

The Legend of the Little Niangua

True tales of an East Kansas outlaw

John Kuebler

1. The Man His Self

He'd be on the river right now, Wilde told me, but he worked 8 hours yesterday and made 140 cash and decided to stay home and fix a flat tire and paint the south side of his garage instead. He'd planned to drive down to very southwest Missouri to check out a river (Indian Cr.) and a Civil War battlefield (Newtonia), but he chose instead to be a homebody and get some shit done.

"I haven't been over to the Homo Depot yet or the Blowes," he says, "but my friend swears by this Behr paint. It's 35 or 38 dollars a gallon, but he says it's worth that because you'll never have to paint again."

The man we call Wilde is a wiry fucker, ponytailed and goateed. He's an irregular and decidedly non-union carpenter picking up odd jobs from a guy he knows in Topeka who owns a few properties, though Wilde is a framer by trade and officially retired (at 55). Wilde on unions: "You gotta answer to all those union guys. Shoot, I don't need another boss." Last few jobs include building a wheelchair ramp off some guy's front steps, breaking up a sidewalk and repouring concrete, replacing the soffit and fascia on roof overhangs and slapping on paint—turd polishing, Wilde calls it. He drives little 4-cylinder Japanese pickups and pushes them well beyond 200,000 miles before he trades up for something newer. With gear under camper shell and canoe atop, he left his house in Perry, Kansas, every chance he's had the past 30 years to float the Ozark streams of Southern Missouri and Northern Arkansas, usually with a joint between his lips and a hit of acid dissolving on his tongue. He's been busted by cops on the road and even on the river itself, for possession and sundry other offences, but it has not deterred nor discouraged him from answering his calling. To say Wilde is a river rat is to state the obvious.

So fabled is he, his friend Stan Kramer dressed as Wilde one year for Halloween: mesh ballcap with fake ponytail, denim overalls, green rubber galoshes.

The rap sheet is lengthy. Here's a sampling:

Spring Break '78: pulled over in Garibaldi, Oregon, and charged with possession (pot). His friend Rob Scott (Great Bendian) was charged with weapons possession. They had a rifle and pistol on loan from another friend in Wichita. "For protection," Wilde says. Cost them \$55 and a night in the Tillamook County Jail.

Spring Break '80: Big Bend N.P. Texas. Possession (LSD). "The arresting ranger was named Billy Lumb," Wilde says. "I don't know why, but I've always remembered that name. They had to test the LSD, which was pretty comical. They were a real hillbilly crew down there." Wilde had to pay \$500 in 20-dollar travelers checks to bail his truck out, and he had to sign every one of them. "That was also the trip I ate a meatloaf in Laredo and got the flying shits."

April of '80: Wilde got a OUI in Lawrence for popping a quaalude. Plea bargained down.

January '88: Headed to the Eleven Point. Pulled over for speeding outside Jeff City on Friday. Cops discovered a baggie and a pipe. Got out of jail at noon Saturday. Missed one day of floating but made the next. Had to go back to Jeff several months later to Cole County Jail for a 5-day stint. Drove himself down and parked in a pay garage near the jail. "Played Spades with the brothers the whole time," he says. "I did my five days, got out of jail, got in my truck, and drove home."

"I never fucked with anybody," Wilde insists. "It's all possession stuff. Just some man-made law. It's not like it's written on a stone tablet."

I met Wilde through Rusty Mather, my old boss at a Lawrence BBQ joint called Buffalo Bob's Smokehouse. I did two tours at the Smokehouse ('97-'98 and '99-'00), and I got to know Rusty doing early morning prep while he pushed spuds (cut frenchfries) and manned the giant smoker with pitchfork in hand, soot-faced, jutting-jowled, a hairy-armed devil out of Dante's Inferno, stabbing the briskets. We wore plastic gloves for prep but everything had a little arm hair in it, particularly the whale sperm (coleslaw dressing), the fritter goo, and the smokey joe—a goulash of burnt ends and spare parts that also notoriously boasted through the years plastic gloves, chicken bones, paperclips, a writing pen, a woodscrew, a cassette tape, and other ephemera. Paraphrasing Zappa, Rusty croons: "Watch out where the huskies go, and don't you eat that smokey joe."

Rusty and Wilde met during college at KU when Wilde was bartending part time at 7th Spirit under the old Lawrence Opera House (now the band dressing rooms in the basement of Liberty Hall). Rusty was already working for Buffalo Bob by then and dating his future ex-wife. Wilde was pounding nails for a guy named Billy Greene, and they helped rebuild the Smokehouse after a fire in the spring of '80. Rusty and Wilde started the ball club "Mr. Cid" with some college buddies and settled in Lawrence, though Wilde moved across the Kaw to Perry in '89. Since Wilde's wife Marty passed away and Rusty got a divorce, the old friends have been hanging out more, meeting for happy hour at the West Coast Saloon or holing up in The Bunker (Rusty's Apartment) with a case of PBR. "Drinking at home is cheaper," Rusty says, "but at the bar you get to look at the pretty girls and listen to the chatter of the brainiacs, and that's why you pay the premium."

It is 14 miles from Wilde's place in Perry to The Bunker in Lawrence. "Two stop signs," says Wilde, "and one of those you can just sorta roll through." The Bunker is a homely little garden level condo just south of the turnpike. Worn-out and mismatched bachelor-pad loveseats and lamps, unkempt countertops, bare cupboards. Rusty

has the necessities though: dining room table and four chairs, radio/CD boom box, PBR in fridge, autographed glossies of Jamie Farr and Meadowlark Lemon on fridge, and even his own square of concrete back patio. And on out past a common greenbelt: basketball court, swingset, see-saw, a gurgling stream running through.

