would be a worthwhile show. Meanwhile, I need to go see Waylon and Eric and buy myself a Ferrari. Fortunately, it is one of the most affordable boats they sell.

Powell River is in a class of its own when it comes to beautiful destinations. After the race, Logan White of the LaFollette Press was interviewing participants. He asked me why I found this race to be so extraordinary. There are many reasons but the most compelling for me is the brilliance of springtime in that small corner of Tennessee. Roll down the windows. Drive over the two lane blacktop as it rises and falls across the hilly, green pastures and find a freedom much like soaring. Come for the race, but stay for the entire weekend.