Rusty says of Wilde: “Saint Louis boy. Pounds nails for a living. Asthmatic. Train head. Civil War buff. Calls bowling ‘kegling.’ Pronounces scenic ‘skeenik.’ Got shot at by a land-owner one time on the river with Clay Henning, DeSoto boy.” Rusty is laughing now, recalling the story. Then his eyebrows raise and his smile slackens and he looks at me in earnest.

“Wilde is a very colorful character,” he says.

2. Encounters with the Anarchist

On the night Rusty gets the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue in the mail, Wilde cuts and divvies up six lines of coke and we each do a couple off buxom Kate Upton’s spellbinding cleavature and chase it with PBR. Somebody Wilde knows over at the West Coast where we’d met for a couple pre-Bunker beers had put this little baggie in his palm, and smoke em if you got em, init?

Rusty changes out *Excitable Boy* for *Some Girls*. He’s got CDs checked out from the library: Lucinda Williams, CCR, Roy Orbison, Alice Cooper, and Peter Wolf mixed in with his own collection. I load a bowl of Colorado Proud in Wilde’s antler pipe and pass it around. Wilde adds his research materials to Rusty’s bible (*Dr. Oz Hawksley’s Missouri Ozark Waterways*, revised 1989) and Rand McNally: a royal blue 200-page Top Flight 5-subject spiral notebook that contains his amended river log since ’85, with one addendum dated earlier:

April, 1979	Scholarship Hall Float Trip	15.7 miles
	Baptist Camp/ Akers Ferry	
	Current River	

and preceded by a ’74 or ’75 float with his older bro Neil and Neil’s frat brothers from the Meramec Community College (Missouri’s largest) in Kirkwood, and an even earlier Boy Scout float not included. Wilde sets up also a picture of Marty and a small turquoise urn containing some of her ashes. “My traveler,” he tells us, and presents us with gifts of turtles: a little black ceramic sea turtle for me (for my son) and a nice woodcarved box turtle for Rusty (for The Bunker), part of Marty’s thousand-piece turtle collection he’s giving away portions of. He’s also been trying to sell off some of Marty’s book collection: hundreds of paperbacks, “mysteries,” Wilde says, “and true crime, Green River Killer and stuff like that. She used to trade bags of that stuff.” The books are warped and curled with water damage. One proprietor asked, “What’d she do—read these in the shower?” No, she read them on the river. Perched in the bow of Wilde’s canoe, seldom ever dipping a paddle in, which is just as Wilde would have it.

At time of writing, Wilde has canoed 3,699.9 miles of mostly Ozark streams, 20 miles at a time, in pretty much just three boats:

The *Delta Dawn* (1,697 miles & counting), a hunter green fiberglass Old Town Discovery 169 (16’ 9”). Bought her from an outfitter on Beaver Creek with Marty in March of ’95, and floated her for the first time on the North Fork April 1 of that year with Marty, their dog Jake, their buddy Sloan, his girlfriend, her son.

The *Eclipse* (1,223.8 miles), a 17-foot aluminum Grumman Eagle. Rocksticker. Wilde and Neil re-riveted the transom. “Had a click chair mounted on the bow for Marty.”

And Dave Smith let him borrow a 15’ red Royalex Coleman canoe for several years. “I don’t remember how many miles I put on it, but it was a neat craft. I thought about buying one—you know Coleman’s made in Wichita. But they’re just too expensive is all there is to it.”

Me (moving to the fridge): “Beer? Wilde? Rusty? Beer?”

Rusty: “I’m ready.”

Wilde: “I can *be* ready.”

As is customary in the Bunker, I rotate stock—pulling our beers from the freezer and rotating three more in. We crack into the cold PBRs and return to our studies.

The original river log was written on paperclipped sheets of typing paper and stored in a manila envelope. Written, not typed. “I gave away my typewriter a long time ago,” Wilde says. Each entry contains the when, the who, the where, the what:

April 16, 1988	Me & Steve Conley; Sam, Rick & Bob Milton Ford/Hwy 215 Mulberry River	18 miles
----------------	--	----------

and sometimes one additional tidbit having to do with the why:

*First green heron sighting 4/17

*High-water float! Intense water

*Lunar eclipse 3/23

*Snowflakes as big as a Sacagawea dollar

amendments to the Hawksley bible (the how):

*Roads aren’t numbered anymore. Take road off

Hwy 63 to Forest to Mineral.

*Recommend access @ Big Eddy—6 ½ miles above

Milton Ford & Campbell Cemetery

*Great access to Pedestal Rocks!

and gray admonitions (or the how not):

*Took drink from Posey spr. & got ill.

which fit together in perfect historical gems:

May 27, 1989	Me & Marty & Jake	2.5 miles
	1st Access Rd. east of Roaring River St. Pk./ Munice Bridge; Munice Cemetery Roaring River	

*River was so low we called it the Whispering R.

“I wisht I had written down more over the years,” Wilde says. “Like if there was a dogfight. Or if we saw a eagle or something.”

Rusty follows me out to my truck to fetch beer. There’s a car parked in Rusty’s space but no sign of Wilde’s truck. Rusty goes for a closer look and calls out “This is it. This is Wilde.” I walk over to where he’s pointing into the front seat and see an open Pabst can in a coozie in the cup holder.

Wilde explains that the sea green 2001 Chrysler Sebring is Marty’s old car. She saw it at the Topeka Mall and said, “Honey, I’ve got to have one.”

Rusty says, “It’s a nice lookin car, Wilde.”

“She bought it new and paid it off a year before she passed. It’s got a hundred’n’forty-five thousand and change on it now,” Wilde says. “I drive it around town. Try and save my truck for the river.”

Current truck is Lucille. Well, wait—here’s another list happen-ing. Wilde’s trucks:

Louise. “Baby blue ’83 Datsun pickemup truck. It had some kind of experimental engine that burned exhaust fumes or something or other. It had 8 plugs even though it was only a 4 cylinder.”

“Lucy was a black ’91 Mazda pickup. Test drove it with 10 miles on the odometer. Sold it with 279,000 miles. That was the truck Marty and I took on the um, the trip down in the desert Southwest, the um...”

Rust: "The Bur Oak Trail. The Ho-Bag tour."

Wilde: "The—yes, thank you, Rasta—the Ho-Bag tour. Gosh, let me see, Bryce, Zion, Cañon de Chelly, Calf Creek, the Bur Oak Trail, Mesa Verde, the trains. That was an expensive tour."

Lucille is current truck. Named after B.B. King's guitar. '98 Chevy S10—his first American truck. "Bought it on 9/11 strangely enough. Had 42K and change. Now has 188 and change."

Me: "What about the truck that got confiscated in Great Bend?"

Wilde: "It wasn't Great Bend, it was Big Bend. That's an important distinction—you might wanna write that down. Let me see..."

Wilde's first truck. '73 Datsun. "Bought it from some guy in charge of the parts desk at Tony's Datsun, which I don't think is around anymore. It's not Tony's anyhow. I'd sand out the rust spots and paint em primer brown till by the time I got rid of it it was mostly primer brown.

"To be honest with you I can't remember the name anymore. That one might've been Louise—no..."

"Well Wilde, you've named your trucks Lucille, Lucy, Louise," I say. "It's no damn wonder."

I tell them how my truck ('90 Ford Ranger, 117K) ran out of gas on the other side of Topeka driving out here. "Gas gauge is broke so I gotta use the tripometer."

Wilde (excited): "Tripometer you say."

Rusty: "You've got one too, Wilde."

(general chuckling)

W: "Wonder what mine reads."

(chortling)

R: "Wilde, Kuebler. Kuebler, Wilde. You know?"

Wilde and I were first introduced in Y2K at a Mr. Cid softball game at Lyon's Park in North Lawrence. Mr. Cid is the legendary

Busch-drinking, hard-hitting softball team that Wilde helped found but never apparently played for.

From the "City Slowpitch Report" on page 7 of the Lawrence "Urinal World" sports section:

EXPERIENCE PAYS DIVIDENDS FOR MR. CID

Named discreetly for their drug of choice with an apple-crate logo as their insignia, Mr. Cid played together almost 30 years, winning 5 league titles and boasting one undefeated season.

"I think you played in a game or two, Wilde," Rusty says.

"I remember shagging fly balls a few times at practices, but I don't think I ever played a game. I watched a lot of games though. Me and Marty. Drank a lot of beer. I always liked Lyon's Park because we could bring the dog or we could watch from the car and I could smoke a big fat one."

Rusty hitches a thumb at Wilde and crosses his eyes and gives me his look. "Spiritual leader," he says.

Wilde (holding in smoke): "That's right."

I ask about the ashes and Wilde tells me it's his travelling urn.

He's been spreading them on the 11-Point, the Current, a favorite spot on the Big Piney (MO), and some have been interred in the Topeka Cemetery next to her brother's remains. "Eight or nine scatterings," Wilde says, including at Turner Mill on the Eleven Point where he and Marty were married, even though Wilde had sworn off the Eleven Point after he got busted there in May 2000.

"Was that the LSD bust?" I ask. "Okay, Wilde," I say, bringing forth my notebooks, "can you fill in a couple holes in this rap sheet I'm compiling?"

Memorial Day weekend 2000. River rangers glassed them from the trees on a Sunday morning. Crept up to their camp in a johnboat and just about tackled Wilde when he tried to stash his pipe. First thing out

of Wilde's mouth: "How come you guys ain't in church?" With probable cause established, the rangers searched Wilde's gear and found, in addition to a film canister of weed, four hits of blotter acid in his river box. Cuffed and stuffed and put in the back of the johnboat. Marty had to steer their canoe to their takeout in Riverton.

His entry for the trip reads: So long Eleven Point.

"Man, Marty was pissed," Wilde says. "We boycotted the Eleven Point, and I didn't float it again til '09."

May '01—one year later, and two months before his August sentencing on the federal possession charge (4 years probation), returning from the Jacks Fork, pulled over just west of Mountain View for DWI. Arrested and taken to West Plains, MO.

"We swear we saw David Crosby on the Jacks Fork that time," Wilde says.

"What is it, Wilde?" I ask. "Is it bad luck?"

"Cop magnet," Rusty says, eyes crossed, lips curled, hitching his thumb in Wilde's direction.

Wilde: "No, you know, I think the odds just caught up with me is all. I've been floating since '85—five or six floats a year. That's a whole lot of driving."

For all his time spent bucking law and order (Rusty calls him The Anarchist) and inciting the ire of the courts, Wilde is touched by good fortune also. He's certainly had his share of—what can I call it?—sunshine on a dog's ass. It might even be possible to say Wilde has got out of more trouble than he's got in.

Late '80s. Returning from a Moody Blues concert at Sandstone, Wilde and Marty took the scenic route home through Tonganoxie. Stopped for a piss and a state trooper pulled up. "And he said, 'hey while you're at it, why don't you touch your nose, walk a straight line and all that.'" Wilde failed the field test but the cop let him go. "I think he knew he'd

broken protocol—he was a young guy. Shoot, he didn't even pull me over; I was already stopped."

Memorial Day weekend '97. Driving down to the Eleven Point to get married, he and Marty encountered a checkpoint on Hwy 13 near Humansville, pretended ignorance, and drove right through, Wilde's thumb over the pipe he was about to hit, a couple lines of coke laid out in the glovebox. Cops did not follow.

Same weekend—return trip. K10 between Eudora and Lawrence, Marty and Wilde consummated the marriage by the side of the road. Got pulled over 6 miles later in the Pricilla's parking lot at 23rd and Naismith for weaving in and out of the lane. "We were fairly toasted. Marty opened the door and a beer can rolled out." Cop let them go.

Wilde says, "I think most times I got in trouble I was being profiled. I wasn't doin nothin."

"Except exactly what they thought you were doing." (this from the peanut gallery)

"Well darn, you got me there."

3. First Day Out

Seven minutes after we put in, we take out on a gravel bar for a smoke. Wilde loads a bowl from a film canister and we partake. Fifteen minutes later we are all still very stoned and some of us surprised when Wilde in the lead boat takes out again. We smoke. We crumple up our empties and fit our coozies with fresh beers. In this manner we progress slowly down the river. The river being the Little Niangua, which once upon a time flowed into its bigger namesake, though they both now flow directly into the reservoir—the Lake of the Ozarks (formerly the Osage River). The we being five: Wilde, Rusty, me, Wilde's bro Neil Wisness who works for Missouri Tool in South County, St. Louis, and Rusty's bro Dave Mather who installs

fire suppression systems up in Olathe. Dave's got a wife and four youngins: three his and one step. Neil has two grown kids, son and a daughter, and an ex-wife who lives in his basement.

The weather is mild for early November in central Missouri. There is some faded color left in the surrounding hardwood forest—some yellow on the hickories, red in the dogwoods. “Very Vermon-ty,” Neil says. No Mr. Cid to trip out on this trip, but between the weed and the PBR our senses are sharpened nevertheless. Or dulled. Or altered anyhow. The river is low, but we are high.

Wilde on not dropping 'cid much anymore: “Mainly cuz I can't find it. But I notice now dinner gets cooked, the tent gets put up. It's maybe not such a bad thing.”

I am steering Neil's old boat, a heavy 17' 2 or 4" unnamed Grumman square stern, all aluminum. I'm calling it the gravel dredge, using it to cut new channels through the shallow rifles, building up speed, speed being figurative here, aiming for the tongue, the deepest trickle of water, paddle already digging into the gravel, paddle a prybar, skooching back and forth like I've got an itch, trying to keep my momentum. Inevitably I end up getting out of the boat and dragging it down the shoals.

My wet Chuck Taylors don't bother me much. I'm in quik-dry pants, flannel shirt and stocking cap. Flannel shirt over t. I'm not often without a t-shirt. This one is a Denver band t: the Legendary River Drifters. Appropriate enough. The others are similarly attired. Wilde in longjohns and overalls. He finds an owl feather on a gravel bar and sticks that in his ballcap. Dave in Keller Fire & Safety windbreaker, KU ballcap and sunglasses. Rusty looking like a park ranger in khaki pants, khaki button-up, and khaki ballcap. Neil wears a hunter orange version of his trademark Gilligan cap over his balding and wispy orange crown.

Text from Rusty:

Ginger or Marianne?

Results as follows (from 26 polled—river rats, Smokehouse kids, et al.):

Ginger: 6

Marianne: 19

including a vote from Neil, our first mate, a ginger himself, with one vote each from me for the answer:

both at the same time.

Solid answer, sure, but not as clever as Rusty's—

Q: Ginger or Marianne?

A: yes please

or Dave's one vote for Mrs. Howell.

The brothers Mather are paddling together now like old pros, and I am competent enough in the gravel dredge, but Wilde and Neil are the real boatmen. They are practiced and seasoned, conserving paddle strokes, moving their canoes at will and with ease. They take up their respective positions: Neil dropping back to the rear guard and Wilde in lead boat, standing up amidships to scout the shoals, the rest of the party snug inside the flotilla.

Coming through a long, slow, deepwater hole, sunken snags drawing their mossy fingertips along the hull of my ship, I spot movement on the steep, wooded bank—a member of the weasel family skittering down to the water. My eyes gone wide I call to the nearest boatman, whispering loudly: “Dave! Dave!” Dave turns his head my direction but does not answer me.

We take out on a long gravel bar opposite Lower Burnt Mill Cave, what Wilde calls the Bat Cave. There is an interesting steel structure here like a flue, meant to let bats in and keep us out, and Rusty and I paddle back over there to see if we can breach it, but we cannot, not

easily anyhow, and that is the idea behind the structure of course, it's done its job, and so we chuck firewood instead down the steep grade of the spring and paddle it back across the river. We are not to our planned takeout at Bannister Ford, but this gravel bar will do nicely for a first camp. Rusty on the beach says to Wilde, regarding his partially docked canoe: "These boats aren't going anywhere, are they, Wilde?"

Wilde: "Give it a yank for good measure, Rasta."

After a pause, someone says: "Did you hear what he told you to do, Rusty?" and we hee haw Merry Christmas and drink our beers.

Tentbuilding. Fire. The drying out of my Chuck Taylors. The leathery flittering of little brown bats. Dinner (pre-made foil meals by Rusty, what Rusty calls MREs, Neil calls foil burgers, and Wilde calls Rusty's meatloaves). Drinks (some kinda cherry flavored whiskey Dave brought). General mayhem. We paraphrase Twain: *Too much whiskey is almost not enough*. And, *it's easy to quit smoking—I've done it a hundred times*.

4. Second Day Out

Ten miles on an Ozark stream isn't much to paddle, even in low water. It's all the taking out that slows us down. Wilde would be better off just smoking in his boat, but he likes to pass the pipe around and be social. He says that on more than one river they've stopped for a bowl and seen the smoke still hanging above their last gravel bar. We've got us another beauty of a fall day—a little bit cooler than yesterday and a few more clouds moving across the sky. In one narrow channel, a canoe-wide rivulet, the very last lane of runnable stream, we have to get out and portage the boats over a tree trunk. We do this just by standing in the cold thigh-high current and handing the boats over. An elderly couple floats down behind us and we help them do the same and they move on ahead of us and we never see them again. Wilde: "I love bluehairs."

I have to catch a plane in K.C. Sunday night at 5. The boys

all have to be at work Monday morning, except maybe for Wilde. Anyhow, we're in no hurry here on Saturday morn. When we finish having a bowl and a piss on any of several gravel bars, Wilde rallies us: "Well," he says, "let's do another mile."

Pulling alongside Wilde in a long slow pool I ask him if he's ever encountered barbwire on any of these small rivers, because I've read about such things. "No," he says, "not barbwire I don't think. Electric wire. On the Little Sugar, a tributary of the Elk River. The water was high and we were running a low water bridge, and there was a wire running above it, and I got zapped when I touched it with my paddle. It was a virgin float. We were just floating by the seat of our britches on that one. I believe that was my only time on the Little Sugar. No, I'm more worried about a fisherman's hook hanging over a limb than I am barbwire." Wilde points with his paddle and I follow with my eyes to the bank. "Right at the end of that log," he says, and I look hard and finally make out the little mud-colored turtle on a mud covered snag right before it plops into the river.

Wilde continues his litany on the next gravel bar. "We had a pot shot taken at us on the Osage Fork of the Gasconade. Me, Clay Henning, River Ron, and Steve Byrnes. We stopped on private land. It was actually just a gravel bar in the middle of the river. We were eating cheese and crackers and some guy starts yelling at us to get off his property and this and that. And to drive the point home he decided to discharge a double barrel shotgun in the air, which I wasn't too happy about."

I am barely able to get the slippery Wilde halfway cornered for a photo, and I hand my camera to Dave to take a portrait of Rusty, Wilde, Me, and Neil. I look in the viewfinder and the photo is blurrier than a Van Gogh, and now everyone has scattered and Wilde is long gone, my opportunity foiled. "Jesus, Dave," I whine.

"Well what was I supposed to do?" Dave inquires.

"Well, you hold still for one thing."

Two fishermen drift by in canoes and we wave howdy. "Do you ever fish these rivers, Wilde?" I ask, and Rusty answers for him, like

he's reading a signpost:

WILDE DON'T FISH

"Wilde don't fish," Wilde agrees, "but I do stare at the water a lot."

As we put back in, Wilde says we can't be more than a mile from our takeout, and Rusty wonders aloud: "Is that a regular mile, or a Wilde mile?"

We float into a small slough at river right and anchor our flotilla and follow the bluff around just a short stretch to Blue Spring Cave. Neil has seen the place before and, as there is no good takeout here, he sits his boat and drinks his beer. We nose around a minute in the mouth of the cave and gaze into the gazing pool. Dr. Oz tells us this spring flows at 3 million gallons a day. It's only a trickle this day, but I imagine after a spring thunderstorm the entire room filling up with water.

Back on the river Wilde gets fired up thinking about the new NO CAMPING sign posted at our takeout at Firey Fork. He is determined to camp there anyhow, itching for a fight. Possibly this is the sort of behavior that gets him in trouble with the authorities. "If they wanna come all the way down there to mess with us—let em," he says. Famous last words. Someone suggests a gravel bar instead. That way we'll get one more day on the river. The group mumbles its approval. Wilde acquiesces.

Tents pitched and fire started, Wilde's red chili warmed and portioned out, Wilde pulls out a little battery-powered tape deck and plays from his repertoire of CCR, Clapton, Little Feat, *Low Spark* (Traffic's *Low Spark of High Heel Boys*), Stones (*Exile*), The Band, and Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* cuz Marty really liked that one.

Wilde: "We encountered a no camping sign on the Big Piney, me and Marty. Guess what the first thing in the fire was that night?"

Round the fire Neil and Wilde list the names of some of the dogs they've floated with:

Sundance

Jake

Buck

Ghost

Sheba

Jewell

Argus

Khaki

Neil: "We've had more dogs than people on floats before."

Somebody—The Stones?—speaks of Memphis and Rusty asks: "Ever been to Memphis, Dave? Ever spanked a girl named Memphis, Dave?" Dave: "No and no. Got a handjob once from a girl named Tex. She didn't say where she was from." Rusty says he made out with a Haskell undergrad outside the Knife and Gun Club (Players bar in E. Lawrence). "We're talkin about a full-blooded 250-pound Native American." I'm laughing and Rusty sneers at me with a half smile. "Well exsqueeze me. John Kuebler Mellencamp over here," he says. "Little pink houses. That's where you were the other night, Kuebler." Laughter. Joy.

Rusty (imitating me): "Dave, Oh Dave! It's some kinda weasel!" Laughter.

"Dave never answered me," I say. "Did you see the thing, Dave, or did you not?"

"It most likely was a mink," Wilde says, "to be honest with you."

"Some kinda weasel," Rusty murmurs. "You know?"

Wilde: "Or an otter, possibly. I don't know, I didn't see it."

Dave leans toward me from his campchair with the same sort of wry sneering grin his brother is known for. I'm ready for his contribution to the weasel debate, but he's apparently still thinking about his handjob of yesteryear. He leans in close and "Hey," he says. "Kuebler. Call me Shady Dave."

5. Third Day Out

Wilde wakes early and I can picture him scuttling about, crouched and bandy-legged, stirring last night's ashes and getting a breakfast fire started. One by one and soon thereafter the remaining crew emerge from the tents, onto the gravel bar, into a cold fog. Coffee is percolated and Neil heats his pre-made Egg McWisnesses in the fire. Last to rise, Shady Dave disappears back up into the woods with t.p. and trowel. We are quiet this early in the morning. Contemplative. Half froze. But the food and the fire slowly bring us to life.

Neil is telling me about the tribute bands he goes to see in St. Louis: Thunderhead (Rush tribute), Celebration Day (Zeppelin tribute), and El Monstero (Pink Floyd). He likes an indoor venue, he says, better than the outdoors. "I like the closeness of the pageant." He tells me he and Wilde did a float on the Meramec in the mid '70s and Wilde got hooked. If it's 4000 miles Wilde has floated, Neil's done at least half that with him. Neil looks at me over the tops of his glasses. "Wilde is the best riverman I've ever seen," he says.

Wilde has been running around, taking down tents and packing gear. "I've got another pot of coffee over there," he informs us. "That'll help the chili slide out." The coffee is weak but it's hot, and I am happy to have another cup while I pass the pipe with Wilde. He had to appear in court last summer in Dent County, Missouri, for blowing a .081.

"Memorial Day weekend, Current River—hadn't even floated the river yet, and I got popped near the Cedar Grove bridge after slamming two beers. Blew a point oh eight one," he says, disbelieving.

And so the legend grows.

Wilde: "Yeah, we did pretty good for a decade or so. And then I started getting in trouble on the river."

I am the last to pack his boat and the last to put in, and I take my place behind Neil for the final stretch of perhaps 150 yards. We take

it slow, cutting the thick fog with our vessels. I think about shouting: Third day out, boys! but the quiet river does not want my raucous intrusion. Morning birds only. The slip and splash of our paddles only. I look downriver at Neil and his boat loaded up and sitting low in the water. Drybags, picklebuckets. One dip of the paddle and it returns to his lap. The Brothers Mather a perfect tandem in their warmest coats. Wilde is out ahead in the *Delta Dawn*, pointing at something (take-out? turtle?), out here where he belongs, leading the way.

Text from Rusty:

Dave says Wilde did
multiple pipeloads &
PBRs on drive home.

6. Perry, Kansas

I wake up dazed in my sleeping bag on Rusty's loveseat, Rusty already gone to work at Bob's, sink full of PBR empties. I go out and fire up my Ranger; get the defrost blowing and the wipers on. Following Wilde's hand-drawn map, I drive N on Michigan, over the interstate, zag W a mile, then N on Iowa, then W again on the Farmer's Turnpike and roundabout to the Kaw River crossing at Lecompton and into Perry. I'm taking Wilde up on his invitation to "hop on over to gay Pair-ee."

His home is a two-story what he calls Pioneer style house built in the 1880s. He and Marty moved in and rented in '89, and bought in '96. I find Wilde on this dark rainy morn at his kitchen table in lamplight with coffee brewed and a pipe going. The last of his pets, an old tomcat named Cracker, preceded in death by the cat Bogart and a couple good cocker spaniels, died sometime last week while Wilde was in St. Louis, and his house is quiet and still. Never any children. "I was sterile as a two-by-four. And then Marty had a hysterectomy."

I bring forth my notes, and Wilde shows me a couple of his

photo albums and gets up and cooks bacon and eggs and potatoes for us. There are pics of Wilde and his river mates and the deep green foliage of Ozark summertimes with tall limestone bluffs showing through. Some pics just of water or clouds or trees. Wilde: “Must’ve been trippin—takin pictures of trees.” His mates through the years are a couple lawyers (a necessary evil), a good number of geologists, an English Ph.D. (who turned Wilde on to mushrooms and Castaneda), and other ne’er-do-wells: Wilde’s friend Sloan is serving time in Pacific, MO, near the Six Flags. “He was drinkin vodka,” Wilde says. “And he assaulted a guy with a baseball bat. Sloan’s just a Springfield river guy—Ozark, Missouri, to be exact. He grew up on the North Fork and the Finley. But his drinking got out of control. I’ll tell you this: if he wasn’t in jail, we’d have buried him by now. I truly believe that.”

“Did he kill the guy?”

“Didn’t kill him, no. But I don’t think he’s quite right anymore.”

The better part of an entire album is from his and Marty’s infamous Ho-Bag tour of Southern Utah and Southern Colorado—red stone spires and hoodoos, precarious ledges, cryptobiotic crusts and other Four Corners regularities. The one or the both of them. “We stopped at just about every Indian trading post so Marty could buy a turtle, and somehow we got to calling ourselves the tribe of the Ho-Bags, and Marty of course was the queen,” Wilde explains. “I can’t remember the chant exactly, but hey-ya, hi-ya, ho-bag was the bulk of it.”

Other pics show Marty and Wilde in late ’80s younger years, smiling, happy, with Jake, with Sundance, with matching white undershirts, Wilde with a blonde goatee that is now gray, long hair pulled back in ponytail, like now. “Marty would never cut my hair,” Wilde says. “I guess her first husband beat the crap out of her for a bad haircut.” Marty on inflatable raft with book and beer. “I would pull her behind on a tow rope.” Little baby snapping turtle in Marty’s hand. “No bigger than a fifty cent piece.” Neil with and without a full fiery red beard and sporting various incarnations of the Gilligan cap.

“Yeah, that’s his trademark. Now we’re trying to get him to wash em.”

I check Wilde’s river log for my name, which appears twice, twelve years apart, misspelled slightly but part of the history nevertheless:

Nov. 2-4, 2012	Me & Neil; Rusty & Dave Mather; John Kubler Howard’s Ford/Fiery Fork Cmpgrd. Little Niangua River	9.5m
----------------	--	------

*Only floated 1.9 miles on 11/2. Camped at Burnt Mill Spr.

and

April 15-16, 2000	Me & Marty & Sundance; Neil & Sloan; Rusty & John Kubler Akers Ferry/ Pulltite Current River	9.5 miles
-------------------	--	-----------

*Flapping beaver @ Cave Spr.

That beaver flapped its tail in warning as we walked into the mouth of the cave at dusk, Wilde and Marty lighting candles and setting them on the rocks. We were stoned and possibly drunk—still coming down from our morning dose.

I look at photos of Marty and try to conjure her whole with my mind’s eye. I met her at the one Mr. Cid game I attended at Lyon’s Park, and then the two days on the Current, and that’s it. Hazy recollection of a gravelly voice calling across the water. Marty’s making sure Sloan the consummate fisherman is practicing catch & release. He is. He releases the little 9-inch rainbow he just reeled in. We feed him a BBQ pork steak for dinner instead.

We eat our eggs and Wilde brews another pot of coffee, and

through the window over the sink we watch the rain turn into big flakes of spring snow. The kitchen walls have pictures of Marty and pictures of Marty and Wilde, turtle kitsch on a knickknack shelf, sawblades painted with country scenes, a bulletin board filled with family pics, girlie pics, a Three Stooges postcard, quotes by Red Cloud and Ambrose Bierce, old notes from Marty, various other ephemera, business cards, bumper stickers: pee for enjoyment/ not for employment. There are turtle footstools, turtle magnets on fridge, turtle ashtrays. Wilde uses his Kenmore dishwasher as a file cabinet. He built a little back porch on the place with a cedar closet on one end. "Which I got a lot of sexual favors for," he says. "Marty loved that cedar closet." Wilde also built the garage out back back in '99. Marty's dad helped him pour the concrete and then Wilde had the lumber delivered and built it his self. It houses the Sebring, the S10, and right above the S10 the *Delta Dawn* hanging from the rafters.

I get up to take a leak in the bathroom off the kitchen. This is where Wilde found Marty one morning seven years ago, dead from an aneurysm. I feel bad about pissing here; I don't want to disrespect this place. But it is, in the end, I suppose, just a bathroom. And it's the only one in the house besides.

About Marty and her sister Carol, Wilde says: "Those girls could drink. I'd come back from a week in Saint Louis, there'd be four or five 30-pack boxes all broken down. They'd just Hoover it down. And you could cut the cigarette smoke with a knife." He smiles to himself, fingers his wedding band.

Wilde shows me the living room: turtle statuettes in bookcases, turtle art on the walls, Christmas garland draped across the ceiling (the ghosts of Christmas past), and a toy train table made out of 2x4s and plywood, which features an impressive layout of complex switchyards. Bright light seeps out the front of the table from behind a bath towel curtain. There is something impressive under here also: four little seedling marijuana plants growing in Dixie cups. Behind the train table, the living room window faces the home of Wilde's

neighbor Phil, a Jefferson County sheriff's deputy.

In winter, from this window and through the bare trees to the southwest, you can make out the freight trains rolling by on the Union Pacific RR on the north shore of the Kaw. Wilde lives within a half mile of the Perry P.O. so he gets a free box but no home delivery. His friend Rob Scott addresses letters to him thus:

Wilde
Perry, KS

no zip code or nothin, and Wilde gets them. According to Wilde, the Casey's General Store has a pretty decent pizza. And though he does not frequent the bar around the corner from his house ("My bar is my kitchen, man"), he admits that he "probably should go check out the local strange. I know there's girls that go to the biker bar out by the Thriftway." When Marty was alive they'd go swimming in the summertime at a secret spot on Lake Perry. His house is at the end of a tree-lined block with easy access to river and highway both. "I can hear the church bells and the train," he says. "Man, I love living in Perry."

Wilde says he sunk 15 grand into homeowners insurance before dropping it. Now, if the house burns down, he gets no \$. Says he'll stay in the garage or put a Winnebago out in the yard. Rent a bulldozer and flatten it all out. Rebuild it.

I'm still beer leery from last night's escapades, but when we finish the coffee, and though I decline, Wilde cracks one back. He cues up one of his favorite Stooges episodes for me on the VCR while he takes a few hits off his nebulizer, opening the passages for the imminent reintroduction of cigarette and pot smoke. The snow quits and the sun makes a dim appearance, and Wilde says he guesses he ought to drive me over to the lake to have a look around. Take the truck out for a drive. "Take a little tour de jour." He grabs some road beers from the fridge, offering one out to me, and by this time...

"Aw what the hell. Yeah, I'll have one. Thanks, Wilde."

The 4-cylinder Chevy S10 putters out of town and over to Perry Lake, an 11,000-acre impoundment of the Delaware River. We drive back on unmaintained roads to a windy cove and swimming beach. There are picnic tables and the remnants of a playground, and I walk out in the wind with my PBR and climb up the rickety slide and slide down once, remembering a kid from Roeland Park who lost half his ring finger on a sharp snag of steel on a slide like this. Wilde sits his truck, loading a bowl, and we pass it back & forth on the drive out. He points alongside the road to the scrubby winter trees with little hard red poisonous fruits. He says, "I need to come out here and harvest this bittersweet and sell it to the Hobby Lobbies."

Back in town we park in front of the old Highway 24 bridge, which has been bypassed and closed to traffic very recently, though it looks like it's been abandoned for decades, the asphalt roadbed cracked throughout and crumbling off the sides and the steel looking rusted and brittle. Posted: No Traffic of Any Kind. We walk out on it and I take a piss over the side and down into the Delaware. Hock a loogie down too. Wilde says the state is going to demolish it ... sometime. Next bridge down is a train trestle and Wilde points and says just downstream where the Delaware meets the Kaw is the Rising Sun access, where he and Rusty put in when they floated down to Lawrence last summer.

Text from Rusty:

Did 4mi from
Lecompton bridge.
Sunny-95. 4 trains-
no snakes.

A diesel horn sounds through the bare trees in the distance. "Well what do you know," says Wilde, "we're gonna get us a train."

We drive back to Lawrence in the late afternoon and Rusty
greet us at The Bunker, home from work and showered. He says:

"Gentlemen, we killed a 30-pack last night."

While we still have daylight, Rusty wants to take us out to some old abandoned train trestle beyond the Dirty Bird. It's a place he found with his son Jake several years ago and he's been wanting to show it to Wilde. So he drives us out north of the river, we see a bald eagle roosting in a huge cottonwood below the Bowerstock dam, and we drive east from Johnny's, past La Tropicana and Lyon's Park, past Bismark Gardens, and out beyond the turnoff to the Flamingo, aka the Bird, aka the Dirty Bird, aka the North Lawrence Country Club, the titty bar where many a KU co-ed has subsidized her tuition. "We went out there a lot during construction days," Wilde says. "The St. Patty's Day parade used to end there." Rusty meets a few dead ends, and doubles back, and we see the RR, but he can't find the right road. He finally parks the car where some tire tracks peter out in the middle of a farmer's muddy field. He gets out and walks toward the trees, toward the river. "It's gotta be right out there," he assures us. Wilde does not believe and lags behind, smoking a cig, as Rusty leads me across the plowed earth, sunk in to our sneakertops, leaving evidence of our trespassing in our wake. Wilde, when he follows, walks out along the broken corn husks on the drier terrace beside the field. Rusty drops into an irrigation ditch and appears again on the levy opposite, a small simian figure in jeans and windbreaker, following his nose.

"Here it is," he calls back, pointing toward the trees.

"He found it, Wilde," I relay the message back.

"Way to go, Rasta," Wilde says, impressed, and crushes his cigarette underfoot and walks faster to catch up.

And there it is, just a little bridge over a little creek, though maybe this isn't the one Rusty remembers after all, for it is not abandoned. We walk across and gather underneath and the oldtimers light fresh cigarettes and smoke as a coal train rumbles over overhead.

After the train moves past, Rusty tells us Bob is selling the restaurant. In the next month or two Rusty will be out of a job he's

worked for more than three decades.

“What’re you gonna do?” I ask.

“Well, I don’t know,” he admits. “But I’d like to do a little traveling before I go work for somebody else.”

Wilde has worked construction for three different guys in that same amount of time, from 1979 to his official retirement in 2010, and now he’s picking up occasional work from a fourth guy in Topeka who went to high school with Marty. Once upon a time, Wilde was a scholarship student studying architecture at the University of Kansas. He dropped out his junior year and went and built houses with hammer and nails for the rest of his life instead.

Rusty wants to treat us to Mexican for dinner, so we hike back to the car, keeping to the terrace in the failing light. I drop behind a little, taking in everything I can and trying to memorize it all for later, for always—the smells of wet earth and chaff, the distant crunch of car wheels on gravel, the train sounding again now through the trees. And the muted silhouettes of the two friends walking ahead of me along the berm in the cold Kansas twilight.

Text from Rusty:

Wilde pulled 9 - 5
today in group
counseling 4 dui.
Stopped by Bunker &
got high on way
home.

Text from Rusty:

Just did 3 hr tour
w/yur protagonist in
hopeful soon to be
released Midnight

Express thriller! He
drank all my beer.

Text from Rusty:

Kate Upton or
Scarlett Johansson?